

Exploring Alix Earle's influence: How trans-parasocial relationships impact brand affinity and
purchase intention through TikTok

By Carmen Nicole Palmblad

University of Colorado Boulder

College of Media, Communication, and Information

Jolene Fisher, PhD – Faculty Advisor

Diane Elliston, MFA – Inside Committee Member

Lecia Barker, PhD – Outside Committee Member

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Chapter One: Introduction and Literature Review	3
Introduction	3
Literature Review	5
Parasocial Relationships	5
TikTok as a Social Media Platform	10
Trans-parasocial Relationships and TikTok	13
Brand Impacts	15
Influencers and Women	18
Examining Alix Earle / Follower Relationships	19
Chapter Two: Methods	20
Chapter Three: Findings	25
Chapter Four: Discussion	39
Chapter Five: Conclusion	44
References	47

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Alix Earle, a recent college graduate from the University of Miami, rose to fame in a matter of months when she started sharing her everyday college adventures online with a few thousand followers. The now mega-influencer has since landed massive brand deals, attended New York Fashion Week, and been featured in Forbes' 30 Under 30 since beginning her TikTok career in late 2022. But how can a single person become so influential and accumulate so much fame so quickly – seemingly out of nowhere? This may be in part because people don't just want to follow influencers, they want to feel like they are friends with them. And Alix Earle seems to be very good at making friends.

This idea that the people we follow online or see on TV are our friends is nothing new. People have understood themselves to be in relationships with public figures far before the more recent phenomenon of influencers. In fact, this idea that we interact with and form what are known as parasocial relationships with mass media figures has been around since the 1950's (Horton & Wohl, 1956). But in the modern world, much more of our day is spent consuming entertainment media, whether we're "keeping up" with the Kardashians or falling in love with TV characters, meaning there are more opportunities for these relationships to evolve.

Further, keeping up with influencers' lives may have similarities to watching reality stars or celebrities on TV, but it is also unique because an influencer's audience gets a more intimate experience now that the middleman of production and television schedules are no longer in the way. Influencers make content now specifically for their followers, and in a matter of seconds they can update the entire world on what's new in their life. And with the added possibility of

interaction through comments and direct messages, these relationships have the possibility of going deeper.

The difference between keeping up with the Kardashians and keeping up with an influencer is the affordances that social media brings to the relationship. Users are no longer just watching people in media, they are commenting directly on their channels, they are following their accounts, and sometimes even sending private messages. And these relationships between influencers and their followers are not just one-way streets. Because there is always the possibility of the influencer responding to a comment or messaging a follower back, these relationships can sometimes become much more personal.

And it's not just the added possibility of influencer-follower interaction that impacts these relationships, it is the interactive nature of the influencer content itself. In late 2022, the format of videos entitled "get ready with me" became exceedingly popular on TikTok. TikTok users, typically women, would post videos such as "get ready with me for a birthday party" or "get ready with me for a first date." This video format had been used for a while by influencers but became a popular social media trend as everyday people would film themselves "getting ready," often talking about their day or spilling juicy details about their lives. In an age where authenticity is valued, these forms of videos are appealing because they feel like spending time with a close friend. This video format opens up an entirely different avenue for interaction, as it is more conversational and requires engagement on both sides. It was this type of video that took Alix Earle from everyday user and content producer to influencer within months.

This was the perfect storm for Earle's social media fame. She was a college student living in Miami, sharing the details of her glamorous, yet paradoxically relatable life. In some ways, her lifestyle was completely unattainable for everyday people by the looks of her obvious

comfortable living and model-esque appearance. But she is charming and does the same thing many 18–22-year-olds do: go to college and have fun. This college girl was able to amass over 8 million followers in under a year, becoming one of the most influential women in her industry. And from a marketing perspective, someone who can rally up a massive audience of people and create an entire target of people to reach is very powerful. The question is, how do these relationships between influencers and their followers develop, and how do these relationships affect the way followers perceive the brands that the influencers work with? The purpose of this study is to try and answer these questions.

This study will seek to understand how parasocial relationships between influencers and audiences form and how they affect brand affinity and purchase intention through qualitative interview research. Specifically, six college-aged women who follow Alix Earle on social media will be interviewed and asked directly about their experiences. Alix Earle, being an especially culturally relevant, influential, and timely example of influencers as they exist in the current day, will serve as a case study for parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers on TikTok. The goal of this study is to uncover the ways that parasocial relationships impact brand affinity and purchase intention in the context of TikTok, and also aims to investigate the ways in which the process occurs in a US context. The following literature review will explore the research that contextualizes the history of parasocial relationships, the social media platform TikTok, and the impact of influencers on brands in the current marketing landscape.

Literature Review

Parasocial Relationships

Throughout modern media history, people have been forming what is now referred to as “parasocial relationships” with the people they see on TV, in movies, or even in their favorite band. The term was first coined in the mid 1950s by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl (Lou, 2022). Originally, parasocial relationships were determined by a one-sided perceived relationship between a celebrity and their fan. The fan feels as though they know the celebrity well, or that they are friends, even, which is more so based in psychological factors than reality.

These parasocial relationships can develop in many different ways for an audience member as they become invested in a storyline from a TV character or personality, watch a vlogger and become familiar with their lifestyle, or even through watching people that they dislike. For instance, a study done on a Finnish online community discussed the phenomenon of parasocial relationships and how they are formed, stating that “an illusion of eye contact through the camera and straight verbal and bodily address may trigger the experience of an actual interaction with the performer...” (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity, & Luoma-aho, 2020).

Chung and Cho (2017) examined parasocial relationships with celebrities, and the purpose of their research was to understand how these parasocial relationships between celebrities and audience members affect brand perception and trust. They distributed a survey to adults in Singapore who were fans of the Korean Wave (the rise in popularity of Korean culture in Singapore.) The people who participated in this study were asked to name their favorite Korean celebrity, and then shown mock advertisements featuring that celebrity. Then, they were asked questions about the credibility of the brand, source trustworthiness, and purchase intention. The study found that “parasocial relationships play an essential role in shaping source trustworthiness perception among social media users” (Chung & Cho, 2017, p.490). In the context of social media, “technological affordances, such as interactivity and immediacy and an

immediate communication style... create a suitable environment for the fostering of close and meaningful relationships between consumers and celebrities ” (p. 490).

One of the major takeaways from the Chung and Cho (2017) study was that in order for a follower to find a celebrity trustworthy, the “quality and depth of the relationship” has major influence (p. 490). In other words, people tend to develop a deep sense of trust with people who they know more about, and that trust is something that builds over time. Ultimately, Chung and Cho argue that fame and popularity of a celebrity doesn’t necessarily transfer to effective endorsements, but having an established parasocial relationship will make a successful endorsement. One thing that was interesting from this study was that it was the first to identify the necessity for “self-disclosure.” Self-disclosure is essentially the gradual revelation of one’s views and beliefs about themselves, others, and the world. This process also plays a huge role in building trust between a celebrity and their follower, and “whereas parasocial relationships in a traditional media environment are determined primarily by controlled and scripted images of celebrities, consumer–celebrity relationships in a social media environment can be characterized as more intimate, reciprocal, and interpersonal” (Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 490).

So, in the social media landscape, the way that fans and celebrities are able to interact with each other has evolved. As mentioned before, interactions between everyday people and media icons have transformed from one-way streets to two-way streets with the emergence of social media. In the context of influencers, parasocial relationships are not just perceived relationships. And although research such as the Chung & Cho study point to the importance of parasocial relationships in terms of celebrity endorsement, we do not yet know how these relationships play into perceptions of brands promoted by influencers. It is essential to further

understand the dynamics of parasocial relationships and the effect they have on brand affinity and purchase intention – from the perspective of the follower.

With the added dimension of interaction, a newer phenomenon, which Chen Lou (2022) calls “trans-parasocial relationships,” provides more context for how relationships between influencers and followers are maintained. With the additional interactivity affordances offered by social media, Lou argues that there is a need to reconsider these relationships, leading to the author’s concept of trans-parasocial relationships, which considers reciprocity, interactivity, and co-creation. Essentially, these relationships are more than just one-sided; when it comes to influencers, relationships between audience members and influencers can be much deeper than the parasocial relationships such as the ones formed between audience members and TV stars or music artists.

