



LUND UNIVERSITY  
School of Economics and Management

# Can parasocial relationships make consumers blind?

*An explorative study on how parasocial relationships between consumers and human brands can affect consumers' response toward human-brand transgression.*

by  
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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study explores how parasocial relationships between consumers and human brands can affect consumers' responses toward human brand transgression. To answer the research question of parasocial relationships can make consumers blind. The study looks at human brands that have been involved in transgressions and focuses on exploring consumers' responses to the transgression.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** This study conducted a netnographic approach by collecting empirical data from YouTube and Instagram from human brands' content prior to the scandal, during the scandal and following the scandal yielding over 400 pages in results. The paper used a non-probability purposive sampling technique with criteria to find the relevant samples for the study. The sample size of the research resulted in four human brands.

**Findings:** The general finding from the analysis showed that consumers' response toward a human brand transgression depends on the strength of the parasocial relationship. It was shown that trust played a significant role in whether consumers would forgive the human brand.

**Theoretical/Practical implications:** From a theoretical perspective, the study proved that building trustworthiness and credibility played a significant role in nurturing parasocial relationships. Long-lasting PSR did not prove a secure relationship in the context of a transgression. From a practical perspective, the research provides clear insights into how the PSR makes consumers respond to the transgression of the human brand. Human brands need to develop a strong foundation in the relationship to generate positive responses following a transgression.

**Keywords:** Parasocial Relationship (PSR), Human Brand, SMI, Transgression, Consumer Response, YouTube, Instagram

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# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	6
1.1 Background	6
1.2 Purpose	15
1.3 Research question	15
<b>2. Theoretical Framework</b>	15
2.1 Human Brands	16
2.1.2 Trust	17
2.2 Parasocial Relationship	17
2.2.1 Parasocial Relationships between human brands and consumers	18
2.3 Human Brand Transgression	19
2.4 Empathy	22
2.5 Forgiveness	22
<b>3. Method</b>	23
3.1 Research Philosophy	23
3.2 Research Approach	24
3.2.1 Qualitative research	24
3.2.2 Inductive approach	25
3.2.3 Methodology used	26
3.3 Sampling	26
3.3.1 Sampling method	26
3.3.2 Sampling size	28
3.3.3 Sampling frame	30
3.4 Data sources	30
3.4.1 Data collection method	30
3.5 Data analysis method	32
3.6 Quality of research	34
3.6.1 Reliability	34
3.6.2 Validity	36
3.7 Ethical considerations	36
<b>4. Empirical data</b>	37
4.1 Comments prior to the transgression	38
4.2 Comments during transgression	38
4.3 Comments after the transgression	42
<b>5. Analysis</b>	44
5.1 Strengthening of PSR	45

5.1.1 Forgiveness and Empathy	45
5.1.1.1 Unconditional affection	47
5.1.1.2 Human Brand as role model	48
5.1.2 Online brand community	49
5.2 Trustworthiness	50
5.3 PSR Break Up - PSB	51
5.3.1 Disappointment	52
5.3.2 Broken Trust	53
<b>6. Discussion and Conclusion</b>	<b>55</b>
6.1 General discussion	55
6.2 Theoretical Implications	55
6.3 Practical Implications	56
<b>7. Limitations and recommendations for future research</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>59</b>

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

In recent years, endorsements by influencers have had exponential growth on social media (Cocker, Mardon & Daunt, 2021). The growing number of users has led to social media marketing becoming a prominent strategy, dominating other past marketing strategies (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Koay, Cheung, Soh & Teoh, 2021). Influencer endorsements create higher purchasing intentions, improved brand attitude, increased congruence of endorsements (Tokers, Augusto & Matos, 2019) and behavioural intentions (Sun, Leung & Bai, 2021). The growth of influencer endorsements can also correlate to the knowledge influencers have regarding their followers, as they are participating in different marketing strategies companies are executing (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). The prominent presence of users on social media has resulted in companies shifting towards digital marketing. Hence, an adaptation of influencer marketing has evolved as it is an inevitable marketing strategy that companies approach (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Influencer marketing is an industry that has seen astounding growth in just a few short years (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The growth of influencer marketing can correlate to the fact that influencers are viewed as third party endorsers (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011). They can target niche groups (Koay et al., 2021) and generate trust and credibility from their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In addition, consumers prefer influencers as they are seen as sociable (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019). Unlike other marketing strategies, influencer marketing builds upon social media influencers (SMIs) who are like human brands that have connected with their audience (followers) through their contributions on social media (Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram) (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019). The contributions on social media are made by content creation (Reels, Videos, Pictures), where the human brands share specific content about endorsed products from brands and products of their own (merchandise) (Rohde & Mau, 2021). Additionally, they generate product awareness through electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (De Veirman, Hudders & Nelson, 2019). The human-like characteristics generate legitimacy in the users' eyes (Etter, Colleoni, Illia, Meggiorin & D'Eugenio, 2018).

Influencer marketing grants access to niche audiences and direct interaction with potential consumers (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). It is important to note that SMIs' fame on social media is not built outside of social media. On the contrary, through social media, they have gained fame and a following (Haenlein, Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen & Welte, 2020). SMIs obtain the ability to influence the views and attitudes of social media users through their credibility (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Guidry Moulard, 2020) and the emotional bonds formed with their followers (Ki, Cuevas, Chong & Lim, 2020). SMI's can be leaders for consumers' opinions resulting in consumers mimicking influencers (Ki & Kim, 2019). In addition, well-formed relationships between SMIs and companies can generate trust and authenticity for the followers of the SMI (Audrezet et al., 2020). Companies utilise SMIs to offer a brand persona where companies can turn to an influencer that humanises the message behind their brand and portrays it forward to the consumer (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Following further, influencers and SMIs are referred to as 'Human Brands']. This fits the existing research, which has stated that when defining a suitable human brand, the number of followers is a valuable metric (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

However, it has been discussed that companies should not be concerned with the number of followers a human brand has but instead should focus on generating engagement with their followers (Ye, Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman, 2021). This engagement between consumers and human brands depends on the parasocial relationship between the two (Ye et al., 2021). The parasocial relationship (PSR) between human brands and consumers is defined as a psychological relationship that the consumer forms with the human brand (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956). The PSR is different from a typical relationship. It is a one-sided relationship that is unbeknownst to the human brand and does not often exist outside of the SNS platform (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). In addition, PSR is concerned with the level of engagement a consumer has with the human brand. The level of engagement affects the PSR and how a consumer interacts with the human brand (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019).

As the presence of consumers has grown on social media and the growth of influencer marketing (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) this has caused an increase in PSR formed between consumers and human brands (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). PSR has been proven to be

especially important concerning young consumers if brands wish to increase consumers' purchasing intention as they are considered to be addictive followers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Previous research has found that the strength of PSR can be an intermediary factor in making a human brand attractive, likeable or similar (Taillon, Mueller, Kowalczyk & Jones, 2020) creating brand loyalty (Jun & Yi, 2020). It is also an intermediary factor in creating attachment to the human brand causing reduced advertising resistance (Kim & Kim, 2022) Furthermore, the credibility of human brands (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity & Luoma-aho, 2020) and parasocial interaction (PSI) between human brands and consumers can influence the purchasing intention of consumers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Influencer credibility could be increased by building upon existing PSRs through consumers' comments, becoming further credible in the eyes of new consumers (Reinikainen et al., 2020). PSI can also yield positive brand perceptions through homophily (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Human brands who self-disclose personal information on their platforms can strengthen the PSR with the consumers (Chen, Yeh & Lee, 2021).

Hence, a consumer's PSR with a human brand becomes stronger by building trust (Koay et al., 2021) and credibility (Reinikainen et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). The PSR with the human brand can also increase the attractiveness of a human brand (Taillon et al., 2020), increase empathy (Ki & Kim, 2019; Hwang & Zhang, 2018) and increase forgiveness (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2015). Although, despite the positive attributes that connect with PSR, if credibility and trust are violated, it can result in negative outcomes for the human brand (Reinikainen et al., 2020). An instance where credibility and trust can be violated is human brand transgressions (Cocker, Mardon & Daunt, 2021; Reinikainen et al., 2021). Human brand transgressions can yield both positive and negative results. However, consumers' response towards transgressions is in many cases dependent on the situation the transgression is within (Um, 2013) Consumers feeling betrayed by a human brand harms the PSR (Reinikainen et al., 2021). However, a factor that minimises these negative outcomes is if the PSR is strong, causing the consumer to continue their interaction and support with the human brand (Reinikainen et al., 2020). The more engagement with the human brand, the more justifications consumers will make for the transgressions human brands are involved within and are less critical of it (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). The current body of literature that researches PSR focuses on analysing how it influences consumers' perception of marketing messages (Kim & Kim, 2022), the impact of



human brands on consumers and the influence of PSR (Breves, Ahmrehn, Heidenreich, Liebers & Schramm, 2021). In addition, previous literature examines the role of PSR on eWOM and characteristics affecting PSR (Hwang & Zhang, 2018), the effect of betrayal on PSR between brands, consumers and human brands (Reinikainen, Tan, Luoma-aho & Salo, 2021), the PSR awareness of consumers and effects on attitudes (Paravati, Naidu, Gabriel & Wiedemann, 2020). Furthermore, comments and interactions between consumers and the human brand influence the PSR formed (Reinikainen et al., 2020) and whether the persuasiveness of human brands affects their followers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Continuing how human brands can utilise PSR to manage their brand (Taillon et al., 2020). Lastly the general effects PSR has proven to have on consumers (Ye et al., 2021). In contrast, previous literature has covered the effect transgressions can have on brand endorsements and the effect transgressions have directly on the human brand (Cocker, Mardon & Daunt, 2021). In addition to this, research has studied how human brand transgressions can negatively affect brand trust, the endorsed brand and purchasing intentions (Reinikainen et al., 2021). If a human brand has dispositional attributes the endorsed brand will be seen as negative (Um, 2013). Despite previous research looking into PSR, human brands and transgressions, no research has studied how consumers' PSR with human brands can influence how they respond or react to a human brand transgression. In addition, the human brand transgression can be either perceived as negative or positive depending on the PSR.

During our literature research (see Table 1), we found that out of the 26 studies, only 3 of them have done research on transgressions concerning human brands. The existing literature researches when human brand endorsements are seen as transgressive by their followers (Cocker, Mardon & Daunt, 2021), how betrayal can affect human brands, the brand and the consumer and the spillover effects (Reinikainen et al., 2021), how attribution style affects and moderates consumer evaluation of celebrity transgressions (Um, 2013). Moreover, current literature has stated that future research should address and focus on qualitative research that explores content created by human brands and what the comments or reactions were generated by the followers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Hence, because of the investment and the role PSR plays in affecting source credibility and consumers having a decreased evaluative persuasion knowledge (Breves et al., 2021), it is essential to discover how this relationship affects consumers' response concerning a human brand transgression. We define PSR based on a pre-established concept as a one-sided

relationship that the consumer has with the human brand (MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2022), unbeknownst to the human brand. We define PSR engagement as the extent to which the consumer is involved with the influencer, which can range from a deep, engaging relationship to a shallow relationship. Henceforth, our main research question is:

Can PSR make consumers blind?

In order to find answers to our research question, we will examine the following:

1. How do consumers respond to human brand transgressions?
2. What implications do human brand transgressions have for SMI and consumer relationships?

We answer these research questions by implementing an inductive approach using a relativism philosophy, gathering data through a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2019), which indicated a PSR between consumers and the human brand and the implications the relationship had on the human brand transgressions. Our research contributes to the literature on human brands, PSRs and human brand transgression in several ways:

1. It contributed that trustworthiness and credibility are the most important aspects when it comes to nurturing PSR in order to increase engagement.
2. It contributes by discovering that once trust breaks between human brand and consumer, it will catalyze a negative opinion toward the transgression.
3. Credibility and trust generate higher respect toward human brands.
4. Long-lasting PSR does not result in a secure relationship.

