

This is an author's manuscript (postprint) version of a book chapter published as "Närvänen, E., Kirvesmies, T., & Kahri, E. (2020). Parasocial relationships of Generation Z consumers with social media influencers. In Influencer Marketing, ed. Sevil Yesiloglu and Joyce Costello, London: Routledge (pp. 118-135).

Parasocial relationships of Gen Z consumers with social media influencers

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Learning outcomes

- 1) *Influencer marketing operates at a more personal level when consumers form parasocial relationships with social media influencers.*
- 2) *Parasocial relationships may end because of several different reasons related to the consumer or to the influencer.*
- 3) *To avoid parasocial break-ups which may result in a negative brand image, social media influencers and influencer marketing professionals need to be aware of the nature of parasocial relationships the followers may have with the influencer.*

Abstract

In a marketing environment where consumers trust each other far more than they trust companies' marketing communications, social media influencers have become important mediators in consumer decision making, particularly for younger consumers. A social media influencer is an opinion leader or tastemaker in one or more areas of consumption, who has a considerable following in social media. Previous research has revealed that when consumers form a one-sided relationship that has an illusion of intimacy with the influencer – a parasocial relationship - they are more likely to be influenced by them in their purchasing decisions. The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the nature and types of parasocial relationships formed between consumers and influencers on social media. This purpose is addressed through an interpretive, qualitative study (n = 29) of Gen Z consumers who can be considered as "social media natives". The findings contribute to an in-depth understanding of how consumers form relationships with influencers and what these relationships mean to consumers in their daily lives.

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Introduction

The influencer marketing phenomenon

Social media has revolutionized the interaction between consumers and companies. According to some statistics, people spent 135 minutes per day in 2017 (Global Web Index, n.d.) in social media, and hence companies have become increasingly interested in reaching customers through the new, interactive Web 2.0 technologies. However, according to a recent Edelman Trust Barometer, three in four consumers avoid advertising, using one or more avoidance strategies (Edelman, 2019). Consumers may not even pay attention to ads on social media, or consider them as negative and intrusive (Bang and Lee, 2016). Furthermore, many consumers use ad-blocking technologies to avoid online advertising.

Consumers perceive social media influencers as more credible than companies in their decision-making (Carr and Hayes, 2014; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). The Edelman Trust Barometer from 2019 found that 63 % of respondents trusted what influencers say about a brand much more than what the brand says about itself in its advertising (Edelman, 2019). A social media influencer is defined as an opinion leader or tastemaker in one or more areas of consumption who has a considerable following in the social media (De Veirman et al. 2017: 798). Influencer marketing refers to companies using social media influencers to spread the word about a brand to the influencer's followers (De Veirman et al. 2017). As a format of marketing communications, influencer marketing spend has grown steadily over the past years, with an estimated market value of 5 to 10 billion dollars by 2020 (Mediakix, 2018). Its benefits for marketers include that consumers may perceive it as word-of-mouth rather than as paid advertising. The industry has

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quickly become institutionalized and many influencers today make their living out of brand collaborations.

From admiring celebrities to forming personal connections

Influencer marketing relates to celebrity endorsement (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016; McCracken 1989), which has been a commonly used form of marketing communications, but which has changed its form online. In celebrity endorsement, the celebrity's degree of popularity is considered as important. A recent study suggested that the higher popularity of an influencer does not always lead to more effective influence in social media (Chung and Cho, 2017). This may be because influencers with large amounts of followers may lack uniqueness and perceived authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018). Instead, a personal connection felt by the consumer with the influencer is more important. Recent studies have suggested that this personal connection may also help influencer marketing to overcome its key challenge: disclosing paid advertising collaborations (De Jans et al. 2018; Evans et al. 2017). As soon as the influencer discloses paid advertising collaboration such as by using hashtags like #gifted or #affiliate, this activates the consumers' persuasion knowledge, and may influence their purchase intentions as well as their attitude toward the influencer negatively. This occurs as consumers may perceive that the influencer is no longer unbiased nor offering their honest opinion (De Jans et al. 2018). However, full disclosure is increasingly a requirement set by, for instance, the international chamber of commerce (ICC) and government agencies regarding marketing communication ethics. Yet, according to a recent industry study, only a fragment of influencer posts currently complies with these requirements (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2019). In the same industry survey by Influencer Marketing Hub, marketers state that the biggest challenge in influencer marketing is finding and selecting appropriate influencers for co-operation (36%) and that the audience relationship is the most

