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Satakunnan ammattikorkeakoulu
Satakunta University of Applied Sciences

NOORA LAANTI

Parasocial relationships between businesses and customers as a way of marketing

Differences between three companies that implement it

DEGREE PROGRAMME IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS
2023

ABSTRACT

Laanti, Noora: Parasocial relationships between businesses and customers as a way of marketing: Differences between three companies that implement it
Bachelor's thesis
International Business
July 2023
Number of pages: 46

Developing marketing strategies that are current and unique is increasingly important in the constantly developing social media marketing world. One of the solutions is implementing a parasocial marketing strategy, something that has been utilized by influencers and celebrities for decades. Now businesses are executing these parasocial strategies directly between themselves and consumers.

The goal of this thesis was to explore the different kinds of parasocial marketing employed by different businesses on social media. I catalogued social media activities from three businesses, Duolingo, Vegas Golden Knights and Casetify, across three social media platforms, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, as well as consumer reactions and comments. The study was conducted as a phenomenographic qualitative research.

I found differences between the businesses and differences between the platforms for each business and how well parasocial marketing was executed. Good characteristics of parasocial marketing included having content on socials that is engaging, feels casual instead of formal business communications, and having a good understanding of the consumer base that the business is looking to target.

I concluded there must be a balance of content on a consumers' feed, so they do not feel over-advertised to, and the easiest way of engaging a specific target group, is hiring a person from said target group to design the content.

Keywords: parasocial marketing, parasocial branding, social media, duolingo, vegas golden knights, casetify

FOREWORD

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

The media landscape is rapidly changing as businesses connect with and engage their customers more extensively through social media's powerful, multidimensional platforms that enable individuals to build, maintain, and display extensive social networking, information sharing, and entertainment channels. (Avery et al., 2010; Boyd & Ellison 2008; Men & Tsai 2011; Park, Song et al. 2014; Utz 2009) Companies and customers collaborate in such a dynamic environment to develop new products, services, business models, and values, while brands gain exposure and strengthen customer relationships. (Ko et al., 2011) This thesis highlights that through parasocial relationships and marketing on social media, businesses have decided to try their hand at becoming influencers themselves. Since influencer marketing has been found to be incredibly successful due to the parasocial relationships built between consumers and influencers, why could a business not build a similar parasocial relationship with the customer directly? This will build customer equity with companies, which is the lifetime value of all customers. (Rust, Moorman, & Bhalla 2010)

Parasocial relationships are considered critical to consumer brand evaluations (Fournier 1998) and brand equity, value equity, and relationship equity (Blackston, 2000; Dwivedi & Johnson, 2013) that influence customer equity and customer lifetime value. (Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml 2004; Vogel, Evanschitzky, & Ramaseshan 2008) In addition, celebrity source credibility (Ohanian, 1990), media features, and customer characteristics, such as their motivations for using social networking services (SNS), all have an impact on parasocial relationships. (Kim & Rubin 1997) These motivations are more effective than program content in fostering parasocial relationships. (Rubin & Perse 1987)

1.1 Research approach and framework

To understand parasocial relationships between consumers and businesses, in this work I have chosen to follow three different businesses' social media behavior between November 10th, 2022, and December 20th, 2022. During this time, I collected a large sample of the businesses' social media behaviors, while covering two largest sales events of the year, Black Friday on November 25th in 2022, and Christmas, as well as a large cultural event in the FIFA World Cup 2022 taking place between November 20th and December 18th. This thesis work chose three social media platforms to focus on for the three companies based on the differences in the content posted to each one. These platforms being Twitter, which is mostly text, Instagram, which is mostly pictures, and TikTok, which is mostly videos.
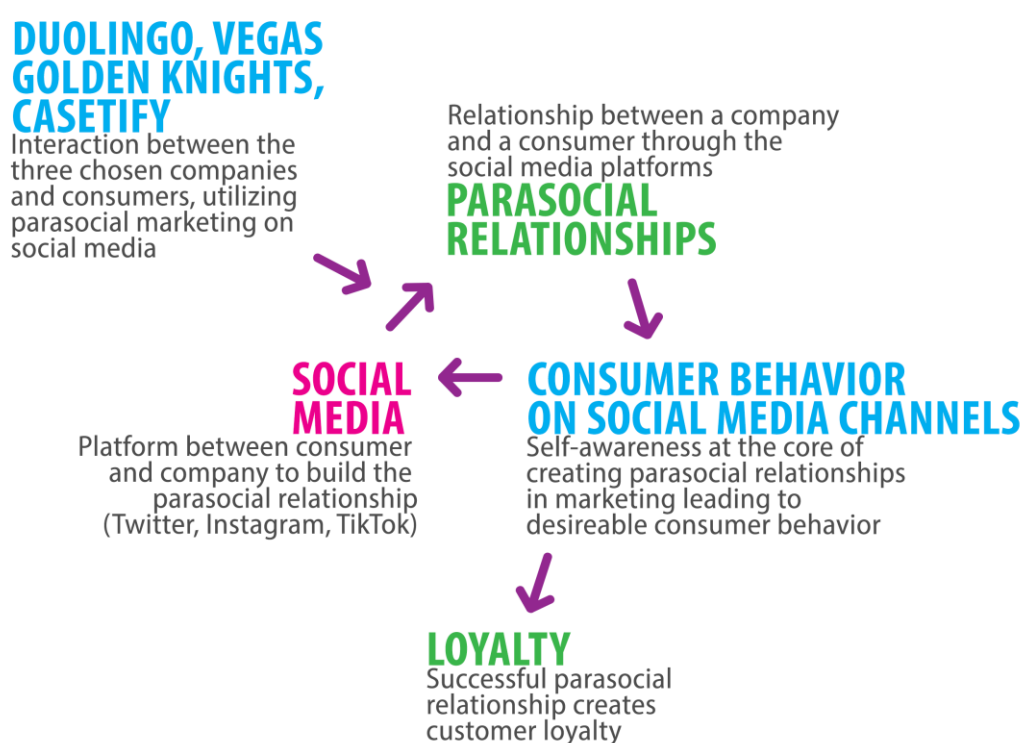

Figure 1. Thesis framework

In the framework of the thesis, the theory combines parasocial relationships and consumer behavior on social media channels (Twitter, Instagram, TikTok). This thesis studied the parasocial marketing communications aimed at

consumers. Parasocial relationships and interactive consumer encounters take place online, on social media platforms. When these parasocial relationships are formed, they generate loyalty towards the business and the brand.

1.2 Purpose and research questions

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between attitude and customer equity. Customer equity is critical in evaluating marketing decisions, as well as developing and implementing marketing strategies. (Rust et al., 2004; Severt & Palakurthi, 2008) Companies must appreciate the value of customers in order to manage investments (Blattberg & Deighton, 1996) and carefully allocate their resources for advertising, promotions, and sales. (Rust et al., 2004) In terms of clarifying the consequences of parasocial relationships, consumer attitude has notable effects on customer equity. Because customer equity drivers are likely to be positively influenced by attitude. (e.g., Kim, Ko, Xu, & Han, 2012) Despite social media's explosive popularity and the fact that marketers are turning to social media as critical platforms, little academic research has been conducted to assist marketers in understanding the best practices for building parasocial relationships with consumers through such channels. (Yuan et al. 2015) This thesis provides practical examples of three different companies social media parasocial marketing differences and how to engage customers in their brands, products, and services by recognizing that parasocial relationships affect customer equity. Marketing practitioners must satisfy consumers' desires for entertainment and relationships in order to strengthen parasocial relationships, which increases customer equity. In other words, when marketers create social media pages that allow consumers to be entertained by and/or connected with businesses, they improve parasocial relationships and customer equity. To achieve the above statement has birthed the following research questions:

1) What kind of parasocial marketing do three different companies achieve in social media channels (Twitter, Instagram and TikTok)?

2) How is parasocial marketing different between these three companies?

3) What kind of best practices can be observed in these three companies' parasocial relationships and marketing with consumers?

The thesis will next go over the case companies which were chosen, then the social media platforms said companies were looked at on as well as algorithms. Following that, the thesis explains parasocial relationships and their role in marketing. After that is a chapter on customer behavior in terms of interaction and customer loyalty, after which the thesis moves to the methodology and findings.

1.3 Companies

1.3.1 Duolingo

Duolingo Inc (Duolingo) is an educational technology company, providing language-learning services through an application and a website. The company's lesson platform includes gamification features like speaking, translation, listening, and multiple-choice challenges, as well as grading and ways to improve. Duolingo English test, tiny cards, podcasts, stories, and a dictionary are among its products. The company's learning platform is available as a mobile app for Android, iOS, and Windows, as well as through the Duolingo.com web platform. Duolingo's main product being sold is a subscription service to their language-learning application. The application can however be free to use, so mostly marketing is to gain and maintain application users. Duolingo's headquarters are in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the United States and their 2022 revenue was $250.8M. (Global Data, Duolingo Inc: Overview)

1.3.2 Vegas Golden Knights

Vegas Golden Knights is a professional ice hockey team in the National Hockey League (NHL), whose main goal is selling tickets to games and

merchandise for the team. Vegas Golden Knights was founded in 2017 as the first major sports organization in Las Vegas metropolitan area. Their 2021/22 season revenue was $198M. (Gough, 2023)

1.3.3 Casetify

Casetify (stylized as CASETiFY) is a tech accessories lifestyle brand founded in 2011. The businesses largest product category is mobile phone protective cases, but they also offer cases for other tech products, like Apple AirPods, the Nintendo Switch and Apple Macbooks. The business' main market is cases for phones and their social design service allows anyone to create custom products using Instagram photos. The designs are turned into "high quality cases with their patent pending technology" (Crunchbase – Organization Casetify, 2023). Casetify employs both parasocial marketing directly, as well as influencer marketing.

1.4 List of Terms

Algorithm: a set of rules and calculations, that determine what content gets pushed to consumers on social media.

Consumer behavior: Set of human processes, like emotions and preferences, used by consumers to determine their purchasing behavior.

Parasocial branding: A perception of the company that has been created to communicate a relationship between the brand and the consumer.

Parasocial marketing: A marketing strategy that focuses on creating a parasocial relationship between the brand and the consumer.

Parasocial relationship: the illusion of a face-to-face relationship between a performer and a spectator, or in the case of this thesis, between a business and a consumer.

2 SOCIAL MEDIA

2.1 Social media channels

Businesses have many options of social media channels to choose from, based on the content they wish to publish, the desired target market, and how frequently they wish to publish content. Common choices are for example Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter and TikTok. From these options YouTube and TikTok are ways to connect with a younger target market in video form. Instagram and Twitter are more popular among all age groups, and the content is images and text respectively. Facebook and LinkedIn are challenging platforms because of the way they present to the consumer. Facebook is robust, but the algorithm is ever-changing and unpredictable and the statistics it gives businesses, offer very little insight into what any of it means. (Meta, 2015) LinkedIn is considered a professional platform, and businesses are expected to communicate things that have to do with themselves as a business, instead of trying to forge relationships.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to focus on one text heavy platform, one image heavy platform and one video heavy platform to investigate for the businesses.