Chen Lou’s study was the first to acknowledge that what we might at first deem parasocial interaction between an influencer and their following is actually a different type of relationship, hence the term *trans-parasocial*. Lou’s study defines the very framework that constitutes a trans-parasocial relationship, which includes reciprocity, interactivity, and co-creation. In the study, which consisted of in-depth qualitative interviews, reciprocity was referred to as the mutual feelings of friendship between the influencer and their followers. “Influencers often do return favors by actively and regularly responding to representative comments, inquiries, or requests from the followers” (Lou, 2023, p. 11). Essentially, Lou found that followers considered their relationship with an influencer as “partially reciprocal,” which meant that although the influencer is not as readily accessible as someone in their contact list, the influencer sometimes replied back to fans and was reciprocating behaviors of friendship.

The next hallmark of the trans-parasocial relationship identified by Lou was interactivity, or rather, that the relationships between influencers and their followers were “asynchronously interactive.” The idea with asynchronous interaction is that “users can participate in modifying the format and content of a mediated environment in real time” (Lou, 2023, p. 12). An example of this from the study was when a participant talked about their enjoyment of watching an influencer’s livestreaming content. When an audience is engaged in a livestream video format, users are able to comment real-time to the influencer, and the influencer can read and respond to the comments in real time. Although it is less personal and not face-to-face, there is still a barrier between the influencer and the audience, but it is far more interactive than watching a character or celebrity on a TV screen. This form of interaction makes followers feel more connected to the influencer, because they feel like are engaging in real, tangible interactions with the person they see online.

The third idea proposed by Lou was the idea of co-creation. This might look like a follower asking an influencer to make a certain kind of video by leaving a comment, and the influencer actually making content that reflects the request of the commenter. This kind of interaction will make the user feel as though they have direct influence or input in the kind of content the influencer is making. “Influencers, as content generators, are constantly adjusting their content offering and have autonomy over what to offer to their followers through back-and-forth interactions with followers” (p. 13).

As previously mentioned, Chen Lou was the first researcher to identify trans-parasocial relationships, which opens the door to an entirely new perspective on the relationships that are formed between influencers and their audiences. In fact, hers was the first study that attempts to understand the relationship-building process between an influencer and their followers from the

perspective of the follower themselves. The entirety of the Lou study examines the phenomenon of parasocial relationships as it is coined and defined by Horton and Wohl and compares it to the newer phenomenon of trans-parasocial relationship coined by Chen Lou, identifying the differences between the two. In short, the biggest difference is that unlike parasocial relationships, trans-parasocial relationships allow for interaction and are thus not a one-way street.

It is also worth noting that the Lou study focuses primarily on the phenomenon of trans-parasocial relationships in the context of Singapore and focuses on influencers more broadly as a whole. However, this study will build on the work of Chen Lou, and seeks to understand trans-parasocial relationships in the US context, and on TikTok specifically using relationships between Alix Earle and her followers as a case study.

TikTok as a Social Media Platform

All of this is especially relevant to a platform like TikTok. Only a couple years after its rebrand in 2018 (TikTok was formerly Musical.ly), TikTok became the most downloaded app in 2020. The stars also aligned as heads turned down to the phones in our laps during the pandemic and users searched for sources of entertainment. On a psychological level, TikTok is captivating because it is addictive in nature (Montag, Yang, & Elhai, 2021). While the algorithm is unpredictable and keeps users wondering what they might see next, it is also completely personalized. This makes the overall experience that much more enjoyable as people are almost guaranteed to like every video they see. Another unique feature of TikTok is that the algorithm is the main point of focus for its users whereas apps like Instagram show users content from those they follow. On TikTok, users can follow people, but typically most of the time spent is on the

“For You” page which is an endless feed of recommended videos. This means that users only have to watch one constant feed of videos and do not have to do anything else (Montag et al., 2021). The experience on TikTok is described as “natural” and “spontaneous,” (Barta, Belanche, Fernandez, & Flavian, 2023) since the videos aren’t very long and require less time to watch.

But TikTok isn’t just magically addicting and enjoyable to its users. An ethnographic study done in London (Schellewald, 2023) sought to further understand the affordances that contribute to the popularity of TikTok. Schellewald defines affordances as “not fixed but ultimately imagined properties whose meaning, and function emerges ‘in the wild’ through how people...make sense of technologies” (p. 1569). Something that Schellewald (2023) found was that TikTok exists, firstly, as a place for people to go when they are stressed, bored or want to pass the time. Additionally, TikTok exists as a place for people to be distracted from everyday life, both willingly and unwillingly. This study was focused on a set of people who use TikTok, both presently but also during the lockdown in 2020, and while many of the users admitted to TikTok being “addictive” and, at times, distracting, many people fell somewhere in between wanting to manage how much TikTok was distracting them and also “actively wanted to get carried away and distracted when they engaged with the app” (p. 1573).

In that case, Schellewald found that TikTok exists as something more than just a cure for boredom, but as a space that “fulfilled escapist desires.” According to a 1984 book by Janice A. Radway, such fulfillment of the need for escapism doesn’t just rely on the existence of a medium but the ability for it to be a more enjoyable space than the current reality. What Schellewald found regarding TikTok is that it has a “feel-good quality,” and it affords “relaxation and the fulfillment of escapist desires” (p. 1575). In other words, TikTok isn’t just an app people are addicted to, it is a place where people can go to escape, feel good, and relax. As one of the

participants of Schellewald's research puts it, "TikTok had become a fixed part of his daily routine...almost like a bridge between living room and bed" (p. 1574).

And there's something even deeper that happens on TikTok that exists beyond just general escapism. One of the key findings of Schellewald's research was that TikTok is personalized in such a way that it shows content to users that "resonate[s] with central parts of [their] identity" (p. 1575). An example of this was especially prevalent with one of the participants, who mentioned enjoying "cottage core" videos which particularly appealed to her enjoyment of being outdoors, hiking, and working at a garden center. She mentioned that during the lockdown, these videos were especially important to her as she was left to the confines of her own home, unable to participate in these typical hobbies. This finding may raise the question of whether TikTok offers a space for individuals to live vicariously through the creators they see on the app.

Something from the Schellewald study that may answer this question was a response from a participant who enjoyed going to TikTok to watch "people who you don't know but also aren't established influencers" (p. 1575). The participant stated that viewing these people is "kind of like seeing what your friends are up to if your friends were all kind of cool and you don't have any obligation to them" (p. 1575). As Schellewald mentioned, TikTok afforded "a social media experience that was relatable yet, at the same time, stripped of social obligations, rendering it a form of escapist entertainment" (p. 1576). Between the participant who enjoyed watching cottage core videos and the participant who enjoyed watching these pseudo-friends, it seems that this escapist reality offers both a reflection of a person's identity along with a fulfillment of their need for social interaction, perhaps in an alternate world.

The final affordance that Schellewald discovers in her research is the affordance of connecting with friends through sharing TikTok videos with one another. One of the participants of the study described sending TikTok clips to her sisters and friends as “how we communicate,” which Schellewald defined as the participant’s way of perceiving the shared videos as a means to stay in touch with friends. This idea of staying in touch with others via sharing videos and memes is also defined in work done by Mirca Mandianou in 2016 which explores the concept of “ambient co-presence,” meaning the “peripheral yet still intense awareness for the presence of distant others” (Schellewald, 2023, p.1578) Essentially, this is something that occurs when a user is online and sees content that makes them think of their friend or family member, typically resulting in the media being shared with them as a form of saying “I’m thinking of you” in an abstract way. Additionally, the connection of people over shared interest in memes or pop culture references is another affordance of TikTok, as Schellewald mentions that sharing TikTok references in real-life interactions has become a way to relate with people and fit in socially.

Trans-parasocial Relationships and TikTok

One study that helps to demonstrate the phenomenon of parasocial relationships in the context of TikTok was done by Barta et al. (2023). Their study was conducted in Spain and looked at the relationships between a Spanish TikTok influencer and their followers and was looking to understand the factors that lead followers to trust influencers and impact their purchase intention. The study involved a survey, and the respondents were asked about their perceptions of the TikTok influencer in regard to originality, hedonic experience (enjoyment of content), humor, opinion leadership (credibility), intention to follow the account, and intention to follow the advice of the influencer.