**Table 1: Exhibiting the current body of literature relevant to the study**

<b>Authors:</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>PSR Transgression</b>
Kim & Kim, 2022	How social media influencers utilize their follower's attachment when delivering marketing messages.	Quantitative, Online self-administered survey	Homophily, social presence and attractiveness generate high attachment. Increases follower loyalty and advertising credibility, which reduces advertising resistance.	No
Koay, Cheung, Soh & Teoh, 2021	To understand how SMIs influence their personal meanings to endorsed brands and drive positive consumer behaviour	Quantitative, Online self-administered survey	Trustworthiness and knowledge of SMIs are important to increase the purchasing intention of their followers. Materialism also had a significant effect on the relationship between purchasing intention and attractiveness.	No
Jun & Yi, 2020	To explain how followers become loyal to SMIs and the influence interactivity may have upon this.	Quantitative, Cross-Sectional survey	Influencer interactivity was correlated to influencer authenticity and emotional attachment, which affected brand trust.	No
Kim & Kim, 2021	How different characteristics of SMIs can affect the trust followers have towards them.	Quantitative, Online self-administered survey	Expertise, authenticity and homophily were the characteristics that had the largest effect on building follower trust.	No
Cocker, Mardon & Daunt, 2021	To define when SMI brand endorsements are considered transgressive by their followers	Qualitative, Netnographic	There are five SMI endorsement transgressions that damage moral responsibility. Further how these transgressions affected both the SMI and the endorsement brand.	Yes
Breves, Amrehn, Heidenreich, Liebers & Schramm, 2021	What impact do SMIs have on their followers and what role does the PSR play.	Quantitative, Online study	Follower status affected the strength of PSR, which in turn affected source credibility and advertisement evaluation. A strong PSR also resulted in followers having a lower evaluative persuasion knowledge.	No
Um, 2013	How can dispositional and situational attribution style of consumers affect and moderate how consumers evaluate negative information regarding a celebrity endorser	Quantitative, Online Survey	Dispositional attributes caused endorsed brands to be seen as negative. Higher homophily with the celebrity also caused a decrease in negative reaction to a transgression. In addition, higher brand commitment toward a celebrity caused positive and favourable attitudes towards the	Yes

			celebrity when involved in a scandal.	
Hwang & Zhang, 2018	How PSR affects eWOM, purchase intentions and how loneliness, empathy and low social self-esteem can affect PSR.	Quantitative, Online Questionnaire	Positive influences of parasocial relationships were shown to be empathy and low self-esteem. PSR could also moderate the effects of persuasion knowledge on both purchase intention and eWOM.	No
Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Esteban-Millat, Torrez-Meruvia, D'Alessandro & Miles, 2020	The effects that perceived brand control and commercial orientation of the influencer's message has on the trust of the influencer and whether their message is credible.	Quantitative, Questionnaire to Instagram Users	Perceived commercial orientation of an influencer's post resulted in reduced trust in influencer compared to perceived brand control. Perceived brand control was shown to reduce willingness to search. Trust in influencers resulted in importance for post credibility, interests and willingness to search.	No
Ki, Cuevas, Chong & Lim, 2020	How emotional attachment to SMIs affects the number of following and the influence they yield on consumers.	Quantitative, Online Survey Questionnaire	SMIs form an influential power over their followers which is caused by the emotional bond formed between them. Ideality, relatedness and competencies are key antecedents that affect the SMI attachment. Relatedness fulfilment makes consumers perceive SMIs as human brands.	No
Reinikainen, Tan, Luoma-aho & Salo, 2021	How do the feelings of betrayal spill over onto the intertwined relationships between SMIs, brands and consumers.	Quantitative, Online Survey	Influencer betrayal has a negative effect on the PSR, affecting brand attitude, brand trust and purchasing intention on the endorsed brand as well as the SMI. Trust violations caused by an SMI negatively affect the endorsed brand.	Yes
Paravati, Naidu, Gabriel & Wiedemann, 2020	Are consumers conscious about the effects the PSR they form have on their attitudes.	Quantitative, correlation studies	PSR and exposure to public figures that consumers are interested in can shift their attitudes, this was especially unique on Twitter. The PSR and attitude shifts were done unconsciously and unintentionally, which could, later on, have a negative effect on the behaviours and attitudes.	No
Moraes, Gountas, Gountas & Sharma, 2019	The influences of celebrity endorsement on consumers and the	Literature review	Both consumers and celebrities should be seen as potential for promotional factors, and the PSR	No

	drivers that managers and researchers can utilise.		between these two are important. Endorsers face more risk and therefore it is important to consider	
Jin, Ryu & Muqaddam, 2021	How is the effectiveness of Instagram posts dependent on the account, whether the brand's account or the influencer's Instagram account and whether it is also dependent on the content posted.	Quantitative, 2x2 factorial design, survey	Through the presence of influencers/humans, PSI would be formed and social presence. The use of humans in posts resulted in higher trustworthiness. PSR feelings can be created and formed despite lacking the presence of a person in an influencers post.	No
Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity & Luoma-aho, 2020	What mediating role does comments done by followers have in influencer marketing.	Quantitative, Online Survey Questionnaire	Participation by followers has an effect on influencer endorsement. PSR between followers and influencers is essential to ensure influencer credibility. PSR with influencers generates trust and reduces uncertainty. Comments allow for followers to validate their feelings.	No
Chen, Yeh & Lee, 2021	How do the characteristics of internet celebrities affect the purchasing behaviour of followers on Youtube.	Quantitative, Online survey	Self-disclosure and expertise of SMIs affected impulse purchasing behaviour. Self-disclosure and expertise positively affect attachment, resulting in a positive effect on impulse purchasing behaviour.	No
Sokolova & Kefi, 2020	How PSI and persuasion cues in influencers affect their followers.	Quantitative, Online Survey Questionnaire	PSI and attitude homophily are positively related but not physical attractiveness. Credibility and PSI play a significant role in relation to purchasing intention.	No
Taillon, Mueller, Kowalczyk & Jones, 2020	How SMIs can manage their brand that they have created through understanding the role of closeness and PSR with their followers.	Qualitative content analysis	Attractiveness of influencers affects the positive attitude toward them and increases the purchasing intention of product endorsements. Likeability is an important factor as it influences the attitude towards SMIs. Closeness is important in building positive attitudes and directly influences purchasing intention.	No
Lou & Yuan, 2019	How influencer marketing affects the consumers on social	Quantitative, Online Survey	The value of influencers' posts and credibility has a positive effect on followers' trust which	No

	media looking at the value of messages and the credibility and how it affects.		has a spillover effect on trusting brand endorsement posts done by influencers. This results in a positive effect on brand awareness and purchasing intention.	
Jacobson, Gruzd & Hernández-García, 2020	What are the norms of using social media marketing and how do consumers feel about their data being used.	Quantitative, Online Survey	Concept marketing comfort formed, relates to pulling, pushing and exchanging information. Users are becoming more aware of the usage of their data for social media platforms.	No
De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017	How does the number of followers have an impact on the attitudes towards the influencers' endorsed brands.	Quantitative, questionnaire	The amount of followers affects the attitudes consumers have towards the influencer, measured in likeability. An influencer having a substantial following could be viewed negatively if they followed a few accounts.	No
Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011	To better understand the perceptions of followers of SMIs.	Quantitative, survey	SMIs are influencers who like to offer advice to their followers. Followers were shown to turn to SMIs to receive advice instead of turning to other ways of gathering information.	No
Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019	What effect does instagram celebrities and traditional celebrity have on trustworthiness, brand attitude, envy and social presence.	Quantitative, questionnaire	Instagram and traditional celebrities are perceived differently by consumers. Social presence was shown to have a mediating role of trustworthiness, envy and brand attitude.	No
Audrezet, de Kerviler & Guidry Moulard, 2020	How do SMIs manage their authenticity during brand endorsements and what strategies are they using.	Qualitative, Observations and Interviews	Passionate and transparent authenticity are two strategies used by influencers when doing brand endorsements.	No
Ki & Kim, 2019	How do SMIs persuade consumers to adopt brands endorsed by them.	Quantitative, Online Survey	SMIs are seen as taste and opinion leaders by consumers who mimic in terms of purchasing similar products/services and brands endorsed by the SMI. Visually appealing content produced by the SMI generated the consumers to perceive them as having good taste.	No
Ye, Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman,	To provide an overview of influencer marketing	Bibliometric Analysis/ Thematic	PSRs need to be established by SMIs to ensure persuasiveness to	No

2021	and its effects upon consumers.	content analysis	their followers. Building long-term relationships are important for both influencers and brands to ensure success.	
Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019	Proposes a theoretical model of PSR identifying variables that predict the different engagements	Literature Review	Defined four different stages to PSR, initiation, experimentation, intensification and integration. Also defined the specific goals and manifestation of the consumers on each of the engagement stages.	No

## 1.2 Purpose

Hence, following the literature research, as only three scientific articles had studied transgressions in relation to human brands it presented the gap within the research field. As this led to the formation of the main research question, “*can parasocial relationships make consumers blind?*” we are taking an explorative approach:

*An explorative study on how parasocial relationships affect consumers’ response toward human-brand transgression.*

## 1.3 Research question

1. How do consumers respond to human brand transgressions?
2. What implications do human brand transgressions have for the human brand and consumer relationships?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter introduces the existing literature regarding human brands, PSR and transgressions. It provides a theoretical understanding of the themes mentioned above. We start by introducing human brands, how consumers connect to human brands and the role of trust in their relationship. We then introduce PSR, which gives a theoretical background to understand the importance of PSR and the aspects that come with it. Later, we bring up transgression and parasocial break up (PSB) literature discussing human brands getting involved in transgressions and how it affects the PSR that they have with their consumer community (?). Lastly, we discuss

empathy and forgiveness to explain how consumers responding to transgressions strengthen the PSR with the human brand.

## **2.1 Human Brands**

Human brands are brands that take on characteristics of traditional brands (Thomson, 2006) while simultaneously considered third party endorsers (Freberg et al., 2011). They provide a platform for consumers that allows for self-expression, entertainment, and access to information (Jacobson, Gruzd & Hernández-García, 2020). They entail unique attributes of the persona or name that distinguishes them from other brands (Thomson, 2006). Previous literature has found that human brands utilize the interactive communication they gain to generate interpersonal power (Kim & Kim, 2022). With that said, human brands can influence consumers, affecting their attachment through relatedness, resulting in stronger loyalty and credibility. Hence, when human brands provide a social resource for consumers (Kim & Kim, 2022) in terms of an emotional bond (Ki et al., 2020), it yields a personal connection to the human brand (Kim & Kim, 2022). The personal connection can increase consumers' perception of human brand authenticity and increase the emotional attachment toward the human brand, which positively affects loyalty (Jun & Ji, 2020).

Another study found that the emotional attachment caused by consumers forming a close and personal relationship with the human brand forms intimacy and devotion and eventually starts considering the human brand as a friend (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). As a result, consumers are less critical of human brands (Um, 2013) and less resistant to advertising (Kim & Kim, 2022). Moreover, the attachment toward the human brand causes consumers to become cognitively and emotionally involved, reflecting similar characteristics as they would with friends and family (Cole & Leets, 1999). However, research has found that to yield an emotional attachment to a human brand through authenticity, there needs to be a form of interactivity with the consumers (Jun & Ji, 2021). Studies have shown that when human brands nurture engagement with their followers, consumers will perceive it as having an actual physical relationship with them (Kim & Kim, 2022; Horton & Wohl, 1956). The interactivity between consumers and human brands will form brand trust and loyalty toward the human brand. In



addition, brand trust motivates and encourages consumers to form long-term relationships with human brands (Jun & Ji, 2021).

