



Exploring the mediating effect of relational quality on brand advocacy: The role of parasocial relationship among millennials in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate the influence of parasocial relationships and relational quality on brand advocacy among Indonesian millennials in the social media era. The study seeks to identify the factors that impact brand advocacy among this demographic group and examine the connection between parasocial relationships, relational quality, and their effects on brand advocacy. The research hypotheses propose that both parasocial relationships and relational quality significantly affect brand advocacy among Indonesian millennials. The research methods utilized in this study include path analysis and the use of SMART PLS tools to analyze the hypotheses. The findings of the study support all hypotheses, demonstrating that parasocial relationships and relational quality have a positive and significant impact on brand advocacy among Indonesian millennials, both directly and indirectly. The conclusion underscores the importance of comprehending the role of parasocial relationships and relational quality in promoting brand advocacy in the digital age. This research provides useful insights into the influence of parasocial relationships and relational quality on brand advocacy and contributes to the existing literature on the subject.

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Transparency: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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1. Introduction

The business environment is constantly changing, and the rise of technology has significantly impacted how companies interact with their target audience. One demographic that has particularly embraced these technological advancements is millennials, who have grown up in a world where online presence is vital. The development of parasocial relationships, which are formed between individuals and media figures or brands, has been a result of this shift. These relationships have been facilitated by the ease of access to information and communication through online channels (Schultz & Peltier, 2013).

Companies have realized the importance of maintaining a positive online image and establishing a strong, personal connection with their customers. As a result, the quality of the relationship between a brand and its target audience has become a key factor in the success of a company (Fatikhaturrohmah, Suharyono, & Kusumawati, 2020). This, in turn, has led to the development of brand advocacy, where customers actively promote and support a brand (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity, & Luoma-aho, 2020). Companies are now

striving to foster positive parasocial relationships with their customers in order to increase brand loyalty and create a community of advocates (Su, Wu, Chang, & Hong, 2021).

In Indonesia, millennial consumers are known for their extensive use of technology and social media platforms, making them a prime target audience for companies (Droesch, 2020). Indonesian millennials are also characterized by their high individualism and a strong sense of self-expression. Consequently, they tend to form parasocial relationships with brands and media figures that align with their personal values and lifestyles (Gosal, Kenang, & Tjahjono, 2022). This highlights the importance for companies to carefully manage their online image and maintain positive parasocial relationships with their target audience in order to enhance brand loyalty and advocacy (Bhati & Verma, 2020).

Companies should also ensure that their brand values align with the values and preferences of their target audience, particularly Indonesian millennials, in order to foster a strong connection and positive parasocial relationship (Yuan, Moon, Kim, & Wang, 2021). The rise of technology has transformed the way companies interact with their target audience, especially for millennials who heavily utilize social media. This shift has resulted in the emergence of parasocial relationships between individuals and media figures or brands.

However, the concept of parasocial relationships in the context of social media and its impact on brand advocacy is a relatively new area of study. Further research is needed to fully understand the extent of its impact on consumer behavior (Bilro, Loureiro, & Ali, 2018). Companies must also recognize that while parasocial relationships can play a significant role in building brand advocacy, they need to exercise caution in managing these relationships and ensuring their alignment with overall brand values and image (Ha, 2023; Purnamaningsih & Rizkalla, 2020). A positive parasocial relationship can lead to increased brand loyalty and advocacy (Reinikainen et al., 2020), whereas a negative relationship can adversely affect a brand's reputation (Hersetyawati, Arief, Furinto, & Saroso, 2021; Naidoo & Abratt, 2018). Therefore, companies must attentively assess the quality of the parasocial relationships they establish and regularly evaluate their effectiveness in achieving their marketing goals. The novelty highlighted in this study is the impact of technology on how companies interact with their target audience, particularly among Indonesian millennial consumers who have grown up in a world where online presence is vital. This has led to the development of parasocial relationships and brand advocacy, which have become critical factors in enhancing brand loyalty and creating a community of brand advocates. This study emphasizes the need for companies to maintain a positive online image and carefully manage their parasocial relationships with their target audience, ensuring alignment with their overall brand values and image. Furthermore, this study specifically focuses on Indonesian millennial consumers, known for their heavy usage of technology and social media platforms, and highlights the importance of aligning a company's brand values with the values and preferences of the target audience to foster a strong connection and positive parasocial relationship. The research aims to examine the interdependent relationship between parasocial relationships, relational quality, and brand advocacy in the context of millennial consumers in Indonesia. Overall, the study's novelty lies in exploring the impact of technology, the development of parasocial relationships, and brand advocacy on a company's success, particularly among millennial consumers in Indonesia. It underscores the importance of carefully managing and aligning these relationships with a company's overall brand values and image.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Parasocial Relationship

