

STUDYING THE NATURE OF PARASOCIAL INTERACTION AND ITS STIMULI AND RESPONSE: NETNOGRAPHY STUDYING THAI KENTUCKY FRIED CHICKEN

DAWAREE THEENANONT, CHAI CHING TAN

Abstract: This research focuses on the parasocial relationship space enabled by the Thai Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) restaurants' Fanpage (Facebook) and their customers. The parasocial interaction is triggered by the stimuli of the marketing arm of the restaurant chain and its employees, by engaging the customers in an attempt to create favorable performances. An S-O-R (Stimuli-Organism-Response) model is introduced to capture the holistic configuration of the phenomena of social interaction, which addresses the research objective, while the details of the nature of the phenomena answer the three research questions being raised. In particular, this research contributes in demonstrating the usefulness of netnography, which is effective in enriching the understanding of parasocial interaction that has lacked the rigor and validity in measurements in the existent literature. In addition, this research identifies also the agentic and intentional components of parasocial interaction, which fills the gap of the existent literature. In sum, this research serves both the exploratory and explanatory purposes of the research.

Introduction: With the accelerating trend of social media as platform for consumers-company interaction, the concepts of parasocial relationship or/and interaction have gained momentum of research interests. Both terms, parasocial relationship and interaction, are sometimes being used interchangeably, but the former is rather ambiguous (Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen, 2016), and unless interview-based qualitative approach is employed, the nature of parasocial relationship may not be validly and reliably examined. This research approaches the data collection by the use of netnography, which exhibits ethnography on online observatory platform, and thus, parasocial interaction (PSI) is studied, as evidences can be obtained, through inter-rater reliability-centric participation of numerous researchers. In addition, many researchers have also discovered that parasocial interaction can capture one-time interaction between the consumer and the brand or company, in the social media platform, but parasocial relationship has molded into an ongoing (Schramm and Hartmann, 2008) relationship. By the virtue of the relationship formed of the consumers or customers with the brand or the company, in social media platform, parasocial interaction is thus a behavior that is both a psychological and a media phenomenon (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Nevertheless, this research would attempt to critically study and examine the data to explore for attitudinal and other aspects of parasocial interactions.

Because of the lack of research in parasocial interaction, and also, partly most published questionnaire-based measures are too generic, the research outcomes generally provide difficulties for enriching the understanding of both researchers and practitioners. For instance, Dibble et al. (2016) indicate that the generic measures are either "not tested with sufficient rigor or are rigorously tested

but not fare well" (p. 22). Thus, to resolve this issue, this research exploits netnography method, as means to explore and explain the phenomenon of parasocial interaction, and its stimuli and responses that are attributable to both consumers and the firm or the brand.

Thus, the following research objective is established: Based on netnography method, and having been guided by the existent literature review, this research aims to suggest S-O-R (Stimuli-Organism-Response) architecture (cf. Aung and Tan, 2016) for parasocial interaction, for a branded fast-food restaurant, Kentucky Fried Chicken. To address this research objective, three research questions are raised.

- First, what are the roles of marketing stimuli played in the parasocial interaction?
- Second, what is the nature of parasocial interaction?
- Third, what benefits or consequences the parasocial interaction brings? Ultimately, this research serves as both exploratory and explanatory means in understanding the S-O-R phenomenon of parasocial interaction.

Literature Review: Concepts and terminologies relating to parasocial interaction or behaviors are first coined by Horton and Wohl (1956), for use in the mass communication discipline, to help describe the relationship formed between a person and another virtual subject or persona such as a movie character or quiz-show TV program. This research exploits this concept to study how the consumers or customers forge the interaction with the fast-food chain restaurant on social media platform, and to examine how the social media-mediated interaction, on parasocial manner, can influence their real worlds.

Albeit parasocial concept as a mainstream subject, its conceptual application, being treated to service and marketing disciplines, is generally lacking. With the accelerating pace of social media technologies

influencing our life and business, as means of communication and socialization, parasocial concept may have inherited significant values which the service and marketing disciplines can exploit. Nevertheless, the research on parasocial platform is challenging as the literature is not only lacking of research publications in these areas, but is also constrained by the concept and the means of measurement instrument. Thus, a preliminary explorative type of research may be more suitable as an effort to lay some useful observable groundwork for further research.