### **2.1.2 Trust**

Mayer et al. (1995) explained how trust is the readiness to accept certain expectations that individuals have and believe in the positive outcomes. Emotional reaction is the basis of how individuals perceive and evaluate the extent of trusting others (Williams and Anderson, 1991; McAllister, 1995). The human brand's trustworthiness is based on the believability and honesty that the consumers portray to their PSR partner. It correlates to how effective persuasive communication is (Breves et al., 2019; Breves et al., 2021). When consumers have a strong PSR with a human brand, they assign a high degree of source credibility (Chung and Cho, 2017). As a result, consumers may be less critical and judge human brand's content positively (Breves et al., 2021; Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019).

### **2.2 Parasocial Relationship**

Horton and Wohl (1956) and Cole and Leets (1999) described that PSR is a relationship occurring between a human brand and a consumer. However, it is shown to be a one-sided bond (Hu, 2016). PSR fulfils a gap of unmet needs that consumers develop over time (Cole & Leets, 1999). In recent studies, it was found that PSR can be built through recurrent exposure to the human brand through social media (Iannone et al., 2018; Kim & Song, 2016) and can influence various behavioural patterns and attitudes that support the human brand (Paravati et al., 2020). These relationships are nurtured by the mental stimuli that create closeness and intimacy with the human brand (Paravati et al., 2020), which appears because of seemingly mutual experiences (Mar & Oatley, 2008). However, for the consumers forming these bonds, they feel like a typical and traditional mutual relationship (Derrick et al., 2008). In addition, human brands that share and express their personal matters to consumers have been shown to increase the level of empathy shown towards them by consumers, feeling proud of achievements, happy for their successes or sad for their miseries (Paravati et al., 2020).

While human brands sharing personal information results in increased levels of empathy, one research found that in order to strengthen PSR further, emotional engagement is essential (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). A strong sense of PSR and liking of a human brand can result in

consumers believing in favour of that human brand or trusting them. Through the PSR, human brands can change and shape consumers' behaviours or attitudes towards a topic (Cohen, Myrick & Hoffner, 2020). Consumers with anxious attachment needs use human brands and the PSR they form as a coping mechanism for what they are experiencing (MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2022). In addition, consumers may also seek out PSR as a form of belongingness (MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2022) or to connect with a community (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). Depending on the emotional state a consumer is in, it can affect their motive for engaging with a human brand and investing in a PSR. Similar to belongingness, it has been found that consumers want to connect with a human brand socially, and the stronger the social presence is from the human brand, the stronger the relationship will become (Kim, Kim & Yang, 2019). Furthermore, the intimacy of the PSR with human brands shows to be affected by the interactions (Quin, 2020; Wang, 2021), meaning that the more human brands interact with the consumers by responding to comments or their opinions, the stronger and closer the PSR becomes (Kim & Kim, 2022).

### **2.2.1 Parasocial Relationships between human brands and consumers**

In PSR, the relationship is unidirectional, and the human brand does not have the same abilities as the consumer to respond or interact with the relationship in the same way (Kreissl et al., 2021). However, despite this lack of two-way interaction between the human brands and the consumers, those consumers that are involved in the PSR with the human brand connect with other individuals who have their one-sided relationship, forming a relationship and community between consumers who share the same parasocial partner (Keng et al., 2011; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Choi et al., 2019). These are called online brand communities (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). The online brand communities consumers are a part of consist of three elements (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). The first element is that consumers share the same feeling of belonging and enjoy the sense of belongingness (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Zhong, Shapoval & Busser, 2021). Secondly, they have a shared history and traditions and have rituals in some cases. Third, consumers within these communities share similar responsibility to defend the members or human brands against transgressions (Cocker et al., 2021).

In addition, a recent study found that consumers who are part of online brand communities increased their loyalty and engagement with the human brand (Kaur, Paruthi, Islam & Hollebeek, 2020). The increased engagement can also result in increased intimacy, where the consumer feels as if the human brand is part of their friend group, causing them to become more empathetic (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) highlighted that modern communities are most likely seen as fictional, and this idea fits with how PSRs are seen. The online brand communities show a safe space for consumers to express their opinions and strengthen their bond with the human brand (Kaur et al., 2020). The online brand communities extend the human brand and allow consumers to participate in further involvement and interactions with the human brand (Wellman, 2020).

Furthermore, research has found that the more a consumer involves within the online brand community, the more attached they become to the community and the human brand (Sanz-Blas, Bigné & Buzova, 2019). One way that has been studied in which consumers involve themselves further within online brand communities is through the connection of merchandise created for the fandom (Stanfill, 2019). Stanfill (2019) analysed how much consumption is unavoidable and understandable in fandom communities. According to Tarvin (2021), human brands use their brand and merchandise to allow consumers to identify with the human brand. Furthermore, similar to how the online brand communities work, merchandise is an extension and goes beyond the online. Merchandising allows consumers to connect with other consumers outside of the online world (Tarvin, 2021).

### **2.3 Human Brand Transgression**

Previous research has explored how human brands involved in transgressions can affect the brands that collaborate with those human brands. The exciting discovery was that it could have both: negative and positive effects on a brand (Cocker et al., 2021; Carrillat et al., 2019; Sääksjärvi et al., 2016). The level of responsibility as seen by consumers is a significant attribute when evaluating moral transgressions, meaning that consumers will be able to divide the responsibility for transgression between the endorsed brands (Thomas and Fowler, 2016). Louie et al. (2001) argued that consumers' response to the human brand transgression would depend on how consumers see the attributes of the transgression. It means that the consumers relating

transgression to the brand's personality will be more likely to judge the human brand, while when the transgression is seen as a situational context, the human brand may be excused from the blaming; this is called situational attribution (Um, 2013; Zhou and Whittle, 2013). Situational attribution may increase sympathy towards the human brand. Therefore the aftereffect of the transgression will be influenced by the way consumers admit the human brand's responsibility in the given situation (Cocker et al., 2021).

Moral reasoning is another factor that can increase or decrease sympathy towards the human brand following a transgression (Lee et al., 2020). According to the article, moral reasoning is a process that allows consumers to determine whether they should support a human brand following a transgression. Hence, moral reasoning can mediate the state of a transgression (Lee et al., 2020). In addition, the perception of the human brand can act as a mitigator following a transgression. If a human brand obtains the perception of being a role model, it will mitigate the transgression causing higher support for the human brand (Lee et al., 2020). In addition, if a human brand obtains a higher preference prior to a transgression, this will also increase support (Lee et al., 2020).

Furthermore, consumers see human brands as role models that cause self-influencer congruence, meaning consumers tend to mimic human brands they look up to (Xiao, Saleem, Tariq, Ul Haq & Guo 2021). Consumers would also consider a human brand a role model if they share similar attitudes or if the human brand is seen as successful, admired (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), clever or funny (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019). Scandals are perceived to add uncertainty and create barriers to the future of the PSR (Hu, 2016). It was evident in previous PSB research that individuals with stronger feelings toward the human brand will be more likely to experience the PSB more intensively (Hu, 2016; Cohen, 2003; Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

## **2.4 PSR Break Up**

A parasocial relationship break-up (PSB) is somewhat similar to any social relationship break up, entitling painful feelings and evoking similarities to the feeling of losing a friend (Cohen, 2003). Even if PSR break up is less traumatic than a close social relationship, sadness that is felt becomes a big part of the consumer's lives in their social worlds (Cohen, 2003). Previous

research has also found that the longer the relationship lasts, the stronger the feelings will follow and the more distress it is going to cause when experiencing a PSB (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

Cohen (2010) discussed three types of relationship expectancy violations: moral, trust and social. Moral violations address how relationships are affected negatively when one of the partners behaves in contradiction to moral relationship conduct and rules (Cohen, 2010). A breach of trust is another negative factor that breaks close relationships (Cohen, 2010). Finally, there is an expectation in relationships for the partners to hold the code of social decency (Cohen, 2010). Cohen (2010) discovered that trust violation had a more significant impact than moral expectancy violation. However, when comparing PSR and individual relationships, there was a significant difference found that for both violations, trust and social media personas were judged harder than partners in personal relationships (Cohen, 2010).

## **2.5 Consumers' response towards APOLOGY regarding transgression**

Human brands often produce an apology after having a transgression (Hu, Cotton, Zhang & Jia, 2019). Even if apologies are a socially expected follow up after transgressions in interpersonal relationships, human brands often make an apology to their online communities as a strategy to keep their public image undamaged (Hu et al., 2019). Some people sympathetically respond to apologies by admiring the courage to admit the wrongdoing and believing in the genuineness of the apology, and as a result forgiving the human brand (Hu et al., 2019). While other consumers will see the human brand after transgression as a person they cannot recognise, seeing the transgression as relational and, as a result choosing not to forgive the human brand (Hu et al., 2019).

In the previous research done by Hu et al. (2019), it was found that there was no significant difference in the reaction to the transgression between people who were exposed to the apology video and people who were not. There could be inconsistencies in interpersonal relationships, as those apologies are made to the victim personally. In PSR, the apology is delivered to the general public (Hu et al., 2019) and may seem less intimate and meaningful. King (2008) research found that it is not easy to distinguish whether the apology is staged and created just for the public image or is an actual genuine act. Thus, even though the apology is delivered to restore the

relationship when delivered by the human brand, it may not guarantee forgiveness from the consumer (Hu et al., 2019).

## **2.4 Empathy**

Empathy is an emotion that allows consumers to connect with and care for human brands while sharing an experience (Krol & Bartz, 2021). Empathy can consist of two aspects, both cognitive and emotional empathy (Chiu & Yeh, 2018). Cognitive empathy is about understanding the feelings another person has, whereas emotional empathy is when a consumer can experience another person's feelings, in this case, the human brand (Chiu & Yeh, 2018). Research has found that higher empathy levels result in higher chances of self-identification, meaning a consumer appoints a specific characteristic to themselves and a stronger PSR with a human brand (Scherer et al., 2022). According to Hwang and Zhang (2018), empathy can strengthen PSR and should be considered essential in building PSR between consumers and human brands. The stronger PSR resulting from a higher level of empathy was in the form of a higher commitment to the human brand and the consumer having higher satisfaction levels (Scherer et al., 2022). Empathetic consumers think positively of human brands involved in transgressions (Um, 2013), showing cognitive empathy (Chiu & Yeh, 2018). When consumers identify with the human brand and the transgression they are going through, they do not react negatively to the event (Um, 2013). However, consumers who show decreased empathy towards human brands and do not fully identify with the human brand will perceive the transgressions as negative (Um, 2013). Furthermore, consumers who are exposed to content created by human brands and actively engage in the content were shown to have an increased empathy toward the human brand (Paravati et al., 2020). Through a human brand sharing their personal opinions, feelings, and information regarding their life, the increase in perspectives the consumer will consider yielded greater empathy towards the human brand (Paravati et al., 2020). Hence, empathy can lead to consumers being more forgiving and accepting of human brands.

## **2.5 Forgiveness**

Transgressions are an inevitable part of human brands (Fetscherin & Sampedro, 2019). However, human brands can minimize the effects of transgressions by preparing for one. The notion of

human brand forgiveness only regards consumers forgiving a human brand following a transgression. The human brand must earn the consumers' forgiveness, and it is not handed to them (Fetscherin & Sampedro, 2019). Through the process of consumer forgiveness, the PSR with the human brand can be restored (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2015). Hence, consumer forgiveness depends on the severity of the transgression (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2015) and how the human brand approaches the transgression and seeks forgiveness (Fetscherin & Sampedro, 2019). In addition, research has found that consumers present a higher level of forgiveness towards a human brand if the brand's personality is a warm personality or a competent brand (Hassey, 2019). However, the personality of the human brand is not the only factor that can increase the chances of consumer forgiveness. However, the willingness of consumers to engage themselves within the human brand's forgiveness is also a factor (Hassey, 2019). Hence, consumer forgiveness was higher after a transgression if they had a closer bond to the human brand prior to the transgression, which resulted in a positive attitude toward the human brand after transgression (Osterman & Hecmanczuk, 2019). In addition, consumers who obtain an interdependent self-construct have a higher level of forgiveness towards a human brand transgression. In contrast, those who have an independent self-construct reflect negatively on giving forgiveness toward a human brand transgression (Hassey, 2019).

