Friend-zone with benefits: The parasocial advertising of Kim Kardashian

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This research focuses on the social-media-driven convention of advertising, and seeks to analyze the type of communication that occurs between celebrity endorsers and audiences within social media. Kim Kardashian is the most current and successful celebrity endorser. A content analysis including posts and responses from April and May 2011 is used to analyze the type of advertising messages and celebrity/audience interaction. The goal of the study is to establish whether Parasocial Interaction could improve the effectiveness of advertising. Due to findings that yielded a high amount of endorsements embedded into personal stories, as well as female approval for those posts, it can be stated that Parasocial Interaction takes place between the celebrity and audiences. It can also be considered as an advertising vehicle, in terms of positive audience feedback. The results imply that advertisers should utilize Parasocial Interaction to conduct successful advertising.

Keywords: advertising; celebrity endorsers; social media; Parasocial Interaction Theory; Kim Kardashian

Introduction

The study is conducted to investigate possible new interactions between celebrity–fan behavior and advertising. Relevance is based on the emerging trends of social communication, high popularity of celebrity–fan interaction via social networks and the rise of celebrity endorsements. The study seeks to find potential new advertising techniques that allow deeper, personal connections with consumers in favorable easy-to-access social environments. Therefore, this research provides the opportunity to reestablish the dynamics of celebrity endorsement in newly developed and highly mediated social environments.

For this research, the previous successes of a celebrity endorser as reality television star have been found to be crucial elements in the attachments of a fan to the celebrity – even during the off-season of the celebrity’s show. Additionally, social media’s tweets and posts, together with the shrinking level of time and patience, have reduced the audience’s capacity to read and infer to a minimum level, which adds to the high popularity of short and direct messages from favorable celebrities to mass media.

This study seeks to analyze what underlying patterns keep the one-sided communication between celebrity and fan alive and create possible market value. To make inferences in the field of advertising, the current communication environment of Kim Kardashian to fans on Facebook is analyzed. The theory of Parasocial Interaction offers a valuable basis for the study of this phenomenon because it classifies communication

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between celebrities and fans as imitation of closeness and friendship, which makes faithful fanship with a high market value possible. Due to the fact that a female celebrity endorser is the focal point, this study further examines the special relationship between female endorsers and female audiences in regards to Parasocial Interaction.

**Theoretical framework**

**Celebrity/audience interaction and social media**

Due to special interactive characteristics, social media have become a popular tool for marketers and celebrity endorsers. The Nielsen Online Report showed that in 2009, social networking sites had already outpaced e-mail as the most popular online activity, which motivated marketers to rethink the transferal of traditional advertising into Web 2.0 environments and plan new approaches for effective online advertising on social networking sites. Since social networking platforms allow the building of strong relationships with consumers, they are now considered a hybrid component of integrated marketing communications. Therefore, marketers are enabled to directly talk to the consumers, but the consumers also have the opportunity to talk to one another. This new form of marketing communication represents a marketing approach that is less controlled and outside of the calculated parameters of traditional marketing (Mangold and Faulds 2009). The Interactive Advertising Bureau noticed this trend in 2009 and categorized the advertising on social networking sites as effective due to the taking place of engagement, commenting, liking of posts and other social connections. The US online social network ad spending was projected to reach $2.6 billion in 2012 (Williamson 2008).

The basis of the success of fan pages on Twitter and Facebook is the ability to connect with like-minded people who share the interest in the same celebrity (Moran and Gossieaux 2010), which leads to the transfer of celebrity–audience relationships to a more closely connected and fast-paced platform online. With new technologies like smartphones, audiences can now add their favorite reality television stars on social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook and ‘follow’ them constantly. CEO of Adly, Inc., Arnie Gullov-Singh correctly states: ‘If people are the new publishers, then people are also the future of advertising, and celebrities are the new “prime time”’ (Thomas 2011, para 5). Reality television stars-turned-entrepreneur like Christian Siriano and Lauren Conrad have recognized the promising dynamics of social media and benefit from new possibilities. With the successful recognition from the reality television show, Lauren Conrad states:

> A good number of companies first approached me to sponsor their brands while I was on [the MTV reality television show] Laguna Beach […] Most deals today require Twitter, Facebook and other forms of digital outreach […] because larger followings and stronger connections with your market translate to a greater scope of influence, adding immeasurable value to your brand. (Forbes Online 2011, paras 1 and 3.

Mixing aspects of mass communication and interpersonal communication, celebrities naturally turn into opinion leaders when tweeting or posting about lifestyle brands and entertainment locations that they are surrounded with (McClelland 2011).

Brand Affinity Technologies conducted a study and found that endorsed messages on Facebook and Twitter are 50% more effective in cost-per-action than Facebook and Twitter ads that did not feature celebrities. Additionally, click-through rates are 21 times higher for endorsed Facebook messages over non-endorsed counterparts (TechJournal South 2011). Another study by Nielsen Research concludes that 64% of adult Internet
users in the USA who follow a celebrity on Twitter also follow a brand, ‘[…] which means the celebrity follower is four times more likely to follow a brand than the average U.S. adult online’ (Kramer 2011, para 3). For this reason, it is not surprising that ‘[…] an active social-media profile has become one of the most important deal-points for brands, talent agents and even PR agencies to consider when negotiating contracts [with celebrity endorsers]’ (Hampp 2011, 76).