2.1.1 Twitter

Twitter is a mostly text based social media, which had 368.4 million monthly users worldwide as of December 2022 (Dixon). Twitter averaged

approximately 400 million tweets each day, approximately 4600 every second in March of 2022 (Leetaru). These numbers are likely to be lower than the reality is, as researchers omit the user information of private accounts from their data. Twitter does not disclose the number of private accounts on their platform.

2.1.2 Instagram

Instagram is a mostly image based social media, owned by Meta Platforms, which has over 2 billion monthly users worldwide. (Zuckerberg, 2022) Researchers found this number to be 1.21 billion in 2021 (Dixon, 2023) which likely means around 800 million Instagram accounts are private and could not be counted towards the survey.

2.1.3 TikTok

TikTok is a mostly video based social media, owned by ByteDance, which is reported to have reached 1 billion monthly users in September 2021. (TikTok) Because of the relatively recent success of TikTok, not much data exists of the userbase or user habits.

2.2 Algorithm

Because of the primary consumption and exchange of information status of social media platforms, it has become increasingly important for businesses to not only appeal to algorithms on those platforms for engagement but create content consumers want to follow their platforms for. These algorithms are complex and change frequently. The issue with businesses trying to appeal to these algorithms, is that they are frequently not understood by platform users nor those posting the content. (Rassameeroj & Wu, 2021) However users who have grown up with these algorithms have been trained to pick them up and tend to understand them better than those who did not grow up on social media. Researchers have shown concern about how the algorithms function and

place people in categories, however many of them fail to consider how easily young people understand and manage these algorithms and manipulate them to their own benefit. This algorithm literacy comes to young people so naturally, that they have a hard time putting their understanding into words. Even highly educated individuals have great understanding of algorithms through experiences, but do not have to vocabulary to share their knowledge. (Swart, 2021)

Where algorithmic literacy and leaning into algorithms and gaining followers who want to consume the content being put out by an entity go hand in hand, is on video based platforms. Matthew Patrick, who has over 8 years of experience in data-driven digital video strategy consultation for large scale YouTube creators, said in an interview with Anthony Padilla that social media algorithms are made to understand if a consumer is functioning like a follower or a subscriber independent of whether the user has followed or subscribed to the account posting the content. He also notes in the interview, that there may be laws coming that will outlaw algorithms on social media as they exist now. The effects that such laws would have on algorithm driven platforms would likely be devastating to businesses. (Patrick, 2023) In an event where algorithms become illegal, must businesses produce engaging and interesting content for social media that consumers want to follow. This is where creating a strong parasocial relationship with the consumer becomes invaluable.

3 PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

3.1 History

A parasocial relationship is the illusion of a face-to-face relationship between a performer and a spectator. Originally the term was coined by Horton and Wohl (1956) for the relationship between people on radio or television and the audiences but has especially in the time of social media evolved to also include celebrities on social media or content creators on video and streaming

services, as well as businesses. At the core of a parasocial relationship is a limited, one-sided interaction that is controlled by the performer, celebrity or business and the spectator, or consumer has the power to withdraw at any point and refuse to continue the relationship. (Horton & Wohl, 1956)

Perse and Rubin (1989) found that construct systems, which are ways people create impressions and explain behaviors of others, about real people and characters on soap operas were "linearly related". Their analysis also showed that parasocial relationships are influenced by length of exposure, where with more exposure, people became more confident in the parasocial relationship.

Sood and Rogers (2000) noted in their research, that people would also voice their complaints about their favorite characters not appearing in a soap opera for a time. Viewers of the show create a parasocial relationship with a fictional character so strong, they would miss them when the character is gone. People will link their own moods and wellbeing to fictional characters. This is also something mirrored with sports fans, where failures and successes in important games or continued losses will affect the moods of fans. (Abdallah, 2017)

Minor interaction possibilities changed the landscape entirely. In consumer-brand relationships, due to this technical possibility, interactions happen, but still are more like one-way conversations. This is because the brand's personality must stay uniform throughout their online presence, so interactions with consumers are made referencing internal guidelines and scripts. However, because the illusion of this interaction exists, consumers are more likely to believe in their relationship with the brand. The responses usually have no identifiable information on the responder, alluding to an idea of all responses coming from a singular source, despite likely there being several different employees working on them. (Labrecque, 2014)

3.2 Parasocial relationships marketing

"Parasocial marketing theory is one perspective explaining the effectiveness of influencer marketing in social media. Researchers in marketing and consumer behavior have utilized parasocial relationship theory to explore themes including consumer-brand relationships in social media (Labrecque, 2014), parasocial advertising (Lueck, 2015), strength of parasocial relationships in social media (Bond, 2016), as well as which social media channels (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011) and what kind of influencer characteristics (Chung and Cho, 2017; Giles, 2002) are most likely to generate strong parasocial relationships." (Närvänen et al., 2020)

Consumers trust other consumers more than businesses themselves when talking about a product or a service. (Hu et al. 2019) However, the difference between parasocial relationships between a consumer and an influencer, who is viewed as a fellow consumer giving a genuine opinion about a product they have also used, and a consumer and a business, is that when a business creates a parasocial relationships, it's not pretending to be an influencer saying how good the product is. The business is forging a friendship like loyalty between themselves and the consumer, in which honesty is vital. (Sirichareechai, 2021) If the consumer considers the business a friend and someone they trust, they do not feel the need to doubt the integrity of a product or a service. Why would their friend lie to them? Why would they not support a friend in their business ventures?

Because people are used to forging relationships with people online, in the modern age if a company or a brand can speak and interact like normal people, rather than a brand with an obvious sales agenda, a consumer can become "close" with a company or a brand, and a parasocial relationship is formed between a customer and a business. (Kunnas, 2017)

3.2.1 Parasocial marketing online

In modern day, engagement and communication are everything. Brands on social media want consumers to talk to them and engage with their content as they would with their friends and because people are so used to creating parasocial relationships with content they consume online, it works, however Labrecque's research results found that if a consumer is aware of the parasocial nature of the relationship with a business, the effects are significantly lessened. Consumers create parasocial relationships with businesses, content creators and strangers online frequently, but wish to perceive these relationships as reciprocal. When the relationship is to the satisfaction of the consumer, they are very willing to provide businesses with personal information and become incredibly loyal to brands. (Labrecque, 2014)

Not only do businesses foster their own relationships with their consumers and try to create an online presence of their own, but they also utilize the existing online presences of celebrities and influencers, who have already created a space for themselves and trust between themselves and their followers. It has been found that celebrity endorsement of goods or services impacts brand awareness, purchase intention and general brand attitudes in a positive manner. While it is estimated that in United States of America and Europe celebrity endorsement only makes up approximately 15% of advertisements, the percentage is a much larger in many Asian countries. It is reported that in India and South Korea that percentage reaches 60%. (Chung & Cho, 2017)

Studies on how parasocial relationships with celebrities affect consumer behavior have been limited, but the findings have been positive. Kim Kardashian with 357 million Instagram followers (Kardashian, 2023), and Kylie Jenner with 391 million Instagram followers (Jenner, 2023) are some of the most sought-after celebrities for product advertising. For a younger audience, brands may want to look to influencers from the internet, such as Addison Rae at 38 million Instagram followers (Rae, 2023) or Khaby Lame at 79 million Instagram followers (Lame, 2023).

Through social media the line between a parasocial relationship and a reciprocal relationship has become more blurred. When celebrities post about their lives and use first-person forms in their captions, as well as informal words and grammar, the spectator feels closer to the celebrity. When the spectator feels closer to the celebrity, through a medium that fosters these parasocial relationships, they are more likely to not only take the advertisement in this casual medium as a genuine recommendation, but they are also more likely to follow through with a purchase. (Chung & Cho, 2017)

In research done by Chung and Cho (2017), it was found that parasocial relationships supported by social media interaction had "a significant marketing value". They found that if a consumer had a parasocial relationship with a celebrity advertising a product, it raised their trust towards the source product company and made them more likely to buy the product. Even though the chances of direct correspondence between spectators and celebrities through social media are small, the existence of such opportunity give fans "a sense of intimacy and reciprocity" in these parasocial relationships, and therefore social media is the perfect platform for utilizing parasocial relationships in marketing.

3.2.2 Parasocial marketing with brands and community engagement

A parasocial relationship between a company and a customer creates a stronger sense of community. This is present in sports fans having a community, based on the team they support, but also for example Apple users or people who drive the same make of car show a certain familiarity and comradery between one another based only on the products they use. This community combined with parasocial marketing has been shown to generate customer, brand, value, and relationship equity. (Yuan et al, 2016) A strong community with a parasocial relationship with the company will also engage in more conversation and therefore free promotion for the company, by talking about the company as well as reposting or otherwise sharing the company's social media posts to their own.

Edelman (2019) found that 3 in 4 consumers avoid advertising using one or more strategies. According to their study, almost half of all consumers use ad blocking technology and a similar amount have changed their media habits to see less advertising. This is why businesses have had to find alternative ways of advertising that are less obvious to the consumer.

Disclosing content being an advertisement is not a requirement for a business, because all social media posts should be considered advertising. All communication from a business online is the brand speaking and does not need to be separately mentioned to be an advertisement. That is the expectation and assumption. This is also how Casetify can repost influencer videos to their own TikTok page, and not mention that the video was made as an advertisement for their product. Casetify often uses micro influencers for videos they will repost, as they are not monetarily compensating these micro influencers. It is common for a brand selling a product to send an influencer a product or several products and say the influencer does not have to make a video or post photos of said products. However, it is largely known in micro influencer communities, that if you do then create a piece of content with the free product, you're likely to get either a paid deal, or at the very least more free products.

Many brands on social media exhibit their brand personalities, which are constructed human personalities to fit the brand. Through these personalities, brands can seem more personable to consumers, and create parasocial relationships with them. Often this means a brand's social media content is created by people chosen for their personalities to represent the brand, under the name of the brand. Research found that the aspects of a brand personality that create brand loyalty the most efficiently are credibility (responsible, confident, consistent), audacity (creative, up-to-date) and joy (happy, extroverted, playful). (Demo et al, 2018) There are however many brands that have had success with brand personalities that do not follow the qualifications found effective by the research. Brands have Twitter accounts that invite you to interact and many of the Tweets posted do not necessarily have anything to do with the brand.

Engaging customers in a parasocial relationship through marketing comes with downsides. Because this engagement will engage the customers emotionally, it comes with the possibility of less than favorable and unexpected reactions. Grove et al (2012) found that *customer rage* is something marketing professionals must be ready to manage and offered the 4Ts of customer rage as a way to do it. They explain that when customers are engaged emotionally, customer rage may occur even if the service is executing everything without failure. This means that marketing professionals must be aware of their customers' potential temperament and triggers to avoid incidents. The study also theorized that sports marketers are likely better at managing customer rage than marketing professionals of other services. A common example of customer rage in a non-sport context would be erratic and abusive behavior towards retail workers on Black Friday, because a product is in short supply.

However, despite the sides of parasocial marketing, it is considered overall a positive and beneficial strategy for businesses and brands to engage in, as it increases loyalty and makes consumers more willing to provide the business with information. (Labrecque, 2014)

3.3 Summary of parasocial relationships

Parasocial relationships refer to the illusion of a two-way relationship in a situation where the relationship is one-directional, like between a television character and viewer, or in the case of this thesis, a business or a brand and a consumer. In marketing parasocial relationships between a business or a brand and a consumer are used to create customer loyalty. When a consumer believes they have a personal relationship with the brand, they are also more likely to spread that brand's messaging through word of mouth.

