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PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN GEN Z AND SOCIAL MEDIA ENDORSERS

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ABSTRACT

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Social media is inseparably tied to the lives of Generation Z (Gen Z) members, and thus marketers want to find ways to be present there as well. Utilizing different influential individuals, such as celebrities, in social media communications and employing them as ambassadors has gained a great deal of interest in the past years. However, the mechanism behind this influence remains unclear. It cannot be explained with marketing literature alone; hence, parasocial relationship theory has been adopted from media and social psychology studies to better understand the phenomenon. Parasocial relationships comprise one-sided relationships formed between a media figure and a viewer.

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the formation of parasocial relationships between social media endorsers and their followers. As this study situates itself within the marketing field, the relationships of interest are those that aim to influence consumers for commercial purposes. The theoretical framework of this study consists of three main parts. First, the parasocial relationships are discussed and bridged to the social media and marketing field. Second, the framework summarizes the literature on celebrity endorsers and the antecedents of their influence. Third, it reviews the earlier work on the focus group of this study, Gen Z.

In this study, research was conducted by organizing four focus group discussions with a total of 23 young women representing the older Gen Z. In each focus group, the participants discussed their favorite social media channels – Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube –with a focus on their own behavior on respective channels and their general views on good content. The content analysis of the empirical data was guided by a strong hermeneutic approach. The focus group participants use social media constantly and it has a significant role in their identity building efforts. They appreciate the authenticity and interaction attempts of the endorsers they follow. To be influential, the sponsored content posted by endorsers must be visually and functionally relevant in light of that endorser's character.

This study contributes to the literature by confirming the existence of a parasocial relationship between Gen Z members and individually chosen endorsers. Members of Gen Z are marketing savvy, but when it comes to content posted by endorsers they believe they know or even admire, they no longer care about the commercial background of the content, as they view it as credible without questioning it. What has not been recognized before is that in addition to friendship- and role-model-like relationships, parasocial relationships can also be negative. The implications of this study are important both to marketing practitioners planning to enter influencer marketing, and to policy-makers responsible for ensuring that consumers are capable of noticing advertisers' persuasion attempts.

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Julkisuuden henkilön hyödyntäminen brändin keulakuvana ja puolestapuhujana sosiaalisessa mediassa – vaikuttajamarkkinointi - on todettu markkinoijien keskuudessa viime vuosina tehokkaaksi keinoksi erityisesti nuorten kuluttajien tavoittamiseen. Syyt vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin toimivuuteen ovat kuitenkin vielä epäselvät. Yksinään markkinoinnin kirjallisuudesta ei löydy selitystä tälle ilmiölle ja niinpä sitä on muutaman viimeisen vuoden aikana ryhdytty selittämään muun muassa median ja psykologian tutkimuksesta lainatun parasosiaalisten suhteiden teorian avulla. Parasosiaalinen suhde tarkoittaa yksityishenkilön julkisuuden henkilöön muodostamaa yksipuolista ystävyysuhdetta.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on kuvata ja analysoida somevaikuttajien ja heidän seuraajiensa parasosiaalisten suhteiden syntymistä sosiaalisessa mediassa. Koska kyseessä on markkinoinnin alan tutkimus, viitataan vaikuttamisella kaupallisiin tarkoituseriin eli kolmannen osapuolen – vaikuttajan - toimimiseen brändin ja kuluttajan välillä pyrkimyksenään saada kuluttaja käyttäytymään markkinoijalle suotuisalla tavalla. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys koostuu kolmesta osasta. Ensiksi tarkastellaan parasosiaalisia suhteita kuluttajakäyttäytymisen valossa ja viedään ne sosiaalisen median kontekstiin. Toiseksi perehdytään aiempaan kirjallisuuteen julkisuuden henkilöiden vaikuttavuudesta mainonnassa ja edelleen tämän vaikuttavuuden osatekijöistä. Kolmanneksi tutustutaan aiempaan kirjallisuuteen tutkimuksen kohderyhmästä Z-sukupolvesta.

Tutkimus toteutettiin kokoamalla 23 Z-sukupolvea edustanutta nuorta naista neljään eri fokusryhmään, joissa kussakin keskusteltiin laajasti heidän suosimiensa sosiaalisen median kanavien - Instagramin, Snapchatin ja Youtuben - käytöstä, heidän käsityksistään muista käyttäjistä sekä yleisesti postausten sisällöstä. Aineisto analysoitiin hermeneuttisen tulkinnan ohjaamana sisällönanalyysin keinoin. Fokusryhmien perusteella voidaan todeta, että nuoret naiset käyttävät sosiaalista mediaa lähes koko ajan ja se on tärkeä osa heidän identiteetin rakentamisprosessiaan. He arvostavat seuraamiensa vaikuttajien autenttisuutta sekä interaktiivisuutta. Ollakseen vakuuttavaa, sponsoroidun sisällön tulee sopia henkilön persoonaan ja muuhun sisältöön niin visuaalisuutensa kuin funktionaalisuutensa kautta.

Tutkimus osoittaa, että Z-sukupolven nuoret naiset muodostavat vahvoja parasosiaalisia suhteita osaan seuraamistaan käyttäjistä ja hyväksyvät heiltä myös kaupallisen sisällön osana normaalia sisältöä ilman kyseenalaistavia reaktioita. Uutena tietona tutkimuksessa kävi ilmi, että parasosiaaliset suhteet voivat olla ystävyys ja ihailun lisäksi myös negatiivisesti värittyneitä. Tutkimuksen tieto on tärkeä niin markkinoinnin ammattilaisille, jotka voivat hyödyntää vaikuttajamarkkinointia tämän tutkimuksen avulla entistä tehokkaammin, kuin myös poliittisille päättäjille, jotka saavat katsauksen siihen, kuinka hyvin sukupolvi Z tunnistaa mainontaa.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 New ways of marketing arising on social media

Everyone talks about social media. Marketers see it as a tempting, easy-to-use channel to reach consumers, communicate with them, and maybe even engage them and, through that engagement, lead them to purchase their products. Consumers spend a great part of their day on social media chatting, looking for information, entertaining themselves, and surely daydreaming too. Policy-makers are trying to stay updated on the actions of these two parties to set regulations and ensure that everyone is treated correctly. Finally, researchers are trying to make sense of all these actions and their implications, as explanations of different functions are needed.

According to the research priorities for 2016-2018 published by the Marketing Science Institute, more knowledge is needed regarding how to reach consumers in today's complex environment. Marketers are asking how they can provide the right information at the right time in the right context to the right individual; how firms provide information that consumers want to receive; and how they can reach the new generations, Gen Z and Millennials (MSI Research Priorities 2016).

Today's marketers have endless communication possibilities on social media through earned, paid, and owned activities. These possibilities offer marketers the chance to help consumers to move even faster through their decision journey; to influence their engagement and further attitudes, loyalty, or even purchase intentions. However, this path is more complex than ever before (Batra & Keller 2016). Web 2.0 with social media has changed the field of advertising. Companies are struggling to understand the consumer engagement circle and value creation on social media, for the simple reason that they joined the platforms before knowing how these aspects are formed in the social media landscape (Barger et al. 2016; Schultz & Peltier 2013).

One main reason for companies' struggles is that social media was not built to sell products but to offer people a platform for social interaction (Schultz & Peltier 2013). As Fournier and Avery state, "marketers are confronted with the stark realization that

social media was made for people, not for brands” (2011, 193). According to one study, consumers do not usually even pay attention to ads on social media platforms, and when they do, they view them negatively (Bang & Lee 2016). However, as consumers spend a great part of their day on social media, marketers are trying their best to play along.

Unfortunately, as everyone wants to be on social media, the number of messages and communication attempts consumers receive has grown to huge numbers. Consumers’ attention is divided between multiple different media sources around them. This endless amount of information had also led to a change in the way of viewing that information: consumers are no longer seen as passive receivers, but as active seekers of information (Batra & Keller 2016). Many social media channels allow them to choose for themselves what they do and do not want to see. In addition, ad-blockers for blocking unwanted information are increasing in popularity daily and give customers even more power to decide what belongs on their social media.

As marketers still need to sell their companies’ products, they have found new ways to engage with customers. Examples of their strategies are native marketing, product placement, and influencer marketing. In magazines, marketers use native marketing, which means hiding the commercial content within other non-sponsored content (Wojdyski et al. 2017). In movies and television shows, product placement is an everyday practice. In the social media context, influence marketing can be interpreted as a form of native marketing: there is a paid relationship between the sponsoring brand and the individual poster, but that often might not be clear to the receiver (Wojdyski et al. 2017).

According to some business magazines, influencer marketing is currently the most effective social media marketing strategy, if not the most effective marketing strategy of all (Ward 2017; Huffington Post 2016). As a term, it is rather new and refers to brands partnering with influential individuals on social media to promote their products or services (Ward 2017). These individuals are seen as “trusted tastemakers in one or several niches” and are expected to spread the word of the brand further to their audiences (de Veirman et al. 2017). Marketing through influencers takes place in all social media channels in the form of Instagram pictures, Snapchat stories, blog texts,

Facebook posts, and longer YouTube videos, depending on the qualities of each endorser.

1.2 Identifying influential individuals

Even though influencer marketing as a term is rather new, the idea of influential individuals has been recognized for decades. Katz and Lazarsfeld conducted one of the first studies combining both mass media research and decision-making studies in 1955. They found that opinions and attitudes are transmitted through interaction between two neighbors rather than by mass media. They named these influential individuals opinion leaders and suggested that ideas flow from radio and print first to opinion leaders and from them to other citizens. As Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) further investigated the topic, they noticed that opinion leaders are not a separate group, but rather integral members of everyday groups of people such as friends, relatives, and colleagues.

Identifying these influential individuals has always been a key interest of marketers; thus, much research has been done on the topic. Celebrity and athlete endorsements are a largely utilized marketing strategy in many companies, and research has proven them to have a positive effect, for example, on brand awareness, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions (Bergvist & Zhou 2016). The classic form of endorsement is when an athlete or celebrity promotes a brand in return for compensation. A more engaged form of endorsement is being a brand ambassador, which usually entails a longer commitment between a brand and the endorser. The sponsoring literature comes close to endorsement too, especially regarding athletes.

As stated, lately influential individuals have simply been called influencers. Unique in influencer marketing is how social media communication has changed the scene and given anyone the opportunity to share their voice, meaning anyone could be an influencer (Huffington Post 2016). In addition to widely followed influencers such as celebrities, smaller-scale micro-influencers such as bloggers and Instagram-famous persons are gaining increasing attention from marketers, as it is said that their niche audiences are even more engaged and willing to listen to them as are the audiences of the widely followed endorsers (Wissman 2018).

However, regardless of the term used, the underlying idea of all listed influencers – influencers, micro-influencers, celebrity endorsers, ambassadors, and sponsored athletes – is essentially the same: as third-party agents, they are supposed to endorse a company's brand and influence consumers through their personal qualities. Thus, in this study, the term *endorser* is used to describe all possible influencers. Influencing happens through endorsing a product or service in some way. An endorser in this study could for example be an athlete; a celebrity such as an artist or an actor; a social media celebrity such as a blogger, vlogger, or popular Instagrammer; or a close or distant friend who happens to endorse something on social media.

Despite the research on the topic, it is still unclear which of these endorsers is the most effective and on what the influence is based. Chung and Cho (2017) suggest that fame and popularity do not directly lead to endorser effectiveness unless endorsers create intimate relationships with consumers. This kind of intimate, and often only one-sided, relationship between an endorser and a follower was already identified by Horton and Wohl in 1956. In their study, they termed these imaginative relationships between media figures and media followers *parasocial relationships*. Lately, the marketing field has adopted parasocial relationship theory from media and social psychology sciences to shed light on the underlying process of endorsement effectiveness (Labreque 2014). Almost 30 years ago, McCracken (1989, 319) conducted a study on celebrity endorsements and the meaning transfer process between endorser and consumer, asking: "What is the process by which consumers contribute to the meaning transfer process?" Parasocial relationship theory can help to answer this question.

Parasocial relationship theory has already shed light on the influencing process between endorsers and their followers, but more research is needed to show its applicability in the marketing field (Chung & Cho 2017; Escalass & Bettman 2017; Lueck 2015). Parasocial relationships are proven to have a positive impact on brand attitudes and further purchase decisions (Chung & Cho 2017), but it is still unclear what characterizes the endorsers with whom this kind of relationship is established. All in all, results regarding this topic are contradictory. This thesis focuses on all kinds of endorsers within social media and, in contrast to the majority of studies, does not draw a clear line between them.

1.3 Gen Z on social media

In marketing, it is widely known that each generation is different, and it is important for marketers to identify the differences between generations as their unique expectations, experiences, generational history, lifestyles, values, and demographics influence their behaviors (Williams & Page 2011). This study focuses on the Web 2.0 generation, Gen Z. Members of this generation were born between around 1994 and the late 2000s (Chaney et al. 2017). This means that in 2018, the oldest Gen Z members are 22-24 years old, which is exactly the age at which individuals take over the responsibilities of their own life, including purchase decisions. Members of Gen Z are accustomed to endless messages and multiple information sources around them (Williams & Page 2011). They value traditional beliefs and the family unit (Williams & Page 2011) and are socially conscious and always seeking change (Chaney et al. 2017). According to researchers, this generation values the authenticity and realness of social media (Djafarova & Rushworth 2016).

Most of the marketing through influential individuals takes place on social media for a reason. Social media usage is continuously growing, whereas the decreased consumption of traditional media channels is noteworthy. For example, among Gen Z, traditional television is no longer popular: only 23% of teens in the United States watch TV, whereas 26% watch YouTube, and 38% Netflix (Edison Research & Triton Digital 2017). Members of Gen Z have never lived without internet; they are used to high technology (Williams & Page 2011) and are connected continuously through their smartphones and tablets (Chaney et al. 2017).

At the moment, the most popular social media channels among Finnish Gen Z members between 13 and 22 years of age are YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat (eBrand 2016). The importance of each channel varies depending of the age of the users. Based on the present author's pre-understanding, Finnish Gen Z members between 15 and 20 years of age mostly use Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube. What characterizes their usage is that they often follow same people on all three channels. Hence, to obtain a holistic view of the influence of a single person, all social media channels are included in the context of this study.

Finnish research argues that Finnish females are more active social media users than males are (eBrand 2016). Sheldon and Bryant (2016) support this by arguing, based on their study, that women are more active than men on Instagram. According to Bush, Martin, and Bush (2004, 118), females spread more positive word of mouth about the endorsements carried out by their favorite celebrity athlete than males do. Furthermore, these authors found that females are more influenced by their role models when it comes to purchase decisions than males are. Moreover, Theran et al. (2010) have shown that teenage girls form strong parasocial relationships with media figures. Finally, Lueck (2015) states that women are more likely to form fake friendships with celebrity endorsers than men are. All these arguments are in line with the present author's pre-understanding. Thus, this thesis focuses on the young women in Gen Z.

Although Gen Z represents the most active social media users, it is a rather un-researched generation about which marketers need more information (MSI Research Priorities 2016). Members of Gen Z are used to having marketing messages around them but, due to their young age, they do not yet have a complete understanding of marketers' persuasion attempts (Wright et al. 2005). Williams and Page (2011) argue that members of Gen Z are intelligent, have a strong sense of right and wrong, and are marketing savvy. However, new ways of marketing, such as influencer marketing, where the content is embedded in the endorser's other content, are making it difficult for consumers to distinguish between commercial content and non-commercial "normal" content (Lueck 2015).

Hiding commercial content within other content can indeed be misleading, and regulations therefore set how marketers and influencers have to disclose their collaborations. According to the Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, everyone has to be able to differ commercial content from other content, and when it comes to children under 18 years of age, marketers and endorsers need to pay extra attention and be careful with their communications (FCCA 2014). In Finland, the Council of Ethics in Advertising actively supervises marketers and endorsers to ensure that they follow the guidelines stated by the FCCA, hence taking care that advertising practice is ethically acceptable (Finland Chamber of Commerce 2018).

1.4 Defining the research problem

All things considered, companies have to find new ways to engage with consumers. To this end, it is important to fill the gaps in knowledge regarding the most effective means of persuading them (Attaran et al. 2015). Utilizing influential individuals has been argued to be the most effective way of reaching consumers on social media (Ward 2017), and given the amount of time Gen Z young women spend there, it should be effective in reaching them too. Although influencer marketing is currently a growing trend among marketing practitioners, it is still unclear which factors make someone influential and what the mechanism is behind that influence. More research about endorsers on social media is needed to update this field to reflect today's needs (Boerman et al. 2017; Lueck 2015).

This thesis focuses on better understanding the mechanism behind celebrity endorsements and influencer marketing. Based on earlier studies, parasocial relationship theory can serve as a mediator of the influencing process, but the formation of the parasocial relationship from a marketing point of view still needs more research. Hence, the purpose of this thesis is to describe and analyze the formation of parasocial relationships on social media. The guiding questions of this research are:

1. What are the drivers of the parasocial relationship formation between Gen Z young women and social media endorsers?
2. What different forms can parasocial relationships between Gen Z young women and social media endorsers take?

The first guiding question will be answered using both theory and empirical data, and the second question will be answered in chapter 4 based on the empirical data. The purpose of this study situates it in the field of consumer behavior, as this thesis investigates how parasocial relationships form between consumers and social media endorsers. Consumer behavior as a multidisciplinary field of marketing has always been open to other research fields such as psychology, sociology and communications disciplines (MacInnis & Folkes 2009). In this study, the parasocial relationship theory from the social psychology and communication fields is used with the marketing

literature to better understand the phenomenon of parasocial relationships, as well as influencer marketing and celebrity endorsement. The multidisciplinary view challenges the researcher to develop novel interpretations and utilize lateral thinking, as there are fewer previous studies or guidelines to follow. However, interpretations require strong analysis and argumentation. Finally, the multidisciplinary approach with emphasis on shedding light on a new phenomenon positions this thesis in the interpretive consumer research field (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 4).

Marketers persuade customers through endorsers for a reason, and according to Kumar (2015), in the social media context this reason is primarily consumer engagement, as it leads to sustained profits by engaging customers with the companies through interactions, feedback, and word of mouth. Barger et al. (2016) argue that consumer engagement on social media includes actions like creating, commenting, liking, sharing, and posting user-generated content regarding the brand and they can later lead to consequences including for example content re-sharing intention or purchase intention. Thus, creating engagement should be the goal of brands on social media, and the goal of endorsers too. A consumer with a parasocial relationship with an endorser can be assumed to feel engagement with that endorser as well. It is not within the scope of this thesis to investigate the outcomes of parasocial relationships; hence, it is enough to state, based on the previous literature, that they have a positive impact on the whole marketing process through engagement.

This thesis investigates a relatively new phenomenon, influencer marketing, and aims to argue for its effectiveness among Finnish Gen Z young women by using parasocial relationship theory. The context being new and unexplored, no theoretical framework could be built before becoming familiar with the phenomenon by generating empirical data. Hence, a strongly abductive and interpreting approach was adopted in conducting the research. An abductive approach is seen to be fruitful especially when the researcher's aim is to discover new things such as new relationships or variables in the literature (Dubois & Gadde 2002). In addition, the majority of the earlier studies on parasocial relationships have been conducted with quantitative methods. Therefore, it was considered to be productive to view the topic from another angle in the present study.

2 FORMATION OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

2.1 Parasocial relationship theory

Communication and social psychology scholars have long been interested in the interaction and relationship between media users and media figures. Established first by Horton and Wohl in 1956, parasocial interaction theory aims to describe this one-sided interaction and relationship attempt that traditionally take place between media figures, such as celebrities or fictional TV program characters, and media users (Giles 2002). Horton and Wohl (1956) analyzed host-presented TV programs and found that viewers interact with people on the screen in a way that is similar to real social interaction. The authors called this interaction parasocial interaction. Parasocial interaction theory explains how audiences interact with, relate to, and develop relationships with media figures, such as celebrities. Parasocial interaction is one-sided but still includes a feeling of social behavior and relationship; thus, the term parasocial relationship is also acknowledged (Giles 2002). The media viewer often feels the intimacy of a relationship and emotional attachment to the media figure and, through seeing him or her multiple times, has a feeling of knowing that figure personally (Horton & Wohl 1956).

The terms parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships are traditionally used interchangeably to characterize a continuing link between media personae and media users (Giles 2002). To distinguish between them, Giles (2002) defines parasocial interaction as a momentary activity, which can through continuous parasocial interactions and encounters lead to parasocial relationship. The present study adopts the term parasocial relationships, as the focus in this study lies more on the continuous relationship rather than on one interaction attempt.