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important factor when running influencer campaigns (48%). To do this successfully, marketers must understand why consumers choose to follow particular influencers, and how such an audience relationship is created or severed. This study focuses on the consumer perspective and investigates the parasocial relationships as an explanatory factor behind why consumers may choose to follow or unfollow certain influencers.

Generation Z and influencers

Consumers, particularly adolescents, typically admire social media influencers and consider them like their friends (De Jans et al. 2018). A theory that provides answers for why consumers trust and follow the advice of certain influencers and not others is the theory of parasocial interaction, which originates in psychology and media studies (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Similarly to the characters of our favorite television series (*ibid.*), consumers have been argued to form parasocial relationships with the influencers they follow on social media (Chung and Cho, 2017; De Jans et al. 2018; Lueck 2015). Lee and Watkins (2016) have established that forming this kind of relationship with a YouTube vlogger led to more positive brand perceptions. These relationships are characterized by their one-sided, mediated rather than direct nature of interaction (Horton and Wohl, 1956). The consumer has been following the life of the influencer for a long time and feels like they know the person, even though they have never met. On the other hand, the influencer does not know almost anything about the follower, making the relationship one-sided. Hence, there is an illusion of intimacy (Lueck, 2015). Studies within marketing and consumer research have begun to apply the above introduced parasocial relationship theory to influencer marketing phenomena (Chung and Cho, 2017; Lueck, 2015). However, so far these studies have focused more on the company perspective. The consumer perspective, i.e. how consumers themselves perceive and experience

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these parasocial relationships has not been studied. However, to fully understand the relevance and value of the phenomenon in marketing, the consumer perspective is important.

Theoretical background

Opinion leadership on social media

In its most basic sense, influencer marketing can be explained by the two-step flow theory of communication developed already by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). This theory explains how messages move from senders to receivers in a marketing environment. Rather than perceiving a direct path between the sender (marketer) and receiver (consumer), the theory identifies the role of opinion leaders as mediators between the message sender (marketer) and the consumer. Hence, there are two steps in the message flow – step one is mediators and step two is the final consumer. The theory has been utilized in marketing to conceptualize celebrity endorsement (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). It has also been applied to study brand communication through digital influencers, especially bloggers (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014). Indeed, today's social media influencers engage in reciprocal and frequent conversations with consumers through different channels (Chung and Cho, 2017). Furthermore, the notion of celebrity has changed as the social media influencers may be popular merely because of the content they produce online rather than as athletes or artists, for instance (Freberg et al., 2011). Hence, ordinary consumers can become tastemakers and gain influencer status through publicly demonstrating their amount of cultural capital in a specific field of consumption (McQuarrie et al. , 2013).

Social media influencers are often admired for their lifestyle as a whole, and hence the influencer disclosing a lot of details about their daily lives, values, interests, and activities, increases their perceived credibility (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017) and in turn, result in greater benefits for marketers (Chung and Cho, 2017). Credibility is required to form trust, which, trust is needed in for

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high quality, strong relationship with the influencer to form (De Jans et al. 2018). Conversely, when a celebrity does not disclose personal information about him or herself, they can be perceived as inauthentic and their value as an influencer may decrease (Chung and Cho, 2017). According to previous research, the ability of the consumer to self-identify as similar to the influencer also plays a great role in choosing which influencer to follow (Chung and Cho, 2017; Li and Chignell, 2010).