Because consumers believe in the parasocial relationship with the brand, they will build communities around the brand. This kind of loyalty feeds itself and requires very minor upkeep from the brand itself. Since 3 in 4 consumers use one or several techniques to avoid advertising, this kind of marketing that can

fly under the radar of direct advertising is invaluable. Brands making their social media fun to follow and interesting to interact with, is likely to be seen by more people than paid advertising with a disclaimer about its ad status.

4 CONSUMER BEHAVIOR ON SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS

4.1 Brand and customer loyalty

Consumers online want to belong to social groups. Belonging to such a group has been found to drive use and purchase behavior. (Wang, 2017) A key in differentiating parasocial marketing from regular social media marketing, is in making the customer consider the business a relatable "person". This has been known as something important when influencers create parasocial relationships with their followers, posting "something real" like "eating candy". (Närvänen et al, 2020) For businesses this has looked like engaging in conversations about sports, concert tickets, or making fun of other businesses marketing stunts on social media. The way parasocial marketing happens is increasingly self-referential and *meta* in a way, where the person executing the marketing technique must be very aware of their own messaging and how other companies are doing similar things. These brands must also be aware of their own company image creating their own personality, as well as other company images dictating that company's social media personality to be compliant with the image.

Studies have shown that parasocial marketing creates brand engagement and brand loyalty across age groups (Närvänen et al, 2020; Zhong et al, 2021). Bilgin (2018) found that customers considered entertainment the most important part of social media marketing, and that to execute and maintain social media marketing successfully, brands should be committed to "individual communication with customers and paying strict attention to content sharing about the brand with considering being interesting and entertaining" (Bilgin, 2018)

This speaks to the success of parasocial marketing over regular social media marketing, which focuses on currentness and advertising. A committed and successful parasocial relationship fosters strong and unique associations in consumers' memories and therefore strengthens the customer's relationship with the brand. (Yuan et al, 2015)

4.2 Consumer interaction and differences online

With the rise of social media and its use among different demographics, consumers expect brands to keep up. In 2012 (Mickens), nearly 60% of consumers worldwide expected brands and businesses to respond to customer service questions on social media. Sprout Social reported in 2022, that 76% of consumers expect this response in a 24-hour period, meaning a rise on expectations in recent years. (Lanier, 2022) However Labrecque (2014) found, that parasocial relationships rely on the consumer believing in the humanity of the business or brand, and if the responses are clearly automated and done through artificial intelligence, the positive effects of parasocial relationship interaction do not hold.

Customer's interacting with a brand online has become such a key part of online marketing, companies encourage customers to post about their purchases onto their social media pages. This is done both through having a share button available at the checkout page on the web store site, (So et al, 2017) as well as directly asking customers, for example on Twitter, about their favorite purchases from the business or if followers purchased something during a sale.

A large portion of middle school aged children cannot tell the difference between news and advertisements on social media and will consume both types of content the same way. (YLE, 2019)

4.3 Summary of consumer behavior and interaction with parasocial relationships on social media channels

Self-awareness is at the very core of creating parasocial relationships in marketing that lead to desirable consumer behavior. A relatable persona will make the consumer trust the brand more and engage consumers of all ages. The line between parasocial marketing and customer service is slim, and often brand social media pages will have to engage in both to maintain relevancy. Consumers have customer service expectations from brand social media pages.

5 METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research method

The research is a phenomenographic research executed as a case study featuring three businesses, looking at the variations in the phenomenon of parasocial marketing by businesses. It is a qualitative research, interpreting data from a limited number of sources to find differences and successes, done from posts created between November 10th, 2022, and December 20th, 2022 on Twitter, Instagram and TikTok.

5.2 Data gathering

The data for analysis is social media posts, extracted from the platforms Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. The timeframe for the posts is November 10th, 2022, and December 20th, 2022, and includes text, images and videos that exhibit a goal of parasocial marketing, as well as comments on posts reacting to the post or speaking to the company in a casual manner. All social media posts by companies are considered official communication and serve a marketing purpose, even if said posts do not mention the business or their products.

	Instagram posts	Instagram stories	TikTok videos	Twitter posts	Combined
Duolingo	15	19	16	76	126
Vegas Golden Knights	119	80	4	1133	1336
Casetify	21	60	20	100	201

Table 1. Thesis data of parasocial marketing messages of three companies on social media channels.

5.3 Data analysis

The research analysis is a qualitative analysis of social media content. It looks at the content of text, image and video content on social media and consumer reactions to the content, to understand the differences in parasocial marketing efforts from different companies and the consumer reception of those efforts, as well as the replicability of those efforts for other companies.

The analysis is a form of discourse analysis and comparative analysis. Discourse analysis looks at text within context and scrutinizes its patterns and key themes. (Rogers et al, 2013) Comparative analysis is the comparison of two or more sets of data, to find similarities and differences. On top of that this thesis does all of that as visual cross-platform analysis, which is a way to study still and moving images across multiple social media platforms to obtain a more thorough understanding of the social media behavior and encouragement of parasocial relationships, than if only a single social media platform was looked at. This also helps obtain a better understanding of whether the case businesses have different approaches and seemingly target different audiences on the different social media platforms. (Pearce et al. 2020)

In the analysis must also be done interpretation of pictures and video. This is an interpretive visual analysis based on social media posts. Observation is done both directly from the visual material, as well as through the text-based reactions of commenters. No standardized strategies have been set, but an important aspect is to understand, not what is depicted in the visual materials, but rather what is the purpose of the things depicted and why those were the

choices made by the brands, as to combat the one sidedness of just analyzing the contents of visual elements, without considering them in context. (Bohnsack, 2008)

6 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

6.1 Consumer reactions

6.1.1 Duolingo

Duolingo's social media is exclusively parasocial marketing. Duolingo spends no time on their social media trying to directly convince the consumer to purchase Duolingo Super, or to even tell people to download the application. All communication is either casual social media posting meant to create parasocial relationships through both jokes about using the application, as well as anything else current on social media or posts that make Duolingo seem more human. For example, Duolingo has a well-established a character trait of having a crush on English singer Dua Lipa. Reasoning for this is unknown, but likely stems from the similarities between the names Duolingo and Dua Lipa.
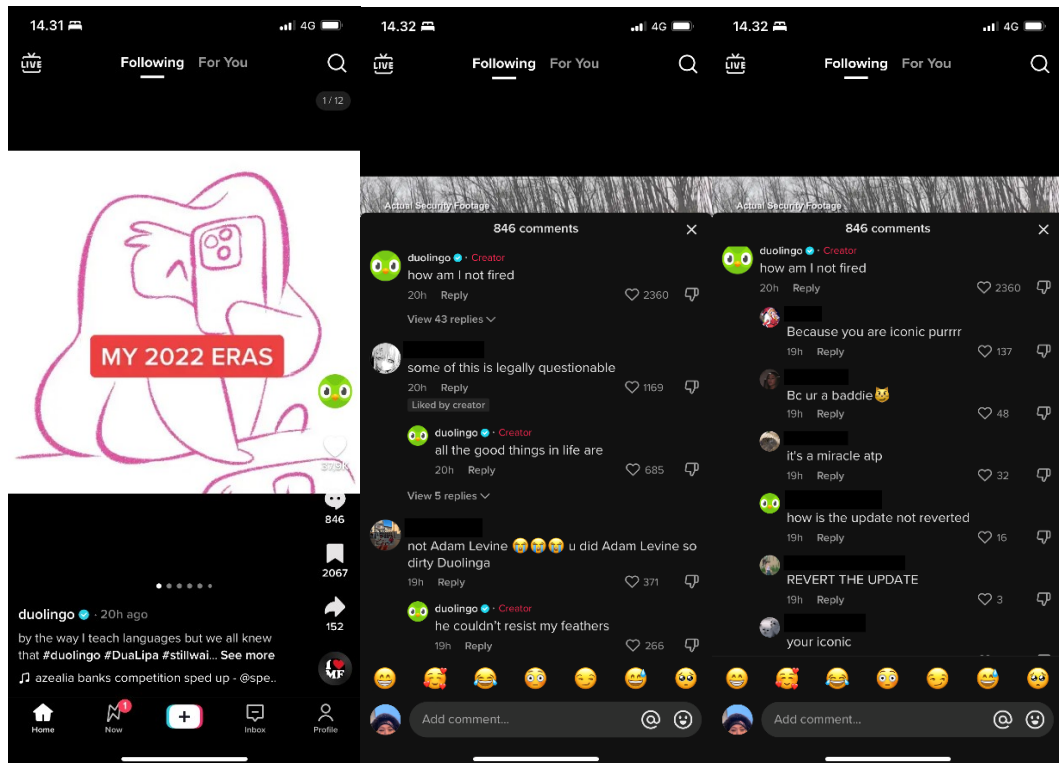
Picture 1. Duolingo's TikTok post of "My 2022 Eras" trend and comments.

There is frequent interaction and personification of "singular admin". Duolingo comments on their own TikTok with "how am I not fired" and people have replied both with reactions and support to the Duolingo admin, as well as upset over a recent update in the Duolingo application. Comments were made under a popular trend at the end of 2022, where people would post pictures of their "eras" that year, inspired by Taylor Swift's Eras tour excitement.
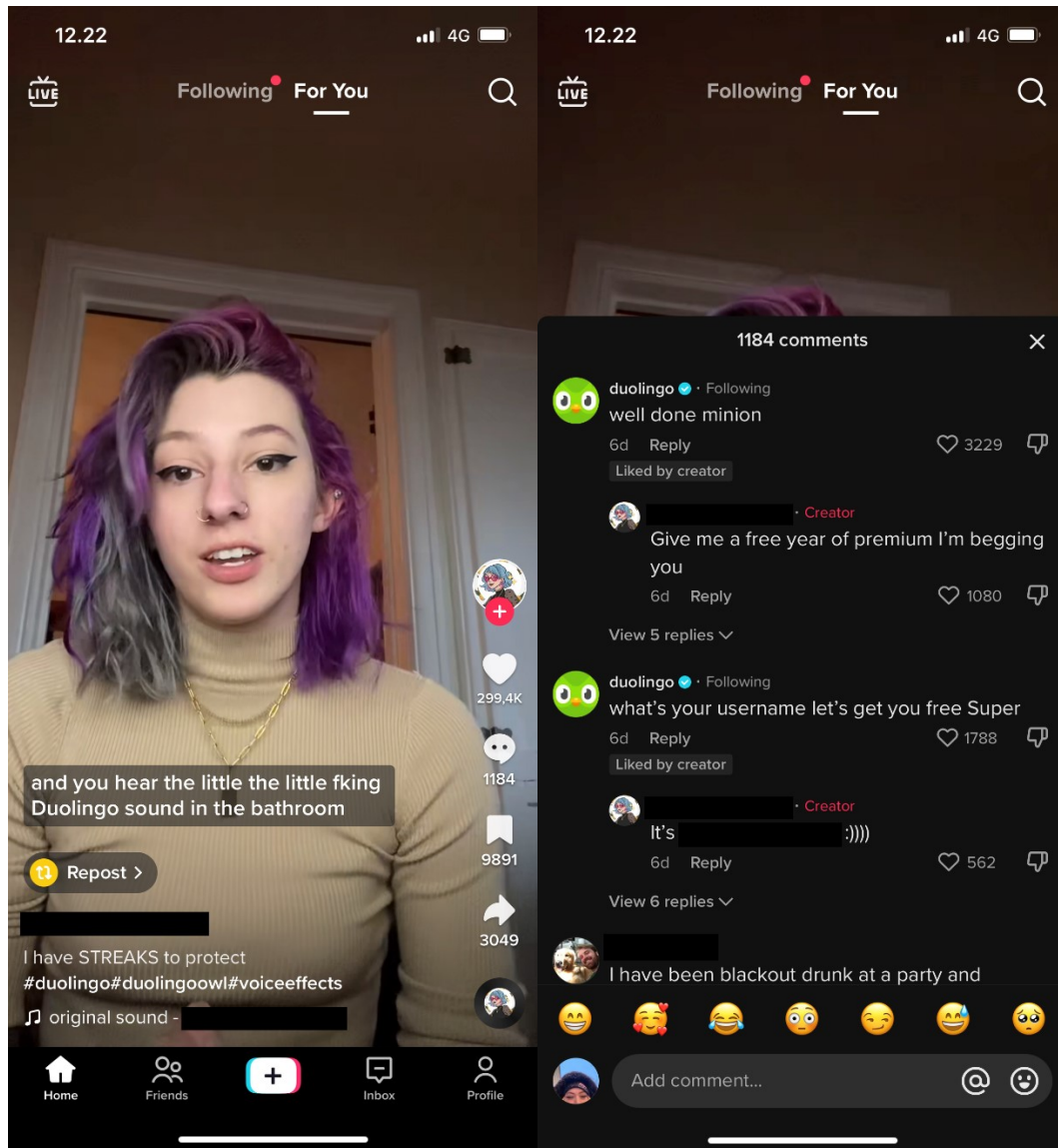
Picture 2. Duolingo interacting with customers posts about Duolingo on Tik-Tok.