2.1.1 Drivers of parasocial relationships

Parasocial relationship theory has been widely studied, especially among communication and media scholars, and has gained much support since the early work of Horton and Wohl (1956). For example Stern et al. (2007) argue that television

viewers establish the same kind of relationships with television stars as they do with real-life friends. The participants in their study bought the television stars' hidden persuasion attempts as, due to parasocial relationships, they felt like friends were giving them advice. Furthermore, Ballantine and Martin (2005) argue that although parasocial relationship is based on vicarious interaction (e.g. television viewing) rather than actual interaction, it still awakens feelings of knowing and understanding the persona with the same intimacy as with real-life friends.

Many scholars have been interested in the drivers and mechanisms facilitating parasocial interactions and parasocial relationship. The majority of studies on parasocial interaction have focused on measuring it with different kinds of quantitative measurements, while only a few qualitative studies have been conducted (Giles 2002, 283). Most of the quantitative studies have used variations of a scale devised by Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985), and some common drivers have been recognized. They are presented in Figure 1.

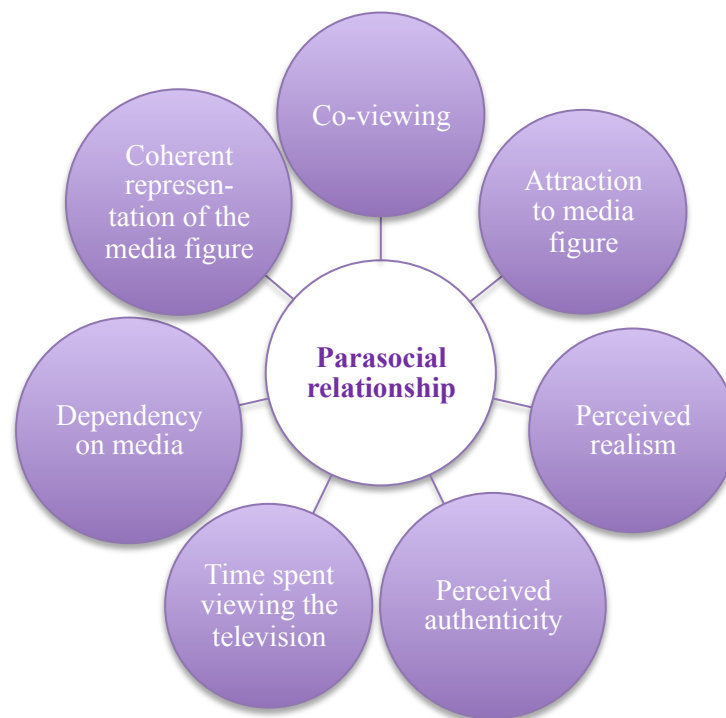


Figure 1. Drivers of parasocial relationship formation in mass media (Adapted from Giles 2002; Gleich 1997; Rubin, Perse & Powell 1985)

First, Rubin et al. (1985) argue that *perceived realism* and *attraction to the media figure* (see Figure 1) mediate parasocial relationship formation. Correspondingly, Giles (2002, 291) adds *perceived authenticity* to the list as an important driver. Furthermore, the amount of *time spent viewing television* or the possible *dependency* on it facilitate parasocial relationship formation (Gleich 1997). *User context* and *co-viewing* have also been proven to mediate the formation of parasocial relationships (Giles 2002, 292). Furthermore, it is important that the media figures carry out a *coherent representation* across different media channels (Giles 2002, 292).

Despite the agreement regarding some of the variables explaining the formation of parasocial relationships, much remains unknown. For example, demographic variables have not been widely studied yet (Giles 2002). Consequently, the effect of the viewer's age remains unknown, apart from a few exceptions. Little research has investigated how, for example, adolescents develop parasocial relationships with media figures (Giles 2002, Theran et al. 2010). It is said that adolescents may use parasocial relationships to form and maintain a healthy self-image (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin 2008). Parasocial relationships may be appealing to them because with endorsers' idealized figures, the adolescents can imagine complete acceptance (Theran et al. 2010). In their study of adolescent girls, Theran et al. (2010) asked these girls how they would characterize their relationship with media figures. While most of them simply named the role of the media figure as media figure, some called him or her their best friend, role model, and friend. In this study, the followed media personas were still mainly Hollywood actors, whereas nowadays social media celebrities and popular bloggers are the most followed ones. Although Theran et al.'s (2010) study is outdated in some parts, it clearly indicates that adolescent girls form rather strong parasocial relationships.

Some psychologists have criticized parasocial relationship theory due to its one-sided communication possibilities (Gleich 1997). However, the idea of interaction as proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956) goes beyond this narrow definition by claiming that communication does not have to be dialectical. From their point of view, parasocial interaction takes place in the mind of the viewer and is purely imaginative. Viewing parasocial interaction as a process of imaginative communication of the viewer with the TV persona includes the same cognitive and affective aspects as real social interaction (Horton & Wohl 1956). In any case, as will be discussed in next section, nowadays

social media even allows two-way communication through sharing, reposting, and commenting possibilities, and there is thus less room for criticism of parasocial relationship theory.

2.1.2 Parasocial relationships in the social media context through marketing lens

Horton and Wohl (1956) already acknowledged that one characteristic of parasocial relationship is that media users want to know more about the lives of media personae, and this is why they engage in a relationship with them. With its sharing options, social media has made the sharing of one's own life easier than ever, and this strengthens the social media parasocial relationship (Yuksel & Labrecque 2016). Regularly following a celebrity's updates may increase the illusion of intimacy and hence generate positive attitudes and behavioral intentions regarding celebrity endorsement (Bond 2016; Chung & Cho 2014). Labrecque (2014) argues that the online environment can offer an even better platform for parasocial relationships than traditional media channels can. According to her, openness in communication and interactivity attempts can help build parasocial relationship on social media. The feeling of being connected to a brand or to another figure through Instagram posts and YouTube videos might already be enough to give one the feeling that one knows the sender without even requiring any interaction attempts (Labrecque 2014).

However, social media as a platform offers many possibilities for interaction. Lueck (2015) investigated whether and how Kim Kardashian, successful celebrity endorser, utilized parasocial interaction on her Facebook fan page. She took a closer look at Kardashian's posts on Facebook through a parasocial interaction lens and found that interactive questions such as "is my hair too dark?" lured the audience to comment on and answer the post and gave them a feeling of having a friend-like connection even if Kardashian did not take part in any further discussions under her post. Accordingly Bond (2016, 656) found that two-sided social media interactions strengthen the parasocial relationship. Based on his study of parasocial relationships on Twitter, he argues that adolescents have a feeling of stronger parasocial relationship if their favorite media personae retweet or response to their tweets than if this is not the case. Furthermore, Colliander and Dahlén (2011) demonstrate how blogs are a typical example of those media that generate parasocial relationships. Through the personal

stories and pictures the bloggers post, their readers gain frequent insights into their daily lives. Readers can even interact with the blogger via the comment functions.

Gummeson (1994) was one of the first to bridge parasocial relationships to the marketing field in his work on relationship marketing, where he listed parasocial relationships via symbols and objects as one of the 30 relations occurring in the marketing context. With this, he meant that relationships do not exist only between people: individuals can also have a relationship with objects or symbols such as brands (Gummeson 2008, 130). A few years later, Fournier (1998, 362) introduced her idea of brands as relationship partners, referring for example to a fling, childhood friend, or arranged marriage. She did not mention parasocial relationship theory, but she still had the same idea as Gummeson about the relationship between a brand and a person. In the marketing field, parasocial relationships have been researched in such a sense ever since, but it is only in the past few years that scholars have started to extend the literature beyond brands by focusing on other persons. The latest marketing based studies over parasocial interactions and relationships are summarized on Table 1. All of them suggest parasocial relationship theory to have capabilities for offering unique insights to marketing related themes such as celebrity endorsement effectiveness and brand-consumer relationships.

The studies shown in Table 1 bring up themes of trust, relatedness, interactivity, source credibility, endorser-product congruence, openness and perceived interactivity as possible drivers of parasocial relationship on social media. When considering the drivers of parasocial relationship formation in traditional mass media (Figure 1), with more “inside” information about the senders through their social media communications, it can be assumed that *perceived realism* and *authenticity* are easier to determine in a social media context. Of the other drivers, *time spent viewing* the media and *co-viewing* are supported in the social media context based on the statistics about social media usage among Gen Z members (eBrand 2016). In addition, a recent study about teenagers’ social media usage (Common sense media 2016) shows that 50% of teenagers feel addicted to their mobile devices, which they use for social media browsing. Thus, as Bond (2016) and Labrecque (2014) also suggest, it is possible for parasocial relationships to develop even stronger in the social media context than in the traditional media context.

Table 1. Latest marketing based studies on parasocial interactions and relationships

Author, Year	Research title	Context	Main Findings
Ballantine & Martin, 2005	Forming Parasocial Relationships in Online Communities	Parasocial interactions on online community	Online community can influence the consumption behavior of other non-participative users.
Colliander & Dahlén, 2011	Following the Fashionable Friend: The Power of Social Media	Blog and online magazine readers and their possible parasocial interactions	Blog readers perceive the blogger as a fashionable and identifiable friend whom they trust and rely on for advice and information. Blogs generate higher purchase intentions than online magazines.
Labreque, 2014	Fostering Consumer–Brand Relationships in Social Media Environments: The Role of Parasocial Interaction	Consumer–brand relationships on social media within adults	Parasocial interaction theory helps in understanding how consumer–brand relationships are established through social media. Openness in communication and perceived interactivity are antecedents of parasocial interaction.
Lueck, 2015	Friend-zone with benefits: The parasocial advertising of Kim Kardashian	Communication that occurs in Kim Kardashian’s Facebook fan page	The celebrity becomes an imaginary friend, who doesn’t talk about brands to conduct advertising, but to comment on a luxurious lifestyle and to give advice on how to create this lifestyle with the use of brands.
Yuksel & Labreque, 2016	“Digital buddies”: parasocial interactions in social media	Public student-athlete accounts on Twitter	Parasocial relationships occur also through personal accounts on social media platforms. They influence consumers cognitively, affectively and behaviorally.
Chung & Cho, 2017	Parasocial Relationship via Reality TV and Social Media: Its Implications for Celebrity Endorsement	Parasocial relationships with media characters via reality TV and social media	Reality TV viewing and SNS use to interact with media characters mediate parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships lead to high endorser and brand credibility, and further facilitate purchase intention.
Gong & Li, 2017	Engaging fans on microblog	Microblog Sina Weibo users	Parasocial interaction and celebrity–product congruence and source credibility are salient antecedents of endorsement effectiveness.

Some of the studies in Table 1 argue that parasocial relationships can lead to higher purchase intentions and greater trust towards the brand and the endorser (e.g. Chung & Cho 2017). An aspect supporting the effectiveness of parasocial relationships as an advertising tool is the audience that can be reached by utilizing the relationships. Like normal relationships, parasocial relationships are formed with someone whom one sees as interesting, or whom one somehow likes. Furthermore, parasocial relationships often also include admiring. The followees are often ready to purchase whatever it takes to reach the admired life of the media figure (Lueck 2015). This thought relates back to McCracken's (1989) almost 30-year-old assumption about transferring the meanings of celebrities' lives to one's own life.

2.1.3 Persuading consumers through parasocial relationships

So, parasocial relationships seem to be helpful in influencing the consumers thanks to the engaged audiences of the endorsers. However, de Veirman et al. (2017) argue that the effectiveness of influencer marketing - utilizing an endorser - lies not only in the easily reachable audience of the endorser, but also on the inexperience of consumers with this kind of new marketing strategies. An interesting perspective on this phenomenon can be seen in Colliander and Erlandsson's (2015) study, where they combine parasocial interaction theories and the persuasion knowledge model. When parasocial relationships on social media are viewed through a marketing lens, endorsers (e.g. celebrities, influencers) are seen as communicating promotions to their followers. Their underlying intention is to persuade consumers to purchase the brand they endorse.

Friestad and Wright's (1994) persuasion knowledge model describes whether and how single persuasion attempts such as an advertisement or Instagram post affect consumers' attitudes and knowledge, and further explains how persuasion knowledge accumulates over time and forms common persuasion knowledge, which in turn affects consumers' views on future advertisements too. The model is based on the idea that individuals learn about persuasion from multiple sources, including their own experiences, those of friends, family, and coworkers, and observations of the marketers; based on all this, individuals develop their own personal knowledge (Friestad & Wright 1994). This helps one to identify how, when, and why one is being influenced (Kirmani & Campbell 2009). Awakened persuasion knowledge does not need to lead to a negative evaluation

of the persuader or the issue in question; rather, it should help the person to see the attempts to persuade him or her (Friestad & Wright 1994). In case of an advertisement in a magazine, this means understanding that there is an underlying attempt to promote the use of something. It is not necessary to automatically view this as negative or to resist it: an individual can purchase the offer as long as he or she does so consciously.

The persuasion knowledge model has been widely adapted to the social media context in the last few years. Scholars are concerned about whether consumers are able to recognize the new forms of marketing – native marketing, influencer marketing, and product placements – as commercial content, due to their hidden nature (Boermann et al. 2017; Wojdysnki et al. 2017). Multiple studies have examined consumers' recognition of online native advertising in the past two years, and nearly all of them show that the majority of consumers do not realize when they are looking at an ad (Bang et al. 2016; Boermann et al. 2017; Wojdysnki et al. 2017). Consumers do not yet recognize these social media actions as marketing, and promotions from endorsers are thus less likely to trigger persuasion knowledge, which could further awaken either favorable or unfavorable attitudes (Friestad & Wright 1994).

However, all consumers should be able to recognize persuasion attempts. For example, in the US, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) protects consumers from misleading communications and hidden messages by stating that whenever there is “a connection between an endorser and the marketer that consumers would not expect and it would affect how consumers evaluate the endorsement, that connection should be disclosed” (FTC Endorsement Guide 2017). The FTC highlights that endorsements must reflect the honest opinion of the endorser and may not be misleading (FTC Endorsement Guide 2017). Finnish sponsorship disclosure guidelines reflect FTC guidelines (FCCA 2014). In addition to these official guidelines, Finnish content and influencer marketing agencies and companies utilizing them have together created an additional set of guidelines called the Ping Ethics code to further elucidate the rapidly changing scene of social media marketing (Ping Ethics 2017). Their goal is to drive trust, transparency, and ethical correctness among all parties. Ping Ethics advises endorsers to use the expression “commercial cooperation” if they financially benefit from it or if there is a contract between the endorser and the content provider (Ping Ethics 2017).

Interesting is, however, that even if they recognize commercial disclosures, for example many blog readers view commercial content neutrally and assume that bloggers are promoting the brands they truly like, and not because they are being paid (Colliander & Erlandson 2015). As anticipated, Boerman et al. (2017) found in their study that 56% of participants exposed to a disclosure did not recognize it. This means the content was viewed without activation in persuasion knowledge and could thus be more effective regarding actions such as engagement or, further, even purchase intentions. The reason for this could be the difficulty of differing between the commercial and normal content posted by celebrities, because not all content they post is commercial (Boerman et al. 2017). Posts about their breakfasts, families, and training are mixed with posts by normal users, and they are therefore often seen as fellow social media users rather than endorsers (Lueck 2015).

Persuasion knowledge is expected to develop through one's life span, starting in toddlers and developing towards adulthood (Wright et al. 2005). This means that children and adolescents still have an inadequate understanding of persuasion attempts and might not be able to decide whether they want to be persuaded or to resist the persuasion (Wright et al. 2005). They might not recognize when, where, and how they are being influenced. The development of persuasion coping knowledge is influenced by practice, and the knowledge is often based on socially constructed ideas (Wright et al. 2005). As teenagers today are digital natives who are used to the endless messages and ads around them and are even keen to discuss them, they are well trained. Therefore, it can be assumed that they have already gained some knowledge about marketers' attempts. Nevertheless, the Finnish authorities (FCCA 2014) still ask marketers to pay extra attention to transparency when communicating to under-aged consumers.

2.2 Bridging the celebrity endorsement literature to parasocial relationships

As parasocial relationships between two persons are still a rather new phenomenon in marketing research, this chapter examines earlier literature about opinion leaders and endorsers to obtain more insights into influential individuals within the marketing domain. This can help marketing practitioners to understand with whom consumers

build effective parasocial relationships from a marketing perspective. If parasocial relationship theory can offer an understanding of friendship-like meaning transfer, the celebrity endorsement literature can help widen the understanding of the mediating drivers of parasocial relationships.

McCracken's (1989, 310) classical definition of a celebrity endorser is "any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement". This serves as a good overview of this theme. According to McCracken, celebrity endorsers are able to draw more attention to advertisements, break through the clutter of competing brands, and positively affect consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions. The effectiveness of the endorser is dependent on the meanings he or she brings to the endorsement process (McCracken 1989). Although consumers may never become celebrities, the typical consumer may still symbolically aspire to identify with this group by purchasing the product recommended by the celebrity (Kamins 1990). This finding refers to parasocial relationship theory and supports combining it with the celebrity endorsement literature.

Endorsers are often viewed as opinion leaders who encourage their fans to engage in specific behavior with their own examples. The literature on opinion leaders dates far back. In their early study, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) found that similarities in personality, interests, demographics, and socio-economic factors increase the influence of opinion leaders. These leaders have a chance to change others' attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, in his early research, Summers (1970) identified characteristics of women's clothing fashion opinion leaders: active participation in social activities and great interest in fashion. Persuading opinion leaders is important for marketers to reach these leaders' social groups (Summers 1970).

The effectiveness of celebrity endorsers has been widely studied in the marketing literature. These theories have been utilized to explain the formation of parasocial relationships too (see for example Chung & Cho 2017). In a review of the parasocial relationship literature, Giles (2002) argues that coherent representation and perceived authenticity are mediators for parasocial relationship formation. Among other predictors listed in Figure 1 in this thesis, perceived realism and attraction to the figure (Rubin et al. 1985) are familiar themes in the celebrity endorsement literature. Two main theories

have been developed to explain the endorsement process: *source effect theories* and *endorser relevance*. Lately, endorser *authenticity* has been discussed as a reliable facilitator of endorsement effectiveness. The following chapters will shortly review the literature on these themes.

2.2.1 Endorser source effects

Source effects models have traditionally been used to explain the persuasiveness of celebrity endorsers; their roots lie in social psychology (McCracken 1989). Recently, source effects have been shown to positively impact the formation of parasocial interaction (Gong & Li 2017; Yuan et al. 2016). In general, it is assumed that endorsers who are perceived as credible, attractive, and well liked will have positive effects on brand evaluations (Bergkvist & Zhou 2016). Some scholars distinguish between source attractiveness and source credibility models (Gong & Li 2017; Ohanian 1990), while others see them as one greater variable (McCracken 1989). Endorser source effects are illustrated in Figure 2.

