Image 1: Djerf Avenue Pop-Up Shop. Lauren J, Threads. 2025

Authenticity Amplified:
Building Influence and Driving Behaviour

Vogue College of Fashion
Critical Research: Understanding Audiences - Research Report

Bethan Gywnne: 00216925
MA Fashion Journalism and Editorial Direction

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Contents

Research Question

Why does perceived authenticity create parasocial relationships between influencer-led brands and audiences, and how does this affect the consumer's behaviour?

Research Scope

How parasocial relationships are formed between fashion/beauty brands founded by influencers and their audiences through authenticity-driven and digital marketing on social media, and how this, as a result, affects their behaviour as consumers. I will use Djerf Avenue as a brand case study to exemplify this.

Abstract

This research will look at the role of parasocial relationships (PSRs) in shaping consumer trust, engagement, and brand loyalty, particularly within influencer-led fashion and beauty brands. As social media redefines how brands interact with audiences, perceived authenticity has become central to creating and allowing emotional connections. This research explores how influencer-driven branding strategies encourage PSRs between brand and audience, the impact of these relationships on consumer behaviour, and the potential risks when authenticity is questioned.

Using a mixed-methods research approach, this study combines quantitative survey data with a qualitative online ethnography to gain a solid understanding of how PSRs are formed and maintained. The survey results reveal that 90.2% of respondents associate authenticity with brand trust, reinforcing existing notions on consumer-brand relationships. Ethnographic observations further show that brands strategically construct authenticity through interactive engagement and personal storytelling to enhance the illusion of intimacy. Findings suggest that while PSRs strengthen consumer loyalty, they also create brand vulnerabilities. When authenticity is compromised, as seen in our Djerf Avenue case study, consumer trust can rapidly decrease, leading to a loss of audience. Consumers feel disappointed with the brands and the owners and therefore disengage. The study highlights that brands must carefully manage consumer expectations, ensuring alignment between their public persona and internal practices.

This research also contributes to the evolving discourse on influencer branding and digital marketing, offering insights into how brands can strategically create authentic branding while mitigating risks. By understanding the balance of authenticity and engagement, businesses can navigate the complexities of parasocial branding in an increasingly scrutinised digital world.

Image 2: Matilda Djerf. Goode. 2024.

Chapter 1
Introduction

In this age defined by digital connectivity, social media platforms have completely changed the relationship between brands and their audiences. No longer confined to the boundaries of consumerism, brands are now interacting with audiences in deeply engaging ways, with emotional connections that mirror human relationships. This is known as parasocial relationships (PSRs) and is characterised by one-sided connections where the consumer feels an intimate bond with the brand or influencer, even though the relationship lacks reciprocity. These relationships are particularly potent in influencer-led brands, where the founder's persona becomes an integral part of the brand identity.

This research focuses on the connection between perceived authenticity, enhanced marketing strategies, and the formation of PSRs, with an emphasis on how these factors influence consumer behaviour. Authenticity, as a marketing tool, has become increasingly important as consumers seek relatable and value-driven brands. This is particularly true for younger audiences, Millennials and Gen Z, who are the target audience for this research study and are proven to prioritise connection and meaning in their consumption choices (Djafarova and Foots, 2022). For brands owned by influencers, authenticity is not just a strategy, it is a crucial part to their success as they build falsely personified and close relationships with their audiences.

The case study at the core of this research is Djerf Avenue, a Swedish fashion brand founded by influencer, Matilda Djerf, in 2019. The brand exemplifies the power of authenticity in creating meaningful relationships with its audience. Through the use of personal storytelling, behind-the-scenes content, and direct engagement from the creator herself, Djerf Avenue has cultivated a following that feels deeply connected to the brand, especially the founder herself – Matilda. She has created a big sister-like, friendly persona online that has caught the attention of millions of young followers. This has only been reinforced and made stronger upon the creation of her brand, and this research hopes to show where examples of PSR's have been formed with Djerf Avenue, and with similar brands.

This research also aims to explore how brands leverage authenticity to build PSRs, examining the psychological and social factors that contribute to this phenomenon, particularly on social media platforms. The study also investigates the impact of these relationships on brand loyalty/trust, and purchasing decisions, providing insights into how brands can strategically use authenticity to strengthen engagement and long-term success. By integrating key theories such as Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), this research will provide an academic framework for understanding the dynamics of PSRs in the context of influencer-

driven branding. It will also look at how fragile these PSRs are, looking at examples where these relationships have broken down as a result of brands and influencers not meeting their audience's expectations, and why brands should be aware of this.