Duolingo also interacts with customers' accounts. The original creator has made a TikTok discussing their commitment to the Duolingo streak regardless of the circumstances they are in. Duolingo has then commented on the TikTok supporting original poster's commitment, seemingly jokingly calling them a "minion". This will make people believe in Duolingo's persona and it's clear that the communications are not automated, which creates customer loyalty. Duolingo also rewards people for making viral content about the business, by for example gifting them free Super, a subscription service offered by Duolingo.
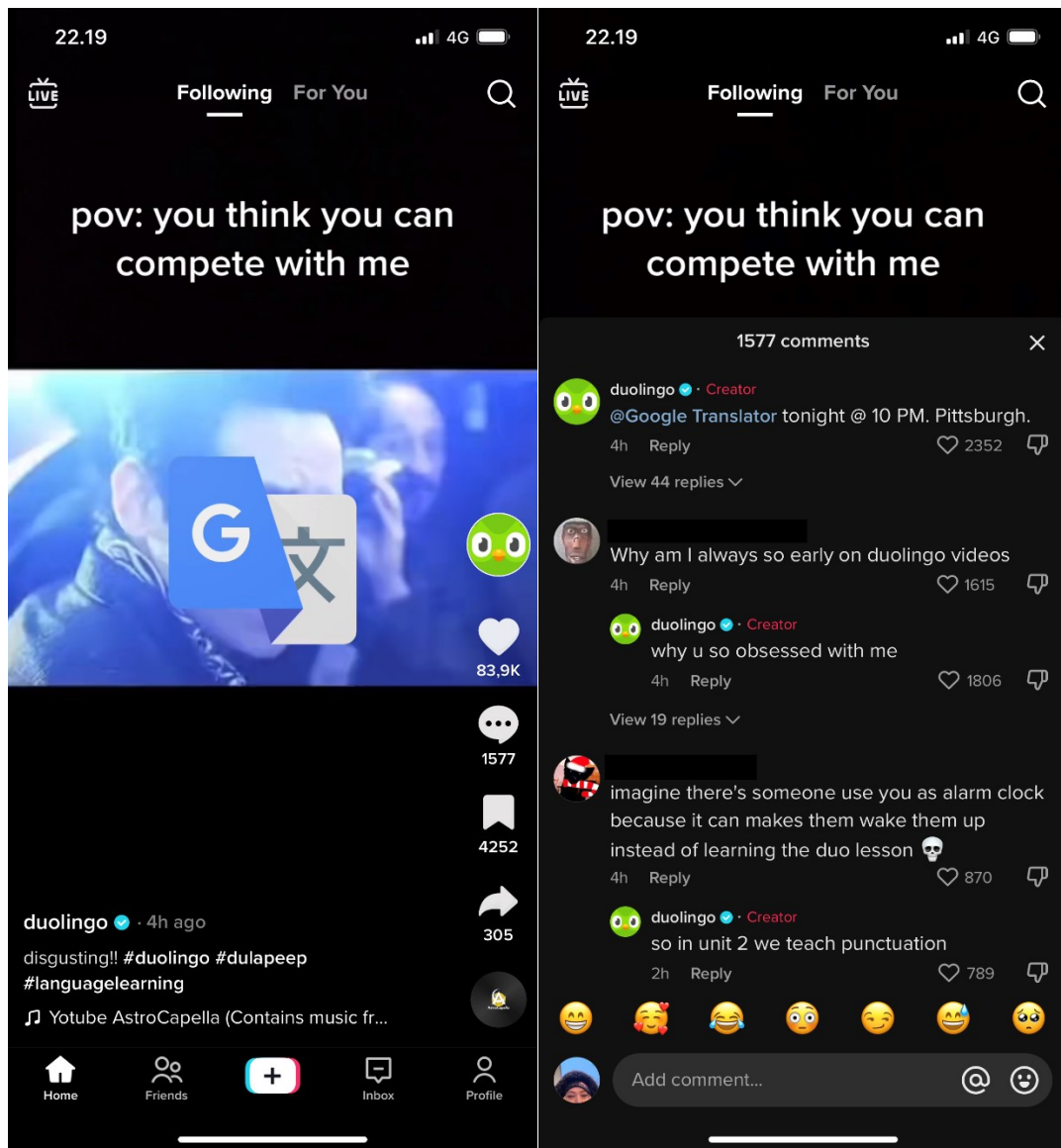
Picture 3. Duolingo post about a humoristic feud with Google Translate and comments on the post on TikTok.

In picture 3, we see Duolingo speaking to consumers casually. Duolingo posts a meme about the unreliability of Google Translate, challenging them into a potential fight. In the comments of said TikTok, Duolingo casually talks to consumers, even in an impolite manner. This is received positively by the audience, as these comments gain hundreds of likes. In the video, Duolingo has superimposed the Google Translate logo and the Duolingo logo over a clip of Ben Stiller and Owen Wilson starring in the 2001 film Zoolander. In the scene, Stiller's and Wilson's characters pass each other on a red carpet and give each other judging looks. It is implied, that Wilson's character, whose face is covered by Duolingo's owl's face, is superior in this scene.
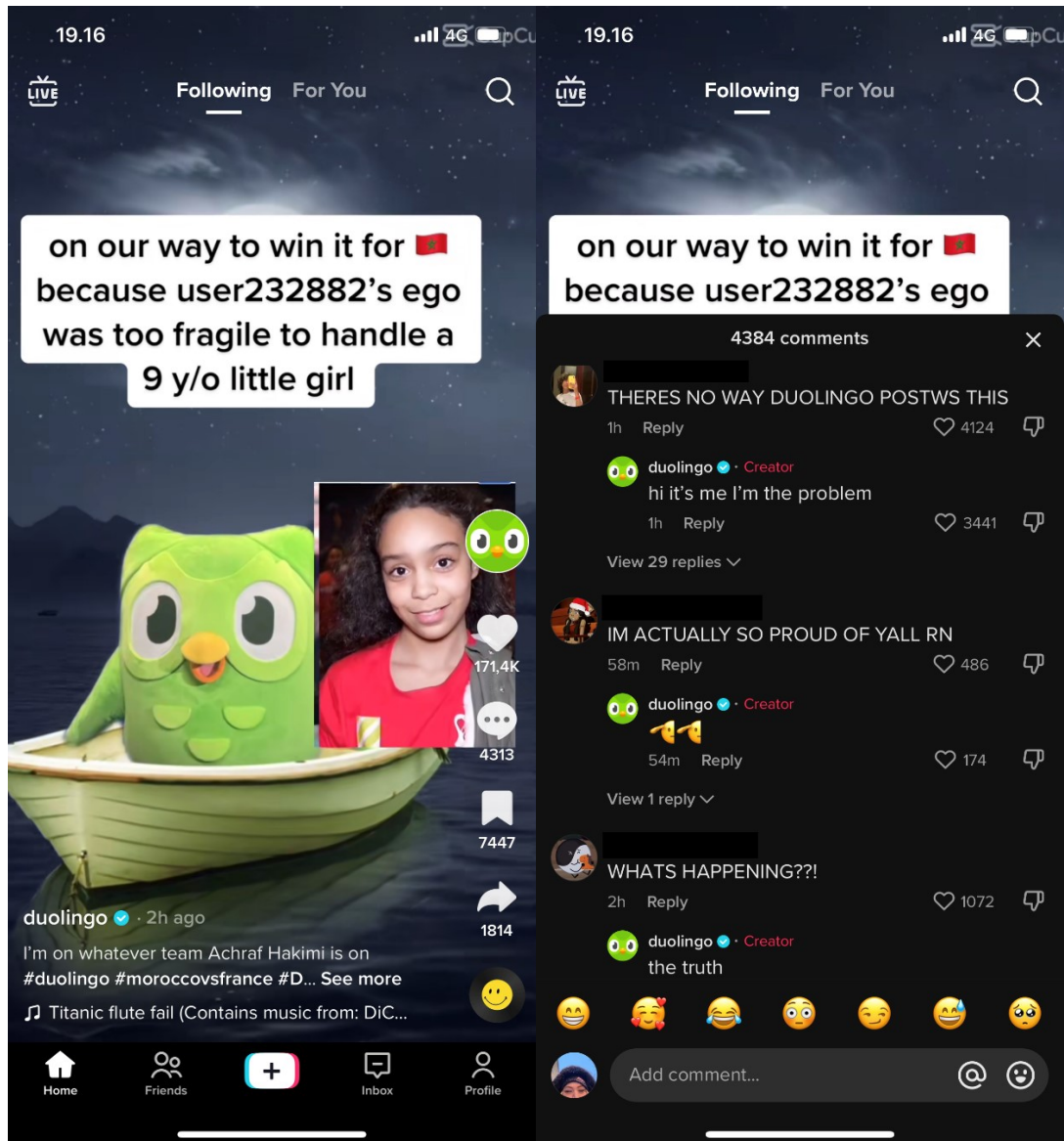
Picture 4. Duolingo post about a current event on December 14th, 2022, and comments on the post on TikTok.