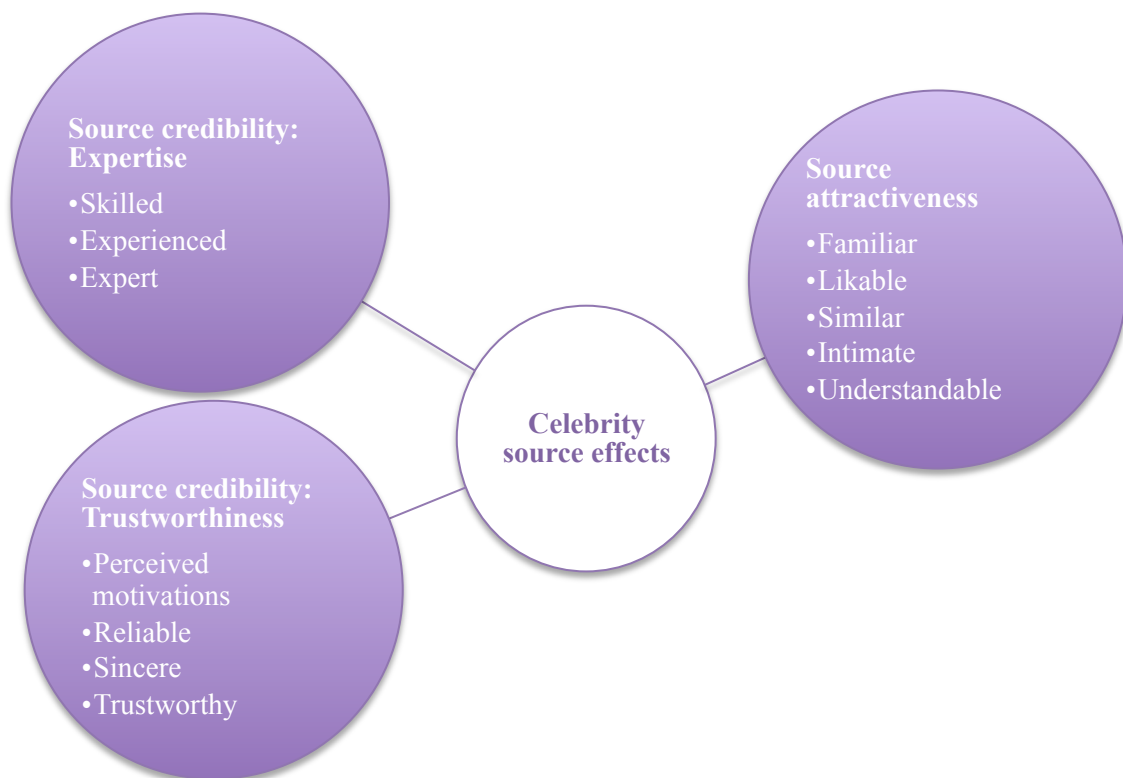


Figure 2. Source effects affecting the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement (Adapted from Chung & Cho 2017; McCracken 1998; Ohanian 1990)

Source credibility studies traditionally base themselves on the early work of Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953; see Ohanian 1990, 41), who defined the further dimensions of source credibility, *expertise* and *trustworthiness*, as "the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" and "the degree of confidence in the communicator's intent to communicate the assertions he considers most valid." Source credibility is commonly used to imply a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message (Ohanian 1990). Expertise can be shortly defined as a perceived ability of the source to make valid assertions, and trustworthiness as the willingness to do them (McCracken 1989).

Expertise can be further described with words such as qualified, skilled, expert, experienced, and knowledgeable; and trustworthiness as honest, reliable, sincere, trustworthy, and dependable (Ohanian 1990, 47). Different types of celebrities will be perceived to have different levels of expertise in different products. For example, athletes are perceived as having high expertise in sports products, especially those close to their own sport. Fashion bloggers, on the other hand, can be seen as having high expertise in fashion-related questions.

The other dimension of source credibility, trustworthiness, describes how trustworthy the followers perceive the sender to be based on their earlier knowledge. Contradictory results have been found in this regard. For example, Ohanian (1990) found a significant positive effect of expertise on brand evaluations, but no positive effect of trustworthiness. However, source credibility and closer trustworthiness can also be seen to cover the motivations of the sender. For example, being motivated only by money instead of actually liking the product may have a negative effect on brand evaluations (Bergkvist et al. 2016). Trustworthiness as a term comes close to authenticity and realness and will be further discussed in next section.

Source attractiveness refers to the receiver's perception of the endorser in terms of his or her appeal in arousing interest. It can be further described with words such as attractive, classy, beautiful, elegant, and sexy (Ohanian 1990, 47). The source attractiveness model is based on McGuire's study (1985), in which he argues that that effectiveness of messages depends on the familiarity, likability, and similarity of the source (see McCracken 1989). Familiarity is defined as knowledge of the source

through exposure; likability as affection for the source as a result of the source's physical appearance and behavior; and similarity as a supposed resemblance between the source and the receiver of the message. In more recent literature, themes such as openness, self-disclosure, intimacy, and understandability are source effects that can facilitate the creation of greater consumer trust in endorsers (Chung & Cho 2017). Source attractiveness comes as well close to the attraction to media figure, which is proposed by Rubin et al. (1985) to be one driver of parasocial relationship formation.

2.2.2 Perceived authenticity of endorser

The idea of celebrity endorsers has been taken a step further by scholars who have argued that celebrity brands are human brands that should be carefully taken care of (Moulard et al. 2015; Thomson 2006). Aiming to discover the underlying mechanism of celebrity endorsement, Thomson (2006) investigated why consumers form strong attachments to human brands. He found that certain human needs, such as autonomy and relatedness, influence an individual's attachment to a celebrity brand. He also suggests that the perceived authenticity of the human brand likely plays an important role in the formation of attachment. This attachment to human brands overlaps with the parasocial relationship theory, where, as Giles (2002) suggests, authenticity serves as one predictor of the formation of a parasocial relationship. Thus, perceived authenticity can be argued to have a significant role in the formation of attachment and parasocial relationships.

Authenticity used to be described as “natural, honest, simple, unspun, sustainable, rooted and human,” whereas nowadays it is defined using words such as “original, genuine, traditional and real” (Munoz et al. 2006, 226). According to the research in psychology and marketing, celebrity brand authenticity can be understood as the celebrity endorser “being true to” him- or herself (Ilicic & Webster 2016). Ilicic and Webster (2016) explored how consumers understand the authenticity of endorsers. Participants in their study said they wanted to relate to the endorsers and experience them failing and living life like normal people. Cornelis and Peter (2017) support this by arguing that real authentic content is appreciated, as it makes it possible for consumers to relate to. In addition, Ilicic and Webster (2016) also highlight the importance of the endorser being honest, *open* and truthful in his or her interactions

with consumers. Endorsers can build authenticity by being *transparent* about their everyday lives and characteristics. The feeling of authenticity can further serve as a mediator of consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions (Cornelis & Peter 2017).

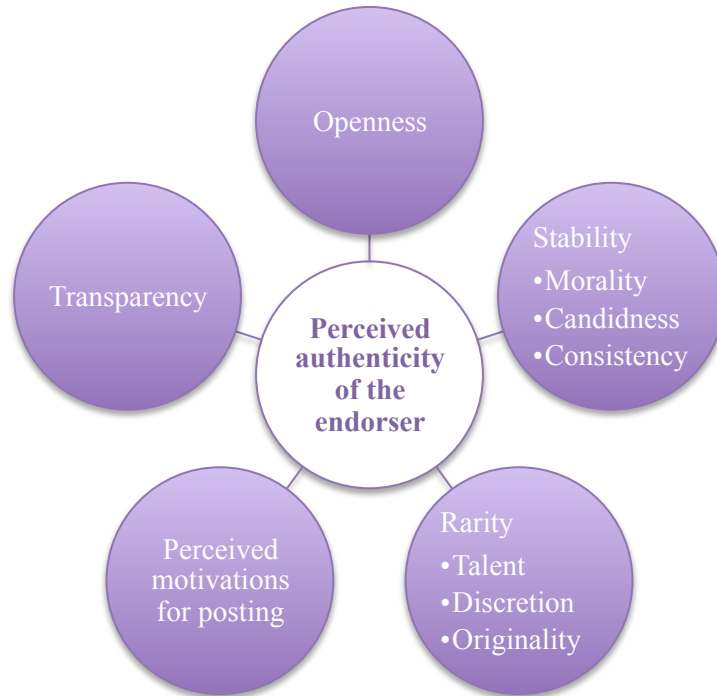


Figure 3. Antecedents of perceived authenticity of the endorser (Adapted from Ilicic & Webster 2016; Moulard et al. 2015)

Figure 3 illustrates the central antecedents of the perceived authenticity of an endorser. Endorser's true self and motivations remain always unobservable to consumers. Thus, consumers assess a celebrity's authenticity by inferring that *celebrity's motivations* from previous information (Moulard et al. 2015). According to Moulard et al. (2015), previous information is mainly built upon a view of the behavior of the celebrity in general. These authors found that *rarity* – “the degree to which the celebrity is seen as uncommon” – and *stability* – “the degree to which the celebrity is perceived as unwavering” – have a positive influence on celebrity authenticity (Moulard et al. 2015, 177-178). According to them, further factors determining perceived authenticity are the celebrity's talent, discretion, originality, candidness, and morality.

In the latest studies of celebrity endorsement effects, authenticity is often highlighted. Djafarova and Rushworth (2016) examined the effectiveness of different kinds of

celebrity endorsers on Instagram among young women and their relation to purchase intentions. They found that non-traditional celebrities such as micro-bloggers, YouTube persons, and Instagram-famous profiles have a stronger influence on purchase intentions than traditional celebrities do due to their greater authenticity. In their study, non-traditional celebrities were seen as more credible, and participants were able to relate to them more than to the traditional ones. Young women in Djafarova and Rusthworth's study (2016) preferred accounts that created positive images and provided encouraging reviews.

2.2.3 Endorser relevance

Earlier studies on celebrity endorsers suggest that endorsers are more effective when the endorser and product are congruent, that is, when the endorser is relevant to the endorsement (Kamins 1990; McCormick 2016; Till & Busler 2000). The relevance of the endorser has also been examined under the names "match-up hypothesis", "similarity", "fit", and "congruency", and it has its marketing roots in the brand extension literature (Bergkvist et al. 2016). Fit between the endorsed brand and endorser refers to the similarity or consistency between the parent brand and the brand extension (Aaker & Keller 1990). Good fit is assumed to form positive attitudes towards the advertisement and brand (McCormick 2016). Most of the empirical work on the match-up hypothesis has focused on the physical attractiveness of the endorser. A common argument is that attractive celebrities are more effective endorsers for products to enhance one's attractiveness (Kamins 1990). However, Till and Busler (2000) argue that physical attractiveness cannot be the only explanation, and found that expertise is more important than physical attractiveness when forming brand-endorser pairs.

Another explanation for endorser-brand relevance is that the endorser should fit the associations the brand currently has or wants to reach, as the meanings might transfer from brand to endorser and vice versa (McCormick 2016). It is also noteworthy that due to the popularity of many endorsers, consumers have pre-existing knowledge about them, and this can disturb the fit. In addition, a connection has been found between consumer self-image and endorser image as an explanation for possible perceived congruence (McCormick 2016). The latest studies prove that endorser-product congruence is effective in the social media context too. For example, high athlete-

product congruence helps to generate more positive attitudes towards athlete endorsements on social media (Cunningham & Bright 2012). Endorser-product fit also comes close to the parasocial relationship literature and the drivers of such a relationship's formation. Giles (2002) suggests that media figures should carry out a coherent representation across different media channels, and to this end, the endorsed products should fit too. Antecedents of endorser relevance are illustrated in Figure 4.

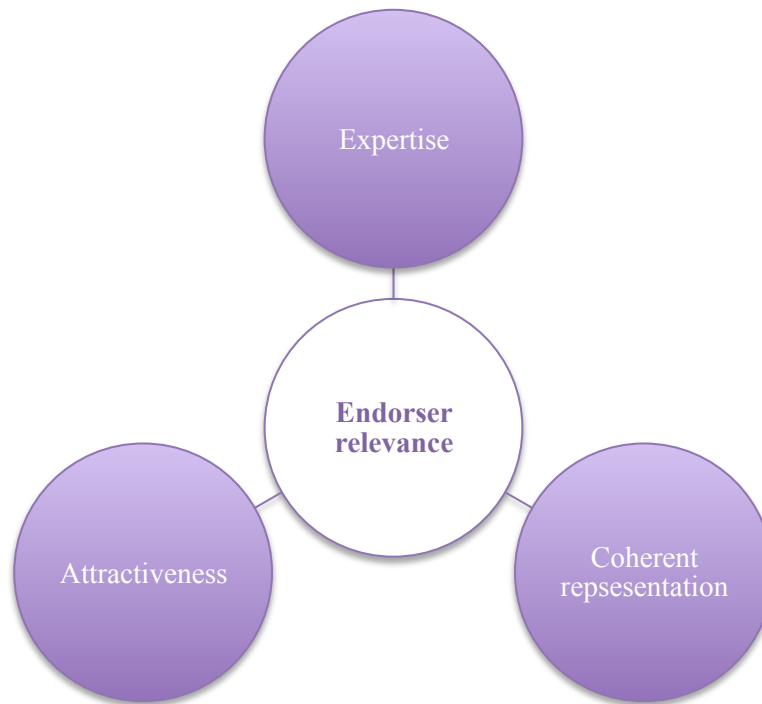


Figure 4. Antecedents of endorser relevance (Adapted from Kamins 1990; McCormick 2016; Till & Busler 2000)

The majority of studies on the match-up hypothesis have considered celebrities that consumers knew beforehand. However, McCormick (2016) wanted to test whether the results would hold for unknown celebrities as well. She found that when Millennial consumers viewed the image of an unfamiliar celebrity and the image of a product as congruent, their attitudes towards the advertisement and brand were positive. Thus, it can be argued that a realistic relationship between the unfamiliar endorser and the brand can lead to the ad being viewed as more believable. Törn (2012) argues that in some cases, using unfamiliar endorsers can be more effective than using familiar ones, as doing so differs from the mainstream. However, McCormick (2016) highlights that

whether the endorser is familiar or unfamiliar, the perceived positive match with the product he or she endorses attracts more attention. As this thesis focuses on social media channels where the users themselves decide who they follow, it can be argued that they already know all the followed accounts to some extent, and this stream of research therefore does not need to be taken further. What is still noteworthy is that disliking the endorser or having negative pre-existing thoughts naturally leads to a negative attitude towards the ad and brand (McCormick 2016).

2.3 Gen Z on social media

The previous chapters discussed parasocial relationships and some of their possible drivers. All the introduced drivers are mainly dependent on the endorser, although perceived from the receiver's point of view. However, Yuan et al. (2016) argue that consumers' motivations for using social media are also central to parasocial relationship formation. Motivations for social media usage, such as meeting new friends and looking for information, determine not only what individuals reveal about themselves on social media, but also what they are interested in and how they communicate and select the content they follow (Joinson 2008). Especially the entertainment- and relationship-building motivations and *information-seeking* motivation contribute significantly to the formation of parasocial relationships (Yuan et al. 2016).

As stated earlier, in his review of the parasocial relationship literature, Giles (2002) indicates user context as one of the mediators of parasocial relationship formation. Furthermore, Gleich (1997) suggests that time spent viewing television (in this study, social media) and one's dependency on it mediate the formation of a parasocial relationship. The focus group in the present study consists of Gen Z young women, who spend a majority of their day on social media; some are even dependent on it, and it is a frequent topic of their conversations.

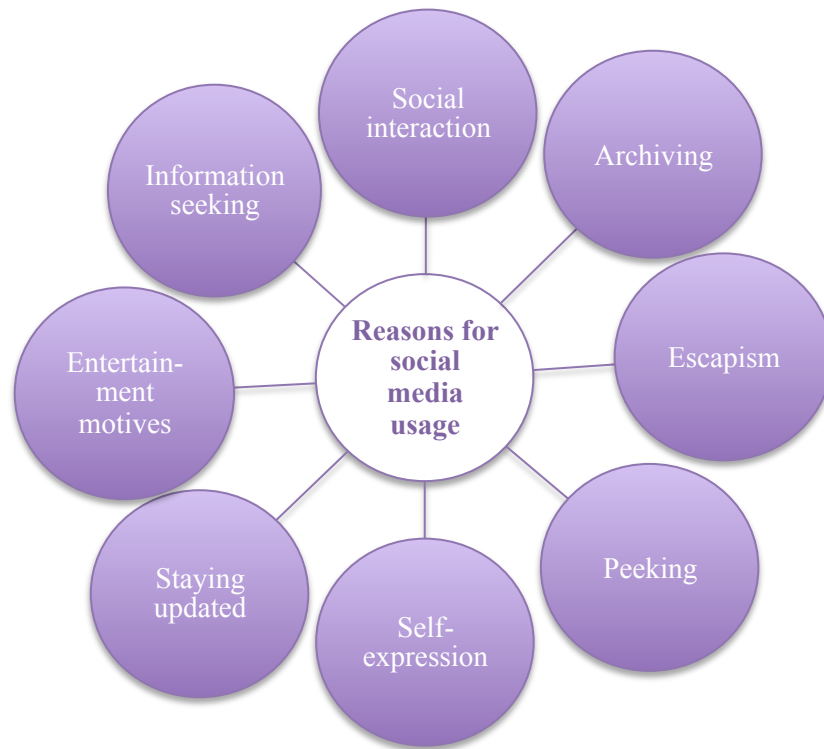


Figure 5. Gen Z Reasons for social media usage (Adapted from Hung 2014; Kowalczyk & Pounders 2016; Lee et al. 2015; Sheldon & Bryant 2016)

Scholars have recognized some common motivations for social media usage among Gen Z. They are illustrated in Figure 5 as reasons for social media usage. Members of Gen Z feel a need to belong to a group which partially determines their self-concept; in other words, peer acceptance is important for them and is something they look for on social media (William & Page 2011). They want to surveil the lives of others and know what is going on in the world in general (Sheldon & Bryant 2016). Through social media, they learn what is cool and popular at the moment, they *stay updated*. According to Sheldon and Bryant (2016), popular celebrities have an important role in determining coolness and popularity, and this why they are highly followed. Research by Lee et al. (2015) indicates the same kinds of motives. These authors identified five social and psychological motives for Instagram use: *social interaction*, *archiving*, *self-expression*, *escapism*, and *peeking*. Their research highlights peeking into other people's, especially celebrities', lives, and archiving one's own life as the most influential motives for Instagram use.

Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) asked the participants of their study why they engaged with endorsers on social media, and found that the main reasons were to stay updated about the latest news concerning celebrities, and to peek into their everyday lives and collect personal information. The authors further asked what the participants liked about following the celebrities, and all answers highlighted the importance of authenticity and realness. Seeing celebrities as real persons even evokes positive emotions such as loving, liking, and relating. Through posts that consumers perceive as authentic, celebrities are exposed as “real” persons, and consumers might feel an emotional attachment to them.

Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016, 352) argue that emotional attachment can lead to increased purchase likelihood and word of mouth. Following Kowalczyk and Pounders, Hung (2014) argues that *entertainment* experiences are an important reason for consumers to follow celebrities and that they mediate the parasocial relationship, leading to greater celebrity effects. According to Hung, entertainment motives can be viewed as playful motives and aspirational motives, both of which have a supporting effect on parasocial relationships. Finally, Escalass and Bettman (2017) examined parasocial relationships in the adolescent context and found that especially teens who have a high need for social connections form parasocial relationships with celebrities. According to these authors, adolescents who feel a high need to belong are those who use social media to build their identities and who are keen to transfer the images of celebrities onto themselves.

2.4 Synthesis of the theoretical framework

Earlier media- and communication-focused studies have recognized some drivers of parasocial relationship formation. These studies have named, for example, perceived authenticity (Giles 2002); realism and attraction of the followed media figure (Rubin et al. 1985); and the time spent viewing television, the dependency on it (Gleich 1997), and co-viewing (Giles 2002) as possible antecedents of the relationship formation. Scholars have reached some level of agreement regarding the predictors, but much remains unknown (Giles 2002). To reach a new perspective on the topic and to bring it closer to the marketing literature, studies of celebrity endorsement, human brand authenticity, and motivations for social media usage were closely examined in the

earlier theory chapters and bridged to the parasocial relationship theory. The synthesis of the theoretical framework of this thesis is illustrated in Figure 6.