**Reality television and branding**

Reality television is considered ‘[…] big business’ (Goudreau 2010, para 24) and a profitable tool, as Bill Rancic, entrepreneur and winner of the first season of NBC’s *The Apprentice*, states. Rancic is one of many reality television stars who have used their popularity to their advantage. Kim Kardashian stands out among the examples of reality television stars-turned-entrepreneur due to her high amount of followers on social networking sites, currently six million ‘likes’ on Facebook, and high amount of endorsements. After *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* first aired in 2007, she quickly transformed her notoriety into a strong business brand, stating: ‘The show is the reason we have the brands. The show started it all […] It’s our best commercial’ (Goudreau 2010, para 2). Since the show mostly attracts women from 18 to 34 years (Ng 2011), The celebrity responded to her audience’s demands with workout DVDs, fragrance lines, a shoe website, and also expanded her endorsements for clothing lines such as Bebe, diet products such as Quick Trim, and skincare such as PerfectSkin (Goudreau 2010). Quicktrim, a weight loss product for which she endorses, earned approximately $45 million in 2010 (Pathak 2011).

Brand Keys, a New York research company that monitors consumer perception of brands, ranked Kim Kardashian at the top of its celebrity loyalty index. Acknowledging the phenomenon surrounding herself, the celebrity states: ‘I really do believe I am a brand for my fans […] Twitter is the most amazing focus group out there’ (Wilson 2010, 1). A branding empire under the direction of mother Kris Jenner, who married athlete and former Olympic champion Bruce Jenner after divorcing lawyer Robert Kardashian in 1990, helps to establish a positive image among consumers. The 56-year-old Kris, who is both the manager of her daughter and executive producer of the Kardashian reality television shows, acts as CMO of the family brand. Jenner states in regards to her children: ‘They’re a lifestyle brand […] People love looking at the growth of a brand. I gave birth to six kids, now I’m giving birth to this’ (Pathak 2011, 32). Kris Jenner has created a brand together with her daughters Kim, Khloé and Kourtney that brought in $65 million in the year 2010 (Kalb 2011, para 1). Researchers state that the success of reality television shows leads to a cultural obsession with reality television celebrities (Choi and Rifon 2007). Within this context, Schickel (1985) argues that ‘[f] rom sports figures to actors/actresses, musical artists and entertainers, audiences feel that they personally know these famous personalities and often develop an “illusion of intimacy” with them’ (Schickel 1985, 29).

**Parasocial Interaction and female audiences**

The theory of Parasocial Interaction was introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) and was defined by both researchers as ‘simulacrum of conversational give and take’ between senders and receivers of mass media messages. Horton and Strauss subsequently clarified
that Parasocial Interaction is ‘immediate, personal, and reciprocal, but these qualities are illusory and presumably not shared by the speaker’ (1957, 580).

The Parasocial Interaction theory focuses on the way audiences interact, relate to and develop relationships with a celebrity. Audiences create a strong bond and intimacy with a celebrity while, for example, viewing a reality television show. This type of social interaction is one-sided and mediated, hence the term Parasocial Interaction (Hartmann and Goldhoorn 2010). Another attribute of Parasocial Interaction is that one side knows a great deal about the other while the other does not (Goudreau 2010). While studying audience–celebrity interaction, it has been found that social attraction to a celebrity is a more important attribute within Parasocial Interaction than physical attraction (Rubin and McHugh 1987) and that audiences often seek a celebrity that resembles similar attitudes, appearances and backgrounds (Turner 1993).

Even though Parasocial Interaction is one-sided, it can create the illusory effect of actual social behavior and relationships. The key factor to the transformation of interaction into the establishment of relationships is the illusion of intimacy with the celebrity and the emotional attachment that is created through Parasocial Interaction, which Horton and Wohl expressed as follows: ‘They [the users] “know” such a persona [the celebrity] in somewhat the same way they know their chosen friends: through direct observation, and interpretation of his appearance, his gestures and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situations’ (1956, 216). Gleich (1997) has found that Parasocial Interaction can be active to some degree and has behavioral dimensions. This finding is supported by affective responses of audiences to a celebrity in negative situations. Some audience members even have strong feelings like embarrassment when their idol makes a mistake. These emotional and behavioral dimensions are similar to those regarding actual social relationships (Kassing and Sanderson 2009).

Kassing and Sanderson (2009) found that Parasocial Interaction seems to be evolving with the rise of social interactive media. Parasocial relationships take place on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, where audiences feel closer to the celebrity.

It has yet to be analyzed whether Parasocial Interaction can be considered as an advertising vehicle. Cues that help determine which target-audience gender is likely to respond to Parasocial Interaction can be found in current studies of the brain. A basic principle states, ‘boys like things and girls like people.’ This fascination with other human beings begins in the infant stages; female infants sustain eye contact with adults approximately twice as long as male infants. At four months, female infants can distinguish facial features and distinguish between photos of people they know versus photos of strangers. Male infants are not able to do so at this infant stage (FemmeDen 2008).