Parasocial relationship, as defined by Horton and Wohl (1956), is an imagined relationship created by a message source with its audience. It involves the media user perceiving the media persona as an intimate social partner. On the other hand, Schmid and Klimmt (2011) view parasocial relationships as one-sided, where one party has extensive knowledge about the other while the other party has no knowledge. An example of a parasocial relationship is the relationship between a fan and their idol, in which the idol acts as a mediator in the relationship or interaction. Labrecque (2014) argues that a parasocial relationship is an illusionary experience where the consumer (media user) interacts with the media persona (mediated by the presenter, celebrity, or influencer) as if they were present and involved in a reciprocal interaction.

Brown (2015), explains that a parasocial relationship is an imaginary relationship between the media user and the media persona, which starts with the media user spending time with the media persona through the consumption of certain media, leading to the development of a relationship felt by the media user with the media persona. Based on the research background, it is evident that the prevalence of parasocial relationships among Indonesian millennials can be attributed to their unique characteristics, such as their heavy reliance on social media and frequent engagement with social media influencers.

2.2. Relational Quality

Relational quality is a crucial factor in relationship marketing. To evaluate the effectiveness of relationship marketing implemented by a company, several dimensions of relational quality must be considered. This includes trust, commitment, and satisfaction towards the company or seller. A higher level of relational quality leads to a stronger long-term relationship between the buyer and seller (Berkman, 2020). Trust and satisfaction are two widely used constructs in the context of consumer behavior online. Trust refers

to an individual's belief in the good behavior of others based on their assessment of the party's actions in a social exchange (Cahaya, Mursitama, Hamsal, & Tjhin, 2022). Satisfaction is an attitude that arises from the comparison between the expected services and quality with the actual quality experienced by the customer after the transaction (Kim, 2012). Relational quality plays a crucial role in the concept of relationship marketing. To assess the success of relationship marketing implemented by a company, it is essential to consider various dimensions of relational quality, including trust, commitment, and satisfaction towards the company or seller (Dorsch, Swanson, & Kelley, 1998). In the current era, establishing and maintaining strong relational quality with customers has become increasingly challenging. To succeed in this endeavor, businesses and marketers must develop a profound understanding of how customers engage with social media. This study sheds light on the close relationship between social media and Indonesian millennials, who often form parasocial relationships. By recognizing the importance of parasocial relationships, businesses and marketers can enhance their ability to build a strong relational quality with their target audience.

2.3. Brand Advocacy

According to Keller (2007), brand advocacy refers to the act of communicating positively about a brand, recommending it to others, or defending it against negative criticism. Jilapalli and Wilcox (2010) suggest that consumers actively promote, support, or defend a brand in brand advocacy. Badrinarayanan and Laverie (2013) describe brand advocacy as the extent to which an individual promotes and supports a particular brand over others in a given product category. Consumer-created brand advocacy involves developing and strengthening customer relationships through positive word-of-mouth about the brand (Xie, Bagozzi, & Grønhaug, 2019). Keylock and Faulds (2012) argue that brand advocacy encompasses recommending a brand, defending it when challenged, and attracting new customers. Indonesian millennials, who are highly active on social media and tend to form parasocial relationships with social media influencers, develop a strong relational quality with the brand. This, in turn, leads to an increased willingness to advocate for the brand.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

Parasocial relationships are one-sided and imaginary relationships between media personas and media users. These relationships are formed as media users consume media and perceive the media persona as an intimate social partner. The media persona, who can be a celebrity, influencer, or presenter, acts as a mediator in this relationship. As the media user interacts with the media persona, they begin to perceive them as a trusted source and develop a connection with the brand (Bhati & Verma, 2020). This connection can lead to increased brand advocacy and relational quality. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the strength of parasocial relationships will positively impact both relational quality and brand advocacy.