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Research Philosophy**

Understanding the relationship that forms between data and theory is highly affected by the philosophical stance researchers take (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The philosophical stance illustrates how researchers approach the research topic from a philosophical viewpoint; how is the research problem approached (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Hence, we define it to know from what direction they are analysing and assessing their research topic. In addition, to know the suitable research design to use. The philosophical stance can affect the theory and the data. Depending on the research philosophy, researchers approach data differently (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), influencing how data is interpreted (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). It is important to have defined the research philosophy to understand how to approach the research.

A philosophical approach one can take toward research and most common within qualitative research designs is an ontological approach (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The ontological approach is concerned with the nature of reality and is built upon assumptions made by researchers (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). Hence, this is the stance taken by the researchers in this paper. The research aim is built upon observations, and from there, we have made assumptions about consumers and their online nature. Although the ontological approach contains four positions that we can take, one of these positions is the relativist approach. The relativism approach argues that concerning the truth, there is more than one single truth. Instead, there are multiple truths (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The relativist believes in multiple realities and perspectives. Interpretations and understandings are determined by cultural-historical context. This means that reality is dependent on who is viewing the context, “it is in the eye of the beholder” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, p. 74). Therefore, we used a relativism approach as the aim of this study is not to find one single truth but to understand the many truths surrounding this topic and gather these different truths.

## **3.2 Research Approach**

### **3.2.1 Qualitative research**

The notion of qualitative research is that it focuses on words instead of focusing upon numbers. It is about understanding the data gathered and the different views extracted from the social world (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In addition, qualitative research focuses on both the participant and the researchers being involved in collecting data (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). As qualitative research focuses upon themes derived from words, the data collected in this research must be arranged in a non-standardized way and analyzed using theoretical concepts (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). Therefore, qualitative research offers an in-depth understanding of empirical data gathered and seeks not to find the truth but the varying truths that may exist surrounding a topic (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). As this research explores how PSR can influence consumers' responses towards human brand transgressions on SNS, qualitative research allows for an understanding of consumers' perception and influence of PSR. In addition, previous research has taken a quantitative approach to PSR. Hence, qualitative was fitting as it will directly extract consumers' views of the social world.



### **3.2.2 Inductive approach**

Deciding upon the approach to use for given research proves essential as it helps with designing the research. In addition, it provides a reflective outlook on the research and what strategies will be beneficial for the research topic (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Lastly, it allows researchers to assess the given constraints they may have for the research and decide what is plausible (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Therefore, we reflected upon the topic to be explored and decided upon an inductive approach. An inductive approach to qualitative research entails that the research initially gathers data, and then the theory is built upon the empirical data (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). Hence, inductivism builds a theory that will answer the observed data. Using this approach for research allows for openness when designing the research, as researchers do not have a rigid structure to follow in the empirical chapter and analysis chapter; theory can be added on later if further inferences are found from the observations (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007; Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Therefore, the theory is not defined prior to the research. However, there can be a slight deductive approach to collecting theory. Hence, this indicates an iterative process, where researchers go back and forth between their data and theory to build upon their theory further (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

Following this, we performed an extensive research process. It assesses and analyses the existing research on PSR, human brands, influencer marketing and social media marketing. We decided that an inductive approach would yield a better result from the gathered understanding of the topics and the prominent research. The research goal is to understand consumers' responses and the influence of PSR. It signifies that it was unknown what empirical data would be yielded from the data collection and the inferences that could be generated. Therefore, the theory was gathered following the data collection period. We returned throughout the process of analysing the empirical data and theory to find different topics to discuss and create inferences. However, we did have a minor deductive approach to the theory as there was a mutual decision on theories that would be necessary for the research. This decision was made through a review of existing research. There were prominent theories found in research papers surrounding PSR that were seen as necessary to include to ensure validity.

### **3.2.3 Methodology used**

Choosing the correct methodological approach to research is dependent on different factors (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). If the study takes a qualitative approach to the research, different methods can be chosen. In addition, the method chosen depends on what data the researchers want to gather. For the given study, as our goal was to study consumers' response to human brand transgressions and see how PSR can influence this response on social media, we decided to use netnography as the method. Netnography is a qualitative approach that entails the researchers doing ethnography but in an online environment (Kozinets, 2020). However, compared to online ethnography, netnography is specifically designed for the online environment on social media and guides the researchers on the specific steps to take to acquire the necessary data. Essentially, netnography is about understanding the cultural aspects and experiences consumers have on social media and giving an explanation to them; it is about assessing and evaluating the traces consumers leave behind on social media (Kozinets, 2020). Hence, the given research is answering the research question and filling in the research gap by collecting comments made by consumers online regarding human brand transgression to give an insight into the influence PSR can have on consumers' responses. Using netnography allows for the direct gathering of these comments and to submerge themselves within the online traces left behind in the comment sections of Instagram and Youtube posts done by human brands.

## **3.3 Sampling**

### **3.3.1 Sampling method**

To reach the research objective of certain studies, a random sampling technique will not suffice. Instead, non-probability is needed (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). Non-probability sampling denotes that samples are not chosen at random. Instead, there is a strategic way it is gathered. The strategic way of sampling is dependent on the aim of the research question and the sampling necessary for the research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). In addition, a key characteristic of non-probability sampling is that one cannot calculate the probability of a member being selected from a sample (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). However, this does cause an issue of claims of selection bias in the selected sample. Hence, we chose samples from a population that yielded a guaranteed result. Although, we further avoided this issue by selecting

non-probability samples of a population that presented the general attributes (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Entailing, the samples were chosen based on the specifics that the human brands were involved in a transgression. However, they were not chosen based on the responses consumers were making towards the transgression. In addition, it was essential to determine whether the sample was a suitable representative sample of the population. Hence, we did a pre-study to see if the results could be used for the study. We found that the selection process did represent the population in a fair way to the best of their abilities. Although, non-probability sampling allows researchers to choose samples that help complete the research goal (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

A non-probability sampling technique is purposive sampling. In purposive sampling, the sample units and the purpose of the study are closely correlated (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). It means that we picked samples that will aid in explaining the research question. Hence, we picked the samples based on a set criterion (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We chose a purposive sampling approach that better fits the research goal. A critical aspect of purposive sampling is that it allows us to choose a minute sample with a specific focus. These human brands on social media were involved in a transgression and addressed the transgression. Hence, purposive sampling allows gathering unusual, unique, key themes and the in-depth importance of the case samples (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). It allowed us to collect samples that yielded the study's most relevant information.

Extending upon purposive sampling, one of the subcategories of purposive sampling is generic purposive sampling (Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019). Generic purposive sampling is a sampling technique that can obtain the attributes of either being sequential or non-sequential. Furthermore, the selection of cases or participants for researchers can be formed prior or contingent or combined (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Hence, we must define the criteria concerning the research questions. Deciding upon non-sequential, fixed, and a priori criterion indicates that the cases have a defined criterion from which they are chosen. Within these cases, a sample is then made (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). It resulted in choosing 4 cases, human brands, for their research on two different social media platforms. We decided to use two social media platforms as the human brands had a combined presence on both. Despite Youtube generating more

extended responses to the transgressions, we felt it would cause selection bias if they only decided on Youtube. Therefore, we also chose Instagram as a second platform. In addition, choosing two social media platforms increases the possibility of generalizability as results are not only gathered from one social media platform. Additionally, generic purposive sampling allows for using theory as a guiding principle, which we return to throughout the sampling process if more samples are needed to discover a theme further (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Hence, for the given research choosing a non-probability sampling technique was the suitable option as the aim of this research denotes the necessity of a non-random sample. This research aims to explore how parasocial relationship engagement influences consumers' response toward human-brand transgression. As this was the aim, it required the selection of specific samples correlated with the research of human-brand transgressions. Therefore, for the given research, a criterion was determined to ensure a relevant sample. The criteria that were created contained the following:

1. The Human-Brand must have acquired fame only through social media.
2. The Human-Brand must be present on two social media platforms (Youtube and Instagram).
3. The Human-Brand must have been involved in a transgression.
4. The Human Brand must have addressed the transgression on the platforms.
5. The Human Brand must have a comment section open on the platforms so the researchers can access the comments made by consumers to gather data.

Through these criteria, it was through these criteria that allowed us to find the samples used for the research and yielded the given results. Hence, the Human Brands and the given cases were chosen based on the transgressions and the generated response from consumers in the comment section.

### **3.3.2 Sampling size**

Sampling size is a necessary but complicated process in qualitative research. The difficulty in the process lies in determining the correct sample size for the research (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The aspect that promotes this difficulty is theoretical saturation in qualitative research. The sample size for qualitative research is individual as it depends on different factors. The

broadness of the scope of the goal is to reach saturation and generalizability. However, the most critical aspect of sample size is being able to justify the reason for the size (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). When considering the sample size and justifying the sample size, the most crucial aspect is whether we can judge the population based on our sample (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In addition, topics considering time and money constraints must be considered in selecting the sample size. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), smaller sample size can present the population better than having a large sample size that does not present the population or is scattered. The sample size is dependent on the goal of the research. However, recent studies have looked into the recommended sample size when saturation has been reached (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

In most cases, thematic saturation is often reached between 6-12 samples (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020); 4-8 samples (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022); 80% of themes can be discovered after six samples (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020). However, some research argues that sample size can be one as long as the given sample generates depth and insight into the topic researched (Boddy, 2016). Although saturation should not be the guiding factor for sample size appropriateness, researchers should also consider whether the data gathered is appropriate (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). We can define guidance in the sample size a priori to the data collection. However, we should consider if the key themes have been defined and are a continuous interpretation through the process (Sim, Saunders, Waterfield & Kingstone, 2018).

For the given study, there were three main goals defined prior: (1) Select samples that present an in-depth understanding of the research; (2) Ensure theoretical saturation; (3) Ensure the appropriateness of data collection. About (2), theoretical saturation in this research is when no different themes can be generated from additional samples (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020). Hence, our initial step was to use the criteria defined in the 3.3.1 Sampling method to generate two samples that would be used as a pre-assessment to determine the guiding sample size. When analysing the two human brands of interest for the given study, an average of 300,000-1,000,000 comments were made when looking at one post of interest on each of the human-brands social media platforms. Following this, when collecting relevant data from the two posts, the results generated over 30 pages of relevant data. It was estimated that 10-15 posts' data would be collected for each corresponding sample. Hence, after the pre-assessment to determine suitable

sample size, we decided to have a sample size of 4 human brands. However, the sample size could increase if theoretical saturation was not reached. Once empirical data was collected from the four samples, we felt that it yielded enough empirical data to make inferences about it, as over 400 pages were gathered.

### 3.3.3 Sampling frame

The sampling frame of qualitative research is dependent on the aim of the research (Saunders et al., 2007; Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). As this research aimed to see how the PSR consumers have with human brands influences their responses to human brand transgression, it was necessary to sample human brands within the frame. The human brands sampled were selected through either Instagram or YouTube. We decided to choose two human brands involved within the beauty community of social media and two involved in the lifestyle community. This decision was made to provide a range and see if there is any difference between the two communities. As can be seen in Table 2 provides an overview of the number of posts sampled from both Instagram and YouTube.