Since women are more interested in the whole picture of an issue, including details from varied sources, and often form their opinion on a product based on the entire service and points of contact they have experienced with a brand, Parasocial Interaction with female audiences could be a successful advertising vehicle due to its emotional and contextual appeal to a specific product or individual and appeal to the female brain structure. These facts can help determine the dynamics between celebrity endorsers who target specific audiences.

Research questions

On the basis of the discussion provided above, the following research questions were proposed:
RQ1: In what ways does Kim Kardashian communicate with audiences through posts on Facebook?
RQ2: How are advertising messages such as celebrity endorsements and product placements embedded in the Facebook posts of Kim Kardashian?
RQ3: In what ways do audiences respond to Kim Kardashian’s posts on Facebook?
RQ4: Does Parasocial Interaction take place on Kim Kardashian’s Facebook wall?
RQ5: Can Parasocial Interaction be considered as an advertising vehicle on Facebook?

RQ1–RQ3 will be analyzed with a quantitative content analysis, while RQ4 and RQ5 allow the research to obtain information qualitatively. Owing to the exploratory nature of the study, it is helpful to include open-ended, qualitative questions to allow the research to report data that cannot be captured through quantitative coding categories.

Method
Sample
The population of the study includes all fan pages of celebrity endorsers with a reality television background on Facebook. For this specific research study, a case study was used to conduct an ‘in-depth examination of a single instance of a […] phenomenon […]’ (Babbie 2010, 309), which is ‘particularly advantageous to the researcher who is trying to find clues and ideas for future research’ (Wimmer and Dominick 2006, 137). A case study can be descriptive in nature and also delivers an explanatory insight, which is intended in this context (Babbie 2010) and will be most powerful if used in combination with a theory (Wimmer and Dominick 2006), as provided by the Parasocial Interaction Theory in this research paper.

Kim Kardashian’s Facebook fan page is chosen due to her current status as reality television star and celebrity endorser. Forbes.com included the celebrity in their article called ‘Reality TV Stars Turned Entrepreneurs’ in 2010 and acknowledged that she has turned her notoriety into a strong business brand (Goudreau 2010). Of paramount importance to the study, the reality television star is an appropriate target of analysis because other success factors that could stem from fields other than reality television can be eliminated. For this study, the unit of analysis is one Facebook post by or in Kim K.’s name, including its responses. The technique of convenience sampling yields a sample within the time frame of 1 April 2011–31 May 2011. During this time period, no reality television series starring the celebrity aired. Kourtney and Kim Take New York aired its last season on 3 April 2011 and Keeping Up with the Kardashians started airing its sixth season on 12 June 2011. The time period, which was randomly chosen, proved to be convenient due to the fact that celebrity–audience interaction still took place even without current airing of the reality television shows. She, therefore, had to engage her audience in subject matter other than her reality television shows to keep her fans interested in her persona and Facebook page. On 25 May 2011, the celebrity announced her engagement to Kris Humphries via Facebook post. On 2 June 2011, she posted that season six of Keeping Up with the Kardashians, starting on 12 June 2011, will feature the proposal as well as her wedding ceremony. Kim Kardashian and Kris Humphries were married on 20 August 2011.

The sample includes a total of 175 posts (87 posts in April 2011 and 88 posts in May 2011) with response rates ranging from 76 to 3311 responses per post. To produce a random and systematic sampling of the responses, as well as creating a representative and practical sampling frame, each post’s responses are mathematically partitioned to produce
at least 25 responses to be analyzed. Therefore, a total of 4375 responses were coded (175 posts × 25 responses).

**Reliability measures**

Two coders took part in the study and participated in coder training before the coding was conducted. The intercoder reliability test reflects a sample frame from 1 June 2011 to 10 June 2011 including 26 posts and 650 responses, which represents 15% of the sample. The intercoder reliability test was conducted through SPSS 19 and yielded a comparison of variables between two coders. An intercoder reliability result of 100% was reached for 11 variables, while 90.4%, 90.6%, 90%, 86.6%, 94.3%, 93.2% and 90.3% were reached for the remaining variables. The variables v6 ‘name of product advertised,’ v9 ‘number of likes of post and v10 ‘number of responses to post’ were excluded from the intercoder reliability testing due to their circumstantial nature (see Table 1).

**Coding categories**

Categories for the study were created *a priori* and were adjusted during data analysis due to the exploratory nature of the study. Coding categories by Kassing and Sanderson (2009) were used as basis for the fine-tuning of the categories that were later adjusted in terms of social media environments and product endorsements (see Codebook, p. 15). To establish whether Parasocial Interaction can be used as advertising vehicle, it was of high importance that the coding categories capture the parameters of the narrative, in which each brand was embedded. Therefore, the coding categories include the theme of the post, type of media, the format of the post, the product types, advertising strategy, audience address, and the number of likes and responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Cohen’s κ</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Facebook posts</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post type</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message format</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product type</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising strategy</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Post responses</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female appreciation</td>
<td>0.906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male disapproval</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female disapproval</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male advice</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female advice</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Third-party advertisement</td>
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<td>Female information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male request</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female request</td>
<td>0.932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.903</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Since the classification of responses to one post was interpretive, overlapping between categories occurred, as several themes could be apparent in a single response. Therefore, responses were counted in terms of themes that allowed multiple counting for the same response. The categories for post responses included expressing approval, expressing disapproval, advice (suggesting improvements to appearance or behavior, life advice, etc.), third-party-related response (contains link of a third-party), informational response and request. An ‘other’ category was included to disregard responses in a language different than English, graphic responses and responses that take up more than one comment box for one comment. Heart-shaped symbols were counted as approval, whereas smiley faces were captured in the ‘other’ category, due to their non-specific nature. Even though communication among fans was not captured, it was important to create categories that allowed for the interpretation of reactions to embedded endorsements.