Through a combination of quantitative surveys and an online ethnography, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which influencer-led brands like Djerf Avenue create and use PSRs and the subsequent patterns of consumer behaviour. This study not only addresses a gap in existing literature but also offers practical insights for marketers seeking to navigate the evolving landscape of digital branding. It shows the power of authenticity in forging emotional connections, highlighting its potential to redefine the way brands interact with their audiences.

DJERF AVENUE

Image 3: Djerf Avenue Sketch. Studio Iva, 2025.

Chapter 2
Research Context
2.1 Foundations of Parasocial Relationships in Modern Branding

The creation of parasocial relationships between brands and their audiences has become a key marker of contemporary digital marketing strategies. Building on Horton and Wahl's Parasocial Interaction Theory, which originally explained how repeated exposure to media figures could create feelings of familiarity and closeness, even in one-sided relationships; this concept has expanded to include branding and marketing. Initially focused on television personalities, this theory now raises important considerations about consumer autonomy and potential manipulation by brands towards their audiences. Influencer-driven brands, in particular, actively encourage these relationships for marketing purposes, often blurring the distinction between genuine connection and commercial intent (Labrecque, 2014).

Although existing research has touched on these ideas, it has not quite explored the specific ways in which influencers actively shape PSRs. While Horton and Wohl's model suggested a passive audience, the dynamic nature of social media and online access today allows consumers to engage more interactively with brands, enhancing PSRs through a sense of mutual exchange (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). However, this interaction remains unbalanced as brands control the content and engagement mechanisms that influence consumer perception (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This research aims to delve deeper into how influencer-led brands, like Djerf Avenue, build and maintain PSRs within the commercially driven digital ecosystem.

Image 4: Djerf Avenue Team. Djerf Avenue @djerfavenue. 2024

2.2 Authenticity in Branding: A Tension Between Image and Reality

Authenticity plays a crucial role in the formation of PSRs, but its exact nature remains debatable. Beverland (2009) describes it as a multifaceted construct that includes sincerity, individuality, and ethical consistency. However, modern branding practices complicate this idea, showing that authenticity often operates as much through perception as it does through actual brand values (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Influencers often engage in what has been termed 'staged authenticity' (Goffman, 1959), strategically creating personal stories and brand images that give an illusion of sincerity and authenticity towards their audience.

The brand Djerf Avenue, for example, presents itself as an embodiment of its founder's personal beliefs, the cool, clean, Scandinavian aesthetics, while still being fundamentally profit-driven. Research by Audrezet et al. (2020) discusses the contrast between intrinsic authenticity (genuine self-expression) and extrinsic authenticity (market-driven authenticity), raising ethical dilemmas, particularly when influencers fall short of the ideals they promote. This issue became especially prominent in late 2024, as this research began, when allegations surfaced regarding a toxic work environment at Djerf Avenue, with claims of fatphobia and favouritism from Matilda Djerf herself towards her staff (Expressen, 2024). This crisis challenges the brand's public image of inclusivity and exposes a gap in existing literature: what happens when the authenticity of a brand is called into question? Though much has been written on how authenticity strengthens consumer trust (Morhart et al., 2015), there is little research on the long-term effects of perceived brand hypocrisy. This study somewhat bridges this gap by examining how authenticity crises affect consumer trust and PSRs, providing a stepping stone into further research concerning the questioning of brand authenticity – but will not explore this fully. Hopefully this report will be a stepping stone towards deeper research into this topic.

2.3 Influencer Culture: The Blending of Personal and Brand Identity

The emergence of influencers as 'human brands' (Khamis et al., 2017) has definitely altered branding approaches. Unlike traditional corporations, influencer-led brands combine the personal identity of the influencer with the commercial identity of the brand, creating a hybridised and personified brand that complicates consumer and audience engagement. This connecting of personal and brand identities raises important questions: Do audiences connect with the influencer, the brand, or both? This is an aspect missing from existing literature – focusing on the crossover between influencers and their own brands.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) helps explain how consumers align with brands that mirror their own self-concept or desired group identity. Djerf Avenue, for instance, markets itself as not just a clothing line but a lifestyle, cultivating a sense of belonging among its followers. However, this strategy makes influencer brands highly vulnerable to any controversies surrounding the influencer's personal conduct (Abidin, 2018). Most existing research focuses on

how influencer authenticity boosts consumer engagement but neglects to explore the risks associated with influencer-led brands, particularly when these personal-brand identities clash. The downfall of other brands following influencer scandals, such as Jaclyn Hill's cosmetics line (Street, 2019), illustrates the need for further investigation into how these brands recover from crises. This research will shed some light on the specific relationships between influencer brands and their consumers, and lead to more exploration of the dangers of these relationships in the context of our ever quick 'cancel culture' (Cohen, 1972).