**Table 2. - Showing the human brands sampled for the study**

<b>Human Brand</b>	<b>Online Community</b>	<b># of Followers on Youtube</b>	<b># of Followers on Instagram</b>	<b>Total posts sampled from on Youtube</b>	<b>Total posts sampled from Instagram</b>
James Charles	Beauty	24.1 million	23.1 million	7	25
Jaelyn Hill	Beauty	5.67 million	7.3 million	4	8
Logan Paul	Lifestyle	23.4 million	22.8 million	29	7
PewDiePie	Lifestyle/Gaming	111 million	21.8 million	36	7

## 3.4 Data sources

### 3.4.1 Data collection method

Selecting the qualitative research method depends on the aim of the research and what data is required to answer the research question (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). One qualitative method approach designed to collect data on social media is netnography. Netnography is a qualitative

approach that shares many similarities with online ethnography but is simultaneously much different (Kozinets, 2020). The difference between the two qualitative methods is that netnography is concerned with looking at the online traces on social media that consumers leave. It is about understanding the culture present on social media. It is these online traces that differentiate netnography from other qualitative methods. Kozinets (2020) discussed that these online traces refer to texts, photos, music, and comments left behind on social media. Three elements define netnography: investigation, interaction and immersion. Researchers approach these three elements to determine the direction and approach to collecting their data on social media (Kozinets, 2020). A combination of investigation and immersion for the given research was used in operation. The investigative data collection step in netnography is when researchers choose a specific set of data from the online traces on social media. The investigative is independent of the researcher, meaning it exists without the interference of the researcher (Kozinets, 2020). The generation of this data often follows random events or occurrences that are unknown. Although it is unknown how the data was generated or its reasons, the researchers will shape the data depending on their research or what perspectives they are interested in. Hence, for the given research, the additional comments made on human brands' social media platforms were previously observed following a transgression. We were intrigued by the PSR that arose, which led to the development of the research question. Following the formation of the research question, data were collected that shaped and fit into the criterion of the data collection instrument shown in chapter 3.4.

The second data collection step chosen for this research was immersive data collection (Kozinets, 2020). The focus of the immersive data collection step is to evaluate the online traces and sort out the parts of the data that will become part of the netnographic study. In addition, the immersive step maintains the data in its original form with little to no alterations. Immersive data focuses on collecting rich and in-depth data where the researchers, throughout the process, take notes on the steps they took and the steps they did not take. Including whether they searched for further clues, explored certain ideas or searched for specific words within the data and what their thoughts were when collecting the data (Kozinets, 2020). We applied this data collection strategy when gathering their relevant data. Sure of the online traces and responses on the human brands'

Youtube and Instagram posts had over 300,000 comments. A certain percentage of the comments were irrelevant or contained the in-depth and rich information relevant to the study.

An example is the frequent spam comments or comments generated by AI bots. In addition, when we noticed specific comments of interest that used certain words, these words would be picked up and searched further on to see other comments using the same. An example of this was "sad", "unsub", and "disappointed". Moreover, we searched for further comments made by the users to see if there were changes in their responses to the human brand transgression or if the PSR had altered throughout the timeline.

Lastly, the uttermost important step in gathering the netnographic data is to have the research question as to the central point throughout the entire research process (Kozinets, 2020). The research question will be the guide when deciding if the netnographic data is relevant or not, in combination with other criteria set by us. Hence, throughout the collection process, we referred back to the questions to ensure that the gathered data would yield results to help answer the aim. Additionally, we used PSR stages developed by Tukachinsky and Stever (2019). It defined how consumers express, act or respond to human brands in a PSR. Therefore, in combination with the research questions and the framework developed by Tukachinisky and Stever (2019), we collected empirical data that helped explain their observations.

## **3.5 Data analysis method**

### **3.5.1 The coding process**

In order to simplify the analysis, the process of coding was adopted by using a coding software called Atlas TI. Coding helps to create specific themes from the empirical data and smoothes the analysis process (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). By adopting the process of coding, we were able to discover new ways of interpreting the comments gathered (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Coding is considered a transparent and objective way to analyse the data (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Therefore, it makes it easier not to create biases.

The first step in the coding process is to form open codes (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Open codes help the researcher observe the empirical data from a different perspective and establish introductory insight into the data (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Examples of open codes were:



love, inspiration, disappointment, and forgiveness. While reviewing the codes created, it is crucial to seek if there are more additional codes that can be extracted from the data (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). By coding individually, we can correctly evaluate the relevance of each code and cultivate a deeper understanding of the codes (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman & Pedersen, 2013). After both researchers code the data individually, it is suggested to compare the codes to avoid prejudice (Campbell et al., 2013). After the comparison is made, it is crucial to ensure that the codes do not vary fundamentally (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Campbell et al., 2013).

The coding process started with gathering all the comments collected and distributing them into three main sections: comments prior to the transgression, comments during the transgression and comments after the transgression. When all the comments were brought together, both researchers coded the data individually. While creating codes, the research question was contained to create codes that best respond and help answer the research question. As a result, over 420 open codes were created. Some examples of the open codes were: “*Love*”, “*Empathy*”, “*Disappointment*”, and “*Trust*”. Both researchers compared the open codes created, and there were no significant differences found in between. Therefore the final open code scheme was formed.

The second coding step is to take the scheme and start comparing individual codes in order 2ps (Bell et al., 2019). When all the groups were formed, we put them into categories, so the group of codes could have a description and explanation. When a connection was found between codes, we grouped them again and put them into new categories (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). For instance, separate open codes may represent emotions (“happy” & “sad”) and have different meanings but still fall under the category of “emotions”. Codes were organised into core categories, which extracted the main concepts for the analysis (Bell et al., 2019). Some examples of the categories created were: “*Completely trusts the human brand*”, “*Betrayal resulted in them unsubscribing*”, “*Forgiving towards the human brand*”, and “*Questioning the genuinity of the human brand*”.

The last step in the coding process was to search for patterns between different categories (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The “Cause and effect” method was used to find relationships between various grouped categories. Therefore, the relationships discovered in the process were considered patterns. Some of the examples of patterns discovered: “*Accepting and always supporting*”, “*Defending the human brand*”, and “*Disappointed in the human brand*”. Finally, the patterns were discussed and analysed in the Analysis section in Chapter 5.

### **3.6 Quality of research**

Through the design process of business research, researchers must assess the quality of their research design. It is essential to assess and consider the quality as it allows for an evaluation of the research and provides an understanding of the decisions made during the process. In addition, it allows for the ability to avoid mistakes throughout the research process. Two factors that can assess the quality of the research are validity and reliability (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

#### **3.6.1 Reliability**

The reliability of business research is concerned with whether the given study can be repeated (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019) and provides consistent findings (Saunders et al., 2007). Reliability in qualitative research can be divided up into two subcategories, external and internal reliability. External reliability of qualitative research is concerned with replicating the research and to what extent it can be replicated (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). However, one aspect proven difficult with external reliability is that the social situations a study may be involved within cannot be frozen in time. Hence, therefore it is not easy to replicate. Therefore, those who wish to replicate a qualitative study can do so but need to adopt the same social role and the setting. Otherwise, it will not yield the same results as the original study (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Hence, for the given research, we have stated under what period data was collected, how the data was selected based on a specific criterion, how we decided which human brands to decide upon and selecting comments that showed any sign of PSR. Internal reliability is concerned with when research contains more than one observer and how the researchers determine their observations to be the same (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We worked together during the data collection and coding process to ensure that similar observations were made.

According to Saunders et al. (2007), there are four additional threats that reliability can be faced. Subject or participant error can be affected by the time empirical data is collected, as depending on the time of day and weekday can affect the response. We ensured that no subject or participant error occurred when gathering the empirical data through viewing comments on Youtube and Instagram posted at the same time frame as the human brand made the post. Subject or participant bias in qualitative research can be present when researchers may analyse the data in the wrong way, interpreting the data wrong and not being able to denote what the data is presenting (Saunders et al., 2007). To avoid subject or participant bias, we carefully assessed the comments. They used the framework designed by Tukachinsky & Stever (2019) to determine whether the comment expressed a PSR or not. Lastly, the observer can present both error and bias. The observer error can appear when researchers interpret or explain the same question, subject, or topic differently (Saunders et al., 2007). Therefore, prior to the study, we decided to define SMIs and influencers as “human brands” and worked together to ensure the same interpretation of the subject throughout the empirical collection.

Additionally, when doing the coding process, we worked together on the data and agreed on what codes belonged to which themes and our reasoning behind them. Lastly, observer bias is an important aspect to consider in qualitative research as depending on the observer, information gathered can be interpreted differently (Saunders et al., 2007). As this is one of the most important aspects to consider, we kept in mind the relativism approach to this research. The interest is in finding the many different truths regarding PSR and not choosing data that will yield the best result. In addition, we used the framework developed by Tukachinsky & Stever (2019), which defines the different aspects of parasocial relationships and ways consumers may act within the level of engagement. Hence, future researchers wanting to replicate the research can use the same framework, although, as Saunders et al. (2007) and Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) state, specific social settings cannot be frozen in time. It can also be difficult for future researchers to yield the same results as even though we have tried not to be biased, there is always a possibility for it.

### **3.6.2 Validity**

As previously mentioned, the second factor that assesses the quality of research is validity. Validity is concerned with whether the findings generated by the research are legitimate and truthful (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Validity is also divided up into two subcategories, internal and external validity. The external validity of qualitative research is concerned with how the findings can be generalised. Bell, Bryman & Harley (2019) mentioned that this part of validity in qualitative research is a challenging aspect as the sample size tends to be small. In order to increase the generalizability, the researcher chose two human brands part of the Beauty Community and two human brands part of the Lifestyle/Gaming Community to show a representation of two different communities that create entirely different content but were involved within a transgression. In addition, within the empirical chapter, exact comments extracted from the different human brands' posts were presented to allow the readers to conclude the empirical data. In addition, to understand how certain conclusions were made in the analysis.

The second part of validity is internal validity (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Internal validity determines whether the theories used in the research match the observations that have been made (Saunders et al., 2007). Hence, to ensure the study's internal validity, we developed the theories from the observations and the themes we used to find a suitable theoretical framework. Continuing, the observations made in the coding had theoretical support to explain what was being observed and hence could be backed up. Therefore, none of the observations was concluded without the support of previous research.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

An essential aspect of assessing and determining qualitative research, specifically netnographic research, is ethical consideration (Kozinets, 2020). A critical aspect of netnographic studies is that they can be on as being an invasive type of research in terms of exposing the observations that have been made online. Netnographic studies entail that the researchers are not physically present in the observation setting (Kozinets, 2020). However, due to social media research becoming a growing topic of interest for research, researchers can take steps to avoid ethical

issues or prevent them to the extent possible. Hence, for this study, we carefully considered the steps and aspects presented by Kozinets (2020) to ensure an ethical standard for the research.

First and foremost, Kozinets (2020) has designed a research ethics process flowchart to simplify the initial steps in netnographic research, where researchers can determine if they need to consider other factors. Our research took an investigative approach where we respected the users' rights, meaning comments that entailed much private information regarding the user we decided not to include. We felt it was against the user's rights. The next step is to consider if the topics investigated are sensitive, and part of the data gathered for this research regarded sensitive topics as it involved human brand transgression (Kozinets, 2020). However, we felt that the benefits were outweighed by the risks as the research could yield potential findings that can be used for future research within the field of human brand transgressions and PSR. The final step to consider is if we could ensure data security, which we felt we could. We can not be in complete control of who gains access to our research. However, as we can keep the empirical data anonymous, the ethical aspect of the research is accepted (Kozinets, 2020).

Our main concern for this study was to ensure that we do not bring any harm or embarrassment to the consumers whose comments have been chosen for the study. Kozinets (2020) discusses how handling consumer data in a secure way is the utmost important aspect of netnographic research. In addition, it is essential to treat the participants whose data has been collected with respect. Therefore, certain parts of consumers' comments were removed to protect them and their private information. As Kozinets (2020) highlighted, despite the data being available and published in a public environment, it does not make it public for anyone to use as the consumers do not sign an agreement that they consent to their comments being used in research. Hence, this was considered throughout the process when gathering the empirical data.

## **4. Empirical data**

This chapter presents the empirical data collected from four human brands on YouTube and Instagram. The empirical data gathering consisted of collecting comments prior to the transgression, comments from the actual transgression, and comments following the transgression. Hence, we present the data with the main headings: 'prior to the transgression', 'during the transgression', and 'after the transgression'. We grouped the empirical data into

common themes and corresponding comments of interest within each heading and placed them in each theme.