Parasocial relationship theory

Parasocial relationship theory is one perspective explaining the effectiveness of influencer marketing in social media. Researchers in marketing and consumer behavior have utilized parasocial relationship theory to explore themes including consumer-brand relationships in social media (Labrecque, 2014), parasocial advertising (Lueck, 2015), strength of parasocial relationships in social media (Bond, 2016), as well as which social media channels (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011) and what kind of influencer characteristics (Chung and Cho, 2017; Giles, 2002) are most likely to generate strong parasocial relationships. From the consumer perspective, a few studies have examined consumer motivations to form parasocial relationships (Escalas and Bettman, 2017; Yuan et al., 2016), and several have studied the effects of such relationships on consumers' online and purchasing behavior (Chung and Cho, 2017; Lee and Watkins, 2016; Yuksel and Labrecque, 2016).

Even though consumers have formed parasocial relationships through traditional media like television, social media offers even better opportunities for this due to its interactive and open nature (Labrecque, 2014). With reference to interactive nature, Lueck (2015) argued that through interactive questions, social media influencers invite consumers to interact, creating an illusion of friendship even though their participation in the discussion is minimal. Bond (2016) found that two-sided social media interactions (e.g. the influencer responding to a comment made by a follower rather than just posting new things) strengthen the parasocial relationship. Colliander and Dahlén

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(2011) viewed blogs as a typical example of a media that generate parasocial relationships, as they focus on personal stories and photos of the bloggers' daily lives, as well as audience interaction.

The drivers for parasocial relationships include features of the influencer themselves like coherent representation and perceived authenticity (Giles, 2002), as well as credibility, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Chung and Cho 2017; McCracken 1988).

The consumer perspective has not yet been prominent in studies of parasocial relationships.

However, a study by Yuan et al. (2016) has examined consumers' motivations to form parasocial relationships and argue that especially entertainment, relationship-building, and information-seeking motivations are central. Further, Escalas and Bettman (2017) examined parasocial relationships of adolescents and find that teens who have a high need for social connections form parasocial relationships with celebrities to transfer their images onto themselves (see also McCracken, 1988). Parasocial relationships influence consumers' opinions and interests, their emotions and moods as well as direct their activities both offline and online (Yuksel and Labreque, 2016), through increasing intentions to buy (Chung and Cho, 2017; Lee and Watkins, 2016) and positive effects on customer equity and loyalty (Labreque, 2014; Yuan et al. 2016). Even though the parasocial theory has increasingly been utilized to study influencer marketing and its effects on consumers, the ways how consumers themselves experience their parasocial relationships is yet largely unknown.

Methods and data

This study is positioned within the social constructionist paradigm (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008) which views reality as subjective and knowledge as gained through interaction and interpretation.

The interest is on how consumers have experienced their parasocial relationships with social media influencers. In recruiting the study participants, they needed to have personal experience of the

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study phenomenon. Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2000) young women who were active users of social media were chosen as the informants of the study. Gen Z are accustomed to endless messages and multiple information sources around them (Chaney et al., 2017). This generation values the authenticity and realness of social media (Djafarova and Rushworth 2016), and are more likely to form parasocial relationships with celebrities (Escalas and Bettman, 2017; Theran et al., 2010).

Two qualitative methods were utilized to generate the data. In the first phase, four focus group interviews were organized. Focus groups offer a way to generate natural discussion data from participants' interaction with each other. This method is useful in social constructionist research because it captures the different subjective views through interaction between group members (Tadajewski, 2016). The focus group interviewees were recruited via Instagram with the criteria that they belonged to Gen Z and were active social media users (they had 400+ followers). Personal messages were sent to potential participants, and they were encouraged to bring a friend with them to facilitate joining the study. The focus group interviews were moderated by one of the authors, asking the participants questions about their social media usage, which influencers they follow and why, their purchasing behavior and especially their experiences and views on brand collaborations. The interviews' duration varied from 77 to 93 minutes and the number of participants per group ranged from four to seven, amounting to 24 persons in total. Details of the data are portrayed in table 1.

| <i>Method / format of data</i> | Participants | Amount of data |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Focus group interview 1</i> | 4 young women, age 17-19 | 93 minutes |
| <i>Focus group interview 2</i> | 6 young women, age 18-19 | 93 minutes |
| <i>Focus group interview 3</i> | 7 young women, age 18-19 | 84 minutes |
| <i>Focus group interview 4</i> | 6 young women, age 17-19 | 77 minutes |