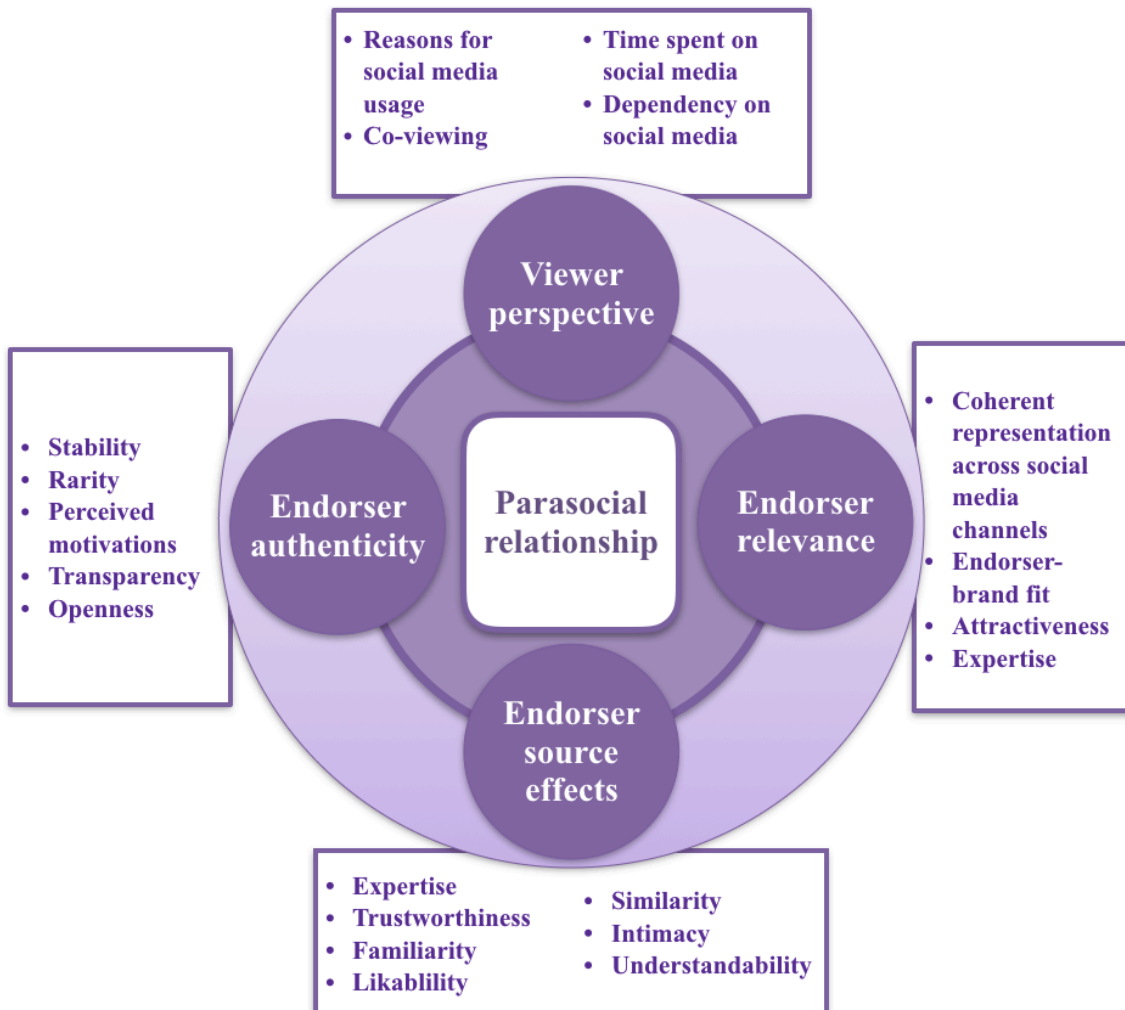


Figure 6. Drivers of parasocial relationships formation on social media

First of all, to understand any consumer behavior on social media, it is necessary to understand why consumers engage with social media in first place (Schultz & Peltier 2013; Barger 2016). The *Viewer perspective* in Figure 6 describes why, how, and how often consumers use social media. Consumers' motivations to use social media affect their behaviors, habits, and communications there: one person is looking for information, another for a new friend (Joinson 2008). According to earlier studies, especially the entertainment and relationship-building motivations and the information-seeking motivation contribute significantly to the formation of parasocial relationships (e.g. Yuan et al. 2016). Viewer perspective as well comprehends the traditional

parasocial relationship drivers co-viewing as proposed by Giles (2002) and dependency and time spent viewing media as proposed by Gleich (1997).

Secondly, *Endorser authenticity* in Figure 6 is currently the most researched antecedent of effective celebrity endorsement and is argued to be critical for the success of endorsements (Djafarova & Rushworth 2016; Ilicic & Webster 2016). Consumers want to see celebrities living normal lives and they want to see them failing too, as it makes it possible for consumers to relate to them (Cornelis & Peter 2017). As parasocial relationships describe exactly this mental action of relating and forming one-sided friendships, it is argued that authentic content mediates not only to the success of endorsements, but also to the formation of parasocial relationships. Earlier studies have shown that people who do not disclose personal details in their social media messages may be viewed as not being honest and authentic (Chung & Cho 2017). Thus, it can be argued that openness and interactivity are essential in building a parasocial relationship (Labreque 2014). Furthermore, authenticity and realness were argued already within traditional mass media by Rubin et al. (1985) and Giles (2002) to be antecedents of parasocial relationship formation.

Thirdly, *Endorser source effects* in Figure 6, endorser attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness, have traditionally been seen to increase the positive endorser effects (e.g. McCracken 1989; Ohanian 1990; Pornpitakpan 2004). Attraction to the media figure was mentioned in early parasocial relationship literature by Rubin et al. (1985) to mediate the formation of such relationship. Lately, source effects have been proven to have a positive impact on the formation of parasocial relationships in an online context (Yuan et al. 2016, Chung & Cho 2017). Individuals are more likely to relate to and form relationships with those people whom they see as being similar to themselves, whereas expertise and trustworthiness have strong impacts on credibility, which is also needed when forming parasocial relationships (McCracken 1989; Yuan et al. 2016).

Fourthly, *Endorser relevance* in Figure 6 has been viewed in the celebrity endorser literature as a critical component of endorsement effectiveness. Relevance describes how relevant the endorser is for the endorsement and is also called fit, congruence, and similarity, and researched under the term “match-up hypothesis”. A common argument is that attractive celebrities are more effective endorsers for products that are used to

enhance one's attractiveness (Kamins 1990). However, physical attractiveness is not the only antecedent of relevance: expertise is also important when forming brand-endorser pairs (Till & Busler 2000). Furthermore, the impact of consumer self-image, previous knowledge of the endorser, and the similarity between the endorser and product brands have been highlighted as determiners of possible congruence (McCormick 2016). Altogether, the majority of studies on perceived endorser relevance argue that positive fit can lead to positive outcomes, such as attitude towards brand or purchase intentions (McCormick 2016). In this thesis, it is assumed that relevance of the endorser is important and that relevant choices of endorsement campaigns also support coherent representation on social media. Coherent representation was mentioned by Giles (2002) to mediate parasocial relationships. Thus, it is assumed in this thesis that relevance supports the formation of parasocial relationships.

Finally, the process of parasocial relationship formation is not linear, but rather a sum of the whole. All four clusters of antecedents are connected to each other and a parasocial relationship is formed as the sum of them all. Furthermore, the already-formed parasocial relationship influences the antecedents too. Through the formed parasocial relationship, an individual has a feeling of knowing an endorser, and this can make her, for example, more dependent on social media, or give her better insights into the endorser through parasocial interactions, and thus helps her to more easily evaluate the relevance, attractiveness, and authenticity of that endorser. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the four fields in Figure 6 overlap in some parts and have an impact on each other. Especially source effects, such as finding someone trustworthy and familiar, usually leads one to find that person authentic too.

3 CONDUCTING THE STUDY

3.1 Research philosophy

All research is based on certain ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, which describe how the researcher views the nature of reality, what she thinks can be known, and how can it be known (Lincoln & Cuba 1985). All these concepts together form different kinds of frameworks – paradigms – that guide the researcher through the whole research process (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Figure 7 summarizes the philosophical assumptions of this study and describes how they frame the topic of this study inside of them. Making the assumptions clear increases the transparency of the study and makes it easier for others to understand (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008).

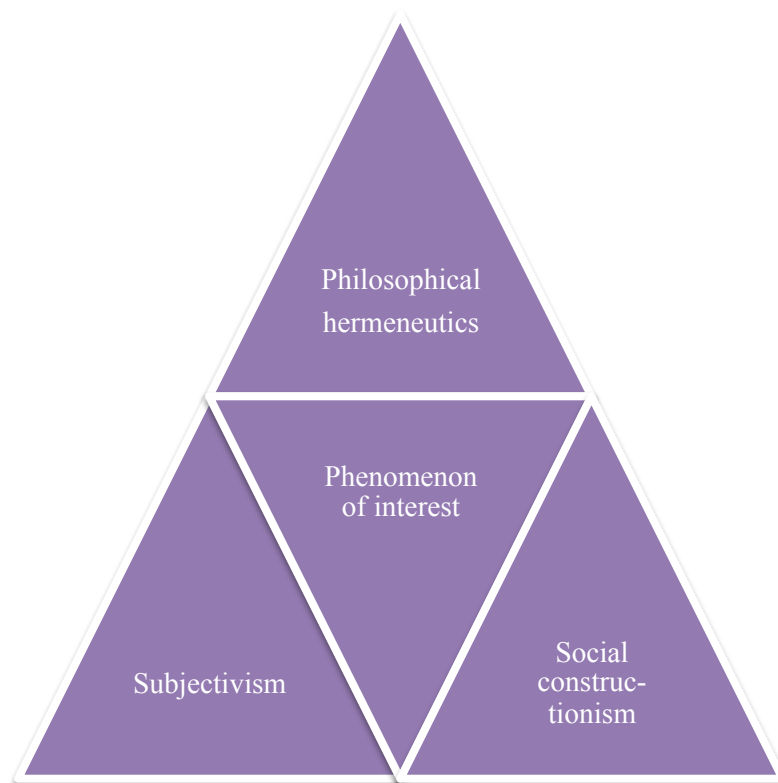


Figure 7. Philosophical base of this study

Referring to the first cornerstone of Figure 7 on the left, this study is *subjective* in nature, arguing that reality is socially constructed (ontology) and can be viewed only

through one's interpretations and observations (epistemology) (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). In this study, the interest lies in the socially constructed view of the social media environment, and it is acknowledged that no independent truth can be identified, as all there is to be known is produced through interpretations and observations made by the researcher and the study participants. The second cornerstone on the right, *social constructionism*, situates this study in the group of other qualitative marketing studies. It is the most adopted paradigm in qualitative marketing research thanks to its ability to support the aims of understanding and describing complex, socially constructed phenomena (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). By basing this thesis in social constructivism, it can be easier related and transferred to other similar studies. This increases the final quality of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008).

Finally, at the top of the triangle in Figure 7 is *philosophical hermeneutics*, in which social constructionism has its roots (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). As hermeneutics highlight the need for continuous interpreting and the importance of pre-understanding, it supports the research problem in this study. Some researchers see it as a methodological assumption, as it has a clear position on how knowledge can be produced, while others see it contributing even to the ontological and epistemological discussion. The hermeneutic approach to conducting research stretches the importance of the role of the researcher's pre-understanding, continuous interpreting, and written text (Laverty 2003).

The hermeneutic approach is further divided into phenomenological hermeneutics, philosophical hermeneutics, and critical hermeneutics (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009). Taking into account the aims of this study, philosophical hermeneutics was chosen to guide the research process from the beginning until the final analysis. The focus of this study is on developing the understanding of the phenomena of Gen Z young women on social media. The pre-understanding of the researcher played key role in all decisions made in this research process. Besides the role of pre-understanding, the aim of the research process was to focus on interpreting, developing the understanding of the researcher, and in this way building a coherent theoretical framework for the study. The hermeneutic approach supported all these efforts.

3.2 Qualitative research

Philosophical assumptions often guide the choice of research methods. A hermeneutic view of research allows for many kinds of methods, but qualitative ones are preferred. Qualitative research can help to shed light on phenomena of interest by allowing how and why questions to be answered (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 5). The emphasis is on interpretation and understanding. Qualitative methods are especially fruitful when the research problem is new and only limited knowledge about it is available (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 5).

3.2.1 Bringing forward knowledge with the hermeneutic helix

Based on hermeneutics, this study strongly adopts the idea of continuous interpreting, which will be presented here with the idea of the hermeneutic helix. Traditionally, the hermeneutic circle describes the act of moving back and forth between the small units and larger parts of the research (Laverty 2003). However, Gummesson (2003) calls this circle a helix to better describe the improvement and advancement of the research process towards a finalized study, instead of remaining at the same level. The hermeneutic helix as a research approach comes close to the abductive way of conducting a study. Traditionally, three different approaches to conducting a study have been identified: deductive, abductive, and inductive. The deductive approach means moving from theory to empirical data, while the inductive approach starts with empirical data and then builds a theory. The abductive approach combines both of these approaches and describes the continuous back and forth movement between the empirical data and theory building (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). In the present study, the research process was guided by the hermeneutic helix, as illustrated in Figure 8.

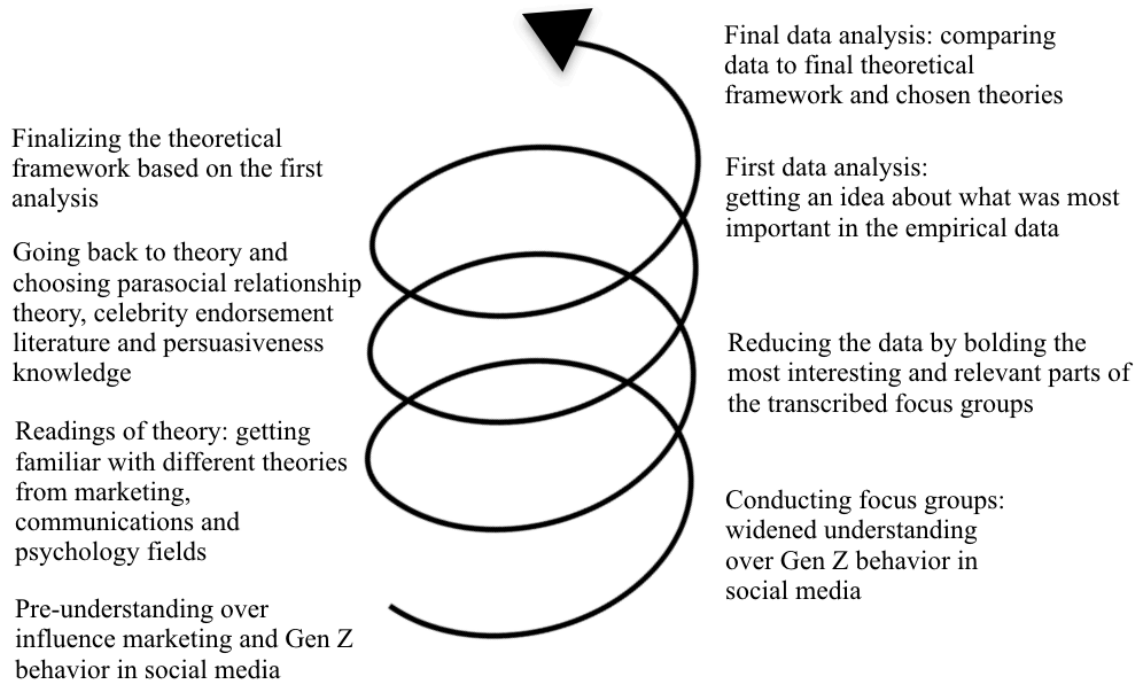


Figure 8. Research process based on hermeneutical helix

Many have argued that pure inductive research is not possible, as researchers always carry some pre-understanding with them (Laverty 2003). Corbin and Strauss (2008) state that a researcher must have an understanding what she will study, either through earlier reading or through her own experiences. In the hermeneutic approach, everyone is seen to have some level of pre-understanding of the phenomenon of interest; this was the case in the present study too. The aim of the research process is to challenge and change this pre-understanding (Laverty 2003). Dubois and Gadde (2002) agree with this view, arguing that going back and forth between empirical observations and theory can help the researcher to expand his understanding of both theory and empirical phenomena. In the beginning of the research process the researcher is expected to have some preconceptions that develop through fieldwork, analysis, and interpretation. Dubois and Gadde (2002) further posit that theory cannot be understood without empirical observation and vice versa. Based on these views, this study employed an abductive approach with a strong use of the hermeneutic helix.

3.2.2 Focus group study

The use of a focus group was selected as the qualitative method in this study. Some researchers see it only as a data collection technique. However, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) argue that, due to its social and communicative nature, where the focus is not only on what is said but also on what is not said and what happens in the group, it can be seen as an independent method. As a research method, the aim of a focus group study is to investigate a specific phenomenon.

A focus group was chosen as the method in this study due to its collective nature and possibility for natural discussion. A focus group study benefits research conducted through a social constructionism lens, as it makes visible the different subjective thoughts through interaction within the group members (Tadajewski 2016). In focus groups, new surprising ideas, thoughts, and interpretations are often generated among the participants, and conflicts can even arise. These events can offer the researcher completely new insights into the topic that would not have been generated in personal interviews (Malhotra & Birks 2007). Thus, it can take the researcher's pre-understanding to a new, unanticipated direction. The focus of the present study is on creating a greater understanding of Gen Z, and as focus group study focuses exactly on bringing up common views of the group rather than personal opinions (Tadajewski 2016), it was seen to serve the purpose of this study well.

3.3 Data generation

In social settings, in which this thesis is based, data is not to be collected as already existing objectives, but is instead generated (Gummesson 2003, 486). Generating data has as important role in the research process and in its quality, as do the later stages of analyzing and interpreting (Gummesson 2003, 486). Generating data in the context of this study means creating it in focus groups. Already in the early stage of the empirical study, the researcher takes decisions that guide the research in a specific direction (Gummesson 2003, 486). These decisions, such as recruiting the participants, planning the focus group discussions, and determining the role of the researcher in the discussions, are discussed in the following sections.

3.3.1 Recruiting the participants

Focus group participants were mainly recruited via Instagram. Out of the three channels of interest – YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram – Instagram was chosen because it allows for direct mailing, unlike Snapchat, and has more accounts and active users than YouTube does. A reasonable number of followers and followees was decided to be 400 followers and followed accounts. People of interest in this study are active social media users who know the topic, and a large number of followed accounts usually indicates activity on Instagram. From a hermeneutic point of view, it is important the participants of a study “have lived the experience” that is the focus of a study (Laverty 2003). Through this kind of recruiting, the participants’ experience was guaranteed in this study.

Young women were found through the Instagram accounts of high schools in Tampere and Lahti, and further through pictures posted together with same-aged women. Altogether, 66 young women were asked on Instagram. They were given an opportunity to join with a friend active on social media, as this was seen to lower the barrier to join the focus group. This kind of snowball technique made it possible to reach more women from the chosen segment. However, Instagram was found to be a challenging place to recruit Gen Z young women because not everyone even saw, or wanted to see, the message sent by the researcher. Therefore, a snowball technique outside of Instagram was also used. Friends of the researcher were asked on Instagram stories and on Facebook to identify 18- or 19-year-old young women active on social media to join the focus group. This recruiting only yielded three participants whereas Instagram yielded 20 participants.

While recruiting, participants were only told that the thesis topic was the behavior of young females on social media. The researcher did not want to give too much detail as it could have guided the discussion in unnatural directions, whereas now the participants did not view the topic through a commercial lens. Participants were told that the research would be made anonymous and that under-aged participants would have to ask their parents for permission to join the study. Focus group participants were also informed that their comments would be published anonymously. All participants asked were at least 17 years of age, which was considered to be old enough to take responsibly

for one's own decisions. Participants were persuaded to join the focus groups by the interesting topic and by offering them a coffee of their choice. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) highlight the importance of voluntary participation, and in this research this was fulfilled as all participants said they even enjoyed the focus groups.

3.3.2 Conducting the focus groups

Three of the four focus groups were organized in the Finnish city of Lahti, and one in Tampere as can be seen from Table 2. All focus group participants were between 17 and 19 years of age (born 1998-2000). The majority of them, 18 of the 23, were in their second, third, or fourth year of high school, whereas three were taking a gap year. Gen Z young women from other education levels were asked to join the discussions too, but none showed interest. Thus, all focus groups were quite homogenous. A group that is too heterogenic can drift too far away from the topic because of their different views and understanding, whereas too much homogeneity can be a barrier for rich discussion (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). In this study, everyone had different hobbies, interests, characteristics, and ways of using social media, which led the discussion to be rich. In all groups, there were friend pairs who knew each other from outside the study (as participants were given the chance to take a friend with them). This made the discussion more natural (Alasuutari 2011) and encouraged the otherwise possibly shy teenagers to join the discussion (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008).

The presence of friends in the same groups did not lead to smaller units within the large groups, mainly thanks to the relatively small number of participants in each group. The views of the optimal size of a focus group vary from 2 to 10 (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008) to 6 to 12 (Malhotra & Birks 2007). In this study, the desired size was 5 to 6 participants. However, cancelling of attendance occurred in the first focus group, which was in the end organized with only 4 participants. In the rest of the groups, all who were asked and even some "extra" friends appeared, and the groups consisted of 6, 7, and 6 participants, respectively. The duration of the focus group discussions varied from 77 to 93 minutes (see Table 2 for summary).