Customers often treat Duolingo like an individual. Tiktok user states they are "so proud of yall" referring to Duolingo. Comments are under Duolingo making a joke about helping Morocco win the world cup of football, in defense of the girl pictured, who had posted saying she saw Cristiano Ronaldo crying after losing a game, which led to some Cristiano Ronaldo's anonymous fans to send her hate on the internet.
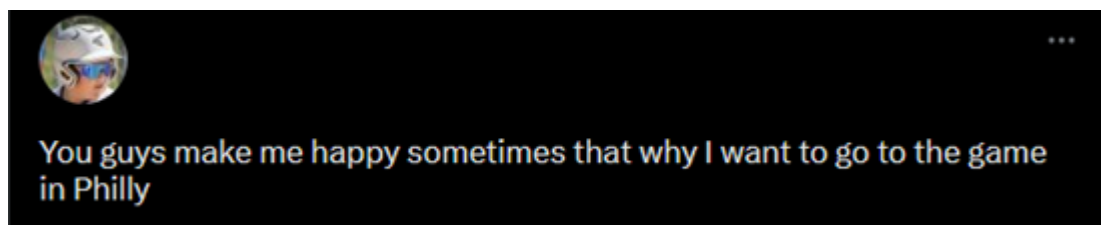
6.1.2 Vegas Golden Knights
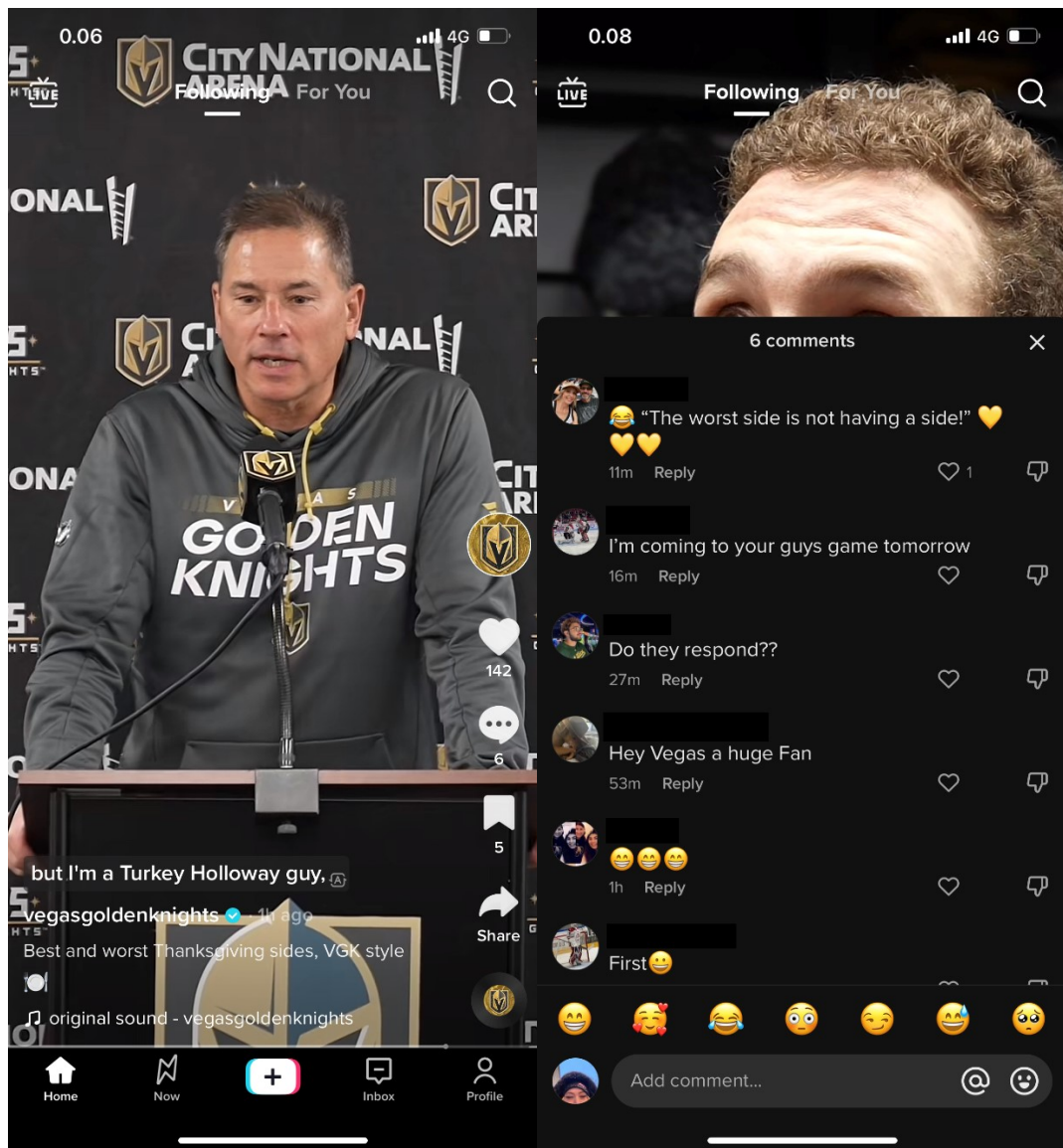
Picture 5. A Vegas Golden Knights post about players' and coach's favorite Thanksgiving side dishes and comments on the post.

There are no replies and no interaction on TikTok by Vegas Golden Knights. Consumers try their best to get something anyway, asking questions or making statements that may get a response or at the very least, a like. The content, however, seems like it wants to create a connection, as in it the players and the head coach are asked about their favorite and least favorite Thanksgiving side dishes, which is something consumers would find a relatable topic.

Picture 6. Vegas Golden Knights replying to a Twitter account replying to Vegas Golden Knights' tweet.

They do, however, reply on Twitter, joking about their own content.

Picture 7. Twitter replying to Vegas Golden Knights on Twitter.

Consumers indicate positive views of the marketing on Twitter.

Picture 8. Vegas Golden Knights interacting with a Twitter user.

Interacting with people will make them happy. Such interaction will give positive connections towards the brand also to people who are fans of other NHL teams and therefore less likely to enjoy the content.
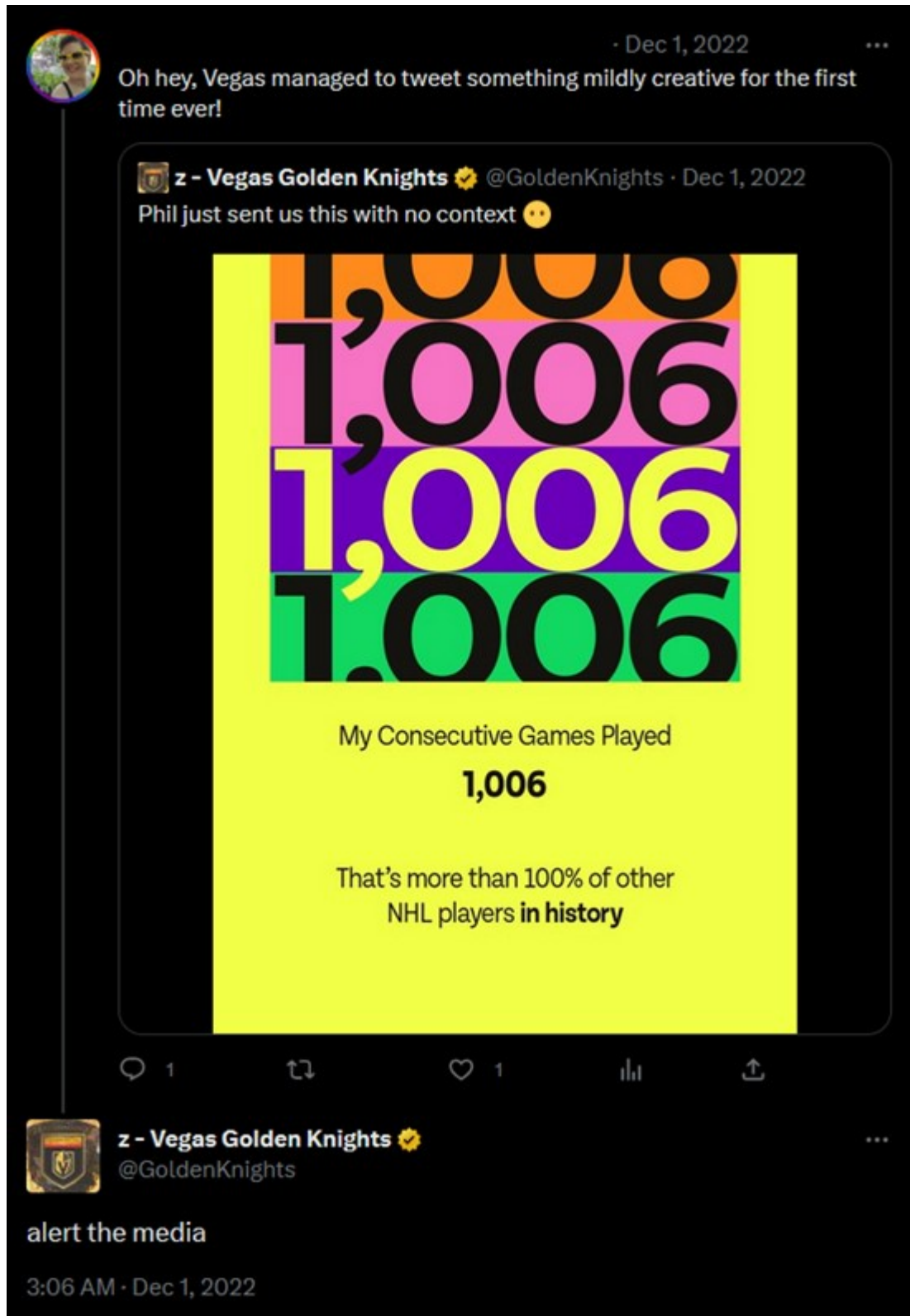
Picture 9. Vegas Golden Knights replying to a Twitter user who quote re-tweeted Vegas Golden Knights' tweet