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| | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Interviewee 1</i> | young woman, age 19 | 37 minutes |
| <i>Interviewee 2</i> | young woman, age 22 | 24 minutes |
| <i>Interviewee 3</i> | young woman, age 16 | 32 minutes |
| <i>Interviewee 4</i> | young woman, age 22 | 60 minutes |
| <i>Interviewee 5</i> | young woman, age 19 | 50 minutes |
| <i>Interviewee 6</i> | young woman, age 20 | 35 minutes |
| Total | 29 interviewees | 585 minutes |

Table 1: Description of the data

A first qualitative analysis that identified common themes across the groups’ experiences was conducted based on the focus group data. Here, it was noted that the participants discussed not only their current parasocial relationships with influencers but also their ended relationships. Therefore, the authors decided to generate more data to explore this and other themes further. In the second phase, six in-depth interviews with a different set of individuals with the same demographic profile were conducted. These interviewees were recruited from the researchers’ personal networks through snowball sampling. Similar questions were asked as in the focus group interviews but special focus was put on terminated parasocial relationships – the interviewees were asked before the interview whether they had an experience of stopping the following of an influencer. The duration of these interviews was 30- 60 minutes. All the data were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The second round of analysis was conducted on all the data utilizing inductive content analysis techniques (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). First, the data were reduced into meaningful segments (keywords, concepts, ideas), then clustered into similar themes and finally abstracted into more theoretical categories. This process was cyclical in nature, in line with the hermeneutic approach where the researcher moves between parts and the whole, theory and empirical material (Gummesson, 2003).

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Findings

Next, we present the key findings of the study. They have been divided into two main sections: four requirements of parasocial relationships that operate as a precondition for an illusion of intimacy to form, and three types of parasocial relationships.

Four requirements of parasocial relationships

The first requirement was that the influencer 1) *portrayed something real" and relatable about their everyday lives* using different social media channels:

“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.”

(Focus group 2 interviewee).

Hence, for the interviewees, it was important that the influencers they followed posted mundane, ordinary things about their daily lives rather than only posting polished pictures and stories about extraordinary events. Endorsers eating candy, experiencing sad days or chaos at home, and talking about personal topics gave the followers a feeling that the influencers were just like their friends. This finding is in line with those of Ilicic and Webster (2016) who argued in the celebrity endorsement context that experiencing endorsers failing and living life like normal people helps consumers to relate to them. Some interviewees carefully chose to follow particular influencers only through specific channels, such as Youtube or Snapchat rather than Instagram, as described by one of the interviewees:

"I only follow [the influencer] on Youtube, because I get the most truthful picture of them there. And this other influencer I only follow on Snapchat. [Interviewer: Why do

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you do that? Why not Instagram, then?]) Because I don't like them boasting about their bodies and appearance [on Instagram] and lack of truthfulness and the amount of commercial content they have there."

(Interviewee 1).

The interviewees also reported how they appreciated that the influencer replied to the followers' comments and questions and thereby engaged in two-way parasocial interaction. This also made them feel closer to the influencer. This is in line with previous studies emphasizing social media's unique abilities for two-sided parasocial interactions (Bond, 2016; Lueck, 2015).

In addition to disliking overly commercial content, participants also appreciated those influencers who 2) *reported their company-sponsored posts* in a transparent manner. This is related to the notion of covert marketing. A study has found that covert marketing – marketing where the brand is hidden to appear more authentic – results in lower brand commitment and brand trust, especially when the consumer has an emotional relationship with the brand (Ashley and Leonard, 2009). This is the second identified requirement of parasocial relationships and was described in the data as follows:

"I really appreciate them [the influencer] adding a sponsorship hashtag there, or somehow indicating that it's an ad. I feel fooled when they don't."

(Focus group 4 interviewee).

Hence, the findings are in line with recent studies on the effects of advertising disclosure – as long as the influencer's aims and purposes are clear, disclosure may be interpreted by consumers as fair and there may be positive effects on the brand and influencer perceptions (DeJans et al., 2018).