2.4 The Psychological Effects of Parasocial Relationships

The psychological impact of PSRs extends beyond brand loyalty, affecting consumer well-being and decision-making. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) puts forward the notion that PSRs fulfil the human need for relatedness, creating a sense of belonging that translates into behaviours like repeat purchasing, brand trust, advocacy, and heightened sensitivity to controversies (Fournier, 1998). However, existing literature tends to overlook the potential risks of PSRs, such as consumer over-identification and developing intense attachments. Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) suggests that individuals with insecure attachment styles are particularly vulnerable to forming intense PSRs, which could lead to unhealthy dependencies (Stever, 2017). Given that influencer-driven brands actively encourage emotional bonds, more research is needed on their psychological effects. This study will look at and attempt to navigate how strong PSRs influence consumer reactions during authenticity crises, especially in cases of perceived betrayal.

2.5 Authenticity, Ethics, and the Power of Parasocial Relationships

Although PSRs are a powerful tool for loyalty-building for brands, they also introduce ethical dilemmas. The illusion of intimacy in these relationships can be seen as a form of emotional manipulation, where consumers invest trust and loyalty in a brand that remains inherently commercial in nature (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).
The Djerf Avenue controversy in 2024 and also notably British influencer Molly Mae's clothing brand Maebe's issues with quality control of their products, highlights how quickly these relationships can deteriorate when the brand's authenticity is questioned. Unlike conventional corporate brands, influencer-led businesses face more intense scrutiny because their personal authenticity is inseparably linked to the success of their business. This vulnerability underscores a significant gap in research: while studies acknowledge the benefits of influencer branding, few address the consequences when the authenticity of the brand is disrupted and analyse why this is happening, linking it to the PSR-style marketing of brands. This study contributes to the ongoing debate around the ethics of PSRs by exploring the responsibilities brands may have in managing their audience's emotional investment.

2.6 Future Research Directions

In order to deepen our understanding of PSRs, further theoretical perspectives are needed. The Theory of Impression Management (Goffman, 1959) provides insight into the performative aspects of branding, showing how influencers create public personas that align with their audiences' expectations. While previous studies have explored self-presentation in influencer marketing, few examine how brands respond when this performance is disrupted. Similarly, Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) highlights how brands function as symbols in the construction of personal identity. This is particularly relevant in the case of Djerf Avenue, where consumers are not merely purchasing clothing but joining a broader lifestyle movement. However, when the brand's authenticity is compromised, it remains unclear whether the symbolic value of the brand diminishes or if consumers rationalise the controversy to maintain their connection. This study addresses this gap by examining how such controversies impact consumer loyalty and will be explored further in chapter 4 when looking at raw data mirroring audience responses to the Djerf Avenue scandal.

This chapter has reviewed the literature on parasocial relationships, authenticity, and influencer branding and has identified the key areas where further research is needed. While existing theories offer the important foundational insights, they sometimes fall short of capturing the complexities of digital branding today. Through this case study of Djerf Avenue, this study aims to contribute to a clearer understanding of how influencer-led brands navigate authenticity challenges, engage with their audiences, and build long-term loyalty in an increasingly scrutinised digital landscape.

Chapter 3
Research Aims and Objectives

3.1 Research Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the role of parasocial relationships in influencing consumer perceptions and brand loyalty, with a particular focus on influencer-led brands such as Djerf Avenue. The central research question asks: Why does perceived authenticity create parasocial relationships between influencer-led brands and audiences, and how does this affect the consumer's behaviour? To address this, the research objectives are:

1. To examine the key factors that contribute to the formation of parasocial relationships between audiences and brands, particularly on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.
2. To identify how different types of brand content (e.g., personal, behind-the-scenes, product-focused) foster the illusion of intimacy and emotional connection with consumers.
3. To assess the impact of parasocial relationships on consumer trust in a brand, focusing on how perceived authenticity and emotional connection affect brand credibility.
4. To provide insights into how brands can strategically leverage parasocial relationships to enhance consumer engagement and drive long-term brand loyalty.