The study found that “Hedonic experience significantly, positively affected both intentions to follow the account... and opinion leadership. However, it does not affect intention to follow advice” (Barta et al., 2023, p. 7). In other words, when an audience member enjoys an influencer’s content on TikTok, they perceive the influencer as more credible and are more likely to follow the user’s account. Here, Barta et al. argue that the hedonic experience did not contribute to intention to follow advice, meaning that just because the audience likes the content, follows the influencer, and views the influencer as credible, does not mean that the followers intend to take the influencer’s advice. Despite this, Barta et al. also argue that because hedonic experience positively influences opinion leadership, the opinion leadership does influence users to follow influencer advice, perhaps indirectly, stating, “opinion leadership does not influence intention to follow the account, but it positively influences intention to follow the advice, which supports commercial purposes” (Barta et al., 2023, p. 9). What this piece goes on to point out is that there is a dichotomy within the dynamic between influencer and audience, as the audience consciously follows the account as a result of their enjoyment of the content, but still end up following advice as the influencers’ perceived credibility increases as a result of content enjoyment.

Based on the findings of their study, Barta et al. (2023) offer some suggestions as “keys to success” for influencer marketing. One of the main recommendations for brands was to seriously consider the type of content an influencer makes in order to strongly communicate the message the brand is trying to send (Barta et al., 2023). Additionally, they found that TikTok influencers have the ability to not only reach but resonate highly with members of a younger audience, stating, “TikTok influencers use communication forms closer and more aligned to today's young people/adolescents” (p. 9). While this study looked at how content type influenced

follower's decisions to follow advice, my study is focusing on how trans-parasocial relationship, which goes beyond content production, influences these things. In other words, it seeks to take things a bit further, looking at it all through the lens of trans-parasocial relationships, as opposed to just parasocial relationships – which are one-sided.

Brand Impacts

Influencers are a critical element of modern-day marketing. People look to them for inspiration and guidance, and it's important to consider the power that influencers have in the current market because at times, they are over-looked or grouped in with celebrities or ad executions. But really, they are in a category of their own. The reason why influencers are stand-alone in the world of marketing is at least in part because they are able to transcend the boundaries of consumer and brand. An influencer can be both, and that's what makes them so influential. When influencers speak to their audiences, they are talking about a product that they use – from one consumer to another (Krywalski Santiago & Moreira Castelo, 2020). But at the same time, they are often being paid to promote a product to their audience. As a consumer, influencers must offer a certain level of honesty and authenticity, whereas influencers as a brand require a level of polish and persuasion (Krywalski Santiago & Moreira Castelo, 2020).

With their ability to connect with their audience, influencers can shape consumer behavior and create trends, even impacting the way consumers use a product (Backaler, 2018). Chapter five of the book *Digital Influence* by Joel Backaler touches on the power that influencers hold in the market, using the example of “toy unboxing” videos and the impact they had on the entire toy market. Founder and CEO of MGA Entertainment, Isaac Larian, had a late-night discovery that toy-unboxing influencers were gathering mass audiences on YouTube to watch

them excitedly open up new toys. Five months later, Backaler and his team created a toy in which the main selling point was the surprise factor and fun unboxing experience. The product was exclusively marketed using influencers, meaning the company saved millions on traditional ad spend. This is just one major example of influencer's ability to not only influence an entire product category, but also almost completely replace traditional digital marketing (Backaler, 2018).

Influencer impact is partly related to the way that followers develop a sense of relationship with influencers (Chung & Cho, 2017). Loyalty and trust are foundational elements to every relationship. For influencers, trust is built as an influencer is discovered by an audience, who ultimately decides to follow them and interact with their content. However, if an influencer upsets their audience, they can negatively impact the audience's perception of any of the brands that the influencer has worked on. Similarly, if a brand upsets or "betrays" an audience, it can negatively impact the way that the influencer is seen by their audiences (Reinikainen, Tan, Luoma-aho, & Salo 2021). As a matter of fact, a 2021 study done by Reinikainen et al. touches on this phenomenon of "betrayals," as it sought to understand the ways that betrayals (whether it be done by brand or influencer) can influence how one or the other is perceived or liked.

Essentially, the study hypothesized that when A) an influencer betrays an audience, there will be a negative impact on the audience's perception of the brands that the influencer has worked with and B) when a brand betrays an audience, there will be a negative impact on the audience's view of an influencer the brand has worked with. In fact, these established parasocial relationships can actually become a love triangle when brands get involved. When the audience is faced with betrayals or disappointment on either side, the influencer or brand could be collateral damage. Ultimately, the study found that when an influencer betrays an audience or

trust is broken, brand trust and purchase intention is also affected. Additionally, brand betrayals had the same effect on influencer “coolness” and this negatively affected influencer-audience relationships (Reinikainen et al., 2021).

In another 2020 study done by Reinikainen et al., a group of girls who were part of a Finnish online community were shown a video of a popular influencer in the community. The woman in the video was known for her lifestyle content, but also made videos that provide advice and guidance to girls, playing the role of “Big Sis.” In fact, the video they chose was a vlog-style video where the influencer endorsed a private healthcare provider, and one of the things they provide is sexual health services for young women, which was a relatively well-known brand with several locations throughout the country. In the video, the influencer visits one of these locations and talks about her experiences (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

The girls in the study were split into two groups and surveyed. Both groups were asked about their general opinions on influencer endorsements and then they were shown the video. One group watched the video and were then shown the comments of the video (which were positive), while the other group was not shown comments. The researchers wanted to test both conditions because prior research points to comments and interaction as an important factor in parasocial relationships. Then, the survey asked them about “perceived credibility of the vlogger, [parasocial relationship] with the vlogger, their trust in the endorsed brand, and their possible intention of purchasing the endorsed service” (Reinikainen et al., 2020, p. 286).

The study found that the group exposed to the comments on the video didn’t experience any different effects from the video. However, they did find that parasocial relationships with influencers “can eventually turn into trust in a brand recommended by the influencer, reducing the uncertainty that people might have towards the brand” (Reinikainen et al., 2020, p. 290). The

authors suggested that reading positive comments could reinforce brand trust, but the researchers believe that it may be more about the personal interactions between follower and influencer that strengthen the relationship and built brand trust – not just the observed interaction from other followers. Overall, the study did confirm that parasocial relationships can increase influencer credibility, and therefore brand perception.

Influencers & Women

As this study seeks to understand the interactions between social media influencers and their audience through the case study of Alix Earle, it is important to note the dynamics at play when discussing female influencers and female audiences. In a world where women are upheld to the expectations of certain beauty standards, the topic of envy and comparison is especially relevant. In a study done in Singapore, researchers attempt to explain female’s envy toward social media influencers (Chae, 2018). They found that “those who frequently see influencer’s social media and those who are interested in postings about the daily life of influencers were more likely to compare their lives to those influencers (p. 257). This is interesting considering the fact that a majority of Earle’s content is about her lifestyle, both during her time in college but also outside of college and into her professional life.

Women are also upheld to standards that dictate the types of roles they should fill in their lives. Many women face societal pressure to perform well in multiple areas of life, which a 2022 study done regarding the “superwoman” role that many female influencers fill addresses (Devos, Eggermont and Vendenbosch, 2022). This study looked into the ways that female influencers position themselves online and found multiple common “roles” that they seem to fill. One of their key findings was that “it is most important to be beautiful, have an exciting life, and be an

expert in your field” (p. 178). They also address the highlighted importance of beauty on a women’s career, in saying, “as beauty is the most common, the most popular, as well as the most sexualized role... the idea remains that above all, one has to be beautiful and sexy” (p. 181).

These are important things to consider in a study like this, as Alix Earle is often referred to as the “It Girl,” meaning that she is generally looked at as a superwoman. On top of that, Earle is a conventionally attractive, thin woman that clearly upholds many of the societal standards and ideals set in place for women. Her ability to uphold this standard may have a direct effect on the ways that her audience perceives her and may dictate whether or not they feel envious of her.

Examining Alix Earle / Follower Relationships

With the dynamics of parasocial relationships, trans-parasocial relationships, brand impacts, and the TikTok platform in mind, as well as the societal nuances of female influencers, this study will specifically focus on the influencer Alix Earle. This influencer’s success and fanbase is the epitome of parasocial relationships, and her fame is unique to TikTok as the short-form videos are foundational in the content that she has created to attract so many followers. The 22-year-old influencer went from everyday user to “internet It-girl” in a matter of months (Franklin, 2023), and is often thought of as a “best friend” to her followers.