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One aspect related to reporting collaborations honestly that was discussed in the interview data was the nature of the collaboration. If the brand fit the content of the influencer's post well, then it was more likely to be accepted by the follower. As one participant noted:

"I'm really annoyed at the type of posts like "use this discount code to buy this watch" [...] Instead I really like challenges, like building a gingerbread house, which was sponsored by this brand of candy that was used to decorate it – so then the content is fun and nice to watch. So it gives me the feeling that I'd like to buy the candy myself and decorate similarly."

(Interviewee 1).

Hence, the fit between the brand or ad content and the content posted by the influencer is important. The lack of fit may also be perceived by the follower as an aesthetic and visual matter rather than related to the content itself, as described by one of the focus group participants:

"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."

(Focus group 2 interviewee).

Thus, like in the context of celebrity endorsement, also in influencer marketing the concept of fit or match is important as meanings may travel from brand to endorser and vice versa (McCormick, 2016). However, followers can consider the fit between various aspects of the influencer marketing campaign including brand, the ad, the posted content, and the influencer's personality and style. All these aspects are filtered through the frame of the parasocial relationship.

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The third identified requirement of a parasocial relationship is that consumers expected the influencer to 3) *be true to themselves* in different channels. It was described by one of the focus group participants as follows:

"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."

(Focus group 4 interviewee).

As stated by this interviewee, they experienced a parasocial relationship over time and hence expected the influencer to remain truthful to their style that the follower had learned to appreciate. Coherent representation has been found in parasocial relationship theory to mediate the formation of such relationships (Giles, 2002) and the findings of the current study support this notion. Also, the followers expected the influencer to not only boost brands and provide recommendations but also sometimes have negative things to say, to prove their credibility. Any doubts about the truthfulness or integrity of the influencer resulted in a threat to the parasocial relationship. One participant expressed her concerns in the following way:

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

(Focus group 2 interviewee).

The fourth requirement identified from the data is that consumers preferred to engage in parasocial relationships with influencers who 4) *carefully chose which brands they support and personalized their endorsements* rather than only transmitted uniform marketing messages. One of the focus group participants described this as follows:

"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

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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."

(Focus group 1 interviewee)

Hence, brand collaborations that seemed to be more natural rather than prescribed by the brand were perceived as better by the interviewees. As also argued by Yuksel and Labreque (2016), the influencers receiving overly restrictive instructions from the brand may be detrimental to their perceived authenticity.

As proof of the credibility of the brands being used by the influencer, interviewees wanted to see the products in an authentic context such as running with the sponsored running shoes on or taking a shower with the sponsored shampoo brand actually seen there with the influencer:

"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 using the products."

(Focus group 1 interviewee)

These requirements can be related to perceived uniqueness and originality, which have been argued to characterize opinion leadership formation on Instagram (Casaló et al., 2018). However, even though authenticity was important to the interviewees, they still often expected a kind of "professional touch" to the way the influencer produced their content, as described by one of the interviewees:

"If I notice that the production is not good quality, I may stop following them. For instance, if they don't post videos when they're supposed to, or if the quality is really low, or you see that they have not made any effort, or the voice is bad. Or suddenly

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the camera is hazy or it's badly edited or they just use [a simple freeware program for video editing]. It shows that they're not really making an effort."

(Interviewee 1).

The above quotation summarizes the way many interviewees felt that for them to form a long-term parasocial friendship with an influencer, many preconditions had to be fulfilled. Next, we will discuss the three types of parasocial relationships that were identified from the data, analyzing their dynamics in more detail.

The three types of parasocial relationships

Three types of parasocial relationships were identified from the data: close personal friendships, ex friendships, and casual friendships. They are each explored next. The first type of parasocial relationship found in the analysis is that of a *close personal friendship*. In this type, the consumer identifies strongly with the influencer and feels the similarity in values and lifestyle choices. Also, the consumers feel that they have a lot of personal knowledge about the influencer generated over the long period they have followed them. This knowledge makes them trust the influencer more and makes them attached to the relationship, as described by one of the interviewees:

"Yea, I'm totally committed more to them [favorite influencer], if you've followed them for four years or so, you start to know them for real. I know that they don't show everything in there, but you start to know them and their routines. (Interviewer: What would it feel like if they suddenly stopped?) Interviewee: I would be totally upset (laughing), I would really be in shock, or I don't know...of course, I would get over it at some point, but if I think about my favorite influencer, for instance, if they take two weeks' break from posting, I'm totally panicked just waiting for the videos to appear. So, I would be really sad. 'Cause you just invest in some of them." (Interviewee 5)

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The above quotation demonstrates the attachment and closeness felt by the interviewees with some of their favorite influencers who were seen as close friends.