3.2 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to offer a good understanding of parasocial dynamics. Quantitative data is gathered through structured online surveys, aimed at measuring the frequency and depth of PSRs and their correlation with brand trust and purchase intention. These surveys provide measurable data that will reveal broader trends. At least 50 survey responses are targeted for statistical significance. Meanwhile, qualitative data will be collected via an online ethnography, which involves observing and interpreting user behaviours, discourse, and interactions within digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, and brand's websites. The ethnographic portion of this research focuses on organic, real-time interactions within relevant online communities with no set number of recruitment participants. This combination of methods allows for a combination of statistical patterns with narrative insights, as recommended by Kozinets (2015).

3.3 Target Audience

The target audience for this study comprises digitally active consumers who engage with influencer-led fashion brands, aged between 18-40. This audience has been deliberately selected due to their active participation in online brand communities where parasocial relationships are most prominently formed. By observing this demographic, the research aims to show how digital consumers take-in and respond to parasocial branding strategies. This will offer insights into the psychological mechanisms that effect brand loyalty and emotional connection to brands.

3.4 Data Analysis

Survey data will be analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, such as correlation analysis, to identify patterns between PSRs and consumer behaviours. Qualitative ethnographic data will undergo thematic analysis, following the Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, to identify patterns in how users interpret and respond to parasocial branding content. The combination of these analytical approaches offers a deeper understanding of the motivations and workings of the brands and how audiences respond.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are very important, especially given the dual nature of the methodology. The study adheres to all ethical guidelines set out by the Vogue College of Fashion, ensuring informed consent, anonymity, and data security. Online ethnography requires additional ethical sensitivity, with anonymisation of public content and compliance with GDPR regulations to protect participants' privacy (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

3.6 Methodological Limitations

Despite its strengths, this mixed-methods approach has its limitations. Quantitative surveys are susceptible to self-report biases, while online ethnographic observation may be shaped by the researcher subjectivity and the specific context of the brand studied. The sample size of 50 survey respondents, while sufficient for qualitative analysis, limits the statistical generalisability of the findings. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample to assess whether these findings apply across different influencer-driven industries.
This research was also limited by the word count of the assignment, therefore the research and analysis needed to be as succinct as possible, leading to the possibility of not being to expand on certain aspects as much preferred. Additionally, while this research identified patterns of PSR formation and breakdown, it did not explore longitudinal effects. Future studies could investigate how consumer perceptions of authenticity evolve over time, particularly following brand controversies or rebranding efforts.

Chapter 4
Research Findings

4.1 The Role of Authenticity in Fostering Parasocial Relationships

This chapter critically examines the findings derived from quantitative survey data and qualitative online ethnography, exploring the extent to which parasocial relationships shape consumer perceptions, brand loyalty, and purchasing behaviour. The research findings are analysed in relation to key academic frameworks discussed in Chapter 2, including Parasocial Interaction Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Brand Relationship, Social Identity, and Narrative Transportation Theory (Green & Brock, 2000).
The findings are structured around three key themes:

- The role of authenticity in creating parasocial relationships
- Consumer engagement with brand content
- The impact of parasocial relationships on brand trust and consumer loyalty

By critically evaluating the data through these lenses, this chapter will develop a deeper understanding of how influencer-led brands construct authentic images, manage consumer relationships, and navigate parasocial engagement with their audiences.

A key objective of this study was to assess how perceived authenticity contributes to the development of parasocial relationships between consumers and brands. The survey findings indicate that 90.2% of all respondents agreed that authenticity influences their trust in a brand, reinforcing previous research that identifies authenticity as a critical driver of consumer-brand relationships (Morhart et al., 2015).

Does the perceived authenticity of a brand influence your trust in them?
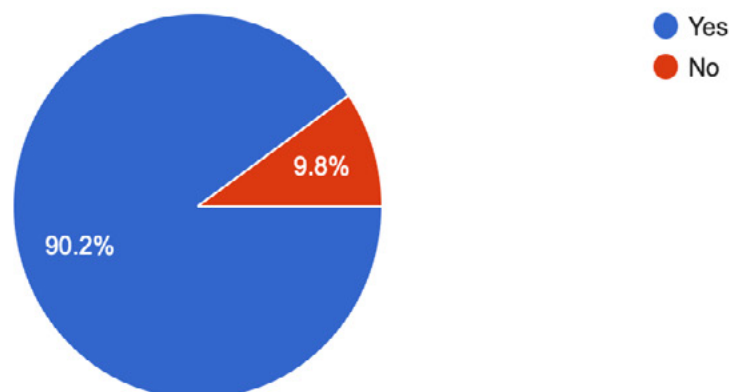
41 responses

Image 5: Authenticity Survey. 2025. Google Forms.