Because Earle encapsulates the framework of parasocial relationships so well, this research project will serve as a case study on the dynamics of parasocial relationships and how they affect brand perception and purchase intention. In her most popular videos, Earle filmed herself getting ready for her chaotic adventures, filling the audience in on what was happening in her life. Often times, the comment section would show followers saying things like “it feels like we’re best friends,” or “it feels like we’re on FaceTime.” The personal feeling that the videos

provide, mixed with the attention-grabbing storytelling led followers to develop parasocial relationships with her, which made her very credible to her followers. In fact, the phrase “you’re my Alix Earle” became a popular thing for TikTok users to comment on other influencer’s posts when they felt that the influencer was influential in their life or when they felt like a friend.

The goal of this research is to interview college-aged women who follow Alix Earle on social media in order to understand what factors led them to follow her and whether they feel that they have a parasocial relationship with Earle. Additionally, the participants will be asked about whether Earle has influenced them to purchase any products or if her content style has led to them liking any particular brands or increased brand perception and purchase intention. The findings can then serve as a case study of how an influencer can create parasocial relationships quickly, and how those relationships are essential to influencer marketing.

Chapter 2

Methods

This study will consist of interview-based qualitative research that seeks to answer two main questions:

1. How do followers perceive their relationship to influencers and how does this relationship develop?
2. How does this relationship impact followers’ purchase intentions and perceptions of a brand promoted by an influencer?

This study is situated within the context of social media influencer Alix Earle and will serve as a case study on trans-parasocial relationships. Alix Earle is an appropriate influencer to use as a

case study on trans-parasocial relationships because part of Earle's fame and success is often attributed to her personal, friendship-like content experience. And in order to address the research questions effectively, it will be beneficial to investigate the factors that contribute to followers' perceptions of their relationship to Earle, how that relationship is established, and its impacts on brand affinity and purchase intention. This can be done by asking some of Earle's followers directly about their experiences following and interacting with Alix Earle in qualitative interviews. As Thomas R. Lindlof and Bryan C. Taylor, authors of *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, put it, "Interviews are particularly well-suited to understanding people's experience, knowledge and world views" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p.222).

A case study serves as a single example of a greater phenomenon. Specifically, this case study serves to illustrate a trans-parasocial relationship between an influencer and their audience, providing insights that can be applied to further understand similar scenarios in the future. The purpose of doing a case study on Alix Earle as opposed to another influencer is the relevance that she has at the time of this research. Because she grew her following at such a quick rate and has fostered such a loyal audience base, Alix Earle is a quintessential example of a successful influencer. While many influencers spend years creating content, trying to reach their first million followers, Earle was able to grow her follower count by millions in a matter of months. In many cases, this would seem like a case of short-term virality often awarded to people who make a ripple on the internet for a couple months, however this hasn't been the case for Earle. With the launch of her podcast, "Hot Mess" in September of 2023, she further extended the friendship-like relationship between her and her audience. Because she comes across so authentic and relatable to her fans and is booming so much in her career as an influencer, there could be a lot of insight to gather from the people who engage with her content.

This research study will consist of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with college-aged women who follow Alix Earle. The purpose of the semi-structured interview style is to allow for participants to naturally explain their responses to the questions thoughtfully. A benefit to the semi-structured interview style is that it allows for the conversation between the researcher and the interviewee to follow a natural cadence, which also may open up the door for participants to go on “tangents” with their responses. The occurrence of natural tangents will be valuable to conducting thorough qualitative research because it ensures that there will be plenty of data to analyze (McCracken, 1988). In other words, with an interview, it is better that there is too much said than not enough.

Questions will focus on understanding the participants’ relationship with the influencer, specifically why they follow the influencer, factors that contribute to following the influencer and/or following their advice, and how the relationship impacts the participants brand affinity and purchase intention regarding brands/products that were promoted by the influencer. The subjects of these interviews will be identified through snowball sampling, starting with an initial pool of approximately three subjects. The subject pool will gradually expand to about six participants as the interviews progress and additional individuals are identified by the original participants. Because this study will include human subjects, IRB approval will be obtained to ensure the safety of all participants.

With Alix Earle kickstarting her career on TikTok during her time at college, she amassed a predominately college-aged fanbase. Being a part of the beauty and fashion TikTok community, Earle also appeals to an audience that is largely women. Because of this, it is essential that the participants of this study are college-aged women. Using interviews as the primary method of research is necessary for understanding the behaviors of these women and allows for the

collection of robust qualitative data, which could not be so easily harvested through other methods of research such as surveys or textual analysis. Additionally, because individuals likely hold differing values and beliefs on what constitutes a relationship, it will be important to talk to the women directly in order to better understand their experiences. Because Earle has been referred to as a “best friend” by other viewers, and deemed internet “it girl,” it is also necessary to ask participants about their personal viewpoints on the subject matter, as interviews can also serve to “verify, validate or comment on information obtained from other sources” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 224). In other words, getting information from some of Earle’s followers directly regarding their sentiment towards the influencer will be highly valuable in identifying the validity of these claims.

The interviews will loosely follow two stages. In the first stage, participants will be asked to talk through their experiences of interacting with Alix Earle on TikTok and when they first came across Earle’s videos. For example, they will be asked to describe their first impressions of the influencer and then what ultimately led them to their decision to follow her on TikTok. The participants will then be asked to describe their “relationship” with Earle and what that means to them. Finally, participants will be asked about their perceived credibility of Earle as an opinion leader and whether their perceived relationship contributes to that. The goal is to ultimately leave the interview with an understanding of why the participant follows Earle, whether they think of her as a “friend” or anything of the sort, and how trust is established with the influencer.

The second phase of the interview will be about the brands featured in Earle’s content, mainly regarding brand perception and purchase intention for both promotional and non-promotional content. Whereas promotional refers to brands and products featured in Earle’s content as paid advertisements or sponsorships, non-promotional refers to brands or products

featured in Earle's content organically. Participants will be asked if they can think of any brands that Earle has mentioned in her TikTok videos, and then will be asked about their opinions regarding the brands. The participants will also be asked if they have ever purchased, considered purchasing, or intend to purchase anything that Earle has promoted or mentioned on her TikTok. The purpose of asking questions of this nature is to understand the role that Earle plays in their decision to interact with a brand that has been promoted by the influencer. It will also help to further understand the extent of which trans-parasocial relationships contribute to brand perception and purchase intention, compared to just general entertainment for the followers.

Once all of the interviews have been conducted, the analysis phase will begin. Each interview will be recorded and transcribed using an online software so that all of the data can be quickly consolidated and used in a thematic analysis. During and immediately after interviews, some light notes will be taken to identify key terms and patterns in order to ensure thorough analysis of each interview. Once all interviews are completed and transcribed, and key terms have been identified, the coding phase will begin. Initial codes will be made from the transcriptions, meaning that the data will loosely be organized into different themes and categories. While categories are "a covering term for an array of general phenomena," the codes will serve as "linkages between the data and categories" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 315-317). This process will be vital in ensuring that all of the data collected from each participant is thoughtfully considered both individually but also in respect to the data from the other participants. For example, if one woman mentions early on that she feels Alix Earle is a "friend," it is important to keep that in mind when analyzing other interview data to determine whether that experience is unique to the participant or is shared amongst several of the participants.

Once some loose themes are identified, a review process will begin, wherein themes may be combined, split up or discarded altogether, depending on what is appropriate for the study. In this review process, the final themes of the interview data will be discovered, providing the findings of the study and the answers to the research questions. The goal is to end up with a clear understanding of themes, and how they address the phenomenon of trans-parasocial relationships. These findings will be used to further develop our understanding of the social-scientific concept of para-social relationships, and to also draw implications for the relevance of influencers and para-social relationships to the fields of public relations and advertising. At this stage, the study may also open up the conversation for future research, evaluating what was found and what may need to be investigated further.

Chapter 3

Findings

This interview research study consisted of six interviews with women who attend the University of Colorado, Boulder. The six women who were recruited for this study follow Alix Earle on social media and were asked a variety of questions regarding their relationship to the influencer and how they make sense of it, as well as the ways in which the influencer impacts their affinity and purchase intention for brands promoted and used by Alix Earle.