Table 2. Focus groups

	City	Number of participants	Age of participants	Duration of focus group	High school/gap year
Group 1	Lahti	4	17-19	93 min	4/0
Group 2	Lahti	6	18-19	93 min	6/0
Group 3	Tampere	7	18-19	84 min	4/3
Group 4	Lahti	6	17-19	77 min	6/0

The focus groups took place in calm cafés in Lahti and Tampere, and both cafés offered a natural setting (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). As highlighted in the hermeneutic approach to generating data, discussion was as natural and close to the everyday experience as possible (Laverly 2003). Thus, the focus groups were conducted in Finnish as it was the native language of all participants and offered the groups a natural setting. The focus groups were recorded but not videotaped, as this was thought to only decrease the participants' natural feeling in joining the discussion. In addition, nonverbal interaction of the focus groups was not the main interest of this data analysis: the verbal discussion was. However, notes were made during the discussions, and things such as silences, disagreements, smiles, and confused expressions were written down.

In focus group studies, the researcher serves as a moderator, facilitating the discussion (Morgan 1996). The moderator can be active and join the discussion by asking questions (more structured) or let the group discuss freely (less structured) (Morgan 1996; Tadjewski 2016). In addition to asking questions, the moderator can feed the discussion with other techniques such as showing videos and pictures or asking the participants to draw, play, or brainstorm around a specific theme (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009). In this study, the moderator took part in the discussions by guiding the group with questions (see Appendix 1). From a hermeneutic point of view, it is inevitable that the researcher joins the interviews and discussions by taking active part, because the aim is to widen or even change her pre-understanding (Laverly 2003). In addition to questions, viewing Instagram and brainstorming for a marketing campaign were used as

supporting techniques. The facilitating questions and extra materials were tested before the focus groups with friends of the researcher.

The first focus group was originally planned to be a pilot group. However, the discussion was fruitful and interactive, and it was therefore included in this study as one of the four focus groups. Focus group discussions repeated same topics since second group, but to guarantee wide enough data, four groups were conducted.

3.4 Data analysis

After generating the data, it is important to make sense of it by analyzing and interpreting it carefully (Gummesson 2003, 486). Gummesson (2003) states that all research is interpretive and asks for willingness to understand the data. The hermeneutic approach adopted in this study encourages interpreting and widening the understanding by continuously moving back and forth between the pieces of the data and theory (Laverty 2003). A general overview of the research process was given in section 3.2.1, referring to the hermeneutic helix. The analysis process in this study also followed the hermeneutic helix in Figure 8.

To increase transparency, data should be accounted for and all the steps should be recorded carefully (Gummesson 2003). As explained in the previous subchapter, all discussions were audiotaped and short notes were made about the nonverbal communication showing disagreement with or strong support of other members' statements during the discussion. The recording of each focus group discussion was listened to once on the day of the discussion. The next day, each discussion was listened to again and transcribed, and comments were added with the few notes on nonverbal communication. The final result was that all four focus group discussions were transformed into a written form, as this is traditionally seen as the starting point for hermeneutic analysis (Arnold & Fischer 1994).

As the hermeneutic approach is based on the researcher's pre-understanding and the ongoing movement between the parts of the study, there is no defined set of tools for interpreting the data (Laverty 2003). Important in the interpreting process is understanding the underlying context of the research and the act of bringing forth

interpretations of meaning. Imagination, the hermeneutic helix, and attention to language and the writing process are the key aspects of the analysis process (Laverty 2003). By using one's imagination, Laverty (2003) refers to aiming to see something in a new way, deepening one's previous understanding. The idea of the hermeneutic helix in the analysis process is to follow the helix from small parts of the data to larger parts and again back. The interpretive process continues until the hermeneutic helix has led the researcher to sensible meanings of the experience (Laverty 2003). In the analysis process, bracketing and categorizing have important roles in forming the data.

Help in the analysis process was taken from classical content analysis, which according to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) serves the analysis of focus groups well. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002) state that content analysis can be categorized by either basing the analysis on empirical data or theory, or being closely bound to theory. The present study emphasizes the abductive, almost inductive, approach of conducting a study, and thus analysis was strongly based on empirical data. Analysis evolving from data aims to create theoretical integrity that is not guided by earlier knowledge and theories (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002). However, according to the hermeneutic view adopted in the present study, the researcher always starts the research with previous knowledge based on his own experiences and previous studies.

According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009), the first step in the analysis is to reduce the data. This is then followed by clustering it, and then by abstraction attempts. In the present study, the data was reduced by bolding the most interesting and relevant parts of the transcriptions. To better understand the complex data for clustering it, all transcriptions were printed out and manually cut into pieces according to the bolded texts. These pieces were clustered under common themes, and as an abstraction attempt, the clusters were named. However, these clusters were bracketed, categorized, and named many times again before they truly made sense to the researcher. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009) note that clustering and abstracting often overlap, which was the case in this research. Referring to the hermeneutic helix, pieces of clusters were transferred to other clusters until the final analysis.

Table 3. Example of analyzing the data and making interpretations of it

Raw data	Reduced data	Clustered data	Abstraction
“If someone only posts some polished California life, I don’t even wanna watch. I wanna follow those how tell real stories about their very real lives, those whose topics are actual and to whose stories I can relate to. They tell their own opinions and don’t just try to please everyone.”	I wanna follow those how tell real stories about their very real lives , those whose topics are actual and to whose stories I can relate to.	Real stories Real lives Everyday lives Normal life	Authenticity
“Many celebrities are really active in social media and they update a lot about their everyday lives too. Through Snapchat you see their normal life and like that even they eat candies and stuff.”	They update a lot about their everyday lives too. Through Snapchat you see their normal life and like that even they eat candies and stuff.		

The analysis was conducted in Finnish, as this was the language used in the focus groups and is the author’s native language. The categories and some of the chosen citations were translated to English only when they were added to the final written version of this work. Using Finnish ensured that misunderstanding evolving from different languages did not happen.

The analysis revealed different positive and negative factors mediating the quality of social media content posted by endorsers. These factors explain why some content was viewed as more interesting than others, and further why the participants wanted to keep following some endorsers. These factors will be examined in section 4.2. As the guidelines for hermeneutic analysis advise, room should be left in the analysis for imagination and attempts to see new concepts. In this thesis, the importance of social media surprised the researcher, and section 4.1 thus focuses on the motivations for social media usage and on the significance of social media. Based on the data analysis,

three examples of parasocial relationships were characterized and are presented in section 4.3.

To provide deeper view of the empirical data and to support the interpretations, some quotes from the focus groups are offered throughout chapter 4. These quotes were mostly spoken by one person and sometimes completed by another. None of them were protested; instead, they were supported by nonverbal communication in the groups at the data-generating level. Thus, they can be seen as presenting the common socially constructed views formed in the focus groups and are referred in chapter 4 with the number of the focus group.

3.5 Evaluating the quality of the study

Evaluating the quality of a study is a continuous process encompassing all the steps, from choosing the topic and adopting philosophical positions, to developing the theoretical framework and generating, analyzing, and interpreting the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). In this study, the research quality is evaluated in the middle of the thesis so that the reader is able to have a close view of the research process and its quality before seeing the results and conclusions. The criteria for evaluating a study are rooted in the chosen theoretical and methodological perspectives, and they guide the different choices throughout the whole research process (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 21). Accordingly, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) suggest that universal criteria for assessing the quality of a qualitative research process are not possible, as from the social constructivist point of view the researcher is always part of the knowledge production. However, the trustworthiness of a study is important, and to evaluate it, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed perhaps the most frequently applied criteria. According to them, trustworthiness can be further divided into four aspects: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. This thesis will be evaluated with the help of these four aspects, but other issues related to hermeneutics will also be discussed.

Credibility refers to establishing confidence in the findings and interpretations of a research study (Lincoln & Guba 2013). To reach credibility, the researcher must first be familiar with the topic, and second, offer the reader enough information about it too. This was done in chapters 1 and 2 by introducing the topic and reviewing earlier

studies. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) suggest that all logic and interpretation should be explained in detail so that anyone can agree and, with the same level of background knowledge, reach similar interpretations and conclusions. However, the hermeneutic point of view however strongly highlights the pre-understanding of the researcher and her subjective view (Laverty 2003), and it is thus not completely agreed that someone else could repeat this study and yield the exact same results.

However, the strong presence of the researcher does not need to reduce the credibility of the study. Even if the hermeneutic point of view allows the final document to include the researcher's personal assumptions, it requires the philosophical bases of the interpretation to be clearly stated (Laverty 2003, 28). In this study, much attention has been given to presenting the philosophical assumptions and the position of the study in the marketing research field. As Laverty (2003) suggests, the interpretation process should be explicitly presented. Moisander and Valtonen (2006, 35) add that this can be done by using appropriate analytical procedures. In this thesis, rigor is reached by analyzing the data following the same procedures, which in addition are described in detail in section 3.4.

To avoid obscurity in the interpretation process and to make the widening of understanding transparent, both Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Laverty (2003) recommend that researchers keep a reflective journal in which they can write down their thoughts throughout the research process. The present author used a notebook as her journal. From the journal, it can be seen that the very first idea for this thesis was to roughly discuss social media, influencer marketing, the most influential individuals, and Gen Z. During the theory readings and focus group discussions, parasocial interaction was found and further developed with the authenticity literature to reach a narrower scope. A close analysis of the empirical data highlighted the dependency on social media and identity building efforts. Although they were not initially supposed to be included in this study, they could not be completely abandoned, and are thus discussed in chapter 4.

In addition, Lincoln and Guba (1985, 307) suggest three further ways of improving the credibility of research: a prolonged period of engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation. All focus groups lasted no more than 90 minutes, each group was only

organized once, and they were all organized within one week. Thus, there was no prolonged engagement or persistent observation in terms of time spent with the focus groups. However, the researcher has been engaged with social media for years. By following the behavior of her younger sister and cousins on social media and by frequently discussing it, the researcher already had a rather comprehensive view of the topic. Furthermore, the participants of the study were not too far away from the researcher's own age, and thus she often compared the focus groups and the whole research process to her own experiences.

Finally, triangulation refers to the process of using diverse sources or perspectives of information (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 307). Theoretical triangulation was reached by combining theories from different research fields instead of relying on one already existing framework. In the focus groups, triangulation was reached by conducting groups in two cities and by inviting young women with different backgrounds and from different friend groups to participate.

Transferability refers to showing the degree of similarity between this research, or parts of it, and other research, to establish a connection between this study and previous results (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). In interpretivist studies such as this thesis, generalizability and replication are not the aim (Lincoln & Guba 2013). Instead, the applicability of the findings and interpretations should be determined by those who want to apply them, and they should thus be clearly stated and connected to earlier studies ((Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294; Lincoln & Guba 2013, 104). The findings of this research are actively related to earlier knowledge, and the study both challenges and contributes to the existing literature, as proposed by Moisander and Valtonen (2006, 34).

Dependability refers to offering information to the reader and carefully documenting the process so that it is logical and traceable (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). It addresses how the findings and interpretations could be determined to be an outcome of a consistent and dependable process (Lincoln & Guba 2013, 104). In this study, the focus is on transparency, and since the first chapter, there has been a strong attempt to offer the reader exact information on the research process and its hermeneutic and inductive nature. The theoretical and methodological perspectives have been clearly

defined (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 33). Furthermore, it has been highlighted multiple times that the researcher's understanding was widened through the hermeneutic helix and that the interpretations are dependent on the interpreter (Laverty 2003).

Confirmability as a criterion ensures that the data and interpretations are not just imagination. The findings and interpretations should be linked to data in ways that are easily understood by others (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). Hence, the empirical data is comprehensively presented in the following chapter to offer the reader proof of the linkage between the data and the findings.

4 PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF GEN Z YOUNG WOMEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA

4.1 Social media as part of Gen Z's life

This study supports Fournier and Avery's (2011) thought that marketers are mainly uninvited guests on social media. Focus group participants did not follow any brand accounts on social media apart from a few exceptions. Hence, marketers can only reach teens' most used channels, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube, through endorsers or paid ads. However, paid ads might make brands look like annoying "party crashers" (Batra & Keller 2016) as according to the focus group participants, they often interfere with the flow of beautiful pictures on Instagram, interrupt the communication with friends on Snapchat, and block the immediate viewing of videos on YouTube.

I'm annoyed by most of the ads (on Instagram) as they are often ugly and visually not fitting with those accounts I have decided to follow. In general, I hate it when ads are forced on me. (2)

Hence, to reach Gen Z on social media, only endorser marketing is left in marketing practitioners' toolboxes. Based on the four focus group discussions, this seems to be an effective way of reaching teenagers, as all participants were following some sorts of endorsers on different social media channels. In addition to friends, the participants followed different kinds of endorsers: artists, athletes, actors, models, bloggers, Instagrammers, vloggers, photographers, and other people famous on social media. Once they were interested in an endorser, they usually wanted to follow that person on all possible channels, as this helped them to have a broader view of and better know the endorser.

All four conducted focus groups highlighted the meaning of social media for the participants. Thus, before analyzing the endorser-based drivers of parasocial relationship formation, next section examines the participants' reasons for using social media. An unexpected finding of this thesis was that social media played a central role in the participants' identity building efforts. They used social media, for example, to stay updated on "what is cool at the moment" and utilized this information when

expressing themselves to their peers. Often, it was exactly the followed endorsers who determined what was trendy in different fields. Thus, after examining the reasons for social media usage, the role of social media in identity building is shortly discussed.

4.1.1 Reasons for social media usage

Yuan et al. (2016) argue that especially consumer's entertainment and relationship-building motivations and information-seeking motivations are central to parasocial relationship formation. All three forms of motivations were strongly supported in this study. Regarding the entertainment motivation, participants mentioned spending time and alleviating their boredom as some of their main reasons for hanging out on social media.

I sometimes watch some videos when I'm bored. It can be addictive. Like you go to watch one video and then there's always another one. (2)

It's like a habit. I mean, if I were to delete Instagram, for example, I would feel, I would feel, like, empty. (1)

--Yeah that's true, it's just automatic that once you open your phone you go through all platforms. Then you close it and then shortly afterwards you take your phone out again and go through it all again although nothing has changed. It really is like a habit. (1)

Relationship-building mainly took place on Snapchat with friends, whereas on Instagram the participants followed some celebrities, friends of friends, artists, actors, photographers, bloggers, vloggers, Instagrammers, and social media celebrities such as the Kardashian family or the smaller-scale Finnish "influencers". According to Sheldon and Bryant (2016), popular celebrities have an important role in determining coolness and popularity, and this why they are highly followed. In the focus group, staying up-to-date about what is cool and gaining inspiration were recognized as strong reasons for social media use. Furthermore, positive energy, motivation, gym tips, fashion news, and information about multiple different things were also mentioned. Escapism and peeking (Lee et al. 2015) as motives were supported as well.

I mainly look at make-up tutorials or advice for gym training. Something that gives me inspiration. I wanna see positive things. (4)

Sometimes I just stalk people. Like now, when I had my final exams in high school and I should have been studying, I just went to the Instagram explore page and looked at how other people were doing. I was escaping my exams. (2)

Using Instagram and Snapchat was an inalienable part of the day for all participants of the study. In other words, statistics about Gen Z's social media usage are not false, although it must be noted that the participants of this study were recruited mainly on Instagram and can thus be seen as representing the more active half of their generation. Explanations for the high usage of Instagram and Snapchat found in this study might be that members of Gen Z feel the need to belong to a group (William & Page 2011) and know what is going on in the world in general (Sheldon & Bryant 2016). Based on the focus groups, it can be argued that teens want to constantly know what is happening on social media so that they will not be left out of the newest trends, and so that they always know what others are talking about. That is, social media and the different actions of friends or widely followed endorsers are common discussion topics at school and in teenagers' spare time. Hence, the predictors of parasocial relationship formation introduced by Giles (2002), co-viewing and user context, seem to be relevant for today's social media relationships as well.

On the other hand, Gleich (1997) proposes that the amount of time spent watching television or the possible dependency on it facilitates parasocial relationship formation. Today, teenagers no longer watch television, but social media. Based on both the statistics of social media usage (eBrand 2016; Edison Research & Triton Digital 2017) and the focus group discussions, it can be argued that Gen Z young women spend the majority of their day on social media and, as already quoted above, spending time there is a daily habit on which they are dependent. Thus, of the drivers of the formation of parasocial relationships, user motivations, co-viewing, and dependency on social media are strongly supported.

4.1.2 Identity building on Instagram

It was found in this study that Instagram had a significant role in the young women's identity building efforts. One reason for this could be that the participants were recruited through Instagram and were thus more active there than the average. However, whereas Snapchat was used to chat with friends and YouTube to be informed, for

Instagram, the need to make one's own life look cool was highlighted. This is in line with earlier work by Lee et al. (2015), who found that self-expression is one of the five main motives for Instagram usage. The focus group participants did not publish pictures on Instagram often: on average not more than once a week, which is rarely compared to their multiple visits to Instagram per day. This is explained by the high standards they had for photos they published. Critical to watch out for was how a picture fit their feed, each Instagram user's "homepage". There were unwritten rules, such as "never post two selfies in a row" and "colors have to be somehow coordinated". Although not every focus group member admitted to being this strict with her own feed, everyone still had strict criteria for their own pictures.

I don't think so much about what I post, but sure, I think a bit about whether it fits with the other pictures on my feed based on the colors and so on... (3)

One of my friends even has two profiles. The other one is private and she doesn't allow anyone to follow it because she only uses it to test how the picture will look on her real feed. (3)

The question is then where these high expectations regarding one's own pictures come from. The participants explained how they admire the visuality of some Instagram user, the funny stories told by another, and the trendy clothes worn by a third; thus, it can be deduced that while endorsers offer teens inspiration and motivation, they also simultaneously form the expectations that members of Gen Z have of their own lives. In their study, Boon and Lomore (2001) recognized that young consumers borrowed aspects related to their identity development from celebrities they admired. Similarly, McCracken (1989) argues that young consumers might find these celebrities personally relevant and use them in constructing their self-concepts.

If I look at my old pictures and there are some bad ones, I delete them. I mean, you just look at them like, no, that's not a good one. They're the pictures where you look somehow, somehow different. (4)

I like to look at others' travel photos, especially before I go on vacation myself. You can get ideas about what kinds of pictures you can take yourself and post from your holiday, and see what the cool places to visit are. (2)

According to Pounders et al. (2016), selfie-posting has become the new tool for self-presentation. Focus group participants also published many selfies. Pounders et al. (2016) suggest that by posting selfies, consumers are able to manage the impression

they make and further show their happiness and physical appearance to others. They suggest that self-esteem serves both as a motivator and an outcome of the selfie-posting process. This was supported in the present study. Focus group participants wanted to publish pictures to make both themselves and their lives look good, happy, and beautiful. As feedback on their photos, they always waited to receive a certain number of likes and comments. These likes and comments further helped them to build and develop their identities and strengthen their self-esteem.

Instagram is a bit, like, like people learn to know what kind of person I am through Instagram. They get a good view of me from Instagram. Sure I've planned what I want to tell them. (2)

You try to find a picture like, "look how cool my life is". (4)

When I post a picture that doesn't reach the same number of likes as my pictures usually do on Instagram, I start to wonder if it's somehow worse. And then I delete it. I always like and comment on my friends' pictures. (3)

As mentioned, the participating teens visited Instagram multiple times a day but only rarely posted pictures. Hence, according to this thesis, the main reason for Instagram use cannot be to archive one's own pictures, as argued by Lee et al. (2015). Nor can it be social interaction with one's own friends, also postulated by Lee et al. (2015), as friends do not post pictures any more often. Instead, based on the focus groups, *peeking* and *escapism* are supported as reasons for social media usage in general, and they can later even facilitate parasocial relationships. The focus groups' reasons for social media usage are illustrated in Figure 9.

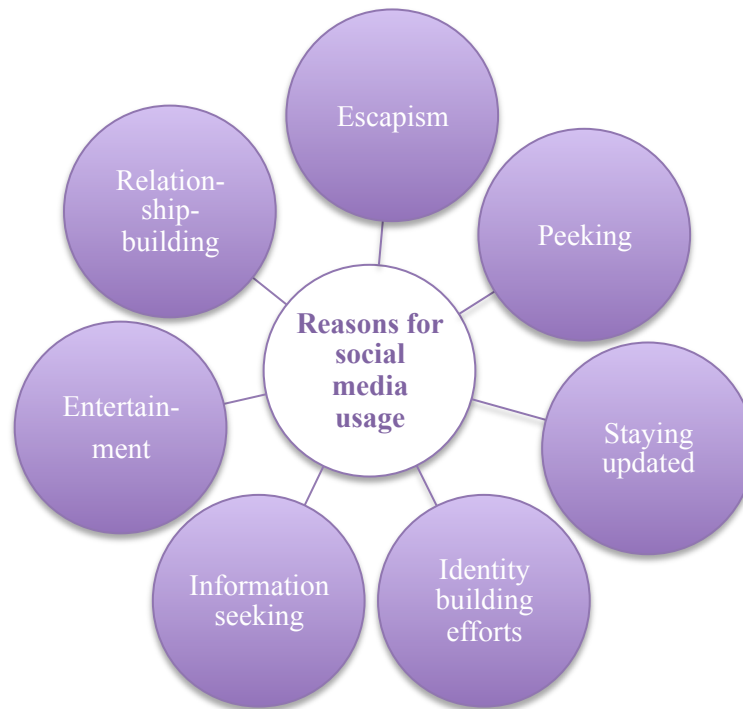


Figure 9. Reasons for social media usage as emphasized in focus groups

According to Escalass and Bettman (2017), teens who feel a high need to belong are the ones who use social media to build their identities and are keen to transfer celebrities' images onto themselves. This study did not test the need to belong, but based on the participants' intensity and emphasis when discussing Instagram, and the time they spent there looking at endorsers' posts, it can be assumed that the participants wanted to belong there, be in that scene, and use endorsers' posts as help in their own *identity building efforts*. They were ready to learn from the endorsers and were thus susceptible to parasocial relationships.