## **4.1 Comments prior to the transgression**

### ***Love towards the human brand***

Many consumers have a feeling of deep connection to a human brand and therefore, declare love to them. On one of the human brands, Jaclyn Hill, a large majority of the comments made by consumers focused on declaring their love towards the brand and it was the most common thing for the consumers to comment on, *“Been with you since day one! Love love love you! So proud of you!”* expressing how they were proud of the human brand and their accomplishments.

Consumers would express their affection towards the human brand, in this case James Charles, by explaining how much the person meant to them. This form of encouragement was done by a lot of the consumers in the comment sections, where some would refer to the human brand as a role model, *“I love you so so soooo much! You are such a great YouTuber and role model! You deserve the world, love you forever and always xoxo”*.

### ***Discussion of merch and online communities***

Consumers in the different comment sections would discuss and tell how they had purchased merch that the human brand was selling or discuss about the online community that they were a part of. For certain consumers purchasing the merch and discussing the merch was a form to connect with others, *“today I saw that a girl was wearing maverick merch, the logang is so strong”*. Some consumers commented on how the merch would be a form of self-expression, *“I literally just fought with my mom about buying ur merch and she was like: No, whyy. But she doesn’t understand what it’s like to be a maverick. Like I’m a maverick and I want something to have that is as a maverick to me, which is ur merch”*.

## **4.2 Comments during transgression**

### ***Declaration of unconditional love toward human brand***

During the transgression, there were comments made by consumers that focused on how they showed unconditional love towards the human brand despite the transgression. The consumers would write *“[I love you] no matter what”* or *“we all love you either way”*. Furthermore, those

who showed unconditional love toward the human brand would accept the apology and justify it through their unconditional support for the online community they were involved within, related to the human brand. Consumers would comment, *“we hear you; we understand. We stand with you, as true bros should. We love you regardless. Once a bro, always a bro”* or consumers would speak on behalf of others within the online community, *“Don’t worry about it [...], it was an accident and I don’t think many people are mad at you honestly. I’m not the bros love you”*.

### ***Showing empathy toward the human brand***

A common discussion thread on the human brands’ comments would be consumers showing empathy and understanding for what the human brand is going through, *“Poor her, I was genuinely happy for her [...] but so sad this happened to her”* or putting themselves in the situation *“I cannot imagine how hard this must be for you. I’m here for you and support you”*. Moreover, consumers did not think the human brand deserved the rude comments or the setbacks they received from the transgression. Certain comments would also circulate on how consumers showed empathy toward the human brand for having the courage to address the issue and understanding the reason behind the transgression better, *“I’m proud of you for stepping up and dealing with this all. I know you have been through a very stressing situation. [...] Very proud of you and I will continue to support you”*. One consumer acknowledged the transgression and the severity of it but did not feel that the human brand deserved the way people were treating them *“[People] make mistakes, you made big ones but that doesn’t give [people] the right to treat you like this. Don’t give up”*. Consumers commented saying that the transgression only became an issue since the human brand is part of the public eye and that otherwise, it would not have been a big deal *“You’ve made mistakes, but don’t we all. It’s only because you are in the public eye”*. Another consumer showed support by believing that the human brand is not the only one to blame for the transgression: *“I’m honestly not putting all the blame on you... the blame goes all the way around w everyone involved”*.

In many instances, consumers would justify and feel empathetic toward the human brand if they considered themselves true fans of the human brand. Consumers would feel empathetic as they would mention how they have done a similar mistake or have also done bad things when no one else has seen and therefore they could get away with it, *“We’ve all been there and I’ve*

*personally said things in private that I regret. The important thing is that you understand your mistake and we can move on” and “we are with you, we all make mistakes and we learn from them much love and respect”.*

### ***Disappointment in the human brand***

There were consumers who were either disappointed in the human brand because of their transgression or there were consumers who were not disappointed in the human brand. One consumer had been initially disappointed in the human brand but through the post addressing the transgression they shifted how they felt, *“You showed a lot of proof in this video. Although you did disappoint me, I’m glad that you will work on changing because although you had a lot of proof, some things you did were still shady”*. Another consumer was disappointed but gained their trust back in the human brand because of them addressing the transgression, *“[You] did disappoint me, but it’s amazing of you that you know you did something wrong [because] a lot of people don’t understand that they did something wrong.”*. Another consumer was deeply disappointed and expressed the feeling that they cannot recognise the human brand: *“[You’re] a good man that video that you posted [wasn’t] you . you [didn’t] have a single right to [post] that video just make sure your mind is on the right track you changed many [lives] it hurt to see that you did something like this i will unsub your channel [until] i see your mind is on the right track”*. One consumer posted how the video addressing the transgression made them regain their trust in the human brand and they were thankful for it, *“After this video, I accept and appreciate how open you are. You have my trust back”*.

### ***Forgiveness regarding transgression***

A common topic of discussion amongst the consumers was whether they forgave the human brand for the transgression or if they could not forget what they had done. One consumer commented that *“You are forgiven. Trust is like an eraser, it gets smaller after every mistake but this mistake didn’t affect anything, [because] you apologized”*. Furthermore, some would forgive the human brand because they considered themselves a fan and that it was why they would forgive, *“It’s okay as a fan I forgive you. I hope this [transgression] doesn’t discourage you. Much love!”*. Some consumers commented how they will have unconditional support and will



not hold anything against the human brand, *“I don’t really care about what happened I will always forgive you and have your back”*. There were those who never forgave the human brand to begin with as they never felt they had done anything wrong, *“I definitely forgive you although I never even unforgived you because I had faith in you”*.

There was one consumer who wish they could forgive the human brand but was not able to although would not stop following them, *“I love you man, and I understand that you did go too far, but I still don’t forgive you, but I still won’t unsub, you’re gonna get through this”*. Another consumer commented on the fact that they cannot forgive what the human brand has done but are at the same time not sure, *“We can’t forgive the act. I have mixed feelings right now. You are my favorite youtuber [...] but this video was so disgusting. It was so wrong [...]. Will I see you differently? Sure. Will I forgive you one day? I don’t know”*.

### ***Unsubscribe***

For some consumers, transgression caused the need to unsubscribe and as a result break up with their PSR partner. One consumer said that they feel like the transgression caused so much pain that it changed the consumer and their life. They also commented that they feel like they were let down by a close buddy: *“I know you didn’t do this knowingly, or to cause any pain, so it’s like a good buddy really letting you down... I spent an hour crying after, knowing you just really didn’t know what you were doing. Seeing my past again in this, and what being exposed to that did to me and my life...has changed me.”* Another consumer mentioned that they were also experiencing emotions like crying and had to unsubscribe because they couldn’t see the human brand the same way: *“cried for an hour..then knew I had to hit that unsub button, because even if I wanted to..I couldn’t see you the same way.”*

Some consumers commented that even after being their loyal fans for a few years, they had to unsubscribe because of the transgression. One consumer felt like the human brand is not genuine anymore and cares more about money than their fans: *“I have loved Jaclyn and been a fan for about 6 years now and I’ve noticed her slowly becoming less genuine and caring more and more about money rather than her subscribers. This seems like a long list of excuses and this was it for me, I have to unsubscribe.”*. Another consumer said they were a fan years back but is

disappointed in the human brand for making the same mistakes over and over again: *“He says the same exact thing every time he starts to get bad publicity. People who continuously repeat the same mistakes over and over again throughout years of the same shit won't change and don't deserve another chance. I've been a fan since the minecraft days and wish I could still enjoy his videos but i had to unsub from this bullshit a while ago”*

### **4.3 Comments after the transgression**

#### ***Support after returning***

For some of the human brands, following the transgression they took a break from social media for a certain period of time. Once they started posting on Instagram and YouTube again, this evoked an emotional response from consumers who expressed that they had missed the human brand. One consumer wrote, *“I missed you baby girl, I'm so happy to see you!!”*. One consumer wanted to disregard the transgression that had happened and only cared about the human brand returning, *“We don't care what happened. We just want you back. You are missed way more than you know. We love you. Let it go and move on. We got ya”*. Consumers would also show their support towards the human brand by expressing how they saw them as their role model, *“You've always been a role model to me and I'll always look up to you no matter what!”*. Furthermore, one consumer said they looked up to the human brand because they did not seek out forgiveness from others, *“I look up to this man because most people would defend their own actions but he said that he didn't want to be defended”*

#### **Trust**

Trustworthiness can be assessed as consumers express how trusting they are towards the human brand. Some consumers said that their trust was not wasted or that their trust is genuine: *“I'm glaaaaad you didn't disappoint me and my trust in you wasn't wasted but you just proved that you deserve it.”*; *“I trust Felix whole-heartedly”*; while another said that they trust the intentions of the human brand: *“I trust your intentions”*. One consumer said that they trusted the human brand to manage everything, *“I will stand with you Jaclyn. I trust that you will get this under control!”* Another one felt thankful that the human brand restored the faith they had: *“thank you for*

restoring my trust in you that you'll do the right thing". Someone expressed their trust by saying that they will be their fan for life: "I appreciate your honesty and I'm a fan for life!".

Other consumers responded that it will be hard to trust them in the future: "Thanks for realising your mistake but if that happens again, I guess, I can't trust you that much, anymore.". There was also a theme found where consumers said that they do not trust the human brand anymore and they were disgusted by what the human brand did: "What you did was something so rude and disgusting and disgraceful that i can't even look at you for some days Sorry but so many people lost trust and respect for you right now.". There was another consumer who realised that they cannot trust the human brand completely as they do not know them on a personal level: "I'm disappointed as many of his fans are too. There is always that one thought that maybe our favorite YouTuber is acting. That they are not as real as they seem and we can never be sure. We just can't ever be completely sure unless we know them on more personal level (friends). We can only have blind faith in them and this video that Logan has uploaded.".



Figure 1. A word cloud showing the most common words that appeared from coding

## 5. Analysis

This research explored how PSRs can make consumers blind to human brand transgressions. We defined two sub-questions to answer this question: (1) How do consumers respond to human brand transgressions? and (2) What implications do human brand transgressions have for the human brand and consumer relationships? The current body of literature surrounding human brand transgressions and their influence on PSR with consumers has found that transgressions can affect both the human brand and the consumer (Cocker, Mardon & Daunt, 2021).

Additionally, some factors can influence the response to the transgression (Um, 2013). In addition, past studies have found the adverse side effects human brand transgressions can have on PSR (Reinikainen et al., 2021). This research supports those findings; however, it also extends to the topic of the human brand, consumers and PSR in the context of human brand transgressions.

This research suggests that following a human brand transgression, the strength of the PSR plays a determining role in how the consumer will act. This study found that human brand transgressions can yield a more robust and more significant PSR with the human brand. It was shown through empathic emotions and consumers expressing forgiveness towards the human brand. Consumers informed of the transgression's adverse effects on the human brand and who had a strong PSR would show remorse for the human brand and decrease the transgression, which aligns with findings of previous studies (Paravati et al., 2020). Furthermore, emotional attachment was an essential aspect of the PSR. Emotional attachment toward the human brand increased loyalty. Another finding of this research did not align with the findings of Kim and Kim (2022), Horton and Wohl (1956) and Jun and Ji (2021). They stated that human brands need to invest in emotional engagement with consumers to ensure engagement. However, this was the opposite of our findings. The findings of this study suggest that stronger PSRs are based on a pillar of trust. Hence, following a transgression, the human brand did not need to nurture the engagement further to ensure emotional attachment or loyalty. However, this research also found that there are negative influences in regard to PSR and human brand transgressions. In some instances, the human brand transgression could lead to a parasocial breakup (PSB), where consumers no longer want to associate with the human brand (Cohen, 2003). In addition, consumers with long-lasting PSR had stronger PSB feelings. Another negative aspect was that

human brand transgressions caused disappointment. However, an apology from the human brand could be seen as a way to alleviate the transgression (Chung & Cho, 2017).