H1: Parasocial Relationships significantly and positively affect Relational Quality.

H2: Parasocial Relationships significantly and positively affect Brand Advocacy.

Studies have shown that high relational quality can lead to brand advocacy, where customers become advocates for the brand and promote it to others. Trust, satisfaction, and commitment are important factors that contribute to brand advocacy, as satisfied and committed customers who trust a brand are more likely to recommend it to others (Berkman, 2020). By establishing and maintaining a high level of relational quality with customers, a company can enhance brand advocacy, leading to increased customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth promotion.

H3: Relational Quality significantly and positively affects Brand Advocacy

As mentioned before, a parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship in which a person has a psychological connection with a media personality, as if they were a close friend (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When social media influencers engage with their followers, they can create a sense of familiarity and trust that leads to stronger customer relationships and increased brand advocacy. Relational quality is another factor that contributes to the development of brand advocacy. Relational quality refers to the level of satisfaction, trust, and commitment that customers have with a brand (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Brands that prioritize maintaining high relational quality by providing excellent customer service, being transparent, and delivering on their promises can build strong customer relationships that lead to increased brand advocacy (Jilapalli & Wilcox, 2010; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Based on the above statements, it can be hypothesized that brand advocacy can develop through the formation of parasocial relationships by maintaining high relational quality with customers. Brands that focus on these two factors can reap the benefits of increased customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and increased sales (Jilapalli & Wilcox, 2010).

H4: Parasocial Relationships significantly and positively affect Brand Advocacy through Relational Quality as a mediating variable

This conceptual framework, depicted in Figure 1, has been built upon previous research and theory, as well as the identified problems and research objectives.

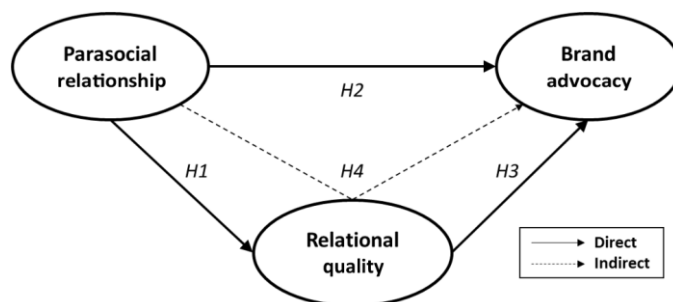


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach and cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between independent and dependent variables. The data was collected through a literature review and an online survey, using 5-point Likert scale questionnaires distributed on Instagram to Indonesian users who follow influencer accounts. A simple random sample of 190 respondents was selected from Instagram millennial users in Indonesia, with birthdates ranging from 1981 to 1996 (Hair, Page, & Brunsveld, 2019).

The data was analyzed using SmartPLS and path analysis. The validity of the measurement model was tested using convergent and discriminant validity analyses, which demonstrated that the questionnaire had good convergent and discriminant validity. The reliability of the indicators was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with a value greater than 0.70 indicating that all indicators were reliable. These results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Validity & reliability test results.

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand advocacy	0.634	0.838	0.723
Relational quality	0.825	0.879	0.646
Parasocial relationship	0.826	0.894	0.740

After analyzing the R² (Coefficient of Determination), the results were used to assess the extent to which the independent variables explain the dependent variable. An R² value of 0.75 indicates a strong relationship, 0.50 indicates a moderate relationship, and 0.25 indicates a weak relationship. Table 2 presents the R² value for each dependent variable in the research.

Table 2. Coefficient determination (R²) results.