**Results**

**Research questions**

*Kim Kardashian’s communication through Facebook posts (RQ1)*

The data from this study were obtained through frequency testing with the statistical program SPSS and was analyzed descriptively.

The first research question (RQ1), inquiring about the ways in which the celebrity communicates with audiences through posts on Facebook, is effectively answered by statistically obtaining the descriptive results of v2 (type of post), v3 (media) and v4 (message format of post).

Out of the total posts on Facebook, the post type most often used was endorsement (44.6%, \(n=78\)), followed by family and friends (29.7%, \(n=52\)) and current events (12.6%, \(n=22\)). Public appearances (8.0%, \(n=14\)) and other post types (5.1%, \(n=9\)) were not used frequently (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Public appearance of Kim Kardashian</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family and friends</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>29.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Endorsement</td>
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<td>44.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current event</td>
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<td>12.6</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>94.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Link only</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple media</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>90.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No media</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The media used within posts are mostly multiple media (84.0%, \(n = 147\)). Posts without media (9.1%, \(n = 16\)) and link-only posts (6.9%, \(n = 12\)) are not used as frequently (see Table 3).

The message format represented in posts is mostly informational in nature (55.4%, \(n = 97\)), followed by questions (18.3%, \(n = 32\)), commands (13.1%, \(n = 23\)), and benefits and promises (12.6%, \(n = 22\)) (see Table 4).

Kim Kardashian’s advertising strategy on Facebook (RQ2)

The second research question (RQ2) asked about how advertising messages such as celebrity endorsements and product placements are embedded into the Facebook posts. To statistically gather results, \(v7\) (advertising strategy) yields an answer. The advertising strategy most often employed, if present, is the embedding of the product into personal stories (emotional and transformational advertising) (60.6%, \(n = 106\)) (see Table 5).

Audience response (RQ3)

The third research question (RQ3) analyzes the ways in which audiences respond to posts on Facebook. By obtaining the statistical frequencies of the response posts (\(n = 4375\)), it can be stated that the highest type of response was female approval (\(n = 1413\)), followed by female information and interaction (\(n = 1159\)), male information (\(n = 805\)), male approval (\(n = 765\)), other (\(n = 525\)), request male (\(n = 186\)), female disapproval (\(n = 159\)), male disapproval (\(n = 148\)), request female (\(n = 146\)), third-party advertising (\(n = 115\)), advice female (\(n = 90\)) and advice male (\(n = 35\)). The ‘other’ category stands out due to a high amount of posts in cryptic or foreign language and explicit nature of responses.

| Table 4. Frequency and percentage distribution of message format. |
|-------------------|------|------|------|------|
|                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Benefit/promise   | 22     | 12.6   | 12.6          | 12.6              |
| Information       | 97     | 55.4   | 55.4          | 68.0              |
| Question          | 32     | 18.3   | 18.3          | 86.3              |
| Command           | 23     | 13.1   | 13.1          | 99.4              |
| Other             | 1      | 0.6    | 0.6           | 100.0             |
| Total             | 175    | 100.0  | 100.0         |                   |

| Table 5. Frequency and percentage distribution of advertising strategy. |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|
|                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid            | 106    | 60.6  | 60.6          | 60.6              |
| Product is embedded into personal story (emotional/transformational) | 
| Pure information | 8      | 4.6   | 4.6           | 65.1              |
| Call for action/interactive advertising | 
| None             | 34     | 19.4  | 19.4          | 100.0             |
| Total            | 175    | 100.0 | 100.0         |                   |
The analysis of the response posts showed that there were not enough significant instances in which respondents changed the topic of a post or created a secondary community discussion among other respondents. Thus, the rare cases in which a respondent changed a topic were counted as ‘information’ when the other topic was clearly identified, and were counted as ‘other’ if the response post contained off-topic aspects that were unclear if analyzed out of context.

Parasocial Interaction on Facebook (RQ4)

The fourth research question (RQ4), relating Parasocial Interaction to Kim Kardashian’s Facebook wall, can be supported. Since v4 (message format of post) yielded that the celebrity provides personal information to her Facebook audiences (55.4%, $n = 97$) and obtained information that she never re-interacts with her audience after her initial posting, and therefore has little knowledge about the individual, evidences that Parasocial Interaction has been found to take place on the Facebook wall.