Additionally, 58.5% of participants reported feeling a personal connection to at least one influencer-led brand, supporting Fournier's Brand Relationship Theory, which suggests that consumers recognise brands as relationship partners and attribute human characteristics to them. The online ethnography further demonstrated that followers of brands like Djerf Avenue and Rhode Beauty frequently referred to them as if they were individuals, expressing emotions such as admiration, loyalty, and even disappointment when the image and person they'd associated with the brand failed to meet their expectations. This suggests that brand humanisation plays a crucial role in fostering PSRs, and that brands have identified this and are using these perceived relationships to leverage sales and boost activity on social media, as well as creating a larger following for the influencers that own the brand. This can be seen in the variety of examples taken from the online ethnography, in which screenshots show brands incorporating aspects such as hand-written signatures, quotes from the owners, social media posts expressing relatable opinions and phrases from the brand as if it were human and holding casual events with 'invites' to make consumers feel like it's a personal invite sent directly to them.

BRANDS NAMED IN SURVEY THAT PARTICIPANTS FELT CONNECTED TO (41 RESPONSES)

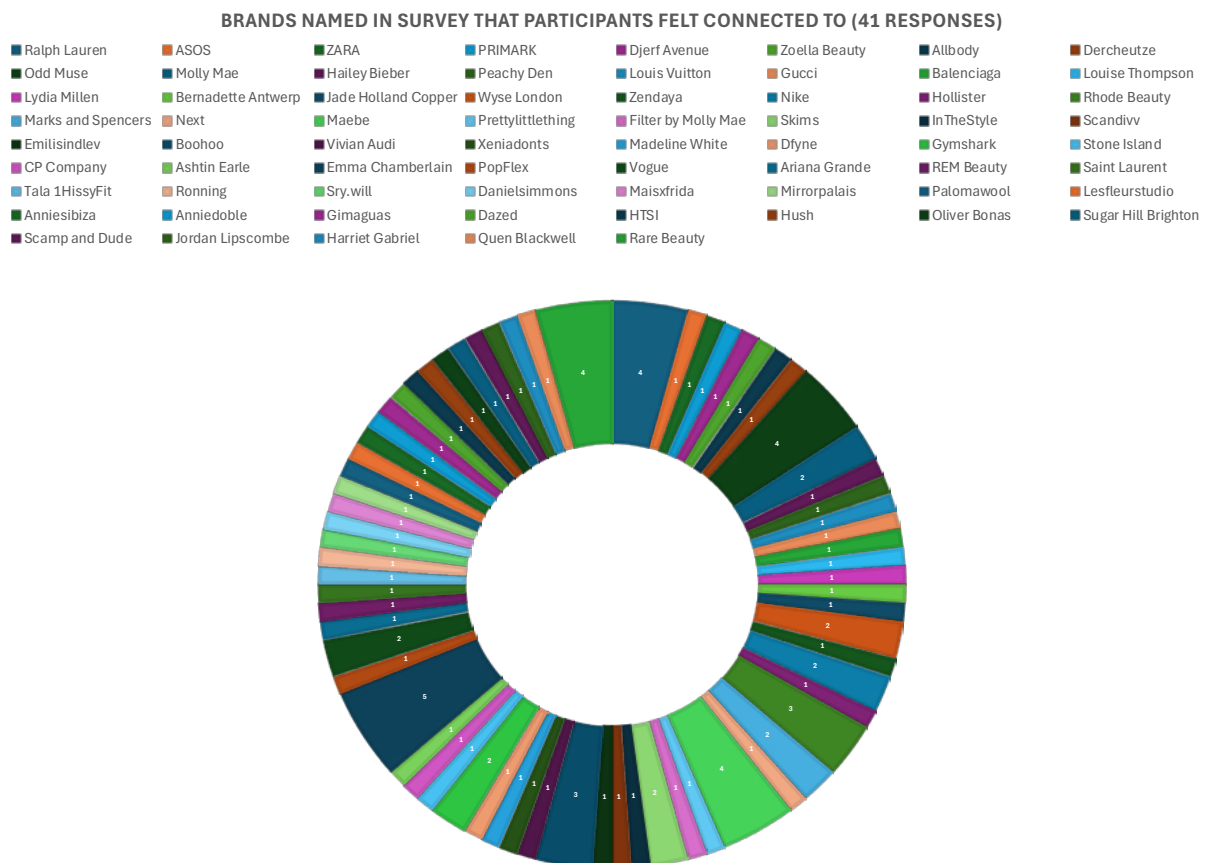|			
Ralph Lauren	ASOS	ZARA	PRIMARK
Djerf Avenue	Zoella Beauty	Allbody	Dercheutze
Odd Muse	Molly Mae	Hailey Bieber	Peachy Den
Louis Vuitton	Gucci	Balenciaga	Louise Thompson
Lydia Millen	Bernadette Antwerp	Jade Holland Copper	Wyse London
Zendaya	Nike	Hollister	Rhode Beauty
Marks and Spencers	Next	Maebe	Prettylittlething
Filter by Molly Mae	Skims	InTheStyle	Scandivv
Emilisindlev	Boohoo	Vivian Audi	Xeniadonts
Madeline White	Dfyne	Gymshark	Stone Island
CP Company	Ashtin Earle	Emma Chamberlain	PopFlex
Vogue	Ariana Grande	REM Beauty	Saint Laurent
Tala 1HissyFit	Ronning	Sry.will	Danielsimmons
Maisxfrida	Mirrorpalais	Palomawool	Lesfleurstudio
Anniesibiza	Anniedoble	Gimaguas	Dazed
HTSI	Hush	Oliver Bonas	Sugar Hill Brighton
Scamp and Dude	Jordan Lipscombe	Harriet Gabriel	Quen Blackwell
Rare Beauty			