Variables	R square	Status
Brand advocacy	0.804	Strong
Relational quality	0.275	Weak

The results of this research are presented in the form of SmartPLS results, including validity, reliability, and the Coefficient of Determination (R²). These results are clearly illustrated in Figure 2.

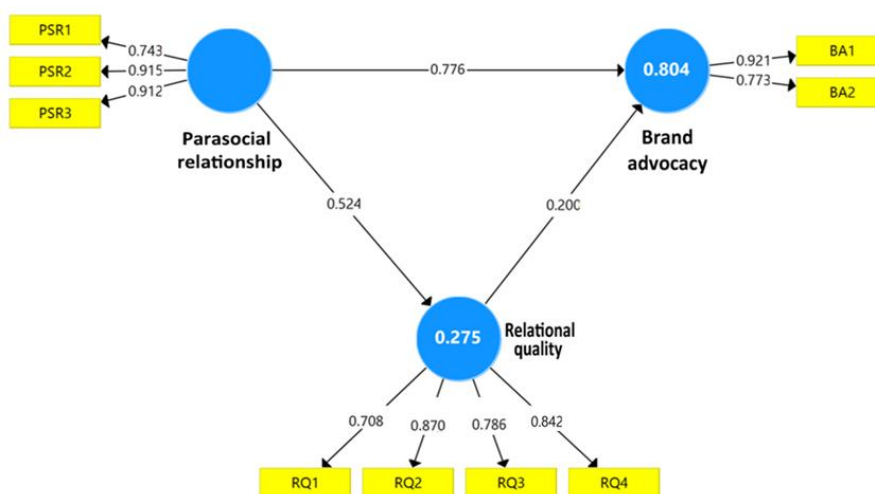


Figure 1. Complete research model for validity, reliability and R² (Outer model).

4. Results & Discussion

4.1. Results

The results of the model analysis show that there is a significant positive relationship between Parasocial Relationship (PSR) and Relational Quality (RQ) with a T-Value of 8.573, which is greater than 1.65, and a P-value of 0.000, which is less than 0.05. This supports Hypothesis 1.

Table 3 displays all the direct effects that were found to be significant and positive. Additionally, there was a significant positive effect between PSR and Brand Advocacy (BAV), which supports Hypothesis 2. The T-Value of 27.368 was greater than 1.65, and the P-value of 0.000 was less than 0.05. Furthermore, Hypothesis 3 was supported by the significant positive relationship between RQ and BAV, with a T-Value of 5.818 greater than 1.65 and a P-value of 0.000 less than 0.05.

Table 3. Hypotheses testing results (Direct effect).

Hypotheses	Relation	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
H1	PSR -> RQ	0.776	0.777	0.028	27.368	0.000
H4	PSR -> BAV	0.524	0.527	0.061	8.573	0.000
H3	RQ -> BAV	0.200	0.199	0.034	5.818	0.000

Table 3. Hypotheses testing results (Indirect effect).

Hypotheses	Relation	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
H4	PSR -> RQ -> BAV	0.105	0.106	0.026	4.083	0.000

Table 4 confirms the acceptance of Hypothesis 4, as indicated by a T-value of 4.083, which is greater than 1.65, and a P-value of 0.000, which is less than 0.05. This suggests that Parasocial Relationship (PSR) has a significant impact on brand advocacy (BAV) through the mediating variable of Relational Quality. The results of the hypothesis testing are illustrated in Figure 3.