In this parasocial interaction (PSI) platform, the exchanges between the different stakeholders can essentially develop a relationship that shares unique characteristics similar to friendship that can exist beyond “face-to-face communication sequences and is able to influence future motivations and selection processes” (Schramm and Hartmann, 2008, p. 386), and gives rise to affectionate behaviors (p. 387). In view of this understanding, the similar phenomenon can be seen in the consumption communities of social media in which people make distant friends and provide self-expressive confirmation or disconfirmation of their attitudes, perceptions and co-creation interactions towards the products, services and the brand at the social media platform such as Facebook. This conceptual theme thus becomes the basis or theoretical protocol to guide the observations of the parasocial phenomenon in this research.

In a nutshell, by borrowing from the works of Schramm and Hartmann (2008), parasocial interaction may incorporate psychological and social media phenomena that include cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses of the customers who participate or interact in the social media on brand focus and virtual or real brand community relationship. The cognitive domain is strikingly obvious as social media-based brand community platform often offers the necessary information (Dholakia et al. 2004) to help enrich the understanding of the customers towards the products, services, as well as the brand, including the behaviors of the communities and the consumer brand identification. Thus, to a large degree, this is the purposive or functional motive of the customers, in addition to entertainment or emotional or affectionate value. The latter is a significant characteristic of the so-called paracommunication which is about the customers’ or consumers’ subjective feeling established in the brand community (cf. Hartmann, 2008).

Parasocial interaction may exist only for the duration of the viewing experience (Horton and Wahl, 1956, p. 156), or may exist due to more enduring, long-term relationship formed between the customers and the

brand (cf. Cummins and Cui, 2014). According to Horton and Wolh (1956), the parasocial interaction involves a “simulacrum of conversational give-and-take” (p. 215), that is reciprocal (Dibble et al. 2015). To foster a good parasocial relationship, the parties involved may attempt to adapt their conversational styles (Horton and Strauss, 1957), which involve a sense of mutual awareness, attention and adjustment (Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011). As a result of the parasocial interaction, the involving parties would gradually learn and become more familiar with each other (Schramm and Hartmann, 2008), and eventually each party would gain the benefits (Gola, Richards, Lauricella and Calvert, 2013).

Although parasocial interaction may be considered less an active consumption when compared to actual social behavior (Auter and Palmgreen, 2000), nevertheless, PSI does contribute significantly to develop closer relationships with consumers, such as in improving urge to buy impulsively and help develop impulse buying tendency (Xiang, Zheng, Lee and Zhao, 2016), and fostering the loyalty of participants (Tsiotsou, 2015).

In this research, the Thai Kentucky Fried Chicken’s Facebook would be studied, and in this case, marketing stimuli that influence consumers’ emotion and the parasocial interaction of consumers would dominate. The marketing-dominated stimuli are applicable to the fast-food consumption, which acknowledges the presence of customers for performance purpose. Nevertheless, the researchers are open-minded in the netnography study, in search for any other external and internal stimuli, such as personal motives or socially induced influences. Figure 1 shows the overall architectural framework of the parasocial interaction and its stimuli and response, which shares the stimuli-organism-response (S-O-R) model advocated by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). The latter variable studies the various response behaviors of the consumers (Ha and Lennon, 2010). Organism is represented by parasocial interaction of the players in the social media, which could involve cognitive responses in terms of consumers’ mental processes and states (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982).