Image 6: Bethan Gwynne. Pie Chart. 2025

The online ethnography also illustrated how brands actively curate perceptions of authenticity through strategic self-presentation. Influencer-led brands such as Maebe and Chamberlain Coffee frequently feature their founders in brand narratives, reinforcing accessibility and transparency to their audiences. This supports the Impression Management Theory (Goffman, 1959), which suggests that public figures are constructing their personas through the lens of PSRs to shape audience perceptions. By embedding founders into brand identity, these companies create a sense of intimacy that strengthens PSRs between the audiences and the founders, and therefore the brand as well.

However, this also reveals an inherent contradiction in how consumers interpret authenticity. While audiences want transparency, they also acknowledge that influencer-led brands are carefully curated performances. Some of the survey respondents expressed scepticism about whether influencer brands truly reflect their promoted values, particularly when brands maintain a highly polished and idealised online presence. This presents a limitation of Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), which assumes that meaning is co-constructed by audiences and brands but does not account for consumer disillusionment and disappointment when authenticity appears artificially created. The Djerf Avenue controversy at the end of 2024, in which allegations of workplace misconduct and bullying clashed with the brand's public image of inclusivity and friendliness, exemplifies this contradiction. While Matilda Djerf's personal branding cultivated trust, the scandal led to a rupture in the consumer-brand relationship that Djerf Avenue had built. This aligns with Horton & Wohl's concept of parasocial breakups, where consumers experience an emotional betrayal when a worshipped brand or influencer fails to meet their expectations of how they should act and present themselves.

4.2 Consumer Engagement with Brand Content

This research highlights that content type significantly influences the strength of parasocial relationships. When asked which content made them feel most connected to a brand, 72% of the 36 respondents that answered the survey question concerning this topic selected 'behind-the-scenes' content as their preferred method of feeling more engaged with a brand, reinforcing the importance of authentic storytelling in holding emotional engagement. This supports with Narrative Transportation Theory (Green & Brock, 2000), which suggests that consumers become emotionally invested in compelling brand narratives. The online ethnography supports this, showing that brands using storytelling techniques, such as personal reflections and videos from founders, behind-the-scenes product development, and everyday lifestyle content, elicited stronger audience interactions as Tik Tok's concerning audience member's aspirations to attain certain lifestyles and aspects of the brand's image/founder were heavily observed.

Image 6: Bethan Gwynne. Word Cloud from Survey. 2025

The role of social identity in content engagement was also evident. Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals align themselves with brands that reflect what people aspire to present themselves as. Ethnographic observations of Djerf Avenue's community interactions revealed that consumers actively reinforced brand identity by emulating Djerf's personal style, posting about their purchases, and discussing the brand in a way that suggested collective belonging and knowing about Matilda's lifestyle.