When people are snarky about their social media, they are snarky right back. This kind of behavior will often come from supporters of other teams. It can

however be noted that it is likely those consumers still follow Vegas Golden Knights on social media, because their marketing is engaging and fun.
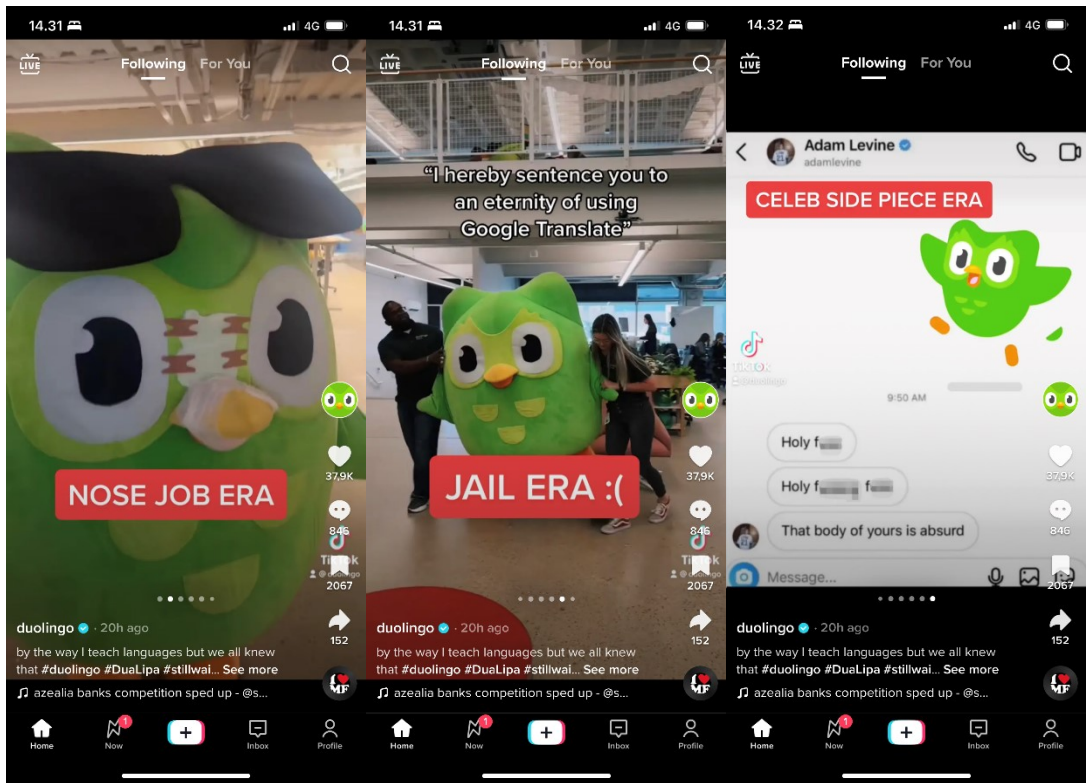
6.1.3 CASETiFY
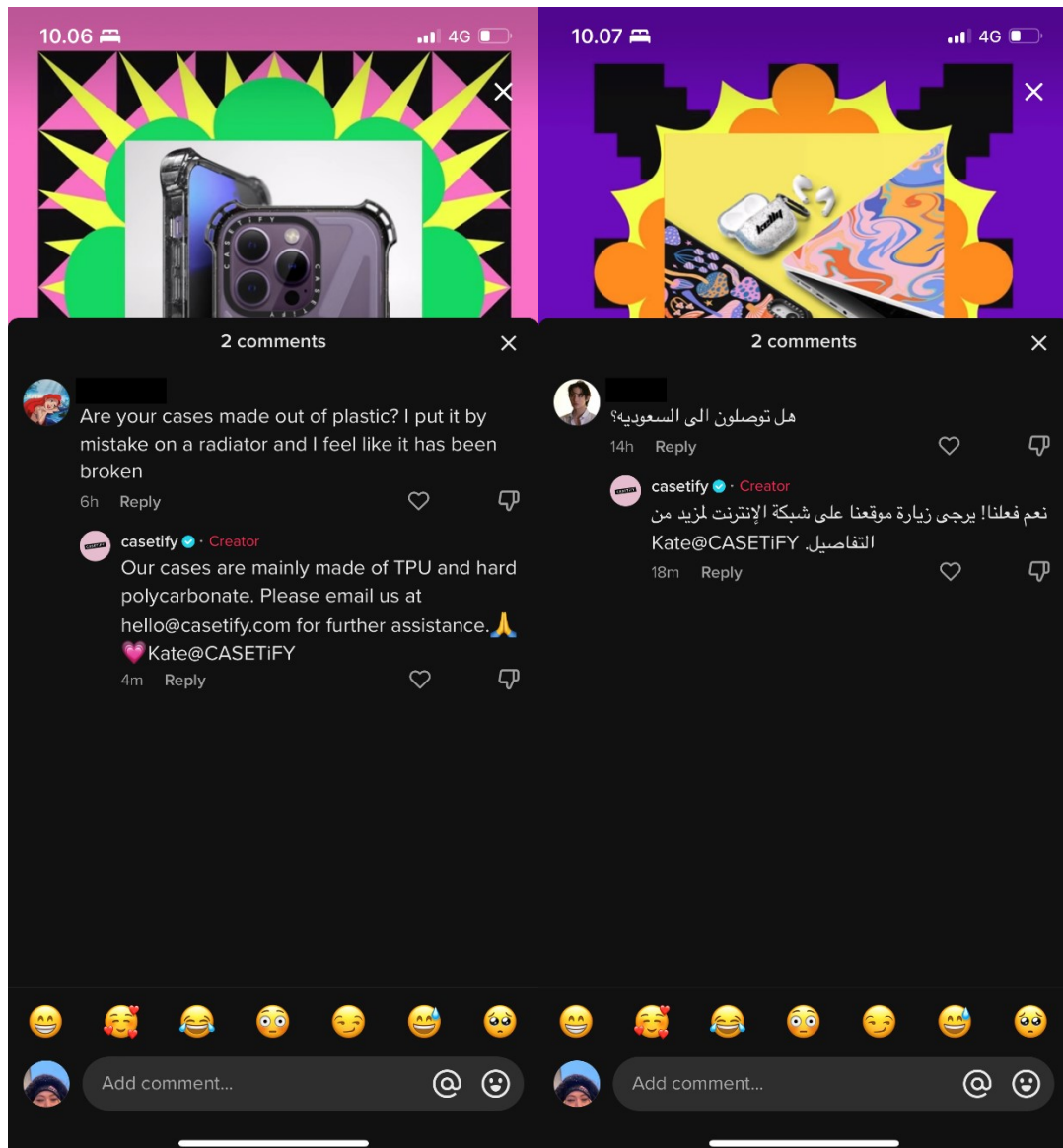
Picture 10. Casetify using TikTok comments for customer service.

Customer service executed through TikTok comments, barely any engagement on the content which reads as social media marketing, despite trying to be parasocial. Spotify Wrapped spoof begs for interaction, without offering it back.
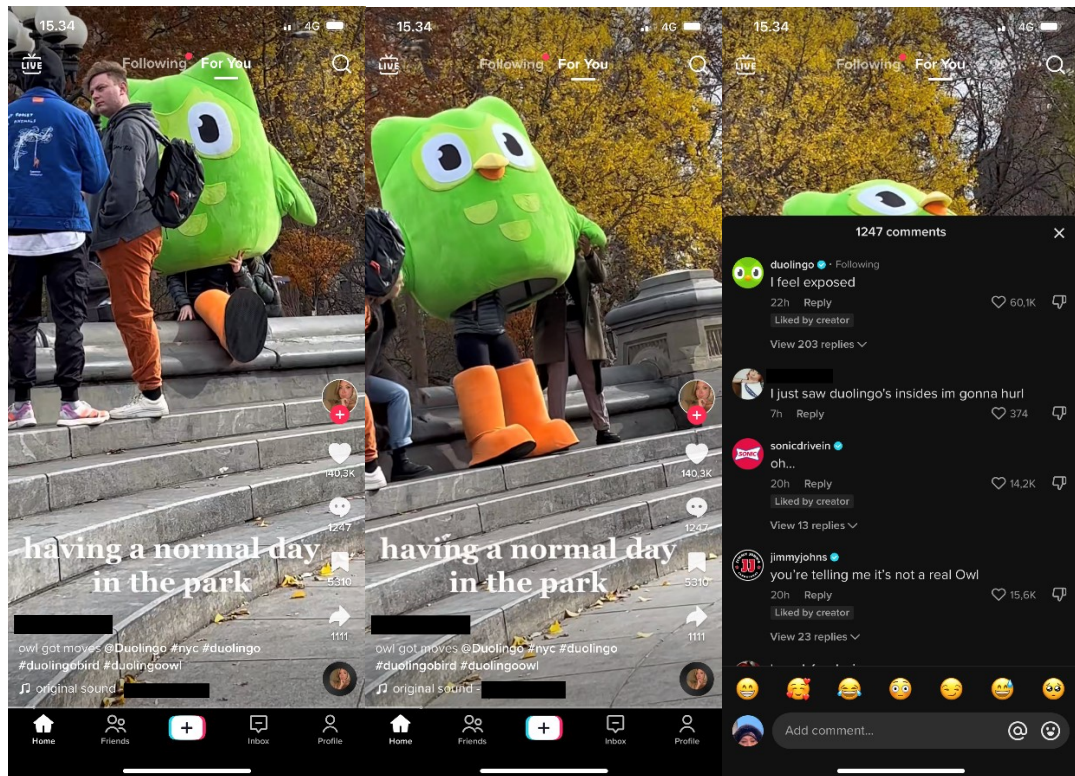
6.2 Key content differences

Picture 11. Duolingo participating in a social media trend on TikTok
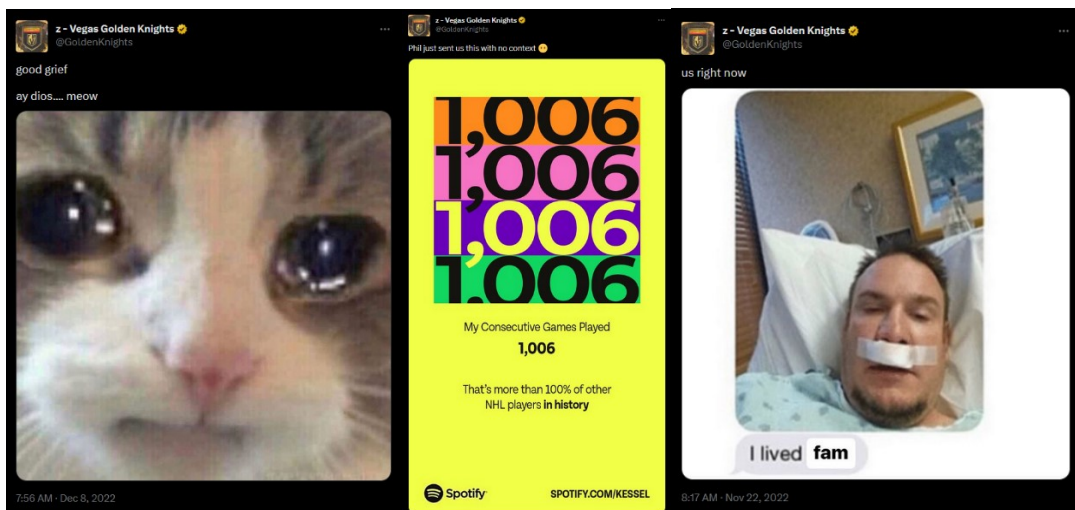
Picture 12. Vegas Golden Knights posting memes on their Twitter

Memes and popular trends. Consumers would find this kind of online behavior relatable and fun.

Picture 13. Stills of a video from an unaffiliated account depicting the Duolingo owl mascot struggling to cross a structure in a park and comments from Duolingo, a consumer and two other businesses.