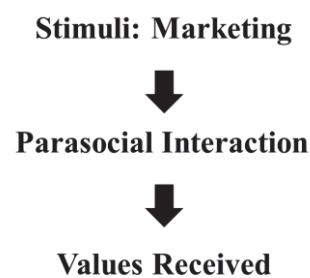


Figure 1: The Conceptual Model

Research Methodology: Netnography is an emerging research method, although its originality takes root in ethnography. In a nutshell, netnography is aimed to study social phenomena by exploiting observation as means to study the textual discourse (Langer and Beckman, 2005) and grounded theory in data analysis (Vaast and Walsham, 2013). After examining the available online communities involving KFC-related contents, the Thai KFC's Facebook page seems to be the most appropriate sources of data, as it has the higher level of contents participation, and is a platform that clearly indicates the parasocial interactions. The demographic profiles would be exempted in this study, as it would not be meaningful in its outcome as this research attempts to explore the phenomena of the S-O-R that involves parasocial interaction, with an effort aimed to provide explanation. The threads and their postings following the predominantly marketing induced stimulation would be examined. The data thus can be categorized to share the nature of a case research study, which aims to obtain theoretical saturation. Validity and reliability are very much ensured by a rigorous concurrent data collection-cum-analysis process, in which 4 researchers and one thesis supervisor co-involve in exhausting the saturation on themes and their patterns of relationships. Authenticity and trustworthiness of the data are easily provided as the data are available online and any other researchers could easily attend to them. The research process involving netnography-based data analysis is challenging, as researchers did not seek clarification, and the fruitfulness of the study purely depends on the data available. The data analysis for the same case runs through 2-3 full weeks of iteration, being guided by the definitions provided in the existent literature.

Data Analysis: Five cases which illustrate the marketing-simulated parasocial interactions of the customers in the KFC fan page, that are capable to describe the shape and contents of the S-O-R architecture, are presented.

Case1: A customer posted a comment, together with a picture illustrated, against the complaining comment stating that KFC lies to them. Another two commenters agreed with this comment in the same way.

This situation presents the parasocial interaction in the perspective of agentic interaction with the attempt to reduce the negative behavior of some commenters which also expressing the cognitive reasoning. "A" consumer intends to cultivate the people to carefully read the text in the advertisement before posting any comment that reveals the self-oriented or bias as mentioned "I want these commenters to read not only seeing the picture and making up your own thought". Two commenters also

conform with the comment revealing the cognitive reasoning, combining with the agentic relationship, to post their views towards this similar situation. 'A' also replied to both of commenters showing her interaction intimately.

Case 2: KFC posted a video clip on fan page with the caption stating: "After work, the great duty of mother is beginning – the important duty that others might overlook." KFC admires all mothers' consecration. The comment of the customers can be the evidence to explain the theory of parasocial interaction.

This situation clearly displays the marketing strategy of the brand in the social media in stimulating the parasocial interaction of the customers. After the customers were exposed to the brand's advertisement, they present the parasocial interaction in the perspective of affective and agentic. These parasocial interactions are not only stimulated by the marketing strategy but is also enabled by customer satisfaction which lead them to interact virtually as a customer mentioned: "Every time I go to the shopping mall I have to have KFC, like I am being allured", "Trigger (customer's son) really like having KFC" and "The children really like having KFC". The positive repeated encounter in the parasocial can also lead to as well as reflect the customer loyalty towards the brand, for instance, 1st customer in this case stated that "Every time I go to the shopping mall I have to have KFC". In addition, the customer can receive the value in term of happiness which, at the same time, contributing to the brand image in terms of "happy time of family". Another customer shows the way to increase happy family time. From this additional comment to this case, it accentuates that the marketing strategy of KFC can stimulate the customers to have the parasocial interactions: affective, cognitive, behavioral and agentic interactions; which, in turn, contributes the value to both customers and the brand. The customers will receive the value in terms of happiness whereas the brand image is illustrated in the perspective of "the brand for happy family time".