## **5.1 Strengthening of PSR**

Previous research has shown that PSR becomes more robust when mental stimuli nurture them (Paravati et al., 2020). The mental stimuli create closeness and intimacy with the human brand (Paravati et al., 2020; Quin, 2020; Wang, 2021), which is done through shared mutual experiences (Mar & Oatley, 2008). The findings of this research support these claims as it was shown that consumers, when being part of the human brand transgression, felt an increased closeness and relatedness to the human brand: “[People] make mistakes, you made big ones but that doesn’t give [people] the right to treat you like this. Don’t give up”; “You’ve made mistakes, but don’t we all. It’s only because you are in the public eye”; “We’ve all been there and I’ve personally said things in private that I regret. The important thing is that you understand your mistake and we can move on”. The consumers would discuss and comment on how the transgression the human brand had been involved in was not an issue and that it would not minimise what they felt towards the human brand. In addition, it was found that the PSR with the human brand is strengthened following the transgression in most cases. Hence, through our findings, we suggest eight factors of PSR that are strengthened or were the result between the human brand and consumer following a transgression. The six factors of PSR were: (1) Forgiveness and Empathy, (2) Unconditional affection, (3) Human brand as a role model, (4) Online brand community, (5) Trustworthiness, (6) PSR Breakup - PSB, (7) Disappointment, (8) Broken trust.

### **5.1.1 Forgiveness and Empathy**

Previous literature has demonstrated that transgressions can positively affect a human brand (Carrillat et al., 2019). The positive effects of the transgression depend on the level of responsibility taken by the human brand. Through this, consumers can decide who is responsible for the transgression (Thomas & Fowler, 2016). This research supports the claim that transgressions can positively affect human brands. This positive effect can be seen in consumers' empathy toward the human brand. Our research showed that consumers would feel bad for the human brand and the transgression they were going through: “I cannot imagine how hard this must be for you. I’m here for you and support you”; “Poor her, I was genuinely happy for her

[...] *but so sad this happened to her*". These findings show that consumers would understand and place themselves in the position of the human brand, taking on the aspect of cognitive empathy (Chiu & Yeh, 2018) and showing remorse for what the human brand was experiencing. In addition to this, consumers who expressed empathic opinions towards the human brand would discuss how they would continue supporting the human brand: *"I'm proud of you for stepping up and dealing with this all. I know you have been through a very stressing situation. [...] Very proud of you and I will continue to support you"*. The research findings showed how the level of empathy a consumer has towards the human brand could strengthen the PSR relationship (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Scherer et al., 2022). Hence, despite the transgression, the consumers feel bad and continue to support the human brand.

Our research also showed how consumers would place themselves in the same position as the human brand, expressing how they had gone through similar experiences. Consumers who show empathy towards human brands will form positive opinions about them when involved in a transgression, primarily if they identify with the human brand (Chiu & Yeh, 2018; Um, 2013). For instance: *"we are with you, we all make mistakes and we learn from them much love and respect"*. It shows how the consumers themselves express how they can make mistakes, but the mistake is not the critical aspect but what we learn from the mistakes. Furthermore, previous research stated that consumers engaged with content created by the human brand and when the human brand shared their personal information, consumers showed increased empathy (Paravati et al., 2020). This research aligns with the previous findings, as it was shown that when consumers knew the negative effect the transgression had upon the human brand and the difficulties they had been through, consumers showed a greater level of understanding and empathy: *"I'm proud of you for stepping up and dealing with this all. I know you have been through a very stressing situation. [...] Very proud of you and I will continue to support you"*.

Another aspect of empathy that consumers showed was through the concept of forgiveness. Research has shown that human brands can be in control of their transgressions if they prepare for them beforehand (Fetscherin & Sampedro, 2019). As consumer forgiveness can be dependent on the severity of a transgression, it was found in the research that consumers would minimise the transgression in certain instances: *"You are forgiven. Trust is like an eraser, it gets smaller*

*after every mistake but this mistake didn't affect anything, [because] you apologized*". Hence, the findings show that consumers had a positive attitude towards the human brand following the transgression, suggesting that they had a closer bond and PSR prior to it (Osterman & Hecmanczuk, 2019). The research also aligns with previous studies where consumers who had an interdependent self-construct were forgiving towards the brand (Hassey, 2019): *"It's okay as a fan I forgive you. I hope this [transgression] doesn't discourage you. Much love!"*, *"I definitely forgive you although I never even unforgived you because I had faith in you"*. Although in some cases, the act of forgiveness was not due to consumers showcasing a particular personality, but instead, they felt the severity of the transgression was not of concern: *"I don't really care about what happened I will always forgive you and have your back"*. These findings support the findings of Tsarenko and Tojib (2015), where consumer forgiveness was dependent on the severity of a transgression. In addition, our findings show that some consumers did react negatively to the human brand transgression and did not give an apology: *"We can't forgive the act. I have mixed feelings right now. You are my favorite youtuber [...] but this video was so disgusting. It was so wrong [...]. Will I see you differently? Sure. Will I forgive you one day? I don't know"*, *"I love you man, and I understand that you did go too far, but I still don't forgive you, but I still won't unsub, you're gonna get through this"*. The adverse reaction from consumers can be explained by consumers having an independent self-construct, which has been shown to cause adverse reactions to human brand transgressions, resulting in consumers not forgiving (Hassey, 2019).

#### **5.1.1.1 Unconditional affection**

Previous research on human brands and PSR has stated that human brands strongly influence consumers, yielding greater attachment in terms of loyalty and credibility (Kim & Kim, 2022). The influence of human brands results in consumers creating a personal and emotional bond with the human brands (Kim & Kim, 2022; Ki et al., 2020). These findings correlate with the findings of our research. With the research, it was shown that the influence the human brands had over the consumers resulted in them expressing their loyalty and their belief in the human brand being authentic (Jun & Ji, 2020). Consumers would comment both before the transgression, during and after the transgression on how they showed unconditional love towards the human brands despite what had occurred: *"Been with you since day one! Love love love you! So proud of you!"*, *"I*

*love you so so sooooo much! You are such a great YouTuber and role model! You deserve the world, love you forever and always xoxo*". For instance, consumers would express their loyalty, which is shown to be a close link to emotional attachment towards human brand (Jun & Ji, 2020): *"[I love you] no matter what"*. It aligns with previous research that discussed how consumers' emotional attachment toward a human brand forms a devotion to them (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019) and how it is essential to strengthening the PSR (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). The devotion and emotional attachment consumers were expressing toward the human brand showed how they were less critical and understanding of the transgression: *"we hear you; we understand. We stand with you, as true bros should. We love you regardless. Once a bro, always a bro"*. Hence, our research supports how emotional attachment reduces consumers' negative responses to transgressions (Um, 2013).

Previous research found that to yield an emotional attachment and nurture engagement with followers. Human brands need to interact with the consumers (Kim & Kim, 2022; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Jun & Ji, 2021). However, our research does not align with these findings as the human brands following the transgression were not present on Instagram and YouTube for a while. However, once returning, consumers still had trusted the brand: *"I missed you baby girl, I'm so happy to see you!!"*; *"We don't care what happened. We just want you back. You are missed way more than you know. We love you. Let it go and move on. We got ya"*. It can suggest that the stronger the PSR is between the human brand and consumer, the less the human brand needs to nurture the relationship, especially following a transgression. The more trust and loyalty the consumers have towards the human brand, the more forgiving they will be (Um, 2013).

#### **5.1.1.2 Human Brand as role model**

One of the research findings discovered was the influence human brands had upon the PSR with consumers if consumers considered them as role models. A human brand considered a role model has been found to reduce the impact of a transgression (Lee et al., 2020), which the findings of this research can support: *"I love you so so sooooo much! You are such a great YouTuber and role model! You deserve the world, love you forever and always xoxo"*. It shows how despite the transgression, the consumer considered the human brand a role model and expressed their love towards the brand, despite the transgression: *"You've always been a role*



*model to me and I'll always look up to you no matter what!*". Previous studies have shown that consumers mimic human brands if they look up to them (Xiao et al., 2021), resulting in the consumer thinking less of the transgression because of the moral effect reasoning can have in their opinion (Lee et al., 2020). It can be supported by the findings of this research as consumers showed that they looked up to human brands, not trying to seek out forgiveness but instead admired them for how they approached the transgression: *"I look up to this man because most people would defend their own actions but he said that he didn't want to be defended"*.

### **5.1.2 Online brand community**

The PSR consumers have with human brands is a one-sided bond (Hu, 2016; Keng et al., 2011; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Choi et al., 2019). However, the relationship can help fulfil unmet needs or gaps that consumers may have within their lives (Cole & Leets, 1999). One way consumers can fill this unmet gap is through online brand communities that are linked to the human brand. According to research, these online brand communities help consumers strengthen their PSR with the human brand by bonding with others within the community or getting access to information (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). This connection can be achieved through merchandise (Stanfill, 2019). The previous findings correlate with the findings of this research, where belonging to an online brand community was necessary for the consumers and a way to connect: *"today I saw that a girl was wearing maverick merch, the logang is so strong"*. These findings support that consumers enjoy belongingness (Zhong, Shapoval & Busser, 2021) while simultaneously, the human brand becomes part of their friend group (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). This sense of belongingness increases the consumer's loyalty to the brand (Kaur et al., 2020). In addition, it supports the notion that online brand communities become an extension of consumers outside of social media (Wellman, 2020).

Another way consumers would express loyalty towards the human brand through online brand communities was through merchandise: *"I literally just fought with my mom about buying ur merch and she was like: No, why. But she doesn't understand what it's like to be a maverick. Like I'm a maverick and I want something to have that is as a maverick to me, which is ur merch"*. These findings show that it is essential for the consumers to have physical products connected to the human brand to identify with the online brand community and socially connect

with the human brand (Kim, Kim & Yang, 2019). This supports the findings by Tarvin (2021), who found that merchandising allows for an extension in connection beyond online, and consumers can identify further with the human brand. In addition, this can also suggest that, as previous research has found, PSR can be strengthened and built further through constant exposure to the brand, which can be achieved through online brand communities (Iannone et al., 2018; Kim & Song, 2016). However, consumers also seek an attachment to cope with their experiences and belong (MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2022). The more consumers purchase merchandise and involve themselves within the online brand community, the more attachment it creates (Sanz-Blas, Bigné & Buzova, 2019).

## 5.2 Trustworthiness

Previous research explored how trust is an element which is highly influenced by the consumers' readiness to accept specific expectations and have faith in positive outcomes (Mayer et al., 1995). Our research revealed that when consumers have a strong PSR bond with a human brand, they have faith in everything that they do. For instance: *"I will stand with you Jaclyn. I trust that you will get this under control!"*; *"I trust your intentions"*; *"I trust Felix whole-heartedly"*. These examples proved that some consumers were ready to accept the expectations they have for their human brand and believed that they would not disappoint them in the future. The extent of trusting others is also evaluated by the emotional reaction that is expressed by consumers (Williams and Anderson, 1991; McAllister, 1995). Our findings showed how consumers feel and express their emotions by commenting that they are glad that the human brand did not disappoint and that they can trust them. Whether the consumers see human brands as trustworthy also depends on how trusting they are toward the human brand. (Breves et al, 2019; Breves et al, 2021). Our findings confirmed that consumers express emotions while indicating some form of trust: *"I appreciate your honesty and I'm a fan for life!"*. It means that the extent of trustworthiness is quite profound as the emotions add to the importance of trusting this brand that brings to the consumer. For instance, thankfulness can be expressed for making the consumer believe in the human brand again: *"thank you for restoring my trust in you that you'll do the right thing"*. Some consumers believed that the brand could do better in the future and appreciated the

human brand's apology, while others could not see the brand being truthful. Therefore the trust was unrestorable. This aspect will be analysed in the following sections.

### 5.3 PSR Break Up - PSB

PSR break-up (PSB) is very much like an interpersonal relationship break-up that evokes similarities to the feeling of loss of a friend (Cohen, 2003; Cole & Leets, 1999). We found that people commented that they felt like losing a friend when they had to break up after transgression. One consumer commented that they feel like they are let down by a good buddy: *"I know you didn't do this knowingly, or to cause any pain, so it's like a good buddy really letting you down."*; the same consumer further commented how this was a traumatic experience that affected their life: *"I spent an hour crying after, knowing you just really didn't know what you were doing. Seeing my past again in this, and what being exposed to that did to me and my life...has changed me."* This phenomenon was explained by Cohen (2003) - even if the PSB is less traumatic than a social relationship break-up, the consumer's sadness can be carried out to their social world.