The survey also revealed that 68.3% of respondents believed that social media interactions—such as comments, likes, and responses—increased their connection

to a brand. This reflects Self-Determination Theory, which states that a sense of relatedness enhances a sense of belonging and brand loyalty. The online ethnography demonstrated that brands strategically engage with consumers through comment replies, direct messaging, and featuring user-generated content, reinforcing the illusion of mutual interaction between the brand and their audience. However, the survey findings also reveal that this engagement can be a double-edged sword at times. While consistent interaction builds loyalty, some respondents to the survey reported feeling disappointed when brands failed to maintain a consistent level of engagement. This was particularly evident upon being asked about Djerf Avenue. While 63.4% of all respondents had heard of the brand, 36.6% had not but continued to display their knowledge about the recent scandal. Those that knew the brand expressed that feeling of disappointment described above keenly. This, again, aligns with Horton & Wohl's concept of parasocial breakups, demonstrating that when brands fail to reciprocate perceived intimacy, consumer attachment can turn into disillusionment and sometimes, hatred.

4.3 Impact of Parasocial Relationships on Trust and Loyalty

This research reveals a strong correlation between PSRs and consumer trust. 90% of survey participants expressed greater trust in brands they perceived as authentic, supporting Napoli et al.'s (2016) research on authenticity and credibility. Furthermore, 90.2% of respondents acknowledged that social media content had influenced at least one of their purchase decisions, supporting Celebrity Endorsement Theory (McCracken, 1989), which posits that influencer attributes transfer onto the brand they endorse.
The online ethnography further illustrated that brands that engaged in two-way communication, like responding to feedback, reinforced consumer trust. This was

Has social media content influenced your decision to purchase a product from a brand?
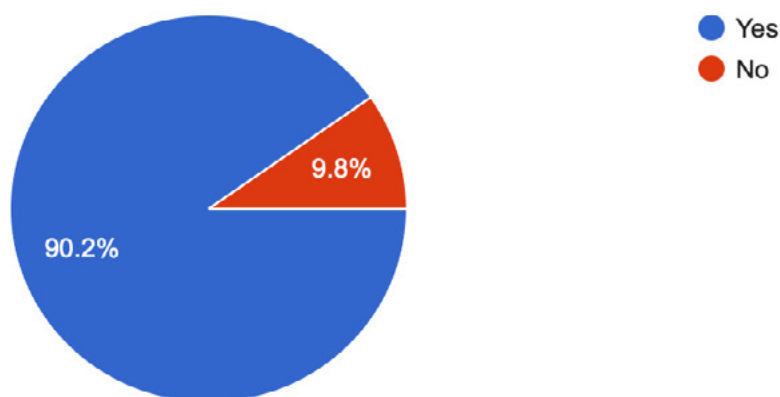
41 responses

Image 8: Authenticity Survey. 2025. Google Forms.

evident in Molly-Mae Hague's response to quality complaints about Maebe's blazer fabric, where her transparent communication strengthened her brand's credibility and her audiences' trust in her motivations behind the brand. If an audience can feel that a brand is attempting to form a connection that moves beyond profit making, a successful bond and PSR between brand and audience will be achieved. This notion is backed up by Fournier's Brand Relationship Theory, which emphasises that trust and emotional investment are very important in long-term brand relationships.

On the other hand, this research also demonstrates that PSRs heighten brand vulnerability during moments of controversy. Consumers who feel a deep emotional connection to a brand experience greater disappointment when their expectations are not met. The Djerf Avenue controversy exemplified this, with some consumers expressing feelings of betrayal due to their prior emotional investment in the brand. This suggests that PSRs, while creating a deep sense of loyalty, also create precarious relationships that can be easily destabilised by perceived breaches of authenticity by the brand. Brands leveraging parasocial strategies must therefore carefully navigate consumer expectations to avoid losing their audience.

4.4 Summary

This chapter critically examined how parasocial relationships influence consumer-brand interactions, emphasising authenticity, engagement and trust. The findings reveal that perceived authenticity is very central to fostering parasocial bonds, with behind-the-scenes content and interactive engagement as primary drivers of consumer attachment. However, the study also illustrates that PSRs create brand vulnerabilities, particularly when perceived authenticity is broken. By integrating the survey and ethnographic data, this chapter provides a wider understanding of how PSRs shape consumer perceptions, engagement, and brand loyalty.