4.2 Endorser-based drivers of parasocial relationship formation

In addition to the viewer-dependent predictors of parasocial relationship formation, much depends on the behavior of the endorser. Some endorsers naturally act in such a way that the viewers want to establish a friendship with them. However, through the analysis, it was easy to see the common themes contributing to parasocial relationship formation. These themes were identified by discussing what is good and what is bad content posted by endorsers. In the theoretical framework of this thesis, the endorser-

based drivers were grouped under three main themes: source effects, perceived authenticity, and endorser relevance. However, in the focus group discussions, the three themes were not all equally important. The following sections discuss the main antecedents of good – and bad – content of an endorser. They serve as mediators in parasocial relationship formation, as people usually want to establish a friendship with those whose content they like.

4.2.1 Authenticity through transparency and coherency in communications

In the focus group discussions, the participants frequently used the terms “real”, “everyday life”, and “normal life” when describing the content they liked to follow. Correspondingly, Munoz et al. (2006) suggest that the words “original, genuine, traditional and real” stand for authenticity. Hence, the results of this study follow earlier ones, highlighting the important of *authenticity* both in celebrity endorser effectiveness (Kowalczyk & Pounders 2016) and in parasocial relationship formation (Giles 2002). Each of the three most used social media channels, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram, was slightly differently characterized, and they largely supported each other in the endorsers’ authenticity ambitions. Snapchat was perceived as the channel where the endorsers come closest to the viewers with their everyday videos of their own lives. However, the participants expected real, everyday posts on Instagram, in addition to beautiful and visually perfect pictures. Thirdly, YouTube was seen as a channel where effort was made for each video, but the participants still claimed that some endorsers managed to stay more authentic than others. Most endorsers are present on all channels and in the opinions of the focus group participants, this helps them to build a coherent picture of themselves.

Many celebrities are really active on social media and they post a lot of updates about their everyday lives too. Through Snapchat, you see their normal life and, like, that even they eat candy and stuff. (2)

Being real and authentic led to another important theme: relating. While the focus group participants followed endorsers to be inspired by them and to peek into their lives, they also followed them to relate to them. Seeing the endorsers eating candy, experiencing sad days or chaos at home, and talking about real, deep topics gave the focus group participants a feeling that these endorsers were normal people. This finding is in line with those of Ilicic and Webster (2016) and Cornelis and Peter (2017), who both argue

that experiencing endorsers failing and living life like normal people helps consumers to relate to them.

If someone only posts some polished California life, I don't even wanna look. I wanna follow those who tell real stories about their very real lives, those whose topics are actual and to whose stories I can relate. They share their own opinions and don't just try to please everyone. (3)

According to the focus group discussions, authenticity is facilitated by *transparency*. Ilicic and Webster (2016) suggest that being honest and truthful in interactions increases authenticity, and the same results were found in the focus group analyses too. Honesty was often referred to by arguing that the endorsers should always indicate or somehow clearly mark in their pictures or videos when they post a collaboration and endorse something; be transparent.

I really appreciate them adding a sponsorship hashtag there, or somehow indicating that it's an ad. I feel fooled when they don't. (4)

Yep, it's somehow even more credible when they indicate it. I just saw one campaign that many endorsers were part of, and they always said at the beginning of the videos that "hey, this is a campaign for this and that". Otherwise I would have started to think like, wow, what are you all doing now? (4)

To prove their truthfulness, the participants expected the endorsers to be honest about the products whose brands they were collaborating with. According to the focus groups, honesty can be shown via straightforward reviews of products. In general, the participants were doubted that any endorser would say negative things about a product they endorsed. The truthfulness could be increased, for example, by showing that a product really was in use, such as showing shampoo in the shower or running shoes during training. Referring to strong parasocial relationships, it was argued in the focus groups that when the viewer "knows" the endorser, for example by having followed her on social media for a long time, the viewer knows if she is speaking the truth and being honest.

I feel that it's good when they say some negative things too. That makes the messages more reliable. I mean, if someone is only praising every product, that's not reliable anymore. Or, they should share their real experiences with using the products. (1)

Presumed motivations of the endorser have been shown to be central in the level of perceived authenticity (Moulard et al. 2016), and they played a central part in the focus group discussions too. When someone was appraised as being motivated only by monetary incentives, she or he was immediately considered to be inauthentic. Sometimes, collaborations seemed to be far away from the endorser's "real self", and he or she was thus viewed to be motivated only by money. Furthermore, the participants viewed an account full of promotions as inauthentic, as too many collaborations gave the followers a hint that the endorser was only interested in money.

I don't know if she would have written that text if she hadn't received those for free. (2)

I don't understand why anyone collaborates with that brand. I can't help thinking that she just wants money from the collaboration. (2)

There are people whose accounts are so full of collaborations, and there are always links in every photo to somewhere, even if the photo has nothing to do with them. I feel then, like, what does this have to do with anything? I feel as if they really only do it for money. (3)

Once again, the participants in the focus groups argued that they noticed when someone was motivated by only money or not. To this end, good knowledge of the endorser, a parasocial relationship with her, is needed. In one focus group, the discussion turned to an endorser and her authenticity and motivations. Some of the participants argued that they "knew" the endorser and were thus sure that she would not promote an unnecessary product for money, whereas the other half was sure she only did it for money.

Maybe you need some kind of knowledge of people so that you can evaluate what they say and write. I mean, if it's a collaboration blog text, you are even prepared to hear only good things, and I mean, then it helps if you know the background of the person and if you can trust her. (1)

You see if they endorse because they really like it or not. I find it nice when someone endorses a new brand for free, like a small Finnish one or so. (1)

Celebrity brand authenticity can be understood as the celebrity "being true to" him- or herself (Ilicic & Webster 2016). In this study, being true to oneself was related to *staying true to one's own style*. As followers cannot truly judge whether endorsers are true to themselves, they judge whether the endorsers stay true to their own previous

style and posted content. This also relates to the person's stability and coherence, as proposed by Moulard et al. (2016). In the focus groups, staying true to one's own style was mainly discussed in terms of whether or not the style of the content seemed to fit the perceived character of the endorser.

Nice post, because it fits her other posts. It's not too different from her other style. (2)

I immediately thought about her when I saw this picture. I've gotten to know her and she isn't only doing easy promotions, but always has beautiful photos like this one. (4)

In the focus group discussions, collaborations were seen as a threat to staying true to one's own style, as sometimes endorsers changed their style of communication when posting collaborations. Correspondingly, Yuksel and Labreque (2016) note that endorsers should not accept overly restrictive communication guidelines for campaigns, as this may put their perceived authenticity at risk. For example, one of the participants said that she saw two rather different endorsers post a picture with the same product and the same text on Instagram on the same day. She did not find this credible as the content did not fit both accounts.

You really easily hear it from YouTubers if they've been told what they have to say. I mean, there's a huge difference between giving a speech someone planned for you beforehand and then just talking about it on Snapchat while you talk about other stuff too. I trust it more when it's just natural, I mean it's horrible when, for example, the endorsed products in a YouTube video are lined up nicely behind them. That's, that's like an ad. (1)

Sometimes how they write these texts reveals it as advertising. Like when the text is too decorated. (3)

Hence, it is important that endorsers keep their own style even in collaborations. For example, the participants expected vloggers on YouTube to make videos typical for them, and if they once focused too much on promoting something, attitudes automatically became negative. A few of the participants even commented that they did not watch videos if the headline already indicated a collaboration, as they did not think these videos represented the endorser they wanted to see. Thus, endorsements should not be given too much power, but rather should be included in the normal content. Figure 10 illustrates the antecedent of authenticity as understood in focus groups.

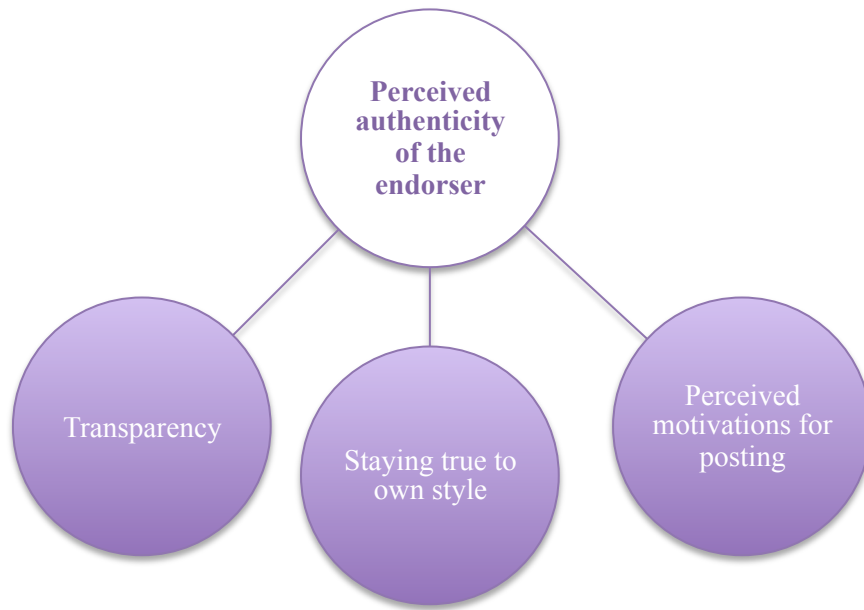


Figure 10. Antecedents of perceived authenticity as emphasized in focus groups

Whereas in theory authenticity was described in multiple ways, in focus groups it came down to these three antecedents, which helped the participants to evaluate whether the endorser is authentic or not.

4.2.2 Interaction efforts

Earlier studies have stated that with its sharing options, social media has made it easy for endorsers to share insights into their lives with their followers, and that this kind of interactive behavior can strengthen parasocial relationships (Yuksel & Labreque 2016). For example, Bond (2016, 656) found that social interactions on social media with an endorser, such as retweets or comments on Twitter, strengthened feelings of parasocial relationships and had an even more important role in its formation than perceived realism. Similarly, the sharing and interaction efforts were highlighted in the present study too. Focus group participants indicated that they liked when endorsers asked them questions, or when they posted question-and-answer posts or videos where the followers could ask anything. In addition, according to the focus groups, the Instagram voting function is brilliant. However, interaction does not always have to be in the form of questions; normal friend-like chatting on respective channels can be seen as interacting too.

On Snapchat, the celebrities come closer. Somehow through their communications there, you realize that they are only human beings too. They feel more familiar then. For example, when there's a possibility on Snapchat to send them messages, I get a feeling that "OK, she's interested in me". But I never text them. (1)

--Yeah, you get a feeling that they really care about the opinions of other people. (1)

Openness in communications comes close to the themes of authenticity and relatedness. Open and interactive communications may stimulate feelings of knowing the endorser, her style, and her motivations for endorsements, and this can further help the follower to relate to the endorser. However, the participants did not discuss being interactive as an antecedent of authenticity, but rather as an independent driver of parasocial relationship formation. Endorsers' interaction efforts are not limited to their own social media channels: their way of behaving outside of social media, for example at events or according to magazines, also influences the way their followers view them. By restricting publicity too much, by never attending events or, in the worst-case scenario, by being unfriendly and arrogant when meeting followers at events, endorsers' interaction efforts are negated.

We were just at a fitness convention and met one of the endorsers I follow on social media. She was really friendly and talked to us. And then we saw this other one I follow too and she didn't say hi or anything. Somehow, I got a really arrogant image of her. And when I don't like someone, I don't follow them even if they have a nice style or something. (4)

In her study of Kim Kardashian's communications, Lueck (2015) found that the interactive questions Kardashian addressed to her followers lured them into believing that she truly wanted and needed their answers, and eventually engaged followers in an even tighter parasocial friendship. Thus, a mere rhetorical question every now and then can keep followers happy. The analysis in the present study supports Lueck's (2015) idea, as the participants did not expect too much, and even a small effort made by an endorser was rewarded with friendship.

4.2.3 Relevance of the endorser

In addition to authenticity and interaction efforts, relevance of the endorser plays an important role in defining good content with which the participants might want to

engage through a parasocial relationship. The participants discussed relevance, or endorser-brand congruence or fit, especially regarding the choices of collaboration brands. When there seemed to be no fit between the endorser and a brand she was promoting, the collaboration was viewed negatively. In line with McCormick (2016), the focus group participants based perceived relevance on their previous knowledge of the endorser and her skills. Kamins (1990) argues that physical attractiveness mediates relevance, whereas Till and Busler (2002) add expertise to the list. In this study, both antecedents were found. Some comments on good fitness or fashion content were rather superficial and revealed that in the opinions of some focus group participants, one's physical appearance also determines whether or not one is relevant for a brand. However, participants more strongly emphasized expertise as a mediator of relevance.

Someone who doesn't play sports shouldn't be endorsing a sports product. It has to be someone who knows what she's doing, someone who really is interested. (2)

Someone whose life the product can be a natural part of, someone who really stands for that, supports that. (1)

When the participants imagined being asked to be endorsers for a brand, they strongly leaned on relevance in their reasoning of whether or not they would do it. Furthermore, at the end of the focus group discussion, they were given the task of planning a marketing campaign. All groups planned to use endorsers, and they highlighted that the endorsers would have to be relevant to the product.

Many who follow me on social media know how I am. And if I then started to promote something that doesn't fit me, everyone would notice. They would be like, why on earth are you doing that? (2)

The focus group participants often saw content irrelevant to one endorser, and this automatically led them to doubt her motives, as well as her authenticity. The problem of irrelevance can be avoided by staying coherent not only in the content style, but also in the choice of collaborations and in other actions on social media. As Giles (2002) suggests, having a coherent representation in all actions across different media channels can help in the formation of parasocial relationships. By making coherent choices in their behavior and collaborations, endorsers can make themselves easier to follow and thus more familiar to the followers. This can further encourage parasocial feelings.

Coherence and other antecedents of relevance as discussed in focus groups are illustrated in Figure 11.

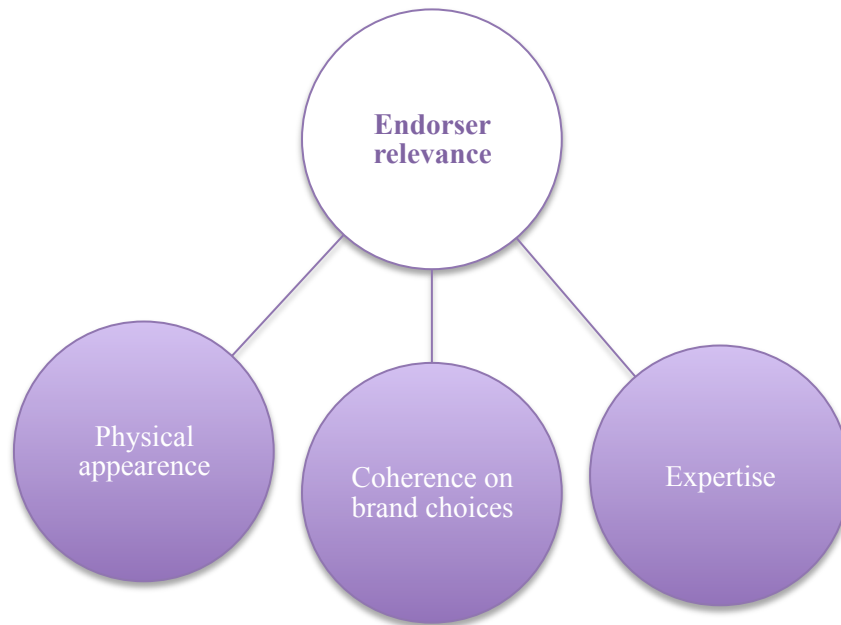


Figure 11. Antecedents of endorser relevance as emphasized in focus groups

Relevance can be maintained through these three antecedents of which coherence on brand choice is however most pivotal, as irrelevance in collaborations can lead even to end of a parasocial relationship. This and two other possibilities will be discussed in next chapter.

4.3 Different forms of parasocial relationships

This chapter examines the drivers of parasocial relationship formation by introducing three different characterizations of such relationships. Theran et al. (2010) investigated the different forms parasocial relationships can take among adolescents. Whereas most participants in their study indicated that they considered media figures as media figures despite feeling some parasocial connection to them, some called the media figures friends and even role models. Besides the different forms of parasocial relationships identified by Theran et al., Fournier (1998) found that different types of relationships formed between brands and consumers, ranging from an old friendship to a marriage. However, little attention has been given to the different kinds of parasocial relationships

that can develop between two persons. In this study, three different kinds of relationships were recognized. They are introduced in following sections.

4.3.1 I know her

During the focus group discussions, the participants often talked about well-known endorsers as if they knew them, as if they were their friends. They used the word “know”, argued that they knew endorsers from the past because they had been following them for so long, and further stated that they, for example, knew whether someone was trustworthy or not because they knew the person. When it came to their parasocial friends, the focus group participants seemed to be motivated not only by information-seeking and entertainment reasons in the form of gym or make-up tips, but even more strongly by peeking. As Gleich (1997) proposed, dependency on (social) media can lead to parasocial relationships, and based on the focus group, it can lead further to dependency on the parasocial friend.

Actually, I don't even know why I follow her, but I guess it's become a habit. I wanna know how she's doing. (3)

A parasocial friendship can develop into a very close friendship, as illustrated by the relationship between one focus group participant and a Finnish vlogger. Their “close” relationship came up multiple times in one focus group discussion. The participant in question was ready to believe almost anything this vlogger said.

I've got an honest image of Miisas on Instagram. She posted a picture of one café in Helsinki, and I really got a feeling that I wanna go there too. (1)

When the researcher took part in the focus group discussion by asking whether the group thought this picture of a café was sponsored, or whether the endorser received a free coffee for it, the engaged participant denied this, arguing that she trusted Miisas and did not think so. Regarding a second post by Miisas, the same participant argued that Miisas would have told her if she had been collaborating with a specific shoe brand:

I know her, she's honest. Or, I mean, at least I have an honest image of her. She wouldn't have done that for money, she would have told me if she had. (1)

The idea of knowing someone from following them for a long time came up in all focus groups to some extent. Perceiving the endorser as authentic was essential for this kind of strong feeling. The endorser had to be transparent in her actions and post content that was similar to her older style, as this was how the followers evaluated whether the endorser was still the authentic person they once knew or whether she had changed. Furthermore, the endorsers were expected to be motivated by real values and goodwill instead of monetary incentives. To show authenticity and to engage the participants in a parasocial relationship, the endorser had to stay consistent in her actions and communicate about her life in an interactive way. Thus, to develop into a friendship, all the drivers of parasocial relationships had to be fulfilled, but the motivations of the participants were highlighted as they were the ones who finally established the friendship. Establishing a friendship was not a decision participants were aware of making, but one that occurred through days, months, and years of following. Once such a friendship is established, endorsers have a good chance of influencing their followers.

I know her background and I don't think she would be endorsing something useless, and I've also heard a lot of good about these socks. I would go and read that post. (3)

Once the participants established a parasocial friendship with someone, depending on its strength, they even accepted the occurrence of negative things. This means that once a parasocial relationship was formed, participants allowed the endorser to make mistakes such as choosing irrelevant collaborations or having questionable motives. However, there was a limit to what they would accept from their parasocial friends.

I don't think that kind of collaboration is her thing. I mean, did she just force that product to fit her daily life or does she really always eat that stuff? (4)

Once an endorser disappoints her followers too many times, the relationship might become a negative old friendship, as discussed in the next section, or might finally even die.