Previous research revealed that the length of the relationship has a significant impact on the effects of the break-up - the longer the PSR lasts, the stronger the feelings are caused by PSB (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). It was also researched that the stronger the feelings in the relationship are toward the human brand, the more likely they are to experience the PSB more intensively. Our findings found that some consumers experienced extreme distress and emotions when they felt they had to unsubscribe from the human brand: *"cried for an hour..then knew I had to hit that unsub button, because even if I wanted to..I couldn't see you the same way."* However, other consumers that commented being subscribers for years were more critical than emotionally sad towards the human brand: *"I have loved Jaclyn and been a fan for about 6 years now and I've noticed her slowly becoming less genuine and caring more and more about money rather than her subscribers."*; *"People who continuously repeat the same mistakes over and over again throughout years of the same shit won't change and don't deserve another chance. I've been a fan since the minecraft days and wish I could still enjoy his videos but i had to unsub from this bullshit a while ago"*. It shows that since consumers had a long-lasting PSR, they could see behavioural patterns over time that they did not appreciate. Saying that they should have

unsubscribed a long time ago shows the disappointment and gives a feeling of the consumer making their peace with the PSB as they had much time to think about it when their PSR lasted.

### 5.3.1 Disappointment

Human brand transgressions provoked disappointment in many consumers responding after the transgression. Previous research found that producing an apology after a transgression was a regular and expected thing to do in order to keep the human brand's public image undamaged (Hu et al., 2019). Our research supports these statements as it showed that some consumers were saying that they were disappointed about the transgression, but after receiving the explanation and apology, they shifted the way they were feeling: *“You showed a lot of proof in this video. Although you did disappoint me, I’m glad that you will work on changing because although you had a lot of proof, some things you did were still shady”*. It shows that the consumer believes in the sincerity of the apology. As Hu et al. (2019) discussed, when the consumer believes in the genuineness of the apology, they are more likely to respond with forgiveness.

Another consumer responded by saying that the admitting of the wrongdoing was the most important aspect of the apology and made them forgive: *“[You] did disappoint me, but it’s amazing of you that you know you did something wrong [because] a lot of people don’t understand that they did something wrong.”* It is how Hu et al. (2019) described the willingness to forgive too. When the human brand admits that they did wrong, it is easier for consumers to grant forgiveness. However, other consumers reacted differently, saying that they could not recognise the person: *“[You’re] a good man that video that you posted [wasn’t] you . you didnt [didn’t] have a single right to [post] that video just make sure your mind is on the right track you changed many [lives] it hurt to see that you did something like this i will unsub your channel [until] i see your mind is on the right track”*. Hu et al. (2019) discussed how the perception of the human brand could change, and therefore, consumers choose not to forgive and, as a result, break up with their PSR partner by unsubscribing.

Nevertheless, it was interesting that the consumer had faith that they would do better in the brand. It could mean that the PSR was significantly important to the consumer. Therefore, they

want to believe that the brand will become better over time, so the consumer can return to the online community to which they once belonged.

Even though the study done by Hu et al. (2019) discussed how the difference in response to transgression did not differ that much between people exposed to the apology and those who were not, our study found that many consumers admitted that the apology was needed. It helped them restore the shaky feeling in the relationship that was felt after the transgression. One consumer said: *“After this video, I accept and appreciate how open you are. You have my trust back”*. It shows that the apology video helped make up for the disappointment in the human brand caused by the transgression. Even if some consumers were not disappointed, the apology made them realise that it was proof that the human brand deserved their trust. It even strengthened their PSR: *“I’m glaaaaad you didn’t disappoint me and my trust in you wasn’t wasted but you just proved that you deserve it. I’ve always respected you and now I respect you even more.”* This is supported by previous research, which claimed that the PSR becomes stronger when consumers assign a high sense of credibility (Chung and Cho, 2017) and as a result, it makes consumers respect the human brand even more.

### **5.3.2 Broken Trust**

There was a pattern of some consumers not being able to trust that the human brand was being sincere with the apology: *“I’m disappointed as many of his fans are too. There is always that one thought that maybe our favorite YouTuber is acting. That they are not as real as they seem and we can never be sure. We just can’t ever be completely sure unless we know them on a more personal level (friends). We can only have blind faith in them and this video that Logan has uploaded.”* It is clearly seen that the consumer is aware that they cannot know the human brand honestly, as they can only see what is displayed by the human brand willingly. The previous research can explain it: Hu et al. (2019) discussed how the apology made by the human brand is devoted to the public and may seem less intimate or sincere. It also proved what King (2008) discovered that it was hard to distinguish if the apology was genuine or staged. However, when consumers have a strong PSR connection, they tend to be less critical of the transgression (Breves et al., 2021; Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019). The consumer mentioned above had a less

strong bond with their human brand as they were being critical and trying to discuss both sides. They felt that they could not fully trust the human brand and acknowledged that the only thing they could do was blindly believe in the sincerity of the apology.

As Hu (2016) discussed, transgressions add to perceived uncertainty and create barriers to the future development of PSR. We found that even if consumers may be willing to forgive the human brand for the transgression, the future relationship can still be negatively affected as trust in the brand significantly decreases. For instance, the consumer may forgive for the transgression but warn the human brand that if it happens again in the future, they will not be able to trust the brand anymore: *“Thanks for realising your mistake but if that happens again, I guess, I can't trust you that much, anymore.”* As Cohen (2010) explained, a breach of trust was a negative factor in close relationships. Therefore, when consumers lose trust in their human brand, they will likely break up their PSR.

Furthermore, as Louie et al. (2001) discussed, the response to human brand transgression will depend on how the consumer sees the attributes of transgression. For instance, if consumers relate the transgression to the human brand's personality, they are more likely to judge it harshly (Um, 2013; Zhou and Whittle, 2013). Our research confirmed this, as we found how one consumer was disgusted by the way the human brand acted and called them out on being rude and disgraceful: *“What you did was something so rude and disgusting and disgraceful that i can't even look at you for some days Sorry but so many people lost trust and respect for you right now.”* It eventually leads to a statement that people lose trust and respect because of such behaviour. However, other consumers reacted differently toward the same transgression in a more supportive manner: *“I'm honestly not putting all the blame on you... the blame goes all the way around w everyone involved”*. It shows that the consumer believes that transgression happened because of many reasons that were not only in the human brand's hands to handle. Cocker et al. (2021) explained this as increased empathy towards the human brand when consumers perceive transgression as more situational than personal. Interestingly, the same transgression is perceived differently by different consumers, meaning that the reaction to transgression is highly dependent on the kind of PSR the consumer has developed before the transgression.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

### **6.1 General discussion**

It is evident that parasocial relationships can affect consumers in multiple ways, whether it is how they respond to human brand transgressions, or if it influences them. This research contributed in many ways to the research surrounding PSR, human brands and transgressions. First, it contributed that trustworthiness and credibility are two of the most important aspects when it comes to nurturing PSR. The nurturing of PSR is done to increase engagement of consumers with the human brand. Second, it contributes by discovering that trust, once broken between human brand and consumer, will catalyse a negative opinion toward the transgression. Third, it found that credibility and trust generates a higher respect towards human brands, that can be utilised by the human brand for their benefit. Lastly, it was found that long-lasting PSR does not result in a secure relationship between consumers and human brands, instead it can result in a parasocial breakup.

With this said, this research provides insight both from a theoretical and practical standpoint. There is limited research within the field of parasocial relationships in relation to human brand transgressions. However, as can be seen, parasocial relationships influence consumers in different ways, either positively or negatively. The parasocial relationship can minimise the negative effects of a human brand transgressions and result in the consumer being in favour of the human brand. While on the other hand, it can result in consumers turning against the human brand and ending the relationship, a parasocial breakup. A human brand can control the outcome of the transgression if they build up trust, credibility and nurture the relationship with the consumer. However, it is not a simple process and forgiveness toward the human brand cannot be guaranteed despite these factors.

### **6.2 Theoretical Implications**

Our research contributes to the existing literature as it explores the way consumers respond to human brand transgressions and what impact PSR has on them. Firstly, previous research mainly discussed that human brands need to increase engagement to nurture the PSR. Even though our findings support it, we discovered that the most important aspect of nurturing PSR was building

trustworthiness and credibility. We found that the moment consumers are not trusting the human brand, they are more likely to respond to transgressions negatively. When consumers have high trust in the human brand, they are ready to defend it as if they were their true friend. Moreover, we found that the higher the credibility and trust is perceived in the human brand, the higher respect the consumer feels towards the human brand.

Another finding that appeared was that the longer-lasting PSR does not necessarily mean a more secure relationship in case of transgression. In comparison, previous research stated that the longer the PSR, the more painful the PSB. However, we found that consumers that were loyal to human brands for some years already saw behavioural patterns they did not appreciate over time. They responded by saying that they were unsubscribing (PSB) and stated their reasons more critically than emotionally.

### **6.3 Practical Implications**

Human brands can utilise our research to provide clear insights into how the PSR makes consumers respond to the human brand's transgressions. Firstly, human brands must engage with their online communities by interacting with consumers and nurturing their PSR. It is crucial as it provides a foundation for the relationship to stay strong when the transgression happens. Another important aspect is to build trustworthy relationships, as trust in the human brand was one of the main findings contributing to the way consumers respond to transgression. The higher the trust in the human brand, the more likely consumers will believe the human brand's genuineness during transgressions. Lastly, when transgressions happen, which is most likely inevitable, human brands must address the transgression adequately so that it leaves consumers satisfied and does not destroy PSR by causing PSB. One of the most common and necessary steps is producing an apology after a transgression happens. Consumers perceive that the more sincere the apology, the more likely they will be able to forgive the human brand and keep supporting them.

Moreover, we suggest the practitioners use this research to utilise the business brand and human brand collaborations. The main question to answer was if PSR can make consumers blind. We discovered that the PSR influences how consumers perceive the human brand and the



transgressions they are involved in. It is helpful for practitioners to understand better how dedicated consumers are willing to do anything for their PSR partner if the connection is strong enough. When companies choose and manage influencer collaborations, managers can consider that the PSR that consumers have with a human brand has a significant influence on how consumers will respond to specific brand collaborations. When the PSR is considered truly strong, consumers are willing to do anything for their human brand, meaning they will be more receptive to their human brand's advertisements. Another takeaway for managers would be to check if the chosen influencer was involved in any transgressions, how they addressed the transgression and how consumers reacted. It is profoundly important as it gives the background information on what to expect if the collaboration goes wrong and what risks may be implied by collaborating with a particular human brand.

## **7. Limitations and recommendations for future research**

When interpreting the results of this study, it should be taken into account that there are some limitations. Firstly, the comments collected from the human brands' Instagram and Youtube channels were selected by us using the criteria of what best fit the theme of PSR. It means that the results cannot be generalised and applied to the whole population of online communities. Furthermore, the human brands chosen for this study were the ones who have produced an apology within their content addressing the transgression. Along the research process, we found that many human brands have uploaded the apology video on their Youtube and then deleted it. Therefore, the research was limited to the human brand samples that have left their posts public and accessible. Another limitation was that there was no way to measure and compare whether the stronger PSR gives a more significant loss of a feeling when PSB happens. Therefore, some future research considerations may include: performing semi-structured interviews. It could be helpful in investigating how deeply connected consumers feel to their PRS partners and how this connection influences the way they respond to human brand transgressions. Another limitation was that the empirical data was gathered in one big chunk. There was no information behind it, meaning that no demographics were considered when analysing the consumer response. Thus, it would be absorbed through semi-structured interviews to investigate the demographics of

consumers and compare how the results differ regarding different ages, genders, occupations, and other demographic factors.

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