Case 3: This case is regarding to the post of KFC in marketing campaign introducing the new product with an animation of a lady holding two flavored spicy chicken wings and crying because of the spicy taste with caption: *This is the spiciest post in the world!!! #chili #chili #chili ...* One customer posted a comment to review a taste of fried chicken. This case precisely reveals that the brand's marketing strategy on social media stimulates the customer to establish the parasocial interaction while the customer was driven by the satisfaction to cognitively contribute suggestion to put more chili in order to make it more delicious in terms of product improvement. This demonstrates that the interaction between marketing strategy by the brand and the customer satisfaction

contribute the cognitive, affective and agentic interactions which distribute the value to the brand in terms of feedback for further improvement which can be considered as the value co-creation. The cognitive and affective aspects of parasocial interaction, in this case, involve customers expressing their perceptions and feelings toward the products and services. Another customer's comment shows the picture to have fried chicken with Pepsi. This comment shows the customer satisfaction drives the cognitive and affective dimensions of the parasocial interaction in the perspective of customer perceptions and feelings toward the product and service. Hence, these parasocial interactions contribute the value co-creation in terms of co-influenced customer perceptions which the customer confirmed the marketing message posted by the brand.

There are other two comments that the customers replied to this marketing campaign posted by the brand with the use of photo sharing. They shared the photos of KFC fried chicken on the tray and stated that they already tried this product and had the positive affection toward the product. These comments also reveal the cognitive and affective aspects of parasocial interaction in terms of expressing perceptions and feelings toward brand's products whereas their photos shared can be considered the agentic parasocial interaction which confirms the marketing message of the brand on the product flavors. The last data reveals the picture of the employee to be glad for welcoming the customer. If carefully evaluating this post of the employee, it can contribute to the brand in terms of business implication that the brand can use indirect marketing presence of the brand other than the promotional campaign. In this case, the brand organization, KFC, can reveal the organizational culture, for example, through the employee's service attitudes. Moreover, this post can indicate that there is another distribution channel/storefront of the brand in Lotus Tung Song branch available for the customers. Thus, the participation of the employees directly in the consumers' parasocial community can serve as a marketing weapon to accentuate the positive brand reputation, through customers observing and perceiving the service attitudes, ideas and affections of the employees.

Case 4: KFC revealed a new promotional campaign on Facebook fan page with the photo of KFC fried chicken in the bucket, being posted with the caption to motivate the customer. There is one customer who commented under this post to display the customer doing. This case indicates that the customer loyalty in the perspective of conative loyalty can also encourage the customer to emerge intentional parasocial interaction which reveals the purchase intention

towards the brand products that the customer wrote in the comment: *"I'm going to have KFC now after I finish taking shower. See you"*. This demonstrates that the value on customer loyalty could lead to the intentional parasocial interaction in some situation. This case displays that the intentional aspect is another interaction that can be found in parasocial interaction.

Case 5: KFC posted the picture regarding a marketing strategy about the secret recipe of fried chicken as being shown why it made the customer being impressed with the product.

This situation reveals KFC uses marketing strategy to show that KFC fried chicken is cooked with the secret recipe that customers have to try on social media to stimulate the perspective of parasocial interaction of the customer. A customer expressed the cognitive and affective parasocial to explain perception and feeling toward the product of KFC brand. Moreover, customer was driven by customer satisfaction that stimulated the behavior and intentional parasocial interaction of the customer as stated: *"Because of delicious fried chicken and my children ask to have every day"*.

The perspectives of cognitive, affective, behavioral and intentional parasocial interactions are contributing to the values of brand equity by satisfying customers with brand's products. At the same time, the customers establish the customer loyalty. Accordingly, their satisfaction as well as their loyalty toward the brand shown in comments that a customer written, *"I want to eat fried chicken every day because of delicious fried chicken"*. Another customer also commented interactively to this post showing that when this customer sees the picture of the advertising, it makes the customers feel hungry. This case is revealing the characteristics of marketing an advertised picture in activating the cognitive and affective of customers in the aspect of parasocial interaction in terms of expressing perception and feeling toward the brand's product attributes. This customer displays customer behavior accessing KFC fan page and following new promotional campaigns as stated, *"I will give up to follow KFC fan page because when I see the advertising picture of KFC, it makes me hungry every time"*. This customer creates the brand equity for the brand by indicating that the customer has brand awareness toward brand's posts which, in turn, allows the cognitive and affective parasocial interaction to be created.

