


Chapter 13

Digital Storytelling and Parasocial Interaction for Brand–Consumer Relationship

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ABSTRACT

Although parasocial interaction as an illusory experience has been studied extensively in the offline environment, it has only recently attracted research attention in the digital marketing literature. In fact, since parasocial interactions are mediated relationships which involve a medium, it is expected that parasocial behavior will be present in Internet mediated contexts. In this sense, researchers and marketers know little about what online parasocial interaction is and how it works from brand-consumer relationship perspective. Digital storytelling components are underlined as important components in the relationship marketing literature to build trust and develop interpersonal relationships. In the light of this argument, the purpose of this study is, by examining various cases, to reveal the relationship between digital storytelling and parasocial interaction as a new and fresh perspective that needs to be emphasized in technology applications for effective customer engagement.

INTRODUCTION

In October of 2019, Lorde's (well known as a singer and songwriter) tweet grabbed much attention from her fans because she shared sad news about death of her dog, Pearl. By referring Pearl as "my boy", she paid tribute to Pearl and shared her sad feelings with millions of followers through her personal social media. When Lorde announced this heartbreaking tweet, she has received numberless replies such as "...:(so sad for you, stay strong", "...oh my god I'm so sorry for your loss. Sending love for the whole family." Lorde might not have an actual, private relationship with most of those people who replied to her tweet. However, her sad story on social media influenced her followers to relate their emotions to Lorde.

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As the sad story of Lorde and her dying dog points out, people share a wide range of information about themselves in digital environment since “(i) it is used for first-hand reporting and thus provides access to real-time coverage, (ii) additional materials like links or photos/videos can be shared and spread easily, and (iii) ongoing discussions about news and events are common and facilitated through the structure of the network” (Kümpel, Karnowski and Keyling, 2015). For instance, celebrities share intimate details of their lives and personal stories about friends and family (e.g. Paulo Dybala’s tweet: Hi everyone, I just wanted just to inform you that we have received the results for the Covid-19 test and both Oriana and I have tested positive...) as well as professional life to promote upcoming events (e.g. Taylor Swift’s Instagram post: Oh man...music video tomorrow at 7 A.M. EST! And I’m going to be chatting/answering your questions/mansplaining the video on YouTube starting an hour before at 6A.M. EST.). With easy access to direct and interactive communication ways with celebrities, followers following celebrities through technological applications may feel like they “know” the celebrity and experience enhanced intimacy and a powerful *parasocial interaction* (PSI) (Kim and Song, 2015).

Since Horton and Wohl’s (1956) foundational research, the concept of parasocial interaction has garnered wide attention in the marketing and communications literature (Sokolova and Kefi, 2019; Labrecque, 2014; Rubin and McHugh, 1989; Perse and Rubin, 1989). Researchers have defined PSI as the engagement of customers with mass media personalities such as movie and television stars, and sports figures (Frederick, Lim, Clavio and Walsh, 2012; Horton and Wohl, 1956). In this sense, there is a consensus on the nature of PSI: namely that the literature points out as an illusionary experience, such that an audience interacts with a media personality as if they are engaged in a real reciprocal relationship (see Horton and Wohl, 1956). Such an experience is self-established and media personalities could be unaware of the relationship and influence audiences (Sokolova and Kefi, 2019). Herein, audiences believe they are engaged in a direct two-way conversation, feeling as though a media personality is talking directly to him or her (Rubin, Perse, and Powell, 1985). The experience of PSI can develop to the point where audiences begin to view media personalities as “flesh and blood friends” (Aydn and Ayar Senturk, 2017).

Although the term PSI as an illusionary experience has been studied extensively in the offline environment (i.e tv, radio etc.), only recently attracted research attention in the digital environment (Ballantine and Martin, 2005; Baek, Bae and Jang, 2013; Tsiotsou, 2015). Since parasocial interactions are mediated relationships which involve a medium (e.g. TV, radio, Internet) (Cohen, 2004), it is expected that parasocial behavior will be present in Internet mediated contexts (Phelps, 2011). Moreover, today’s current dynamic environment that requires accelerated brand strategies and intensified competition at the global level, and instantly alters the needs of customers have forced many firms to improve their consumer-brand relationship and provide customer engagement in digital environment to increase their brand success (Sakib, Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast; 2020). This situation implies that the development of PSI is not restricted to traditional mass media but can also be fostered through messages in a technological application that are designed to bring the audience closer to brand or celebrity (Labrecque, 2014). From the marketing perspective, for instance, Fetscherin and Dato-on (2010), in their celebrity-fan relationships studies, investigate that brand love is better explained by the parasocial interactions rather than actual interpersonal relationships. Labrecque (2014) studies parasocial interactions between consumers and brands, and points out that parasocial interactions evoke brand loyalty and willingness to ensure personal information to brands in Web site forms and customer surveys.

In particular, the digital storytelling is one of the ways in which brands use to develop and maintain PSI with consumers in digital environment. While the term digital storytelling sometimes refers to a

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