Upon analysis, there were seven key themes identified from these interviews: content genre, appearance, female audience, relatability, authenticity, relationship, and brand affinity. These seven themes appeared throughout all six of the interviews and produced many meaningful insights about influencers as well as partnerships between brands and influencers.

The content genre theme refers to the specific kind of genre of video that Alix Earle is known for on the TikTok platform. This genre was central to each subsequent theme in this study. Alongside content genre, Alix Earle's predominately female audience was also highly relevant in all six interviews, which impacted followers' perception of the influencer. The appearance theme refers to the ways in which Alix Earle's appearance plays a role in the relationship between the influencer and the follower. Relatability and authenticity, although often grouped together, are two entirely different themes with their own meaning which was revealed in this study and will be further dissected in the discussion section. Finally, the brand affinity theme refers to the overarching ways that all the aforementioned themes affect brand affinity and purchase intention. This section will analyze key findings from the study, which will be relevant for the discussion that follows.

Content Genre

One of the first questions asked to the participants was about how they first stumbled across Alix Earle's videos. Almost every single respondent cited the "Get Ready With Me" (GRWM) video style as the type of video they first saw upon discovery of Alix Earle on their TikTok "For You" page.

P3: I first saw her just on my For You page, probably like a year and a half or two years ago, and she was just doing a Get Ready With Me.

As mentioned in the introduction, the GRWM video genre has been around in the influencer realm for many years but became exceedingly popular on TikTok in 2022. Many content creators and everyday users began setting up their phone to record themselves "getting ready." Typically, the person in the video shows the audience what products they are using while also describing it, often accompanied by a storytelling element, like telling the audience what they are getting ready

for or spilling details about their life. Some participants found this video style very appealing as it provides entertainment while also introducing them to new products.

***P2:** I love watching Get Ready With Me's just because I think that's a good way to just be like, "Oh, that's an interesting product." Like, okay, they used it, they said they really liked it, should I get it? I'm very, very influenced by that kind of stuff.*

In fact, some participants even noted that the GRWM video style offers influencers a more organic way of mentioning the products that they are using or promoting. This participant specifically felt that Alix Earle was promoting products without even trying to, and that her visual aesthetic is what creates appeal for a product, comparing her to Regina George. She notes that while other influencers tend to tell their audience to go buy a product, sometimes mentioning a promotional code for commission, Alix Earle sells product simply by informing her audience of the product she is using, and their liking her look makes them interested in trying it.

***P1:** I don't even think she knows that she's promoting everything she does and uses in every video. Because... kind of why I follow her is also because of this aesthetic she has. And although I don't see any paid promotion, she doesn't say, "code this" or any of that. She's telling me "And now I'm going in with this product on my face," and then you see the end result and your kind of like, "I mean, that looks good." It's like a Mean Girls moment, where everyone says, "Regina George did this, so I did this."*

Another appeal of the GRWM video style is the way that it often involves some storytelling, which gets the audience's attention. This participant felt that the storytelling element in Alix Earle's GRWM videos distract her from the fact that Earle is probably getting paid for making the video. This participant also noted that even when Alix Earle mentions a product overtly in a video, it still doesn't feel like a sales pitch, because it feels similar to a girlfriend telling her about their new favorite product.

***P1:** That's what Alex Earle does best. She's promoting these products, but she's doing it so subtly that I don't even notice. It's like, "Oh, get ready with me," like, she's telling me this story, and I'm following the story. And somehow, because I'm locked in with her life and this realness, I'm not thinking about the fact that she's getting money for what she's trying to sell to me. I don't see it as she's trying to sell it. I think to me, I see it more is like "Hey,*

girlfriends, I've got this product, and it's so good. You guys should try it." Instead of "I'm getting paid for this."

An additional participant also referenced the "Storytime" video style, which often involves the person in the video sharing a personal story directly to the camera. Sometimes, a Storytime video is combined with other video styles, including GRWM. This often involves the video creator doing their makeup while telling a story to the audience, almost as if they were friends sitting in the bathroom getting ready together. For example, they might be telling a story about the time they caught their partner cheating, while also applying makeup and getting ready for the day. This participant noted their love for GRWM and Storytime content, and that it is what initially drew them towards Earle's videos.

***P3:** I just like a good Get Ready With Me or a Storytime. And her stories are really entertaining to me.*

Appearance

When it comes to Alix Earle specifically, many of the participants said that her appearance plays a role in why they follow her. This participant, for example, stated that she not only liked Alix Earle's makeup, but also looks to her for style, makeup, and hair inspiration.

***P4:** I really like her makeup routine. I guess I like her for style inspo, makeup inspo, hair inspo, sort of thing.*

And while Earle's appearance often contributed to why participants chose to follow her, when asked if they compare themselves to her specifically or experience any feelings of envy, many said no. One of the main reasons for this, according to some of the participants, was because they were aware of Alix Earle's cosmetic work that she has gotten done, including a breast augmentation and lip filler. For many participants, not only did this make them not compare themselves to her physically, but it also provided a level of trust between them and Earle. This

participant claims that Earle’s transparency about her cosmetic work makes her seem honest and down to earth.

P2: She’s just, she’s pretty, you know? Obviously, she does get, you know, filler, and she’s had a boob job and stuff like that. But like, she’s very honest about it. Which, again, is very down to earth, like, “Yeah, I did this.”

Another topic of discussion for the participants was about their appreciation for Earle’s transparency about her struggles with acne and her needing to go on the acne medication Accutane. For many participants, this was noted as being “authentic,” and it made them feel more comfortable about themselves knowing that a woman they look up to for aesthetic reasons also dealt with imperfections.

P2: She struggled with acne, and she’s been on Accutane, which, again, is kind of just like a real-life thing. People don’t talk about that. And she’s normalizing it. It’s like, you know, everyone has it, it doesn’t matter.

In fact, Earle doesn’t just mention that she has acne in her videos. She also is known for going deeper about her life experiences on her new podcast, “Hot Mess.” In one of her podcast episodes, Alix Earle talked about a time when she posted an old picture on Instagram looking presumably flawless, while, in all actuality, she was lying in bed, experiencing a bad acne flare-up. She wanted to remind her followers that not everything they see online from influencers is real. For one participant, Earle’s candidness about her acne was refreshing.

P5: She has like podcasts where she talks about acne struggles, and she’s like, “this is the Instagram picture I posted. And this is what my skin looked like that day when I was sitting in bed and posted it.” And it’s just strikingly different. Like, that’s so refreshing.

The same participant went further, saying that Earle being candid about her insecurities shows that even those who we think “have it all” are still struggling with their own issues. The participant mentioned that this kind of discourse from Earle reminded her that she can experience the best of both worlds.

P5: I feel like she's showing a really good contrast, like, you can have it all and still have issues. You don't have to brand yourself as the underdog. You can be best of both worlds, which I love because I'm like, "I want to be like the 'It Girl.' But I also deal with struggles." It's fun to see.

Female Audience

The next common theme discovered from the interviews was Alix Earle's predominately female audience. Some participants found that Earle's female audience had a positive effect on their trust for the influencer, fostering a safe space for women to engage with the content tailored to them. This participant mentioned that being a "girl" was a point of relatability for Alix Earle, claiming that getting ready was one of her favorite parts of the day.

P3: The only thing we have in common is like, we're girls, right? And I think that might be why I like watching Get Ready With Me's is because like, I love getting ready so much. And to me, a routine part of my day is when I get ready. So maybe that's why, or that's how I got hooked.

Being a girl seems to be a key identity marker for some of the participants of the interview and went deeper than just gender identity. The term "girl's girl" was brought up a number of times throughout the videos, which is the idea that when a woman is openly supportive of other women, they are a "girl's girl." For many participants, this was really important in their development of trust towards Earle.

P5: I think it's nice that she seems like a girl's girl. Obviously, like, when she does her Hot Mess advice. I think that's like so big and I love that she's like posting female content and like helping females through stuff because I think it's so big to have an influencer like her that is also showing what she dealt with for the younger people. And if it was all male or just a thirst trap, I don't think I'd follow her because I'm like no, this is no substance.