Conclusion: This research clearly shows that the KFC's employees and its marketing arm play a stimulation role in initiating, maintaining and staging the parasocial interactions with the customers, in which evidences show that such experiences can enhance the customers' satisfaction with the products and services, alter their perceptions and attitudes

towards the customers, and thus strengthen customer loyalty and contributes to improve brand image. Thus, as to research question one, the role of marketing stimulation in the parasocial interaction is predominantly stimulating, while it also involves maintaining the relationships and image of the brand, performing service failure initiatives, creating brand awareness, fostering customer loyalty, and also in value co-creation.

The second question indicates that parasocial interaction is the total sum of cognitive, affective, behavioral, agentic and intentional actions that also manifest value co-creation in the social media-mediated brand community that involves the customers and the brand organization. The latter is seen to be represented predominantly by the marketing communication messages as well as the postings by the employees, which have the significant advantage to share with the customers of the ways things are around the organization and its products and services offered (Roberts and Alpert, 2010).

The third research question is addressed, which indicates the values created for both the customers and the company or the brand via the parasocial interactions. Numerous benefits or values are evidenced, such as the ability to influence the perceptions and attitudes of the customers towards

the products and services, suggestions for product improvement and new product development, fulfilling the agentic benefits which are shared with other customers, the happiness of the customers and their families, as well as the contributions made to build brand image and foster customer loyalty.

Customer loyalty is indicated in customer attitude, behavior and intention to revisit. Clearly these are the values co-created, which benefit both the customers and the company, through a parasocial interactive value co-creation process that involves cognitive (co-ideation) efforts, as well as behavioral, affectionate, agentic and intentional actions of the customers. The latter two components of parasocial interactions are, in particular, a significant contribution to the literature. While agentic parasocial interaction sheds light towards an empathic or corporate-citizenship voice that benefits the other stakeholders (i.e. customers, and the company), intentional parasocial interaction exhibits the potentialities and possibilities of opportunities which the company should actively explore and exploit.

Overall, the business research objective has been fulfilled, in which Figure 2 integrates the three research questions in an S-O-R model of parasocial interaction.

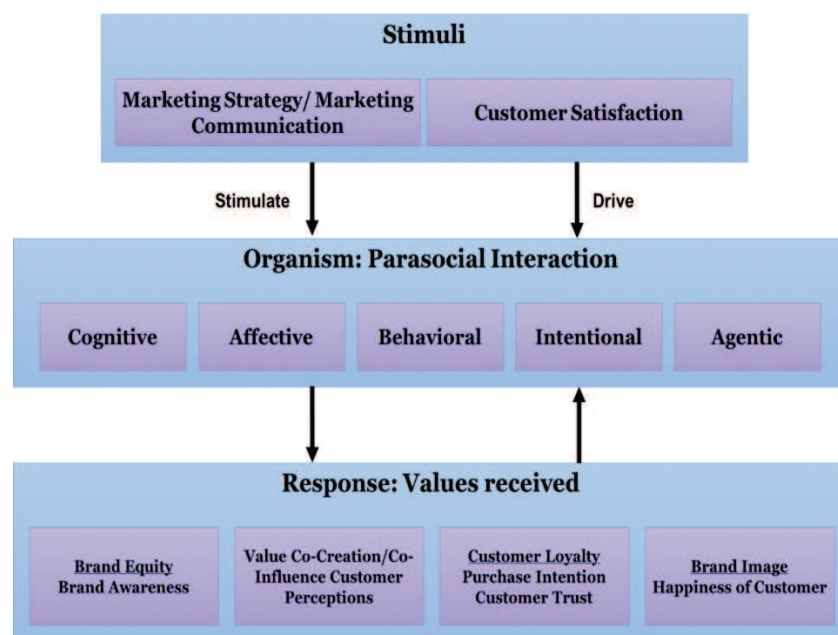


Figure 2: The S-O-R Model of Parasocial Interaction (Result of Netnography-based Data Analysis)

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Dawaree Theenanont ,Chai Ching Tan
School of Management, Mae Fah Luang University.