Further, with close friends, consumers are more likely to have a stronger trust toward the influencer. One interviewee described having bought several things that the influencer had worn without acknowledging any paid collaborations. When asked whether she was sure that the influencer had not been paid by the fashion brands to wear the clothes, she reported:

"I know her, she's honest [...]. She wouldn't have done that for money, she would have told me if she had."

(Focus group 1 interviewee).

Establishing the friendship was not a conscious decision, but one that occurred through days, months, and years of following the influencer. This personal knowledge helped consumers also appreciate and evaluate the brand recommendations better:

"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 [...] then it helps if you know the background of the person and if you can trust her."

(Focus group 1 interviewee).

These types of parasocial relationships also typically fulfilled all the requirements stated in the above analysis. On many occasions, the influencer was also perceived as a role model for the follower who admired their style and way of posting content:

"I have followed this influencer for a long time...I've actually always followed her. She has a nice style and I really admire her. I would buy these things she recommends."

(Focus group 4 interviewee).

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The followers were also in these cases willing to forgive their favorite influencer for a few mistakes if they generally remained the way the followers had learned to know them. However, the influencer needs to be perceived as a friend rather than a stranger for the parasocial relationship to thrive. Next, we will discuss the relationships that have taken a wrong turn and the relationship has ended or is currently dissipating.

The second type of parasocial relationship identified is that of an *ex-friendship*. As described above, this relationship type may result from a friendship somehow ending due to either the influencer's behavior or the consumer's changing life situation. In the first case, influencers may cause negative reactions due to their increasing fame. Hence, when the influencer loses their perceived authenticity and does not reveal enough about their daily life anymore or their content becomes too professional, it may be a reason for the consumer to end the relationship or take distance:

“Sometimes you notice when someone gets more followers that they start to more carefully think about what 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.”

(Focus group 1 interviewee)

Hence, this kind of behavior may decrease the perceived intimacy of the relationship and result in a parasocial breakup (Cohen, 2003).

Another reason for the parasocial breakup due to a perceived change in the values or lifestyle of the influencer:

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"This influencer had similar values as I do for a long time. I could identify with her and she was such an inspiration to me. I wanted to be like her and then suddenly she started acting totally contradictory to my values."

(Interviewee 1).

This quotation also shows how important it is for strong parasocial relationships that the influencer is perceived to have similar values and interests so that the follower can self-identify with them, as supported also by previous studies on influencer marketing (Chung and Cho, 2017). Lack of interaction, especially in situations where the consumers felt that the influencer had promised them something or betrayed their trust, was another reason for ending the relationship:

"These [followers] are the people they [influencers] get paid for. You cannot just disappear. You have to have some respect."

(Interviewee 5).

This quotation illustrates that the consumers expect the parasocial relationship to be honored by the influencers as well, in terms of respecting their followers and showing some reciprocity toward them. The interviewees also discussed that ex-friendships may actually have a negative impact on their consumption choices, as they may feel angry and disappointed at the influencer and turn against the brands they recommend:

"Now I've blocked the person from my life so that I would not buy the products that she recommends."

(Interviewee 1)

Hence, the danger of severed close relationships with followers is a genuine risk for brands collaborating with these influencers.

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The third identified relationship, *casual friendship*, is much less emotionally engaging for the consumer than either the close friendship or the ex-friendship. It concerns relationships that were described by the interviewees as ongoing at some level, but which were not seen to be very influential or important for them. These relationships could be with influencers that were only followed for entertainment purposes – for escaping the mundane everyday life. Rather than following people that the consumer can really identify with and relate to, they may follow influencers that are highly different in terms of lifestyle or life stage, for instance. A focus group participant describes this as follows:

“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.”