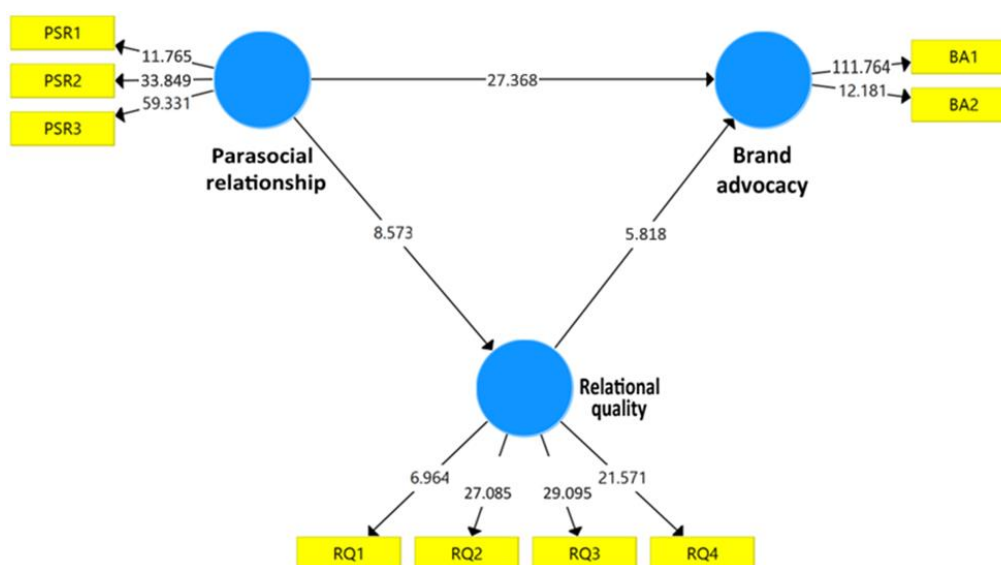


Figure 3. Complete research model for hypotheses testing (Inner model).

4.2. Discussion

Based on the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that there is a significant positive relationship between Parasocial Relationship (PSR) and Brand Advocacy (BAV) through the mediating variable of Relational Quality (RQ). This confirms the hypotheses that PSR has a direct impact on BAV and that RQ acts as a mediating factor in this relationship. These findings carry significant implications for businesses and marketers. By understanding the role of PSR in shaping consumer attitudes and behavior, companies can devise more effective strategies to build strong relationships with their customers and enhance brand advocacy. By enhancing the quality of these relationships, businesses can increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, which in turn, can lead to amplified brand advocacy. Businesses can formulate strategies to foster robust parasocial relationships with their customers and improve the quality of those relationships. One approach could involve investing in social media marketing and influencer campaigns to establish a more

personal connection with their customers. This can aid in building trust and loyalty, ultimately resulting in heightened brand advocacy. One effective strategy for businesses to connect with millennial consumers is to establish a robust presence on social media platforms and cultivate parasocial relationships with their followers. This can be achieved by leveraging social media influencers, creating compelling content that resonates with millennial values and interests, and actively engaging in two-way communication with followers to build a sense of community around the brand. By developing a strong parasocial relationship with millennial consumers, businesses can foster a sense of loyalty and trust, thereby leading to increased brand advocacy and positive word-of-mouth recommendations.

Another key component of this strategy involves focusing on building strong and positive relationships with millennial consumers through Relational Quality (RQ). This entails placing emphasis on exceptional customer service, promptly addressing feedback and inquiries, and creating personalized experiences that make customers feel valued and understood. By investing in RQ, businesses can improve customer satisfaction and loyalty, which in turn positively impact brand advocacy and long-term business success.

In summary, businesses that prioritize building parasocial relationships and improving Relational Quality (RQ) with millennial consumers are more likely to experience increased brand advocacy and attract potential buyers. Additionally, businesses can use the findings from this study to guide their overall marketing and branding strategies. By recognizing the importance of developing strong, positive relationships with customers and acknowledging the role of PSR and RQ in shaping brand advocacy, businesses can design marketing campaigns and branding efforts that prioritize these key elements.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the relationship between PSR, RQ, and BAV. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research and the need for further investigation to enhance our understanding of these relationships.

One limitation of this study is its reliance on cross-sectional data, which restricts the ability to establish causal relationships. Utilizing longitudinal data would provide more robust evidence of the causal links between PSR, RQ, and BAV. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of biases such as social desirability bias or recall bias. Future research could incorporate more objective measures, such as behavioral data, to validate these findings. Moreover, it is important to recognize that this study was conducted in a specific cultural context, and the generalizability of the results to other cultures may be limited. Further research could explore the cross-cultural validity of these findings, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between PSR, RQ, and BAV.

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