Chapter 5
Conclusion

This study examines the intersection of authenticity, parasocial relationships (PSRs), and influencer-led branding, focusing on how these dynamics impact consumer trust. Using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative online ethnography, the research highlights the significant role perceived authenticity plays in fostering emotional connections between consumers and brands. These findings contribute to the growing literature on digital marketing, influencer branding, and consumer psychology, shedding light on the strategic benefits and vulnerabilities of PSR-driven brand engagement.

A key finding is the central role of authenticity in building and maintaining PSRs. The survey showed that 90.2% of respondents linked authenticity with brand trust, supporting existing research that identifies authenticity as essential in consumer-brand relationships. The ethnography revealed that brands strategically create authenticity through personalised storytelling, live interactions, and the humanisation of brand identities. However, the study also uncovered a contradiction in consumer expectations. While audiences seek transparency, they recognise that influencer-led brands operate in a curated and commercialised environment. Tensions between perceived and real authenticity were evident, particularly when brands presented a polished image that contrasted with their real-world actions, as seen with Djerf Avenue's bullying allegations. This aligns with Horton & Wohl's concept of parasocial breakups, a key framework for this research.

Another significant finding concerns the type of content that strengthens PSRs. The survey indicated that behind-the-scenes content was most effective in fostering consumer attachment, supporting the Narrative Transportation Theory. The ethnography also showed that interactive engagement, such as direct responses on social media and user-generated content, enhanced the illusion of reciprocity, in line with Self-Determination Theory. However, excessive engagement tactics can create unrealistic consumer expectations, leading to dissatisfaction if brands fail to meet the expectations they have cultivated. The study also explored the role of PSRs in consumer trust and brand loyalty. It found a strong correlation between PSRs and purchasing decisions, explaining how influencer credibility and authenticity transfers to the brands they promote, through Celebrity Endorsement Theory. However, PSRs also increase brand vulnerability, particularly during controversies. Intense consumer-brand relationships can amplify both trust and scrutiny, creating a dilemma for brands relying on PSRs for engagement.

This research demonstrates that PSRs are powerful yet fragile marketing tools that can foster strong consumer loyalty but also expose brands to vulnerability. The study emphasises that authenticity, whether real or perceived, is key to parasocial brand engagement. Personal storytelling, brand humanisation, and interactive engagement strengthen consumer relationships, but brands must align their internal operations with their external image to maintain trust. As influencer-led branding continues to dominate digital marketing, this study offers valuable insights for brands, marketers, and researchers, underscoring the importance of strategic authenticity management and ethical considerations in emotional consumer-brand relationships.

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Image List

Image 1: Lauren, J. (2025) 'recent vibes' [Instagram]. 22 January. Available at: https://www.threads.net/@ljscanvas/post/DFIkayFARh7 (Accessed: 29 January 2025).

Image 2: Goode, J. (2024) Matilda Djerf wearing floral outfit. NBC News. Available at: [https://www.nbcnews.com/news/matilda-djerf-avenue-dupes-copyright-strikes-controversy-rcna121901. (Accessed: 29 January 2025).

Image 3: Studio Iva (2025). Djerf Avenue Sketch. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/studio_iva (Accessed: 29 January 2025).

Image 4: Djerf Avenue (2025). Djerf Avenue Team [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/DAQzsp_tTAQ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link. (Accessed 30 January 2025).

Image 5: Bethan Gwynne. 2025. Survey: The Authenticity of Brands: How Do You Feel Connected to the Brands You Follow? [online]. Available at: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Drb4q4475v3OfojEqn2f7fzUQKUQkX0AVoylKo19wJw/edit.

Image 6: Bethan Gwynne. 2025. Pie Chart to show brands named in survey that people felt connected to. Excel.

Image 7: Bethan Gwynne. 2025. Word cloud created with freewordcloudgenerator.com showing results of survey question 'what factors contribute most to your trust in a brand? (e.g. knowing the creator/founder of the brand, up-to-date marketing trends, projecting a close relationship with its audience).' Available at: https://www.freewordcloudgenerator.com/generatewordcloud#google_vignette.

Image 8: Bethan Gwynne. 2025. Survey: The Authenticity of Brands: How Do You Feel Connected to the Brands You Follow? [online]. Available at: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Drb4q4475v3OfojEqn2f7fzUQKUQkX0AVoylKo19wJw/edit.

Appendix

My appendix is located in this Google Drive. Please click the icon to access.