A "thirst trap," as mentioned in the above quote, is a native internet colloquialism referring to digital content that is overtly sexual in nature, intended to appeal to an audience that finds the creator attractive. In this context, a thirst trap would probably entail Alix Earle posting suggestive content for the purpose of appealing to men. The participant above was not alone in

feeling uncomfortable with the idea of Earle appealing to a male audience, as another stated that Earle's content is made for women and likes that Earle did not become a sex symbol.

P3: It's more about her getting ready or her picking out an outfit, which I think is just stuff that girls are interested in more. Even on Instagram or whatever, boys don't follow her. That makes me find her more appealing. I think I just don't like it when – whether it's a celebrity or creator, the women whose content I like to consume – I don't think I like it when boys get a hold of them. And then they become a sex symbol first. I think that is what I don't like. And that doesn't happen.

Relatability vs Unrelatability

The topic of relatability and unrelatability came up a lot in the interviews. In this sample of interviewees, there was a somewhat even split between participants who found Alix Earle to be relatable and unrelatable. As mentioned above, some of the most commonly referenced points of relatability for Alix Earle were her struggle with acne and her experience being a woman. However, another point of relatability was Alix Earle's experience of being a college student. One of the participants found that she related to Alix Earle in having to sometimes sacrifice sleep when life got a little busy.

P1: I remember like, kind of in the beginning, when she was still going to school in Miami, how she was going out. And then the next day, she had something planned. And she was like, 'I have to wake up early, I'm only gonna get this many hours of sleep.' And I feel like that something that is happening to people in college.

But with the participants who didn't relate to Alix Earle, it seemed like her affluent, luxurious lifestyle played a role. Many of the participants mentioned that they were aware that Alix Earle came from a wealthy family, and being an influencer has made her even more "rich." For this participant, Alix Earle's lifestyle is so out of reach that she finds it entertaining.

P3: Her lifestyle is so far out of reach. I'm super intrigued that people live lives like that. Like that people have boyfriends who plan like, private jets to take them to an island for their birthday for two days. Or, like, even just her podcast clips of her like begging her dad for a boob job.

But it wasn't just that participant who found her extravagant lifestyle to be entertaining. For some, seeing a window into someone else's life is something that attracted participants to follow Alix Earle. For this participant, watching Earle live this luxurious lifestyle is funny to watch:

P6: I feel like it is just a life that a lot of people don't attain or live so that's what draws people in to watch. I don't know, I thought that her videos were interesting and funny. So, I find that part of it interesting because everything is just so extravagant.

Another participant stated that she enjoys watching content from people who are different from her, because she finds it fun to hear stories from people who have a different perspective. For her, Earle was relatable in every way except for her constant college partying, but that did not stop her from enjoying Alix Earle's videos:

P5: I'm drawn to people that are very similar to me, or something that's the complete opposite. Like the way she talked about her nights out and like, blacking out or something, I was like, okay, I can never see that for me. And I was like, this is kind of funny. Like, I'm not gonna do it, but it's fun to hear these stories from a different perspective.

Authenticity

Authenticity is a word that is often brought up regarding influencers but is rarely defined. In the interviews with these six women, all of them mentioned things that Alix Earle does that make her come across as authentic. Oftentimes, authenticity does not necessarily equate to relatability, but rather honesty, transparency, and rawness. One of the participants felt like unlike other influencers, Alix Earle did a good job of making content that shows her day-to-day life as a person, not just an influencer.

P2: I think the fact that she was in school, like, she was always talking about her homework assignments or her essays and morning class. And I feel like once someone becomes an influencer, they don't even talk about their actual day-to-day lives. Obviously, she's a huge celebrity now and gets invited to all these different things. But she's still very real about her life and is not hiding the fact that she's an actual human being.

Being authentic, for these participants, also sometimes referred to the ways that Alix Earle handles her paid promotions. Many of them found that because Earle is honest about her opinions regarding the brands and products that she works with, she is much more trustworthy. This trustworthiness seems to be related to her talking about products as an actual user of the product, rather than talking about it in a way that seems like she is telling her followers to go buy it. This participant specifically mentioned that Alix Earle only promotes brands she actually uses, which makes her seem more authentic.

P1: And I think what's different is like, I remember a video she did and she was saying how she only wants to do promotions for products that she's using. And no one really says that. I mean, like, usually if you get a promotion, you get money. And you're gonna do it if you're an influencer. But I feel like for her, especially now that she has such a big audience, she can pick and choose what she actually likes, which makes her have more authenticity. Because she's like, choosing products that actually work.

Another participant felt that when Earle talks about a product, she likes to see her putting the product on in a GRWM, because it allows the audience to actually see how it looks on. This makes her trust Earle more because she knows that she likes to actually use the product, not just show it off.

P2: I do feel like some influencers will have the product, but not use it and just show it off and be like, 'Oh, this is a great product, totally use it.' But I do feel like she's the one that's promoting it and actually using it and showing people what it looks like on.

Another participant had a similar comment, and mentioned that when she watches Alix Earle, she notices that she's promoting a product that she has used many times in previous videos, and because of this, she feels like the promotion is authentic.

P3: Yeah, I feel like with most of the things that I see her promoting -- and I know people get kind of sneaky with it -- but I feel like it's mostly just stuff that you actually see her using not just in one video or in a video for a week but like throughout months and months and stacks and stacks of content.

Another thing that makes Alix Earle authentic, according to her followers, is the fact that she has close relationships with her family and longtime friends. Many of the participants mentioned that other influencers start to socialize and hang out with other influencers once they become famous, sometimes even becoming friends with other celebrities. But the participants of this study felt that despite becoming famous online, Alix Earle still has close relationships with all of her pre-fame friends as well as her family members. One participant mentioned the fact that she is close with her friends and family which can be seen in all of her content, which makes her seem much more authentic. She compared this dynamic to other famous TikTok stars, like the D'Amelio family and Addison Rae.

P3: I think seeing her relationships with her sisters, like, between the one that's closer in age and the younger ones, that to me is really relatable. And her mom and her stepmom and stuff, like I think those relationships and being able to see those, to me, is what is like, oh my god, she's just a girl. And she just wants to hang out with her family sometimes. And then the interactions that she has with her friends and stuff, too. Okay, this is not a good example. But like the D'Amelios, or even Addison Rae. It's like, why are you hanging with Kourtney Kardashian? Like, I feel like all the people that Alix Earle hangs out with, they seem like on her level, or people she's known. She seems to hang out with people that she gets to know really well. I think that part of her friendships and stuff feels very authentic to me.

Another thing that Alix Earle does really well is show off her love for her community. Many of the respondents felt that her involvement with the University of Miami since graduating in 2023 also contribute to her authenticity. Earle has a scholarship in her name at UM, and also is actively giving back to the UM community as she returns back for occasional guest lectures for current marketing students.

P2: The fact that she is creating scholarships for you know, people at [the University of Miami] and stuff like that, I think that's super cool that she's also just using her platform in a way to not just be popular or be relevant or something... I truly feel like she's using it to, you know, better her community and give different opportunities to people in her community.

Another participant mentioned her affinity for Earle's participation in her community at UM and found that her academic background is something that makes her stand out against other influencers.

P5: She came from New Jersey, like, I'm from Massachusetts, and she's doing what she wanted to do. And she did this speech on marketing, in a class. That's like, so cool. Because she has that college degree and academic background, which I think gives her such an edge... it's humbling, like, she's humble.

Many of the participants in this study claimed that they actually do not typically enjoy following influencers or celebrities on social media. This finding was particularly interesting, because it could mean that Alix Earle may be doing something that makes her more appealing and therefore worth a follow. One participant noted that she doesn't even really look at any influencer or celebrity content online unless there is something specific that she is looking for. However, she follows Alix Earle on multiple platforms.

P2: I do not follow any celebrities; I don't even follow actors and actresses or anything like that. It's a thing that I have where I'm like, well, if I'm worried about them, if I want to see their stuff, I'll just look at that. She's like one of the only influencers that I have followed on both Tik Tok and Instagram and Snapchat.

Another participant had a similar sentiment and said that if she is going to follow an influencer it has to be for a good reason. She also noted that she primarily uses social media to follow and keep up with her friends, and that because she views Earle as a friend, she follows her as well to stay up to date.