The post with the highest amount of responses (3311) was posted on 31 May: ‘Is my hair too dark? Should I go lighter for the summer?’ followed by ‘Kris and I are engaged!’ (Posted on 25 May; 2651 responses and 15,062 likes) and ‘I’m confused why does everyone think the world is gonna end today? Only God can determine that! But what started all of this talk?’ (Posted on 21 May; 2244 responses and 11,261 likes).

It can be inferred that Parasocial Interaction plays a major role in Kim Kardashian’s Facebook communication. The main indicator for this phenomenon is based on the fact that she does not engage in any further communication after the initial post. Even though posts can reach up to 3000 audience comments, the dynamics of Parasocial Interaction make possible an illusion of actual social interaction and intimacy with the celebrity. Parasocial Interaction can also be found where audiences respond with sincere advice based on their own life experience and the sharing of highly personal and sensitive information to increase the already existing illusion of intimacy between fan and celebrity. The Facebook posts that seem to create the highest amount of responses are the type of posts that imitate questions asked by real-life friends. Questions like ‘is my hair too dark?’ lure audiences into thinking that the desire of and respect for opinions resemble an actual friend-like connection with the celebrity. While she posts information exclusively concerning her own persona, she does not know details about the audience, while the audience knows a great deal of information about the celebrity, which is another indicator for Parasocial Interaction.

Parasocial Interaction as advertising vehicle (RQ5)

The fifth research question (RQ5) asked about whether Parasocial Interaction could be considered as advertising vehicle on Facebook. Through v2 (type of post), v4 (message format of post), v5 (type of product/brand advertised) and v7 (advertising strategy), it is supported that Parasocial Interaction could be considered as advertising vehicle on Facebook. Since the celebrity mainly uses her Facebook interaction to conduct endorsements (44.6%, $n = 78$) while using the strategy of attaching endorsements to personal information (55.4%, $n = 97$) and embedding it into personal stories (60.6%, $n = 106$), it can also be inferred that she knows her previously established female audience through her reality television show well. She mostly advertises magazines with her on the cover, web pages and other media outlets (21.1%, $n = 37$), followed by fashion (14.3%,
n = 25) and the Kardashian reality television show (10.9%, n = 19), beauty products (8.6%, n = 15), and entertainment and leisure products (6.3%, n = 11) (see Table 6).

One statistical result that stood out from the study was that the postings address the audience mostly in a non-personal way (72.0%, n = 126) as opposed to personal addresses (28.0%, n = 49). The initial analysis of this phenomenon indicated that it disproves the taking place of Parasocial Interaction. However, after taking a closer look at the framing of the posts in terms of audience address, it can be stated that posts without a personal address take the audience directly into the matter of the post. This created a dynamic of constant, ongoing communication and without the marking of the beginning and the ending of a discussion; the audience is even more engaged in the process of Parasocial Interaction.

Most of the Facebook endorsements are embedded into the discussion of the reality television show (‘did you see what happened last season on Keeping Up with the Kardashians?’) and the references to magazines that featured Kim Kardashian (‘What do you think about my Cosmopolitan cover shoot?’). Audiences usually react to the initial post by sharing their personal opinions about the reality television show, appearances and cover shoots and by asking further questions. If a specific tangible product is embedded into Facebook posts, for example her endorsements for Sketchers Shape-Ups, audiences share their mostly positive experiences with the product and oftentimes request additional colors or other variations of the product. Referring this to the celebrity’s interview quote, stating that social media resembles the best focus group for products, it can be inferred that the illusion of intimacy in terms of Parasocial Interaction motivates the consumer to share information about the use of a product, which can be highly valuable for the marketing of a product. Additionally, the sharing of positive product experiences on the Facebook wall creates not only a focus group, but also a product community that will motivate other consumers to purchase the product. Thusly, it can be stated that Parasocial Interaction serves as promising advertising vehicle (see Table 7).

Table 6. Frequency and percentage distribution of product type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beauty</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body and nutrition</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment/leisure</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
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<td>14.3</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>32.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kardashian reality</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>television show</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazine/web page/media</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>64.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>98.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Frequency and percentage distribution of address.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-personal</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Impact of Facebook messages on audience responses

To gain further insight into the correlation between the type of posts and audience response in terms of number of likes and responses, the researcher also conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) of Facebook posts. The correlation testing was based on the independent variables post type and media and the dependent variables number of likes and number of responses.

It can be concluded that the results of the MANOVA testing showed a high correlation between media and responses \((F = 11.366; p = 0.000)\). These results indicate that the number of likes and responses for posts that contain little or no media are high. Comparing those results with the fact that posts that do not contain an address also create a high amount of likes and responses, it can be inferred that, in terms of Parasocial Interaction, ‘less is more.’ Just like actual social behavior, messages that seem more spontaneous with raw and direct information give the audience the feeling that the message is even more personal and directed toward the individual.

Furthermore, the results indicate that the type of posts and the format of the posts are correlated with the number of responses \((F = 2.177; p = 0.04)\) (see Table 8).

Post type and message format

The analysis of the correlation means also gave insight into the factors that created high audience responses and likeability of the post.

In terms of audience responses, the benefit and promise message format created most audience responses for public appearances of Kim Kardashian \((M = 367.500)\), while the information format was most useful in terms of family- and friends-related posts \((M = 659.559)\). Posts that contained questions as message format were most successful when incorporated into endorsements \((M = 501.603)\), current events \((M = 1220.000)\) and others \((M = 1312.000)\).