4.3.2 I knew her but nowadays she is different

Once the drivers of parasocial relationship are no longer met or the endorser shows continuous negligence, the relationship might turn into a negative one before the final break-up comes. This development of the relationships reflects Fournier's (1998)

findings regarding how brands can take different forms of relationship partners, depending both on the brand and on the consumer's phase of life. When considering the parasocial relationships in this thesis, the most common case of a negative friendship is one of an old friend one used to know, but who has somehow changed. According to the focus groups, the worst kind of change is when endorsers become arrogant and start to see their followers as fans instead of friends. This often happens to endorsers once they are given more publicity.

I guess the change comes when you get more followers and, thanks to that, attention from companies and collaborations, and so your posts are different. These people with their collaborations are ruining my feed. (2)

I've been following him (YouTube star) for rather long and I somehow think that he is increasingly aware of his own situation and fame. I've even heard from people who know him in real life that he doesn't say hi to his old friends anymore. (1)

The participants themselves could change too, but this was not discussed in the focus groups. Noteworthy is that the participants have been following many endorsers for years, and both parties had most likely changed during those years. However, the participants did not discuss those changes, and it is thus assumed that they considered this kind of development as normal growing up with friends. However sometimes the endorser and viewer grew in different directions, for example when the endorser became pregnant and started to post about family, or became an ambassador for a brand the viewer was completely against. Although some of the focus group participants still continued to follow their parasocial friends with a slight filter over the "most annoying" posts, some stopped their friendship completely. Of the reasons for social media usage, especially information-seeking and entertainment (Yuan et al. 2016) and peeking (Lee et al. 2015) were no longer fulfilled, as following these endorsers did not offer the viewers the life they wanted to follow and learn about anymore.

The transformation into an old friendship, or otherwise negative relationship, was most often caused by the endorser's lack of authenticity and irrelevant actions. Lack of authenticity is a serious concern for those endorsers who suddenly end up changing their habit of talking about themselves, their style of posting, or the type of brands with which they collaborate. Followers base their evaluations of authenticity on the earlier knowledge they have about the endorser, and as Moulard et al. (2016) propose, the

endorser's stability and coherence play an important role here. A stable image is facilitated by coherent choices of collaborations, which further helps viewers to either keep or change their assumptions of the endorser's motivations.

Sometimes you notice, when someone gets more followers, that they start to more carefully think about what do they post. For example, I have this one blogger I have followed since she started, and in the beginning her posts were personal but now she isn't sharing much at all. I mean, maybe it's what you get used to, but sometimes I wish she would share something real about her life again, like how it's really going at the moment. (1)

In addition to the actual content and activities, the style of the content should stay coherent and the communications at least as transparent and interactive as earlier. When there is less friend-like chatting and interaction with endorsers, followers easily feel that they are no longer respected as friends, and they thus either perceive the endorsers as old, more distant friends, or they end the friendship completely.

Although the focus group participants were still following many of their old and nowadays even somewhat annoying parasocial friends, these kinds of relationships are not as effective from a marketing point of view. If a parasocial friend talked about a nice café or good mascara, the focus group participants took this advice as honest, friend-like tips. However, in the negatively colored parasocial friendships, the information-seeking motive no longer existed, and trust in the endorsers was lower as the participants were not sure about their motives. In other words, the collaborations carried out by old parasocial friends were questioned more than those by good parasocial relationships. Section 4.3.4 will closely discuss the focus group participants' understanding of persuasiveness.

4.3.3 I wish I was like her

Finally, endorsers can serve as role models. In the parasocial relationship literature, it has already been recognized that parasocial relationships can take the form of admiring someone. For example, Theran et al. (2010) suggest that a role model is one of the ways adolescents characterize their parasocial relationship partners. However, in both their study and the present one, perceiving the parasocial relationship partner as a role model was not the most common form of parasocial relationship, but rather the ultimate one. To develop an admiring relationship instead of a friendship, the endorser has to fully

meet all the previously discussed drivers of parasocial relationship formation. The deciding point, however, is the motivation of the viewer to engage in a parasocial relationship. When all reasons, including entertainment, information-seeking, social interaction, peeking, and especially escapism (Lee et al. 2015; Yuan et al. 2016), were met and the viewer was also keen to learn and develop herself with the help of the endorser, a role-model kind of relationship was built.

I'm looking for positive energy and motivation. I follow people who are quite different than I am, who live differently than I do. I mean, it's cool to follow them. Some of them are so weird, some so personal. I think often that I wish I was like that, I wish I was as bold. (2)

I enjoy following those positive people who give you motivation and who are just positive and funny. They are social and they always say things that put me in a good mood. I mean, maybe I admire them a little or something. (4)

Based on the focus groups, it is not possible to clarify who looks for a role model, as it seemed to be normal for everyone to have that one endorser they looked up to in some way or another. Sometimes, the participants admired the endorser's whole life, sometimes her career, sometimes her family, sometimes her fit body and style, or, as seen below, just her good sense of posting photos on Instagram.

She has amazing photos, I wish my feed looked like this too. (3)

When admiring, the focus group participants seemed to be ready to accept every piece of advice or promotion the endorsers made, as this could bring them closer to their life. Thus, it can be argued that the role model kind of parasocial relationship is most effective marketing-wise. However, this type of relationship is only established by followers once they find a person they admire and into whose life they would like to escape. Endorsers cannot influence whether a friendship or a role model relationship is established, as the drivers from their side remain the same.

4.3.4 Understanding of persuasiveness

As stated in theory chapter, one of the major advantages of utilizing endorsers and their parasocial relationships is that consumers lack persuasion knowledge on these occasions. For example, Lueck (2015) suggest that as the method of reaching consumers through endorsers is still rather new, consumers' persuasion knowledge is not activated, and they often do not even view the endorsement as an advertisement. It

has been proposed that this might be the case especially for the younger generations (Wright et al. 2005), and the findings of this thesis fully support this view. Especially when the participants saw an endorser as a friend or role model, they did not question that person's commercial posts, even when the participants saw the hashtags disclosing the collaborations.

It was also found that the participants had general difficulties noticing commercial purposes. All focus groups were asked to find Instagram pictures behind which there could be collaboration with a brand. The majority of the participants could not name a single photo from their newswire as a possible collaboration. It can be interpreted that the participants did not notice collaborations whether they were disclosed or not. All of the study participants followed accounts that posted collaborations, and besides, anyone could have been offered a free lunch or free hotel room for a nice picture, but the Gen Z young women did not understand this possibility. On some occasions, participants saw the persuasion purposes as a normal part of blogger communications and viewed them positively without questioning them.

I think it's nice that she tagged those clothes, as now I can go look for same ones. I don't know if it matters if she got these for free or not. I mean, she's a fashion blogger anyway, this is what we expect from her. (3)

It was interesting to notice that while persuasion knowledge was rather underdeveloped in some respects, the participants did not want to be fooled by endorsers and marketers, and were thus rather skeptical of advertisements once they recognized them.

Whenever it says it's sponsored, it takes my trust away. (2)

Why would they endorse anything for free when they have that many followers? (2)

That's a clear advertisement picture. I mean, on that blog text she won't say anything negative about the product. (4)

Based on these views, authentic and honest endorsers are truly effective from a marketer's point of view, as they penetrate through the persuasion resistance which is activated only when there is a clear advertisement produced by brands themselves. Thus, there is a good chance for marketing practitioners here, but also a case for policy-makers to examine. Further implications for both groups are discussed in detail later.

4.4 Conclusions and re-evaluation of the theoretical framework

The goal of this study was to investigate the formation of parasocial relationships on social media between Finnish Gen Z young women and social media endorsers. The phenomenon was approached first by examining the drivers of parasocial relationship formation, and second by analyzing and describing what different forms parasocial relationships can take in this context. The first question was already partly answered by theory. The synthesis of the theoretical framework (Figure 6) illustrated the four main drivers of parasocial relationship formation. The formation of the relationship was described to be the sum of a whole rather than a linear process. All the predictors were on some level recognized in the data analysis, but as their degree was emphasized differently than in the theoretical framework, a re-evaluated framework is illustrated in Figure 12.

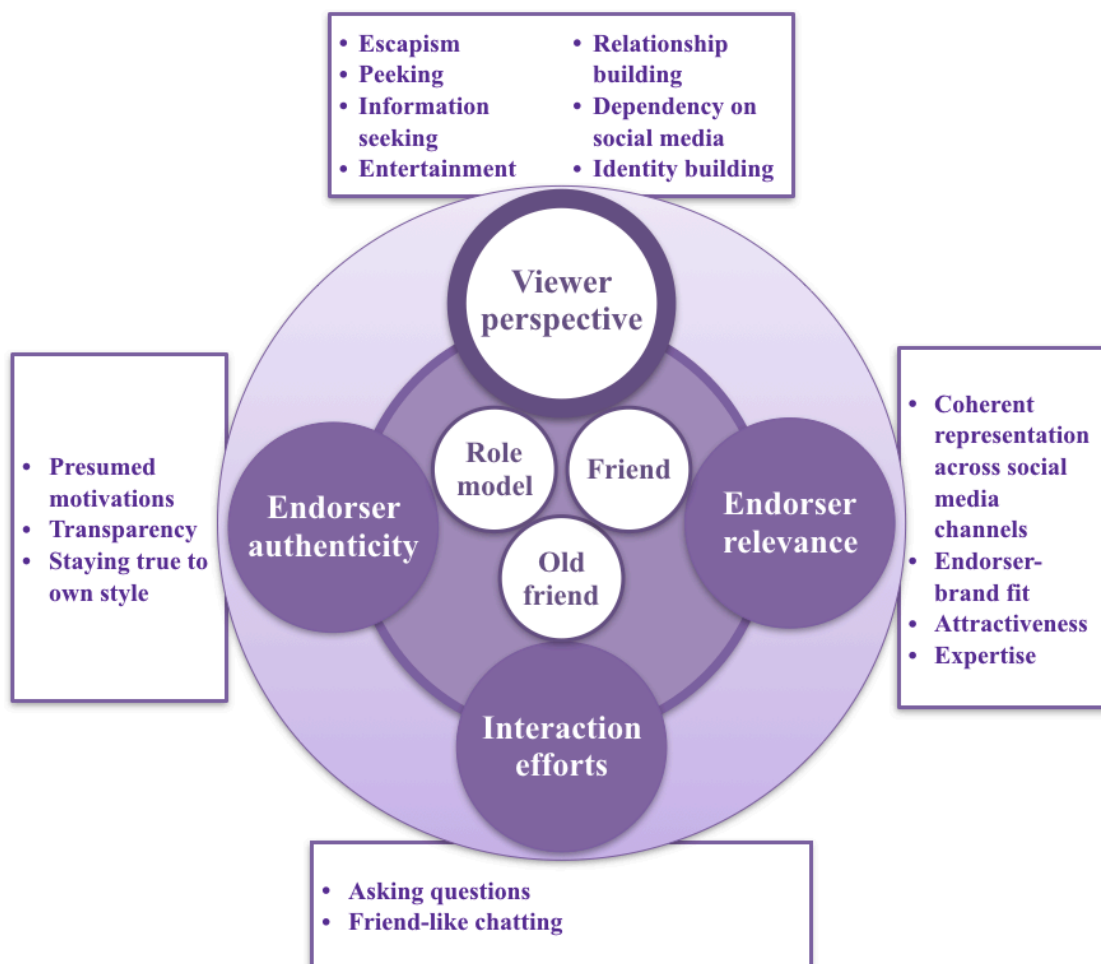


Figure 12. Drivers of parasocial relationships formation on social media between social media endorsers and Gen Z

The data analysis revealed that strong parasocial relationships exist, and their main driver is the follower herself. As stated by Yuan et al. (2016), motivations for social media usage seem to be a crucial starting point for parasocial relationship development. Without motivated viewer, no parasocial relationship is established and thus the *Viewer perspective* is highlighted in Figure 12. Based on the focus groups, the main reasons for social media usage are *information-seeking*, *relationship-building*, and *entertainment* motives. In addition, *peeking* into endorsers' lives or *escaping* one's own life, as proposed by Lee et al. (2015), were also found to mediate the parasocial relationship formation. Furthermore, the *dependency* on social media mediated the relationship formation, as all study participants used social media constantly and called it a habit without which they could not imagine living. Adding to the earlier research, in this study the Gen Z young women's *identity building efforts* were discussed with an intensity that cannot be ignored. Thus, these efforts are combined with the motivations to represent the viewer-based drivers of the parasocial relationship formation process illustrated in Figure 12.

Of the endorsed-based predictors, *Perceived authenticity* in Figure 12 was highlighted in this study. The literature on human brand authenticity has offered multiple antecedents of authenticity; these were reviewed in the theory chapter of this thesis. However, not all of them were relevant for the authenticity perceived by the present study's participants. According to the analysis, perceived authenticity consists of *transparency* of the endorser, her *presumed motivations*, and finally, her attempts to *stay true to her own style*. These three antecedents largely include those introduced in the theory, though emphasizing those most important for the focus groups of this study.

In addition to authenticity, or even partly contributing to it, *Relevance of the endorser* was found to be an important driver of parasocial relationship formation and is included in Figure 12. Based on the analysis, relevance refers to choosing relevant brands for collaborations, staying coherent while doing multiple collaborations, and having expertise on those themes one posts about. Relevance is closely related to *stability*, which according to Moulard et al. (2015, 177) contributes to authenticity; and close to *coherent representation*, which according to Giles (2002) contributes to the formation of parasocial relationships. In the theoretical framework of this study, source effects were presented as one of the parasocial relationship drivers. However, in line with

Bergkvist and Zhou (2016), they were found to be irrelevant in the context of this study. Although source effects including attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness can help to understand the effectiveness of a celebrity, they are too narrow to explain the influence process. Furthermore, these three antecedents are more or less included in other concepts, mainly in authenticity and relevance of the endorser, as can be seen in Figure 12.

The third endorser-based driver illustrated in Figure 12, *Interaction efforts*, is also closely bound to perceived authenticity and relevance. It was not included in the theoretical framework of this study, but in the focus group discussions it was found that interactivity of the endorser is important for the formation of parasocial relationships. Accordingly, Kassing and Sanderson (2015) and Lueck (2015) have proposed that social media might allow the traditionally one-sided nature of parasocial relationships to turn into two-sided relationships through its sharing, liking, and reposting features. Furthermore, Bond (2016) states that interactions are one of the main drivers of parasocial relationships. Similarly, the focus group participants assumed the endorsers first of all to be open in their everyday actions and to share their thoughts through friend-like chatting. In addition, they appreciated the questions the endorsers asked their followers, and the endorsers' answers to the participants' own questions or those of their co-followers. This kind of open interactive communication strengthened the feelings of authenticity and also helped the participants to better know the endorser and her expertise.

Regarding the second research question, it was found that a parasocial relationship can take three different forms. These three forms are illustrated in the middle of 12. First, the most common is the *friend*-like relationship, where the endorser is considered a friend. Followers are keen to hear their friend's advice and to follow her daily activities. On the endorser side, all the presented drivers should be met so that the relationship can become a friendship. On the follower side, information-seeking and entertainment reasons and the desire to peek color the friendship formation.

Second, a parasocial relationship can become an *old-friend*-like relationship. This might happen for example if the endorser changes something in his behavior or communication habits, as these kinds of changes quickly lead to decreased authenticity.

Furthermore, the follower's interests and reasons can also change, and this can make the friendship more distant too. The focus group participants followed many endorsers they nowadays found annoying, arrogant, or fake, but they continued to follow them because they still wanted to know how they were doing.

Lastly, a parasocial relationship can adopt a *role-model*-like nature. In this case, the relationship is based on the follower admiring the endorser. Of course, the endorser has to fulfill all the drivers by being authentic, interactive, and relevant in her choices, but from her point of view, the base for this kind of relationship is the same as for a friendship. Whether the endorser is seen as a friend or as a role model depends on the follower. Once the relationship takes on a role model nature, the follower is motivated by entertainment reasons, information-seeking, social interaction, peeking, and especially escapism.

The results of this study support the views of Gen Z as partly lacking persuasion knowledge (Boermann et al. 2017; Wojdysnki et al. 2017). Especially when their role model or parasocial friend endorsed something, the participants did not always see this as a commercial post even if there was collaboration text disclosing the commercial background. It was also observed that the participants were not always interested in whether or not a post was an advertisement for which the endorser was paid, as they trusted the endorser's taste and thought she would not endorse something completely unsuitable or unnecessary. On the other hand, if this sometimes happened or there started to be too many collaborations in the endorser's social media content, the role model and friendship relationships turned into an old friendship, where the endorser was no longer perceived as authentic, coherent, or credible.

In conclusion, none of the drivers of parasocial relationships are independent; instead, they are all related to each other. The strength of each endorser-based driver combined with the social media usage motivations and reasons of the follower influence the type of parasocial relationship that is formed. Furthermore, once a parasocial relationship is established, it often reflects the follower's motivations, as she might become even more engaged on social media, and the enjoyment of peeking at the endorser in question might increase. As discussed in the focus groups, having a long common history helps

the follower to evaluate the choices and authenticity of the endorser and can further strengthen the relationship.

For example, a social media user interested in a vegan diet might be looking for information about this kind of lifestyle or might want to peek into the life of a vegan. Seeing an endorser posting multiple times about vegan food and the ethical themes around it, leads to an image of the endorser as a true vegan. The social media user interested in veganism then perceives this endorser as most likely authentic. When the social media user sees the endorser doing a collaboration with a vegan brand, she perceives the endorser as an expert and views the choice of collaboration brand as coherent. Endorser's friend-like chatting about the theme or interactive questions about the follower-users' opinions further strengthens both the perceived relevance and authenticity of the endorser, as the follower-user might learn more about that endorser's expertise and find confirmation of her motivations. Learning useful tips for her own vegan lifestyle might encourage the follower-user to stay in contact with the endorser in the future too, and with time the established relationship might develop deeper and deeper.

5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Summary of the study

The original aim of this thesis was to better understand the mechanisms behind celebrity endorsements and influencer marketing. To date, there is no generally acknowledged explanation of endorser effectiveness in the marketing literature; therefore, this study used parasocial relationship theory from media and social psychology studies to shed light on the phenomenon. The purpose of this thesis was to describe and analyze the formation of parasocial relationships on social media. The guiding questions in this research were:

1. What are the drivers of parasocial relationship formation between Gen Z young women and social media endorsers?
2. What different forms can parasocial relationships between Gen Z young women and social media endorsers take?

As a few other studies have already shown, parasocial relationship theory was relevant to shed light on influence mechanism (e.g. Labrecque 2014; Lueck 2015). This study is one of the first to examine parasocial relationships in the marketing context, and to the best of the author's knowledge, it is the first to describe the different forms these relationships can take in this context. The study was conducted with a strong abductive-hermeneutic perspective, which helped the researcher to stay open to new directions and to continuously rethink the key purpose of the research throughout the whole process.

The theoretical framework of this thesis was built around parasocial relationship theory. As this theory alone does not offer enough insights into the drivers of parasocial relationship formation on social media context, and to bring it closer to today's marketing field, it was related to the celebrity endorsement and human brand authenticity literature. In addition, attention was given to Gen Z and their motivations for social media usage, as this was seen to be an inseparable part of the possible parasocial relationship formation.

The study comprised four focus groups with young Finnish women between 17 and 19 years of age. In these focus groups, the participants discussed their social media usage and behavior based on guiding questions and material provided by the researcher. All social media channels were included in this study, but the discussion mostly concerned Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube, as these were the most important and frequently used channels for the participants. Furthermore, the discussion was not limited to specific traditional celebrities or social media celebrities; instead the antecedents of good and bad content and interesting social media accounts were discussed extensively. This yielded rich empirical data that served as a good base for analysis and interpretations, which in turn contributed fruitful results.

In light of the first guiding question, some common drivers for parasocial relationship formation were found. As the main driver, the follower has to be a motivated social media user looking for entertainment or information, and willing to maintain relationships as part of her social activities. Furthermore, escapism and peeking are also mediated with parasocial relationship formation. Without the motivation to follow, no parasocial relationship will be established. The rest of the drivers are endorser-based. Endorsers should be authentic by being open about their motivations for collaborations, by staying true to their own style, and lastly by being transparent in their communications. Furthermore, interaction efforts and endorser relevance contribute to the relationship formation.