P1: I don't follow a lot of influencers or TikTok people. And I feel like if I'm going to, it's for a good reason. Like, most of the people I follow are my friends. And following her was like following a friend. I want to see what she's up to, and so, I feel like I have this closeness to her because of how she is with in her TikToks. It's things I would get from my own friends, so it almost feels like she's in my friend group and I've never met her before.

Finally, another hallmark signal of authenticity for the participants of this study was the idea of not feeling like one is being "sold to." Most of the participants mentioned that they do not like being blatantly sold to, and that is a leading factor as to why they do not enjoy following other

influencers. Because many of the participants referenced above claim that Alix Earle's content does not feel like advertising, they enjoy seeing her content even when it is pertaining to sponsorship.

P2: I do not enjoy watching people's videos that are blatantly like, this is a sponsored ad. I don't like that stuff.

Relationship

Relationships between influencers and their followers was one of the most central themes of this research study, so it was very important to investigate the ways that they exist between Earle and her followers. Something that was discovered in doing this part of the research was that while some of Earle's followers view her as a friend, some of them do not. When it comes to those who do view her as a friend, this was due to a multitude of reasons. For one participant, Alix Earle feels like a friend because she thinks a real-life friendship with her would actually be attainable. One example that she gives is that she has seen videos on TikTok of Alix Earle meeting fans out at a bar and engaging with them. She makes the following comparison to how unreachable traditional celebrities are:

P1: She is known to do like rounds of shots with her followers, or like people will see her and take videos with her or they'll be partying together. Again, is that something you can do with like Beyonce? No, it's attainable. She's just that friend.

Not only does Alix Earle seem like an easy friend to make, she also appeals to many of her followers as someone they want to be friends with. For this participant, it is deeper than aesthetics, and more about wanting to be like Alix Earle. When asked if she sees Alix Earle as a friend, this was her response:

P5: Definitely. Because it's not just about like, oh, I want to look like her. I want to be her friend. She's a cool girl.

And just like any pair of friends would, Alix Earle often talks about her romantic relationships to her followers, too. Earle has been open about previous relationships, and even a newer one that fans got to see form in real time. Early on in her current relationship, Earle nicknamed her new love interest, NFL player Braxton Berrios, as “NFL” man. This participant felt that Earle’s language surrounding the relationship was relatable to her own personal experience with romantic relationships and felt that it made her friendship with Earle stronger as she revealed more about her love life over time.

***P1:** When she first started dating her boyfriend Braxton, who is plays for the Dolphins, she was calling him ‘NFL man.’ And even though that doesn't seem like anything, I feel like that's something me and my friends do now. Like, you make nicknames for little crushes and you have little code names, like, ‘Oh, look, here comes white t-shirt guy!’ It almost feels like I'm a close friend... and also, she's storytelling in a way that it's just like real life. Every day as it progresses NFL man slowly turned into Braxton, and now we're getting more of her.*

For another participant, Earle didn’t feel like a friend, but rather a sister. Earle is known for being a real-life big sister and makes her relationships with her siblings very public. This participant has a real-life big sister and can see that connection in Earle.

***P6:** I would describe her more as an older sister. I do have an older sister, so it kind of reminds me of that. But I definitely can see how people would consider her like a best friend, especially when you're seeing every part of her life. And sometimes the videos do feel like a FaceTime.*

However, as mentioned before, some participants do not view Earle as a friend. Although they may relate to her, like her, or enjoy her content, this did not all necessarily constitute to a trans-parasocial relationship for them. One participant felt that although she can relate to Alix Earle, she doesn’t feel connected with her.

***P2:** I don't feel connected with her in a way. I feel like I can be like, ‘Yeah , I relate to that.’ But that doesn't mean like, you know, we would have all this in common.*

Another participant said that she doesn't think she would be friends with Alix Earle, even if they knew each other in real life. For this participant, watching Alix Earle was seen as more of a means of entertainment.

P3: I definitely don't think she's like my friend. Nor do I think if I knew her in real life, she would be my friend. I think I just view her as like, entertainment.

On the other hand, a participant mentioned that because she thinks Alix Earle does not interact with her fans much online, she does not really see her as a friend, and believed that "friend" would be the wrong way to describe a relationship between Alix Earle and a follower.

P4: I think of myself as a follower. I don't intend on doing anything else with her really. I think her whole podcast is like she's your best friend. But like, she doesn't interact with many of her fans very much that I've seen. I think that's just the wrong way to like, call her.

Brand Affinity and Purchase Intention

The final theme of this study that was discovered in initial findings was brand affinity and purchase intention. Generally, participants had positive things to say about brands and products promoted by Alix Earle, indicating that somewhere along the way, she is doing a good job at making the brands and products that she works with sound well. For this participant, the fact that Alix Earle uses and likes a product is reason enough to go buy it.

P2: I do feel like if uses it and it looks good on her, I'm more influenced to buy it, because she likes it and she uses it herself.

Some of the participants trust Alix's advice on what kinds of products to purchase because, as mentioned before, Alix has been open online about her struggles with cystic acne. Because her followers are aware of her experiences with acne, they find that she is more credible to offer recommendations for makeup products.

P4: She has skin kind of like mine. And if I wanted to use a product, I need to take into account how it would react with my skin, especially if I'm spending money. She openly

talks about having cystic acne and obviously having sensitive skin can be kind of a gamble with some people because you can get a reaction. If a product is \$40 or \$50, I'd rather know for sure if it would bug my skin.

For another participant, actually watching Earle use a product in a GRWM video is what makes her want to buy it. Because she can see how it looks and how it works, she feels that she is more likely to actually want to try it for herself. This was something that was mentioned by multiple respondents who felt that when they can see an influencer demo a product in a video, they can trust that it is something that will work for them.

P6: For me I like to see how the product works because sometimes obviously it can be ingenuine if you're just seeing them talk about it because like you know, it's an ad. But when they're actually showing it, I feel like that really helps me to understand if they're being genuine about it... And especially when it's makeup now it's not cheap at all. So, if I'm spending my money on something, I want to make sure that I'm gonna enjoy it and like it.

However, although many of the participants indicated a high purchase intention for brands that were promoted by Earle, this didn't necessarily translate to purchase decision. For this participant, not having the need to go buy a product often got in the way of making a purchase decision.

P2: I have bronzer, why not just use that up before I go and buy a whole new one that was more expensive? I think that's number one. I have stuff that I'm like, 'Okay, do I really need it right now?' Every time I go to Sephora, I always look at it, but I just don't get it. So, I think that's one reason, because I just don't know if I would really use that every single day.

Chapter 4

Discussion

Upon reviewing the research findings and discerning key themes, the discussion will shift towards unraveling the significance of these findings and exploring their implications.

Conversations with participants in this study have unveiled a myriad of insights into how followers of Alix Earle comprehend and interpret their relationship with her. Alix Earle does a good job of portraying herself in an authentic way for her followers, which seems to hold true for both participants who do not find her relatable at all, and those who find her very relatable. For both sides of the spectrum, authenticity was present in Earle's content, regardless of how much the relatability aspect was present. For the participants of this study, authenticity is shown through an influencer's ability to be their true selves, live authentically, and be honest about the ways that they portray themselves online.

For example, many of the participants felt that Earle being her true self looked like her openly talking about the things happening in her life, like romantic relationships, school, and work, and talking about her social life. Living authentically for the participants was a major component to trust, and that was often demonstrated through Earle's openness about her relationships with friends and family. Many of the participants felt like this differed from other influencers, who almost seem to only show themselves living as influencers, befriending other influencers, making lavish purchases, and becoming celebrities. However, participants felt that rather than doing what other influencers do, Earle offers a window into her life. And the life that she lives tends to be consistent with the life that she lived before all the fame.

As mentioned earlier, Alix Earle's decision to be candid about her cosmetic work and acne struggles is also received well by followers. While many of the participants said that they find Earle to be a beautiful woman whom they look to for aesthetic inspiration, they appreciate her transparency about how she chooses to portray herself online. It seemed that many of the participants found that because she is open about things like lip filler and breast augmentation,

they do not find themselves comparing themselves to her physically, and also find that her honesty about the matter contributes to her authenticity.