Table 8. Impact of Facebook messages on audience responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean square</th>
<th>(F)</th>
<th>(P)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PostType</td>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6731415.773</td>
<td>2.052</td>
<td>0.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>280015.182</td>
<td>2.074</td>
<td>0.087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20229385.986</td>
<td>6.168</td>
<td>0.003**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1534465.924</td>
<td>11.366</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MsgFormat</td>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3123338.211</td>
<td>0.952</td>
<td>0.436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>272600.667</td>
<td>2.019</td>
<td>0.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(P \times M)</td>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3378902.715</td>
<td>1.030</td>
<td>0.402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>235323.279</td>
<td>1.743</td>
<td>0.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(P \times F)</td>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1791635.298</td>
<td>0.546</td>
<td>0.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>293853.542</td>
<td>2.177</td>
<td>0.040*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(M \times F)</td>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4276196.384</td>
<td>1.304</td>
<td>0.266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>191142.549</td>
<td>1.416</td>
<td>0.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(P \times M \times F)</td>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23221187.858</td>
<td>7.080</td>
<td>0.001**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>623561.495</td>
<td>4.619</td>
<td>0.011**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>3279955.239</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>135008.665</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.5; **p < 0.01.
Post type, media and message format

The absence of media was most successful for endorsements with information ($M = 825.500$) and question ($M = 850.500$) in terms of audience responses and was equally successful in relation to the number of likes. While the absence of media created a high amount of likes for current events and question ($M = 11261.000$), it also created a high amount of responses for public appearances and benefit and promise ($M = 555.00$). The usage of multiple media was most effective in terms of family- and friends-related posts for both likeability ($M = 2908.286$) and number of responses ($M = 378.714$). The utilization of media was also successful in terms of current events and information in terms of audience responses ($M = 675.700$).

Discussion

Findings and implications

This research was the first attempt to explore whether Kim Kardashian, as an example of reality television star-turned-entrepreneur, makes use of Parasocial Interaction on her Facebook fan page and to analyze how her audience reacts to it.

The results of this study clearly show that post interaction with audiences creates Parasocial Interaction and gives the illusion of intimacy with the primary underlying intent to endorse, sell products and conduct public relations for her own persona. Therefore, this fact speaks for the nature of reality television stars turning their fame into entrepreneurial dynamics on social networking sites such as Facebook.

While embedding endorsements into personal stories (emotional and transformational advertising), the celebrity endorser is strategically using the benefits of emotional involvement created in the realms of Parasocial Interaction to her advantage. The audience is constantly being rewarded with additional information about the celebrity and is involved with multiple media and interactive posts, so that the dynamic of a well-informed and active audience is created. The audience, therefore, stays constantly alert and informed, while being consumed by an idol, wanting to imitate her lifestyle and purchase the brands and products that make her lifestyle admirable.

An additional success factor for the merging of Parasocial Interaction and advertising is created when the endorsements are catered to an already existing audience from previous reality television show successes including the demographics thereof. All of the product types employed in the posts are oriented toward a female audience, which speaks for the assumption that the celebrity transferred her already existing fan base from her reality television show to a new social media platform. Kim Kardashian knows her target audiences well and therefore exclusively markets products that cater to a female audience, which increases her credibility and consistency. This strategy is well employed and perceived, hence the result that most of the response types were female approval.

Due to high response rates and high likeability of posts by female audiences, it can be inferred that an emotional attachment to a celebrity though Parasocial Interaction can translate to an emotional connection with a product or brand, that ultimately leads to positive purchasing behavior. This study supports the idea that it is of high advertising value to adopt a celebrity-endorser strategy on social networking sites that is based on Parasocial Interaction and catered to a well-known audience, especially if the celebrity endorser already is highly credible in a certain field of brands and products.
The idea of Parasocial advertising is to promote a lifestyle, not a single brand. The ways in which Kim celebrates her own lifestyle gives audiences a virtual canvas for the use of brands. However, in this context, the endorsement is perceived as secondary notion. At the beginning stands a celebrity who promotes a lifestyle through reality television and social media that is socially accepted and admired. Audiences then, especially females, begin to engage in Parasocial Interaction by wanting to imitate their idol and to create closeness through communication. 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. The addition of the ‘how’ to the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of brand usage is provided by brand narratives that are based on emotional appeals. It no longer is important what the brand can do, but instead, how it can bring one closer to an admired lifestyle, which ultimately leads to social acceptance for the individual. The brands are a gateway to the celebrity lifestyle and are therefore not perceived as nuisance, but instead, as welcomed tools provided by a trusted source.

Limitations and future research

First, the sample for this study might be considered a limitation. Since this research study is of exploratory nature, it does not seek representativeness for other social networking sites and celebrity endorsers. However, the advantages of a case study used in this research context outweighed the obvious limitations. The nature of a case study gave the researcher the opportunity to suggest why the interaction phenomena between celebrity and fans occur, based on the theory of Parasocial Interaction. Due to its novel characteristics, the research study aims at providing a basis for a possible new theory that can be applied to new media advertising. Future research could investigate whether the trends found in this study are applicable to other media outlets or societal communication, in general. It has been found, however, that the posts on Facebook and Twitter are all of the same nature and stem from the same source post from her personal blog. Further research should establish whether this is a common strategy among other celebrity endorsers within the social media age.