(Focus group 2 interviewee).

Consumers reported for instance that they kept following certain popular influencers in order not to miss anything important:

“Perhaps I like to keep the option open... if I stopped following them, then they would in a way disappear from my life, and then if something cool and crazy happened, I would miss it.”

(Interviewee 5).

Hence, not all parasocial relationships are equally strong or influential, from the point of view of the consumers. The plurality of parasocial relationships also illustrates that consumers may follow influencers for various reasons.

Discussion

The findings illuminate the nature and types of relationships that young Gen Z women have with the influencers they follow on social media. These relationships are differently characterized by the

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influencer's perceived authenticity and credibility, the feeling of intimacy with the influencer as well as how consumers react to brand endorsements by the influencers. The study's findings provide further support for emerging studies on influencer marketing that specifically highlight the crucial role of authenticity and openness (Audrezet et al. 2018; Chung and Cho, 2017; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Labrecque, 2014). All the identified requirements for parasocial relationships with social media influencers in this study are connected with this notion. First, the influencer needs to portray something real and relatable, second, they need to be transparent about their branded collaborations, third, they need to be true to themselves and finally, choose carefully which brands they collaborate with and personalize their endorsements. We argue that these requirements are all interlinked and filtered through the consumer's parasocial relationship. The parasocial relationship is temporal in nature, and the evaluation of whether the requirements are met by the influencer depends on past experiences of the consumer. Furthermore, we propose that the loss of authenticity in any of these requirements may lead to a lack of authenticity being transferred to the endorsed brand as well. Hence, our findings build a more nuanced, temporal perspective on how authenticity is evaluated by consumers in the context of influencer marketing.

The findings also add a contribution to the emerging literature that has focussed on parasocial relationships in the social media context. These studies have utilised quantitative research designs and concentrated on effects of parasocial relationships on variables such as customer equity (Yuan et al. 2016), brand attitude (De Veirman et al. 2017), and loyalty and purchase intentions (Labrecque, 2014; Yuksel and Labrecque, 2016; Chung and Cho, 2017). Using an interpretive perspective, the current study offers a more nuanced analysis of the temporal dynamics of these relationships. The findings of this study support previous studies that similarly highlight openness and interactivity as preconditions for parasocial relationships (Labrecque, 2014) as well as the need for followers to be able to self-identify and share similar values with the influencer (Chung and

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Cho, 2017; Casaló et al. 2018). However, previous studies have not examined how parasocial relationships evolve and develop.

The three identified relationship types reveal that consumers have various parasocial relationships the strength of which varies and they are dynamically changing over time. Some parasocial relationships may also be terminated and end up in a "break-up" that may be felt like a painful experience for the consumer. While the parasocial relationship theory has considered breakups in the context of media characters (e.g. Cohen 2003) and branding research has considered how consumer-brand relationships end (Fournier 1998; Hemetsberger et al. 2009), this study is the first to consider this aspect in the context of influencer marketing.

Managerial implications

The study has important managerial implications for brands considering influencer marketing as a marketing communications tool, as well as for influencer marketing agencies and influencers themselves. The findings reveal that not every influencer is able to affect their followers similarly, because the followers decide the nature of the parasocial relationship. This is a subjective issue, which is dependent on both the influencer's perceived behavior as well as the motivations of the follower. The study also illuminates the risks involved in terminated parasocial relationships, as they may result in consumers rejecting brands endorsed by their "ex".

The implications for influencers include that they need to be constantly monitoring their followers' opinions and feelings related to their content. This way, the influencer can detect when they are about to lose followers due to parasocial break-up and can change their content accordingly.