But regardless of how authentic Alix Earle seems to be online, this authenticity did not necessarily translate to relatability for the participants of this study. It seemed that for these participants, Alix Earle's relatability held a different meaning for different people. For some, Earle's honesty about her struggles with acne, her strong relationships with family and friends, and her expression and presentation of her gender identity as a woman (or girl) were all ways in which she came across as relatable for participants. However, some participants felt that her affluence, extravagant lifestyle, and social life made her extremely unrelatable. This was a very interesting part of the research, as it revealed that people relate to others in different ways. For some, it doesn't matter how rich and popular someone is, they can relate to people who have similar values and interests as them. However, for others, living a luxurious, out-of-reach lifestyle immediately puts oneself on a different "level." Participants made comments either saying something along the lines of, "Alix Earle is so fun and likes the same things I like, so I feel like we are on the same level," or "Alix Earle is so rich and has so many friends, we are nowhere near being on the same level."

Being on the same "level," can mean different things to different people. And in the same breath, so does being "friends." Similar to the relatability spectrum, there was also a spectrum of how much the participants viewed Alix Earle as a friend. Naturally, it seemed that those who felt they related with Earle also looked at her as a friend. And those who felt that Earle was unrelatable did not look at her as a friend. Regardless of the two, it seemed that the majority of participants follow Alix Earle for some degree of entertainment.

Alix Earle is also very good at entertaining her followers. As mentioned in the findings section, Earle is known for making GRWM videos, a very popular genre on TikTok. This style of content is very important to Alix Earle's success as an influencer. On one hand, it has an entertaining storytelling element that allows viewers to get a glimpse into her life and hear anecdotes about what she is getting ready for. On the other hand, GRWM videos also serve as a demonstration of makeup application, hair styling, and outfit selection. For those who appreciate Earle's appearance, seeing how exactly she is doing her makeup, which clothes she is wearing, and how she styles her hair is a great way to achieve the look themselves. Additionally, it offers a more natural way for Earle to introduce new products to her audience, whether she is promoting them or not.

It was obvious that some degree of trans-parasocial relationship was present in the interviews for this study. As mentioned in the literature review, trans-parasocial relationships have three elements: collective reciprocity, asynchronous interaction, and cocreation. Collective reciprocity refers to the step beyond parasocial relationship, which is one sided, and instead consists of a two-sided relationship between the influencer and the audience. Participants in this study mentioned that Alix Earle shows reciprocation to her followers by occasionally responding to their comments, sending clothing items to fans, and even sharing a drink in real life. Asynchronous interaction refers to the ways that influencers and their followers can interact in real time. A good example to this, which was just mentioned, was when Alix Earle responded to a follower who asked to borrow one of her dresses. Earle ended up seeing the video, commented back, and sent the dress to the follower. Even just watching this interaction for some will make Earle seem more reachable, which may reinforce the strength of a trans-parasocial relationship. Finally, cocreation refers to the ways in which comments by a follower or requests for a specific

video influence the content made by an influencer. In Earle's case, this seems to be present in her podcast, where she is often releasing episodes that followers have requested, such as episodes talking about her romantic relationships or her experience with Accutane. Additionally, many participants mentioned that they have seen Earle make videos or comments in response to followers asking where she got a particular clothing item or makeup product. In short, many felt that Earle's content creation was influenced by her followers' requests.

Although trans-parasocial relationships are present in Alix Earle's following, they did not seem to have an impact on brand affinity and purchase intention. As mentioned before, not all participants view Earle as a friend, however, every single participant was able to name at least one brand that Alix Earle had promoted that they were interested in. All participants noted an affinity for brands that Earle not only promotes but is seen using. Based on the conversations that took place in the interviews, brand affinity and purchase intention were much more linked to authenticity and content style than relationship or relatability. When asked about brands and products that Earle uses or promotes, all participants cited either the naturalness of the product placement or the demonstration of using it as reasons why they trusted her and have interest in purchasing. Although many participants have not yet made a purchase decision, each participant had positive associations with the brand or product due to their perceived credibility of Earle as an influencer.

This introduces new implications for brands who chose to use beauty influencers for their digital marketing. For one, while trans-parasocial relationships exist and form online between influencers and their followers, they do not seem to contribute to brand affinity and purchase intention nearly as much as authenticity. This means that brands should consider working with influencers who are known for their authenticity and honesty on their platforms. Additionally, the

content style, GRWM, is also very helpful for followers to be introduced to new products. Brands should consider sponsoring influencers who follow this content genre, because it will make the promotion or collaboration seem more natural and contextual for the audience viewing the content, as opposed to a one-off post about a completely random and unrelated product. This would ensure that the audience not only feels organically introduced to a product but also gets to see the product used in real time.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Although this study produced many insights, there were some limitations. For one, all but one interview took place over video chat via Zoom. This created some issues as participants are likely to behave differently on a video call than in-person. Additionally, it created some minor technical issues in the recording and transcription of the interviews, as Wi-Fi connection cut out occasionally during some of the calls.

Another limitation of this research study was that only six interviews took place. Due to time constraints for this project, I was only able to conduct interviews over the span of two weeks. Due to the fact that all six participants and I are students, this meant that there was limited time to meet with more than six individuals to perform this study. Although these interviews produced meaningful results, it would be easier to discover more themes and behavioral patterns if the sample pool consisted of at least twelve participants.

It should also be noted that all participants of this study self-identify themselves as being followers of Alix Earle, so I expected that I would be hearing generally positive things about the influencer and her creation style. Because it was necessary for my research, it made sense to

select these individuals for those reasons. However, it likely contributed to some bias in the research as all participants like Alix Earle and probably felt inclined to speak highly of her as an influencer. Also, me being a fellow student of all six participants may have added some additional pressure to participants to perform in a certain way because they were talking to a peer.

In the future, it would be helpful to conduct similar research across a larger sample pool. It would also be important to look at followers of Alix Earle across different age groups, socioeconomic status, gender identity, and geographical location. Because this was a smaller study, the findings likely reflect a small subset of Alix Earle's followers. In the future it would be better to expand this sample pool in such a way to better understand these dynamics and given that the influencer has amassed several millions of followers, there could be more insights to be generated from a larger scale.

Overall, this study was incredibly eye-opening and a phenomenal experience. I really enjoyed talking to all six women and hearing all of their perspectives and related to them all in different ways. Something interesting that I found when conducting this study was that interview research requires a lot of pivoting and improvising. There were several lessons that I learned along the way that made each interview better and better.

First, everyone is different. Everyone expresses themselves in different ways. Something I noticed early on was that I had to ask questions in varying ways according to what made the most sense for certain participants. When participants seemed to love Alix Earle, I continued probing them about what they liked about her, why they trust her, and why they want to follow her. When participants seemed to follow her more for entertainment, I probed them more about

what they find entertaining. It was all about being able to understand their point of view, and thankfully, both interview styles produced similar results.

Another thing that I was mindful about in the interviews was the fact that interviewees likely want to please the interviewer. I learned early on that I can't just tell the participants "There are no wrong answers," I had to show them. While for the first three interviews I took a more unbiased, objective approach in responding to interviewee's anecdotes, I quickly learned that I needed to validate what participants were saying so that they felt comfortable to elaborate.

I made this discovery when I realized that after every interview, as soon as the recording ended and I went back to being "myself," another conversation would follow that often lasted about fifteen minutes. In these post-mortem conversations, participants would reveal more to me than they did during the interviews. After discussing this concern with my faculty advisor, I realized that I needed to be more "me" in the interviews, especially as the participant's peer.

I was sure to do so cautiously without injecting my own bias into the interviews, and I realized that doing so produced far more candid responses from the participants. I believe that part of this may be due to a cultural perception of influencers, and an underlying belief that they are inherently deceitful or untrustworthy. There also seems to be a negative connotation surrounding "liking" an influencer, so sometimes it took more probing to understand why a participant did or did not like Alix Earle.

Finally, one of the most insightful takeaways from this study for me was the discussion surrounding "girlhood." It was at times very refreshing to see so many women talk about a woman who they feel inspired by, seen by, and look up to. Regardless of where participants fell on the spectrum of parasocial relationships or relatability, all participants had something meaningful to say about their womanhood, Earle's, or both. I can't wait to have more

conversations like this with other women in my life and would encourage others to take the time to do so, because there is so much left unsaid regarding the ways that shared female experiences can transcend in-person relationships and exist in our very pockets.

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