Second, audience behavior is only analyzed in a limited way in this study. No distinctions have been made in terms of audience-to-audience interaction due to a limited amount of instances and the intended research angle of Parasocial Interaction. The theory of Parasocial Interaction predetermines this research to be heavily focused on the intent of the endorser, instead of focusing solely on audience behavior, which will call for a different theory and a new research study. While it has been found that fans are the actual creators of content and interactivity on the celebrity’s Facebook fan page, the Parasocial Interaction Theory suggests that based on an ‘illusion of intimacy,’ the endorser’s initial action might be sufficient to set of interactivity that is still focused on the main communicator, the endorser, and not on the fan base. The fact that Kim Kardashian never ‘re-posts’ after her initial post is not a sufficient reason to divert the angle toward audience member interactivity. This assumption was supported by the fact that the fan base never turned into a driving force of interactivity within the observed content, nor did the researcher find sufficient evidence for single-product criticism by audience members. The general tendency of fan commentary content was directed toward the persona in either a positive or negative way. If persona likeability was present, then the audience member was much more likely to also leave a positive comment about the product. However, in some situations, individuals criticize the celebrity while others defend her, which could be
counted as an extended form of fan-community Parasocial Interaction, because the fan becomes emotionally involved with the celebrity and comes to the celebrity’s defense. Future research should analyze this type of fan–community interaction in terms of extended forms of Parasocial Interaction.

Third, the statistical procedures should have included the option of counting the audience’s actual usage of the brand names in their responses. This information could have evaluated the role of Parasocial Interaction in advertising even further.

Limitations also apply to the analysis of Facebook posts. The message format category of ‘information’ should have been more clearly specified into types of information, for example, personal opinions or experiences. The term ‘endorsement’ could have been more specified. Even if there was no direct endorsement found in the post, the celebrity still promotes her own persona through her Facebook posts. Owing to the strict exclusion of self-promotion in the ‘endorsement’ category, the results for this section were skewed with a high ‘none’ result. The researcher attempted to capture self-endorsement through the connection of red carpet events or modeling references; however, even if the celebrity does not mention an event or a brand, every aspect of communication on her Facebook fan page can be considered self-endorsement. Future research needs to take this aspect into consideration when developing coding categories.

Interestingly, Kim Kardashian does not use personal addresses often. Including personal addresses to audiences in posts could possibly increase the amount of Parasocial Interaction that takes place. Further research could examine this proposition.

Since socially mediated advertising is a multifaceted and multidimensional phenomenon, future studies should go beyond a descriptive analysis of current trends in this area and provide a more detailed and specific explanations as to whether Parasocial Interaction in advertising leads to a higher market value of products and brands, as well as an improved brand and product image among audiences. It could also be argued that the hybrid characteristics of social media endorsements and the cultural need for celebrity interaction and relationships call for a new or improved theory in the areas of new media and advertising research.

Notes on contributor

Jennifer Anette Lueck is a first-year PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Minneapolis, Minnesota. The idea for the research project ‘Friend-Zone with benefits: The Parasocial advertising of Kim Kardashian,’ was formed during the course of her graduate studies at the University of Southern Mississippi with the guidance of graduate adviser and thesis chair, Dr. Fei Xue. Lueck’s research interests currently revolve around social media advertising, celebrity endorsers, and brand narratives. Her latest project focuses on social media celebrity endorsements and brand credibility.

References

**Introduction**

This Facebook post protocol was designed to help determine the ways in which celebrity Kim Kardashian communicates with target audiences. It examines the types and strategies of postings as well as advertising messages and responses on Facebook. The following definitions and references are important in selecting and analyzing the content under study.

**Appendix: Codebook and definition of terms**

This Facebook post protocol was designed to help determine the ways in which celebrity Kim Kardashian communicates with target audiences. It examines the types and strategies of postings as well as advertising messages and responses on Facebook. The following definitions and references are important in selecting and analyzing the content under study.
**Post**

A post, or posting, is any message at the top of a message thread posted by the celebrity (and associates). A majority of Facebook posts by Kim Kardashian contain a source link to her personal blog. It is evident that messages are automatically published on multiple networking sites through associates. A post may also contain pictures and videos. If the copy of a post is cut off or shortened, the coder will include the source post from the celebrity’s blog as reference and it will be treated as if the copy on Facebook was complete.

**Likes**

Every post has so-called ‘likes.’ Every Facebook user can press the ‘like button’ to express likeability of a posting; however, to be able to like a post, the user has to ‘like’ the entire Facebook profile first. Once a user ‘likes’ the celebrity’s profile, it will appear in the user’s newsfeed for others to see, unless he or she disables visibility.