Influencers could use the findings of this study as a checklist to ensure that their content is able to generate parasocial relationships. Influencers and their agencies could also use the findings to plan surveys for the followers in order to find out more about their experiences. Implications for marketers include the need to build authentic, relevant and interactive co-operation with influencers

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in order to avoid parasocial breakups and negative reactions. In order to do this, the brand really needs to know the influencer and their followers. Identifying what kind of relationships the influencer has with their followers is crucial for brands investing in influencer marketing. If most of the followers are in a "close friendship" type of a parasocial relationship, there is the opportunity to do successful influencer marketing through establishing a long-term partnership with the influencer. This way, the brand is also able to develop and evolve its communications alongside the influencer's content. If some of the followers that belong in the brand's target group are rather in an "ex friendship" type, then collaborating with the influencer may result in negative brand image and hence, should be avoided. Finally, with casual friendships, there is perhaps less risk as the consumers are not as emotionally committed to the relationship, but the effectiveness of the communications may be lower compared to true friendships.

Conclusion

In summary, this study contributes to a more profound understanding of parasocial relationships on social media from the consumers' point of view. Previous research on the topic from the consumer perspective is still rare, and most of the existing studies have examined the effects of parasocial relationships on consumer's purchasing behavior and online activity. The current study hence provides a much-needed, deeper level perspective to consumers' experiences. Further research should be conducted on the consumer perspective to influencer marketing and parasocial relationships including the motivations of consumers to form a parasocial relationship, and especially on the notion of parasocial breakups with social media influencers beyond Gen Z young women to deepen and expand the exploratory findings achieved in this study.

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Case study: Food bloggers promoting poultry resulted in mixed reactions

In 2016, a Finnish food producer brand Atria initiated an influencer marketing campaign with food bloggers and invited them to visit the farms where their poultry meat is being produced in order to create authentic content about it in their blogs. The brand wanted to try to change consumers' negative perceptions of the animals' living conditions and improve the brand image. As a result, many bloggers wrote very positively about their experiences at the farms, emphasizing their feelings of becoming convinced that the production is ethical and responsible. The blog posts written by these influencers were largely relatable to their followers, who were also interested in corporate responsibility and food production. Increasing the authenticity of their posts, some bloggers also included critical aspects in their texts, but all of them ultimately ended with a positive note about the brand. The influencers also praised the brand for its openness and willingness to engage in interaction with consumers. The company reported in its blog post that the campaign had

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been a success. However, the results of the campaign amongst the influencers' followers and the general public were mixed.

The comments the blog posts received from followers described how the followers themselves had had a negative perception of poultry production before, and how they had been concerned about its ethical aspects, clearly demonstrating the *relatability of the content*. Many followers thanked the bloggers for their courage to go to the farms and report their experiences. However, while some followers expressed a positive attitude toward the brand after reading about it, others criticized the bloggers for their lack of critical assessment and for being paid to promote the brand. They felt the campaign posts were not in line with the influencers' image or their other blog posts – thus, the influencers were not perceived as *being true to themselves*. Commentators in various discussions on both the blogs themselves and elsewhere on social media expressed feelings of sadness and disappointment at the influencers they had been following for a long time. Further, the participating bloggers were blamed in many comments for not *choosing more carefully which brands they collaborated with*, and indeed, the bloggers who had refused from co-operating were praised about their integrity. The resulting discussion amongst the followers of the influencers pointed out that they believed the bloggers were led to write mainly positive things. Some followers reported that they would stop following these blogs and that the blogs' reputation would be tarnished forever by the collaboration. In addition, some consumers were concerned about the *transparency of the campaign* in terms of the bloggers failing to fully disclose that the company had paid them. In fact, the Finnish Council of Ethics in Advertising issued a statement that the campaign had broken the code of ethics in marketing communications because consumers were left unsure about the advertising intent of the campaign. The practical lessons learned about this campaign are that brands need to carefully consider whether their collaboration with an influencer is likely to be

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perceived by their followers as authentic and genuine and whether it will strengthen or severe the parasocial relationship that the consumers have with the influencer. Especially popular influencers have a big audience which can be divided as a consequence of a branded collaboration. Some followers may become alienated and as a result, a great amount of negative publicity toward the influencer and also the brand. Being well aware of the values that are important for the followers, especially the ones that are in the brand's target market, is crucial, and the risks involved should be analyzed in advance, especially when touching issues that are controversial.