Addressing the second guiding question, three different kinds of parasocial relationships were recognized when analyzing the focus group data. When all the drivers were present, a parasocial friendship was often established. Following Fournier's (1998) idea about different kinds of developing relationships between a consumer and a brand, the friendships in the present study could take other forms too. Once the follower was highly motivated to learn and be inspired, was looking for a friend, and was keen to escape her own life to someone else's, a role model kind of relationship was often established. Parasocial relationship could also be of a role model nature from the beginning. However, this kind of relationship including a great deal of admiration is uncommon, and most of the time it is a friendship that develops.

However, the parasocial friendship might also take a negative form. This happens if an endorser neglects one of the main antecedents: authenticity, interaction efforts, or relevance attempts. This kind of relationship is comparable to one with an old friend who is slightly annoying but whom one continues to follow before potentially ending the relationship. Noteworthy is that social media is an important topic of discussion among Gen Z, and co-viewing is common. According to Giles (2002), co-viewing is one predictor of parasocial relationship formation, and in this study, it was recognized as one reason to stay in the relationship although the parasocial friend no longer felt interesting, or was even annoying. For example, two participants explained that although they did not like a particular fashion Instagrammer anymore, they still followed her as she was often a topic of discussion at school and they wanted to stay updated about her the way the others were.

In addition to the two guiding questions, a third question arose during the research process. The researcher herself has always been interested in what social media means for the younger generations. However, this question felt too distant from the other goals of this study and was left aside. Hence, the meaning of social media was not directly discussed in the focus groups, but everything the participants said emphasized its importance for Gen Z. Section 4.1 briefly reviewed the analysis of the focus group discussions around this theme. Of course, the participants of this study were chosen based on their activity on social media and especially Instagram, and this background might have influenced the importance of social media for this group. However, as most of their peers seemed to be equally eager social media users, it can be argued that social media plays a critical role in Gen Z young women's identity building efforts, and that it is an inseparable part of their lives. This finding offers valuable insights into Gen Z's motivations for engaging in parasocial relationships.

Besides to its contributions regarding the existence of parasocial relationships, this study was able to address other related interests as well. In their review of the celebrity endorsement literature, Bergkvist and Zhou (2016) state that multiple endorsements by the same celebrity often have negative effects, but the research in this regard is too narrow to draw strong conclusions. The same is true for celebrity transgressions: they have been found to have a strong negative impact on celebrity endorser effectiveness, but the underlying process has not yet been well researched (Bergkvist & Zhou 2016).

Both of these findings were supported in the present study. Multiple endorsements decreased endorser authenticity as they made the followers reconsider the motivations of that endorser. Furthermore, endorser relevance was harmed, as the participants argued that no one is relevant for all types endorsements. Continual transgressions led first to the development of a negative, old friend kind of parasocial relationship, which then eventually came to an end. The participants were ready to forgive a few transgressions, as friends forgive each other in real life too, but depending on the closeness of the relationship, a break-up would occur at some point.

Chung and Cho (2017) argue that social media marketing strategies using celebrities are an effective tool to promote products, and suggest that the effectiveness is based on parasocial interactions between the endorser and the receiver. The marketer-wise profitable outcomes of the parasocial relationships were not included in this study because of the limited scope of the master's thesis. However, the participants were willing to believe almost everything their parasocial friend or role model told them, and thus it can be assumed that endorsers are effective mediators of marketing messages. Furthermore, according to Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016, 352), feeling emotionally attached to and engaged with endorsers can lead to increased purchase likelihood. This kind of emotional attachment was recognized in the present study through the parasocial relationships.

Marketing-wise, the role model kind of parasocial friendship is the most effective one, as the followers are willing to transfer the qualities of the endorser to themselves and are thus susceptible to commercial messages. Similarly, tips and recommendations from parasocial friends are often viewed as advice from real-life friends without questioning them, and they are thus influential as well. Negatively colored old parasocial friends are less influential and their incentives and current taste, for instance, are often questioned. Endorsements done by old friends might be immediately viewed negatively, and the negative image transferred to the brand. One factor supporting the effectiveness of an endorser as a promoter is the lack of activation of persuasion knowledge in parasocial relationships, as shown in this study. Following Boerman et al. (2017), it is argued that distinguishing commercial content from other content on social media is not easy, and members of Gen Z usually do not notice or, as found in this study, do not care if the content is commercial, as they believe what their parasocial friend says.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

Ladik and Stewart (2008, 158) argue that a contribution is not independent of its audience but that instead, to be significant, it should be addressed to the right audience. The purpose of this thesis was to describe and analyze the formation of parasocial relationships on social media. The results of this study make considerable contributions to the theoretical discussion about consumer behavior on social media, and more precisely on celebrity effectiveness and influencer marketing. According to Ladik and Stewart (2008, 161), a paper can contribute to theory, context, or methodology, but the best studies feature contributions to all three domains. This study's contributions to theory and context are highlighted in the following, whereas its methodological contributions are limited.

This thesis's *contributions to theory* comprise its explanations of and insights into influencer marketing and endorser effectiveness. This study is in line with previous works that suggest that parasocial relationship theory can offer insights into the mechanism behind social media endorsers' effectiveness (e.g. Labreque 2014; Lueck 2015). Boerman et al. (2017) called for more research to validate this idea. As a qualitative study, this thesis cannot help validate a theory, but offers a broad view of parasocial relationships and can help other scholars choose the right variables to measure it.

Furthermore, this thesis bridges the celebrity endorsement literature to the social media context and combines it with parasocial relationship theory as one of the first marketing-oriented studies. The literature on parasocial relationships alone still has a limited view of the drivers of the formation of such relationships on social media. Therefore, the choice was made in this study to combine relevant literature from related fields to build a unique framework for this phenomenon. The re-evaluated framework of this study recognizes both viewer-based and endorser-based drivers as having an important role in the parasocial relationship formation. Viewer-based drivers are antecedents such as reasons for social media usage and identity building efforts, whereas endorser-based factors include authenticity, relevance, and interaction efforts. Following the example of this study, more scholars should take a wider view of influencer marketing and celebrity endorsements and utilize other literature streams

such as psychology, media studies, or even information technology based studies to make sense of the topics of interest.

This thesis makes *contributions to the context* first by recognizing strong parasocial relationships in the social media context between Finnish Gen Z members and social media endorsers, as suggested by other scholars (e.g. Labreque 2014; Lueck 2015). Second, this research also contributes to filling the gap in knowledge on Gen Z (MSI Research priorities 2016). As William and Page (2011) suggest, every generation differs from the others. With Gen Z members approaching the age at which they can make their own purchases, it is important to know more about their behavior as consumers. This study contributes to earlier research by highlighting the importance of social media to this generation (William and Page 2011) and showing that findings that members of this generation partly lack persuasion knowledge (Boerman et al. 2017) are true for Finnish Gen Z young women too.

Methodological contributions are produced when a new or refined method is used in an old context or when an old method is used in a new context. This thesis does not make such a contribution, as focus group studies are already widely utilized in communication, psychology, and marketing contexts. However, most of the previous studies on both parasocial relationships and celebrity endorsements have been conducted using quantitative methods; thus, this study offers unique insights into this research domain and shows that using focus groups makes it possible to create a deepened understanding.

In their paper, Ladik and Stewart (2008, 163) introduce a *contribution continuum* to describe the nature of contributions that research can make. According to them, an author can produce an identical replication of an earlier study, which locates the study at the left end of the continuum, or develop a new theory to predict a new phenomenon, which locates the research at the right end of the continuum. Between these two contribution types, they describe six other possible contribution types. This research falls in the third category, as it aims to *extend new theory*, parasocial relationship theory, in a marketing context *to explain a new phenomenon*, influencer marketing.

5.3 Managerial implications

On a managerial level, this thesis has significant implications not only for marketing practitioners but also for endorsers themselves, for the agencies representing them, and finally, for the policy-makers setting the regulations for advertising recognition. First, for *marketing practitioners*, the use of influencers, ambassadors, and celebrity endorsers is a frequently employed marketing strategy. Marketing through these influential individuals is effective, and the majority of marketing professionals do not foresee an end to this trend (Contestabile 2018). The superior power of utilizing influential individuals is supported in the present study too. When the focus group participants were asked how they would carry out a campaign focused on young women their age, they chose social media and communications through endorsers as the most effective way. Thus, to reach Gen Z, marketers should even more actively focus on social media marketing through endorsers.

However, to date the mechanism behind the influence has remained unclear, and it has thus been impossible to identify the most influential individuals. Parasocial relationship theory applied in this study offers new insights into the topic and yields strong recommendations for marketers regarding the type of endorsers they should consider. This thesis proposes that the effectiveness of endorsers lies in the friendship-like relationships their followers form with them. Followers consider endorsers as their friends or even role models, and believe it when “a friend” proposes a restaurant to them or tells them about how good a new mascara is.

Yet, not every endorser has the same number or the same kind of parasocial relationships. Instead, these relationships are always subjective and dependent on both the behavior of the endorser and the motivations of the follower. The endorser’s authenticity and transparency, perceived motivations, and tendency to stay true to herself in her communications across all social media channels influence whether the follower wants to engage with her. For marketing practitioners, this means they should look for authentic endorsers who share a great deal about their lives, are transparent in their communications, and post collaborations because they believe in them and not only for money. Once they have chosen an endorser, practitioners need to remember to give that endorser space to carry out the collaboration in an authentic way and with

natural communications instead of readily written lines to promote the brand. As Chung and Cho (2017) suggest, marketers should be careful and not push the endorsers for specific types of communications, as this might decrease their authenticity and trustworthiness, and thus their effectiveness.

In addition to authenticity of the endorser, hers or his interaction efforts and relevance of the collaboration are also important predictors of the formation of parasocial relationships. Social media offers platforms for interaction through questions in videos and pictures, and also through commenting and voting options. Marketing practitioners should look for endorsers who apply these efforts to their everyday communications and share much of their normal lives through, for example, chatting on Snapchat. Furthermore, endorsers should only do collaborations that fit their character, as failing to do so might give them a negative reputation and make them seem irrelevant. Marketers should be careful with this too: they should not work with someone unsuitable for their brand, as this might harm both the endorser and the brand.

In this thesis, it was found that in addition to the friend and role model types, a parasocial relationship can also be negative. These are, for example, “old friends” one used to follow and know, but who changed their style of communications in some way, or participated in an irrelevant collaboration. Furthermore, becoming “too popular” and maybe in this way “too commercial” is a danger for the authenticity of an endorser. The old friend kind of parasocial relationship might awaken negative feelings not only towards the endorser but also towards the endorsed brand; thus, marketing practitioners should consider the popularity and commerciality of the endorser before engaging in collaboration.

Regarding the size of an endorser’s follower base, utilizing micro-influencers in marketing communications is predicted to be an important marketing trend in 2018 (Wissmann 2018). Whereas influencers have been considered to be those with a considerable number of followers and a certain name and level of fame, micro-influencers are those who have a smaller but, according to Wissmann (2018), relatively engaged audience. He argues that micro-influencers are often more relatable and, through their engaged audience, they can offer the marketers better ROI. Better ROI is based on notably smaller provisions combined with the reach of highly engaged

followers. McCormick (2018) and Törn (2012) agree with this view, and both suggest that the number of followers the endorser has is not always most important. Both further propose that sometimes, the smaller, unfamiliar endorsers can be more effective in terms of influencing their followers. This is based on the more intimate and closer relationship the smaller endorsers often manage to form with their followers.

Correspondingly, the participants in this study often viewed the smaller endorsers as more authentic and easier to relate to, and they formed rather strong friendships with such endorsers. The participants were engaged with the smaller-scale endorsers and willing to listen to what they had to say, whereas they perceived some of the more famous endorsers as too mainstream to be friends with. While planning the imaginary marketing campaign in the focus groups, all participants preferred utilizing smaller-scale endorsers to very famous ones. Thus, this thesis supports marketers' use of micro-influencers in their campaigns.

All above points also apply to *endorsers* themselves and to *influencer marketing agencies* promoting the endorsers to companies and marketing practitioners. By adopting a favorable behavior and taking care that all endorser-based drivers of parasocial relationship formation – authenticity, relevance of collaborations, and interaction efforts – are present, an endorser can increase the possibility that followers will want to establish a parasocial relationship with her. As many of today's endorsers are not used to public and do not have previous knowledge about the mechanisms behind celebrity endorsements, brand ambassadors, or influencer activities, it is important that the agencies taking care of them provide them with enough instructions for social media behavior, as presented here.

Referring to the micro-influencer trend, influencer marketing agencies now have a good opportunity to sell their services to companies or traditional advertising agencies with which they co-operate. Whereas larger scale influencers are widely known and easier for marketing managers to reach with enough money, smaller-scale micro-influencers often represent niches that might stay unknown to marketing managers. As previously stated, finding a matching collaboration partner is equally important for both the endorser and the brand, as working with an irrelevant brand decreases authenticity and weakens parasocial relationships of the endorser, and this might further harm the brand

too. By thoroughly learning about their endorsers, branding them the right way, and developing suitable content offers for each of them, influencer marketing agencies have a great chance here for establishing their role in the content creation process between the marketing managers and endorsers.

Knowledge about the effective endorser process is important not only for marketing practitioners but also for public *policy-makers* who try to protect consumers from misleading marketing attempts. Multiple scholars have expressed concern about how the new ways of marketing affect consumers and whether they recognize embedded messages as commercial content, for example in native marketing, product placement, or influencer marketing context (e.g. Bang & Lee 2016; Boerman et al. 2017). Despite the sponsorship disclosures indicated in persuasive messages, consumers' persuasion knowledge is often not activated (Boerman et al. 2017). As Wright et al. (2005) suggest, it is important to protect the still-developing persuasion knowledge of adolescents.

This study supports earlier findings that Gen Z members do not seem to have a complete understanding of persuasion attempts in the social media context. While the participants were marketing savvy and skeptical of advertisers, they did not always recognize persuasion attempts. Especially when the focus group participants perceived someone as their parasocial friend, they did not even care if marketing messages were embedded in that person's communications. The situation is not completely worrying as the participants did appreciate transparency and wanted to avoid being "fooled by the marketers", but in some cases their psychological feelings towards the endorsers were so strong that their persuasion knowledge was turned off. Thus, in the future, policy-makers should also pay attention to social media regulations and require schools to organize more media education for their pupils.

Important for all parties – marketing practitioners, endorsers, agencies, and policy-makers – is the ongoing discussion about the ethics of influencer marketing and the contributions of the present study in this regard. Despite the regulations and guidelines set for example by the FTC (2017) in the US and the FCCA (2014) in Finland, endorsers post content that does not meet these regulations. In Finland, the Council of Ethics in Advertising deals with misbehaviors by giving statements about whether the content is ethically appropriate – in the case of influencer marketing, recognizability is

most often key – or giving both the endorser and the brand behind the post a warning. Recently, for instance, the Council has given a warning to an athlete and her sponsor because of the lacking sponsorship disclosure on the athlete's Instagram picture (Council of Ethics in Advertising: MEN4/2018), and to a vlogger who did not disclose a collaboration clearly enough on his YouTube channel (Council of Ethics in Advertising: MEN 37/2017). In the latter case, the council drew its attention to the vlogger's young audience (20-25 years) and asked the advertisers to be careful when utilizing new forms of marketing, especially when addressing young audiences.

In one of its statements, the Council of Ethics in Advertising highlights that ultimately, the marketer is always responsible for all advertisements, including those that take place through influencers (Council of Ethics in Advertising: MEN 37/2017). Thus, to avoid negative rumors, it is critical for marketers to look for endorsers who understand the importance of transparent communications and always use sponsorship disclosures. Although marketers should not affect endorsers' content too much, they should actively remind them about transparency. Furthermore, for endorsers and their career, it is crucial to stay open about collaborations. One point in favor of influencer marketing agencies is that in addition to trainings on effectiveness on social media, these agencies usually also educate their influencers on posting ethically correct content by highlighting the necessity of disclosures. In the future, these agencies should even better inform their endorsers about ethical guidelines, such as those provided by Ping Ethics (2017). The Ping Ethics code is a good example of proactive work to ensure that all consumers will be able to recognize persuasion attempts in the quickly changing social media scene in the future too.

5.4 Limitations and future possibilities

In qualitative research, context is always an inseparable part of the study; therefore, this thesis has some limitations. However, as MacInnis (2011, 144) suggests, the findings of this study together with its limitations help to identify new avenues for future research. First, this study was conducted in two cities in Finland, and with young women studying in high school. Different cities and countries could already yield different empirical data, as could different education backgrounds and gender. The focus group participants in this study represented the oldest members of Gen Z. Learning more

about Gen Z is important (MSI Priorities 2016), and in the future, the focus should therefore be on even younger Gen Z members. In the focus group discussions, the participants indicated that they did not completely understand the social media behavior of their siblings who were only a few years younger. It would be interesting to know if the latter's behavior will more closely resemble the participants' as they age, or if the younger Gen Z members could be even more engaged with social media.

Bond (2016, 659) encourages future scholars to further examine social media parasocial relationships and adolescents' interpretations and understanding of them. The participants of this study were mainly recruited on Instagram, thus ensuring that they were active social media users as this was seen to be necessary for fruitful focus group discussion. However, it would be important to investigate whether only active social media users form parasocial relationships, or if those who are less active behave similarly. Referring to Bond (2016), it would also be interesting to see if Gen Z members realize they talk about endorsers as if they were their real-life friends, or if this is completely unconscious process.

Wang and Huang (2017) found that the size of the network on social media is positively related to greater trust in ad sponsors. Their explanation for this is that people with a larger network spend more time on social media and have developed greater trust in it in general, and thus they trust people there. In this study, all focus groups participants had rather large networks on social media, with more than 400 followers and followees on Instagram. This led to greater trust, which might have decreased the importance of this study. Thus, in addition to the level of engagement on social media, the size of the network should also be considered when examining the phenomenon.

As Yadav (2010) states, conceptual articles are needed to prove the relevance of theories in general. Parasocial relationship theory is still a rather new one within the marketing field, and the present study relied on recently published articles. It can be argued that parasocial relationships still need more attention and research until they are fully adopted into the consumer behavior domain. Moreover, parasocial relationship theory is not the only possible theory for describing the influence between endorsers and their followers. For example, the social influence (McCormick 2016) and emotional attachment literature (Thomson 2006) have been bridged to the influencing process.

Comparing or maybe even partly combining these theories would be interesting in the future to find the best possible framework to explain the influence that takes place between endorser and follower.

This study focuses only on the formation process of parasocial relationships and does not consider its outcomes besides stating that according to earlier studies, parasocial relationships lead to increased engagement. Hence, there is room for research on the outcomes of such relationships, such as the quality of the engagement, and their effects on purchase decisions or brand preferences. Researchers should also further examine whether consumers notice endorser collaborations and their persuasion knowledge is activated, or whether the effectiveness of endorsements lies in the fact that consumers do not recognize the content as advertisements (McCormick 2016). This thesis examined the influencing process and the formation of parasocial relationships in the interpretive consumer behavior domain, with an emphasis on understanding the process. However, not recognizing commercial purposes is a significant danger. Hence, in the future, marketing scholars should more often apply the transformative consumer research mindset when studying this theme. The transformative consumer research stream focuses on developing solutions and solving problems rather than aiming to better influence behavior (Mick 2006). In his paper on this subject, Mick (2006, 2) indicates adolescents as a vulnerable group that scholars should care about. Thus, more transformative consumer research is needed about Gen Z members and their parasocial relationships.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Questions for Focus group discussions

Different media channels

- Describe your media usage
- What social media channels are you engaging with, how often and why

Social media usage

- Instagram, Snapchat, Youtube, Facebook, Twitter; what are the differences and which one you prefer?
- Who are you following in these channels?
- What kind of celebrities and famous people are the nicest ones to follow? What do you expect they tell about themselves on these channels?
- Are you ever tagging brands in your pictures? What do you think about those who tag?
- Have you once opened these tags to see what is there behind? Maybe even bought something?
- Can you come up with any examples of hearing about a new brand first time through social media? How did it happen?

Exploring Instagram

- Look for
 - A photo you like. Why is it nice?
 - A photo through which you got interested in a brand on the photo. Could you think about buying it?
 - A photo where you think there is co-operation between the person and a brand.
 - A photo you don't like.
- What kind of collaborations you like in Instagram? What about in other social media channels

Planning a marketing campaign

We are a marketing team who is supposed to plan a product launch for a new sports bra brand. The bra has a nice design, it is supportive and is made from recycled plastic bottles from ocean. Our segment is the girls at your age and we have endless budget.

You can think about the earlier discussions we have had and pay attention to in where exactly you yourself would be best reached and with what kind of campaign.