**Reality television**

Kimberly (‘Kim’) Kardashian garnered a great deal of success from her reality television show ‘Keeping Up with the Kardashians,’ which captures the daily lives of her mother Kris Jenner, stepfather Bruce Jenner, sisters Khloé and Kourtney Kardashian, stepsisters Kendall and Kylie Jenner, and brother Robert Kardashian Jr. Further stepsisters and stepbrothers are not included in the television series and public events. Sister Khloé Kardashian is married to Lamar Odom and currently has her own reality television show ‘Khloé and Lamar.’ Sister Kourtney has a son, Mason, with Scott Disick.

**Parasocial Interaction**

Parasocial Interaction is a term that usually defines one-sided relationships, especially between celebrities and their fans, where the fan seeks a lot of information about the celebrity and therefore knows a lot about him or her; however, the celebrity does not know details of the fan. This study seeks to analyze whether Parasocial Interaction takes place on Facebook between Kim Kardashian and a targeted audience. Furthermore, the study investigates whether Parasocial Interaction can be used as advertising vehicle, especially for a female audience.

**v1. ID**

**v2. Type of post**

*Code these types of posts with the associated numbers:*

1. Public appearance of Kim Kardashian
2. Family and friends
3. Endorsement
4. Current event
5. Other

**Public appearance**

A public appearance is the event in which Kim Kardashian appears before the public eye at a gala, fashion show, nightclub or other event. A public appearance is usually characterized by the publishing of pictures on a red carpet.

**Family and friends**

Any story that is associated with the celebrity’s family or friends, whether it is in regard to reality television shows or giving personal information and photographs, belongs in this category.

**Endorsement**

An endorsement is a testimonial for a product or brand that speaks for its positive features.
Current event
A current event is what was currently the agenda in the media around April and May 2011.

v3. Media
What media does the post contain?
(1) Photo only
(2) Video only
(3) Link only
(4) Multiple media
(5) No media

v4. Message format of post
(1) Benefit/promise
(2) Information
(3) Question
(4) Command
(5) Other

Please choose how the post justifies interaction and catches the users’ interests and creates responses.

v5. Type of product/brand advertised
If no product or brand is advertised, select ‘none’; if a product is advertised but does not fit into any of the listed categories, choose ‘other.’
(1) Beauty
(2) Body and nutrition
(3) Entertainment/leisure
(4) Fashion
(5) Kardashian reality television show
(6) Magazine/web pages/media
(7) None
(8) Other

v6. Name of product/brand advertised
Identify the product or brand that is mentioned and advertised in the post.

v7. Advertising strategy
Please select the option that is most evident in the post:
(1) Product is embedded into personal story (emotional/transformational)
(2) Pure information (informational)
(3) Call for action/interactive advertising
(4) None
(5) Other

Personal story
An advertisement can be embedded into a personal story and will create an emotional appeal by doing so. In creating a personal frame for an advertisement, the audience finds the brand or product appealing because the trusted source Kim Kardashian uses this product herself or shares it with her family and friends.
Informational
An advertising strategy can be purely informational by giving bare information about the product, its release date, benefits and costs to the audience.

Interactive
An interactive advertisement usually tries to engage the audience with the product in various ways through games, videos, links, discussions and other forms of interactivity. Interactive advertising always asks the audience to take some kind of action that ultimately leads to a purchase of the product.

v8. How is the audience being addressed?
Please select ‘personal’ if Kim Kardashian specifically addresses her audience in a way that creates closeness. Select ‘non-personal’ if the post does not contain a specific form of addressing an audience.

(1) Personal
(2) Non-personal

This case includes the ways in which the audience is addressed (e.g. ‘Hey dolls!’), to establish whether target audiences are addressed in a manner that can be classified as personal and similar to ways in which real-life friends are greeted (Parasocial Interaction between celebrity and fans).

v9. Number of likes of post
v10. Number of responses to post
v11. Type of response

Identify the gender of the respondent to your best ability by analyzing the user name and picture used in the comment field. If the name and picture does not give any clues or gives conflicting information about the gender, please choose ‘other.’

(1) Expressing approval male
(2) Expressing approval female
(3) Expressing disapproval male
(4) Expressing disapproval female
(5) Advice male
(6) Advice female
(7) Third-party related
(8) Informational response male
(9) Informational response female
(10) Request male
(11) Request female
(12) Other

Expressing admiration
A respondent can express admiration by directly posting ‘I love you Kim,’ or giving compliments ‘you look amazing’ and support, as well as embedding the heart symbol into a post.

Expressing disapproval
A respondent can express disapproval by directly posting ‘I hate you Kim,’ or criticizing the celebrity ‘you look terrible,’ as well as other forms of disapproval.

Advice
A respondent can give advice by giving his or her opinion to one of Kim Kardashian’s questions in a manner of advice, or referring to ways in which she can improve her appearances.

Third-party advertisement
A respondent can employ third-party advertisements by responding to the post with a link to his or her own business website, or through advertising other causes, products and brands unrelated to Kim Kardashian on her Facebook page.
Informational response
Please select informational response when the user engages in interaction with the celebrity by answering questions or providing opinions related to Kim Kardashian’s post headline.

v12. Did Parasocial Interaction take place? If yes, why and how?
v13. Could Parasocial Interaction be categorized as advertising vehicle for Kim Kardashian on Facebook?