Inherent benefit of being able to have a physical manifestation of the not-real thing being sold. Like for Duolingo, it is the owl mascot, and acting like Duolingo and its socials are run by said owl. This is again an example of a third party posting a video of the Duolingo mascot struggling to cross a waist height wall in a park, to which Duolingo has replied "I feel exposed". In the comment of this TikTok, there are also other businesses participating, like fast food restaurants Sonic and Jimmy Johns.
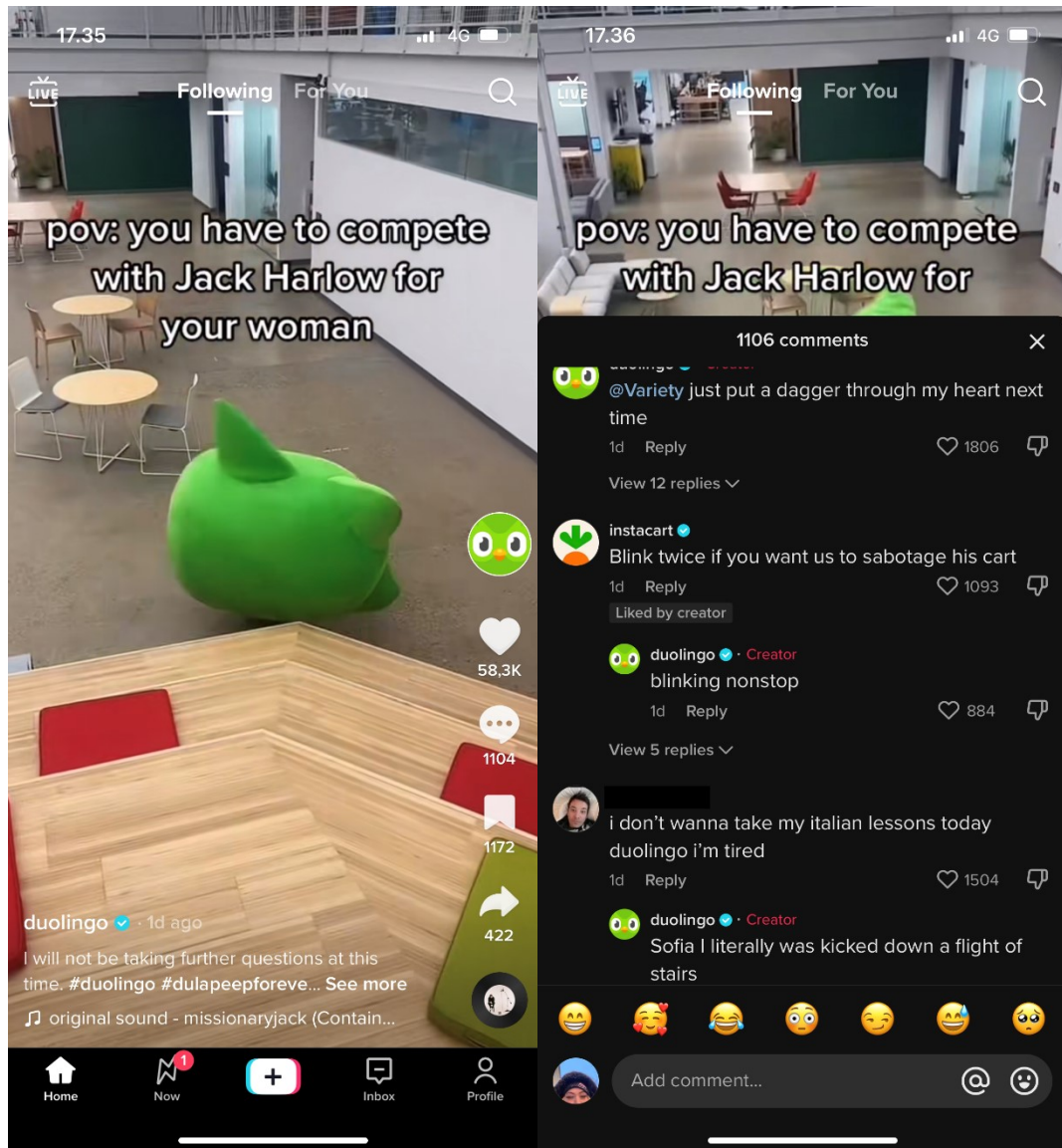
Picture 14. Duolingo post about Jack Harlow and Dua Lipa rumors and comments on the post

Humanization of the owl. Duolingo posted a TikTok in reference to celebrity rumors of singer Dua Lipa and rapper Jack Harlow dating (Veitch & May, 2022). Duolingo has a well-documented "crush" on Dua Lipa across their social media channels. It is likely because their names sound similar. Duolingo reacted to the rumors with a video of the owl part of the mascot costume tumbling down a flight of stairs. When in the comments a consumer complained that they are tired, Duolingo replied with "Sofia I literally was kicked down a flight of stairs" to try obtain sympathy.
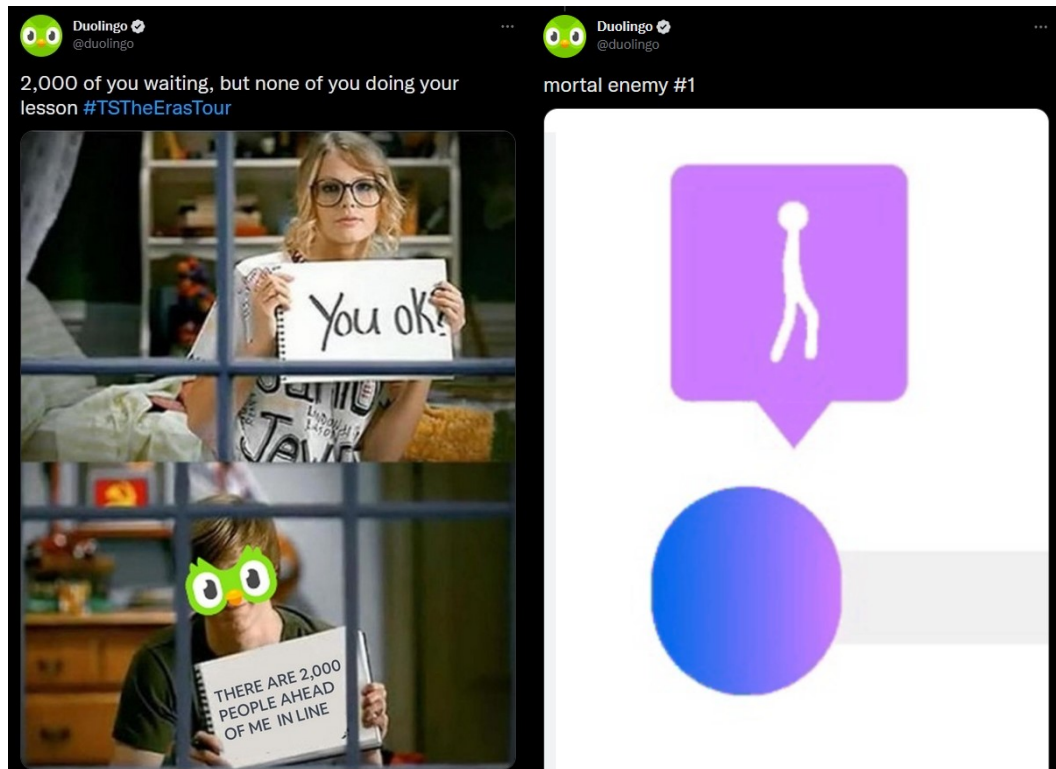
Picture 15. Duolingo tweets about obtaining tickets to Taylor Swift's Eras tour

These tweets are implying Duolingo was buying tickets to Taylor Swift Eras Tour. The second image was the waiting image on the ticket website. Duolingo frequently references current events in pop culture relevant to the platform they post on, only posting about things that originated on TikTok, like the incident with the young girl and Christiano Ronaldo fans and a 9-year-old girl originated on TikTok and Duolingo's commentary on it remained on that platform, and only posting in a conversation happening only on Twitter, like the Taylor Swift Eras tour ticket purchasing system, on Twitter.


Picture 16. Vegas Golden Knights tweet about an ice hockey game event

Vegas Golden Knights post jokey little questions during games for engage-
ment, while also making commentary on the game. These posts gain a lot
more replies and overall engagement than Tweets featuring post-game inter-
views or Tweets with information on events or even polished team graphic up-
dates. Engagement for the Vegas Golden Knights is primarily in parasocial
communication on social media.

Picture 17. Vegas Golden Knights congratulating Ash from Pokémon as well
as George Russell, a Formula One driver

Vegas Golden Knights also have a lot of interaction with accounts that have
nothing to do with hockey or the NHL. This has included congratulating Ash for
becoming a World Champion in Pokémon as well as congratulating George
Russell on a Formula 1 race in and proclaiming they "love F1".
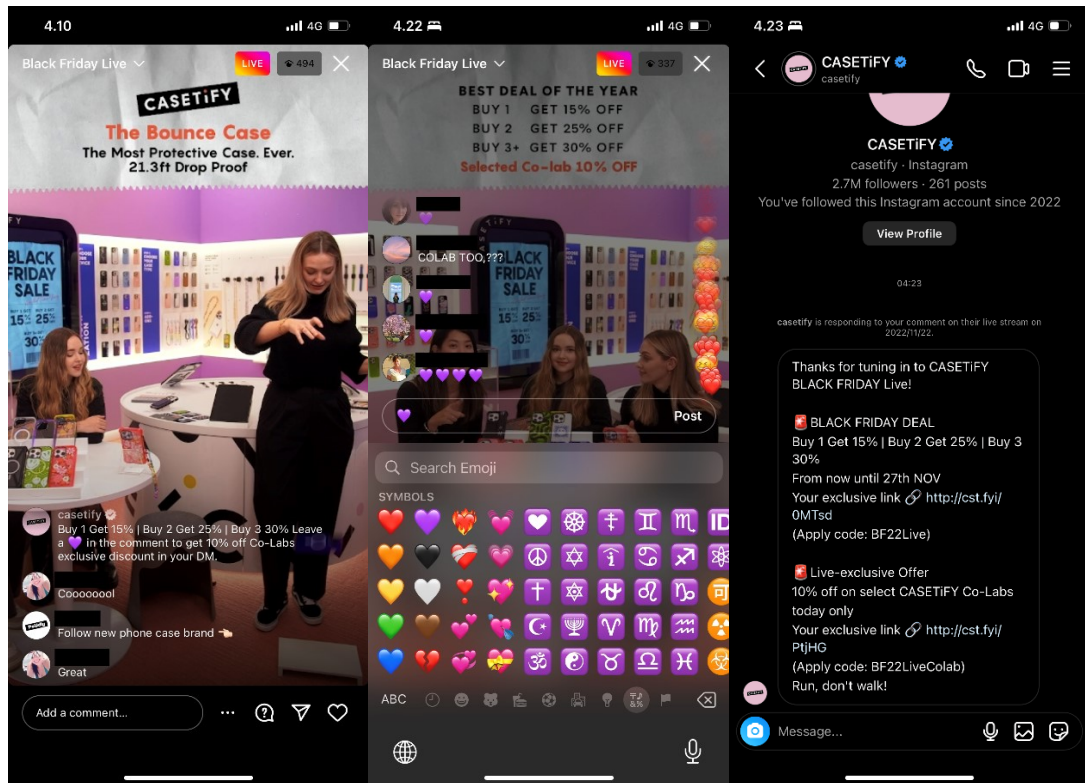
Picture 20. Stills from a Casetify Instagram Live stream, during which sending a purple heart emoji to the chat rewarded consumers with unique sale offers through a direct message.

Casetify did livestreams to advertise sale events. These sale events had an option to send a specific message into chat and receiving an "exclusive discount in your DM" but the automized messages weren't even personalized, leaving the customer feeling like the offer isn't as exclusive as lead on.
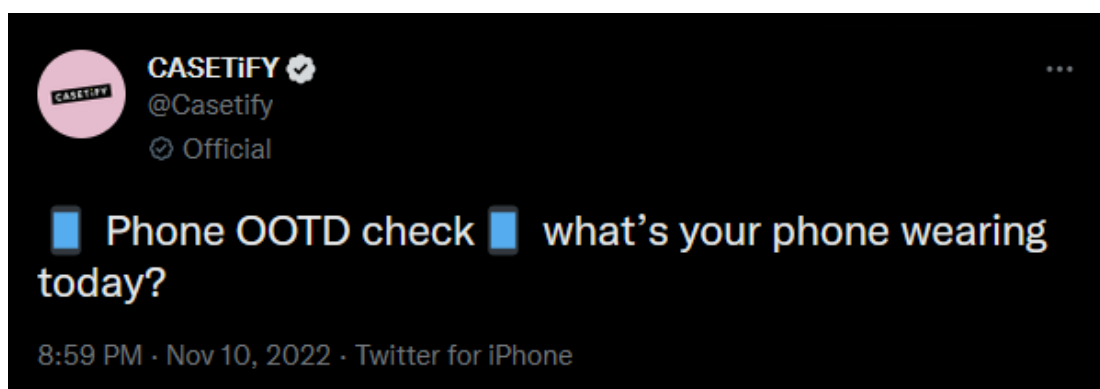
Picture 21. Casetify tweet asking customers which case they have on their phone on that day.

Casetify also exhibits surface level interaction on the socials. The advertising has a feeling of a real attempt at creating engaging parasocial marketing but

falling short of current standards for it. Casetify's marketing rather seems like parasocial marketing either executed by people who do not know how to or are not allowed to make it as casual as necessary. This leads to their content reading as aimed at the wrong demographic at best and automated and impersonal at worst.

6.3 Characteristics of good parasocial marketing

Good parasocial marketing is something consumers, who aren't even customers yet, want to follow on social media. Making surface level attempts that do not engage the consumer fully, or not responding to any comments on social media channels hurt the attempts of connecting the consumers in a parasocial marketing relationship.

However as found with influencers, consumers respond well to relatable content. The best examples of something consumers found extremely relatable was a struggle to obtain concert tickets by Duolingo. There are also numerous examples of Vegas Golden Knights followers relating to memes posted during games communicating upsets or joys in the game.

Strengths	Weaknesses
• **Duolingo:** Engaging, feels personal, personification of the owl • **Vegas Golden Knights:** Efficient, communicative, feels real • **CASETiFY:** Established market share, understanding of the audience	**Duolingo:** Very focused on engagement and customer service, doesn't "sell" • **Vegas Golden Knights:** Inconsistency across different platforms • **CASETiFY:** So focused on social media marketing, parasociality is lacking •
Opportunities	**Threats**
• **Duolingo:** Implementing promotional material more into the content • **Vegas Golden Knights:** Becoming more active across different platforms • **CASETiFY:** More fun content that engages the community for "unrelated" things	**Duolingo:** High risk content towards people seeing it for the first time • **Vegas Golden Knights:** High risk of alienating older consumers with content • **CASETiFY:** Lack of consistent engaging content risks of falling off the algorigthm •

Figure 2. SWOT analysis of three companies' parasocial marketing.

In the SWOT analysis, is found the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for each case company. Duolingo's strengths are engaging content that feels personal. Also, their personification the owl character is a strong aspect of their marketing. Vegas Golden Knights' strengths are their efficiency and how well they communicate information through social media. Posts also feel real and casual, instead of official. Casetify's strengths are an established market share and a deep understanding of their consumer base's interests. Weaknesses for Duolingo are that with a high focus on engagement and customer service, they fail to promote things that would create revenue for the business. Vegas Golden Knights' weakness is inconsistency across different platforms. Casetify's number one weakness is high focus on normal social media marketing, and therefore their presence lacks parasociality.

Opportunities for Duolingo could be implementing more promotional material into their content, this does not have to be constant, but the occasional post could be an opportunity for growth. For Vegas Golden Knights, they can simply become more active across different platforms. Casetify could develop their parasocial approach and post more "unrelated" things that drive engagement. For threats, Duolingo's social media is extreme and polarizing, and for consumers seeing for the first time, intimidating. They have many inside jokes and the marketing is even surrealist at times. There is similar concern with Vegas Golden Knights, where older consumers are less likely to understand the posts and enjoy them, however these consumers are also less likely to be on social media than the younger consumers who this approach is targeting. Casetify's top threat is, that lack of engaging content leads to a lack of engagement, which means the algorithm is less likely to push the content to new people.

6.4 Memorability

When marketing to feelings, memorability is incredibly important, and humor is invaluable. Kellaris & Cline (2007) found that with the universal appeal of humor, it may be extremely useful especially if the target audience has been identified as one with a specific sense of humor. Consumers remember feeling

something and being interacted with, especially if they found the interaction funny. Casetify unfortunately stumbles in creating meaningful or memorable moments for most of the consumers. Live streams included giveaways, but in the end, in my opinion, a giveaway is only memorable for the one winner.

Duolingo creates memorable moments and jokes with a large number of their posts across social medias. Referencing online jokes and interacting with consumers' original content is memorable not only for the person who originally posted, but also for people who know said person, and people who saw the original post and were excited to find that the business had also seen it and was supporting it. This kind of support from the business or brand, makes people want to post more about them, which in turn is free marketing.

7 CONCLUSION

7.1 Key research results

The most successful kinds of parasocial marketing are ones that play into the needs of the algorithm. More clicks and more engagement is more eyes on the marketing. More eyes is more people who will form a parasocial relationship with the business, and more people with this relationship is more people who will be loyal to the business as consumers. Especially in the case of Duolingo, their parasocial relationships with the consumers are so strong that they are the market leader in language learning applications. Many competitors exist, but none have been able to create such reliable customer loyalty as Duolingo. Engagement of content is incredibly high, and consistently so.

All negativity towards Vegas Golden Knights parasocial marketing seemingly came from accounts that are predisposed to not like Vegas Golden Knights, due to being fans of different NHL teams. This means the people with negative reactions were not potential consumers at all, so their negativity holds less

impact overall. These people are also unlikely to spread their negativity to potential customers and will keep their opinions on a hockey team's social media behavior online in social circles around hockey.

Casetify's creativity and variety is so subdued, when they make an effort towards parasocializing with their customer base, the response is lackluster. Engagement on the Casetify socials is very customer service focused and it seems people are not very likely to engage with Casetify on social media unless they have customer service concerns. It is likely consumers would be willing to change to a different business, if one offered a similar quality product with what is undeniably Casetify's biggest pull in the market, an impressive variety of licensed products made in partnership with brands like Barbie, Disney, and NBA.

An overall fact of the matter to me, that seems especially clear, is that people in their early to mid-20's recognize each other in social media spaces independently of any company branding. The success of Duolingo's and Vegas Golden Knights' parasocial marketing at least partially lies in the consumers recognizing themselves in the communications on social media. Because creating relatable content and relationships seems uniquely age restricted to a specific generation, to make that content work, it must be by the people it's trying to engage with.

1) What kind of parasocial marketing do three different companies achieve in social media channels (Twitter, Instagram and TikTok)?

Duolingo and Casetify engage in a lot of customer service through Twitter, while Vegas Golden Knights' Twitter content is very engagement based. This can be seen by the sheer volume of tweets posted by Vegas Golden Knights, compared to the other two companies. On Instagram and TikTok Duolingo creates much more engaging content posted frequently. Casetify's content especially on TikTok leans towards their influencer partnerships through reposting their content instead of making an effort to create their own.

2) How is parasocial marketing different between these three companies?

Duolingo's parasocial marketing is very focused on creating a deep relationship between consumers and the business, personifying the owl mascot, and making the implication that the owl's wellbeing is dependent on the consumers completing their language lessons on the application or website. (Barbi, 2023) Vegas Golden Knights is focused on creating engaging content that also keeps consumers up to date on what is happening in the hockey games, as well as outside of the games with the team. Casetify's focus is more shifted towards communicating the community aspect to the consumers, and using it to upkeep loyalty, like pointing out Casetify products in images posted by celebrities and influencers and linking to said product.

3) What kind of best practices can be observed in these three companies' parasocial relationships and marketing with consumers?

Consumers relate to human feelings and enjoy seeing a business express them. This is especially visible in Duolingo's social media content, where they post about having a crush on Dua Lipa or struggling to obtain concert tickets. It can also be seen when Vegas Golden Knights posts popular memes about ice hockey game events, like sad cats when the team is not winning. Casetify shows great understanding of who their customers are and what kind of products they wish to see and hear about.

7.2 Research validity

As a case study, the businesses looked at are unlikely to be a reliable reflection of businesses at large executing parasocial marketing, as there are numerous ways of doing it, however they present good examples of strategies implemented by businesses with different marketing goals and offer insight into what consumers might want from each different kind of business. As an area of study, parasocial marketing by businesses directly to customers is underexplored and as prevalent as ever in the current market.

The data was gathered over a six-week period in November and December of 2022, and is an interpretive comparison of three businesses executions of parasocial marketing.

7.3 Reliability of research

A fact of parasocial marketing on social media, is that as a singular person following these businesses closely and engaging in their content for the purposes of gathering data, it is impossible to not develop opinions. Because these businesses are executing parasocial marketing to varied levels of success, they are appealing to the feelings and thoughts of anyone following. None of the businesses change their communications in any meaningful way over the course of a year, but content does differ depending on current events, trends, and relevancy of what is being sold.

7.4 Future research topics

I believe future research topics may get more specific on the topic. For example, a researcher could compare a number of different sports teams and their execution of parasocial marketing, or even more specifically maybe a number of different sports teams within the same league. Pinpointing differences and things that work in specific contexts is likely to be easier, compared to more broad conclusions.

7.5 Reflection

I chose to do my thesis about something extremely prevalent in social media marketing in the current day but was not discussed at all in the marketing classes I was taking. I wanted to challenge myself and learn something that I believe is important for me to know if I wish to work as a marketing professional in the modern world and be up to date with practices that have been born. I also wanted to try figure out how much of these choices are intentional, and

how much of them are incidental to businesses hiring younger social media managers to manage their social media, and these younger workers are doing something that comes to them naturally.

I believe it is impossible to conduct research like this and not become opinionated and somewhat invested in not just the subject, but the businesses used as case studies. I started my research as someone who did not engage with team sports, was learning languages and was not really interested in a branded phone case. I'm still not interested in a branded phone case, but I do watch hockey now and I did stop using Duolingo. Several times through my research I considered purchasing a Vegas Golden Knights hockey jersey, despite not ending up being a fan of the team, but also following Duolingo closely on social media and getting constantly reminded about how important this owl character is supposed to be to me, became exhausting. Seeing the marketing work, but also exhausting me because I was too close to it, was an interesting experience, and one I think is important to remember when executing parasocial marketing. It must be diluted with other businesses or individuals' content to not become overbearing.

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APPENDIX 1: DATA MATERIAL SAMPLE DUOLINGO
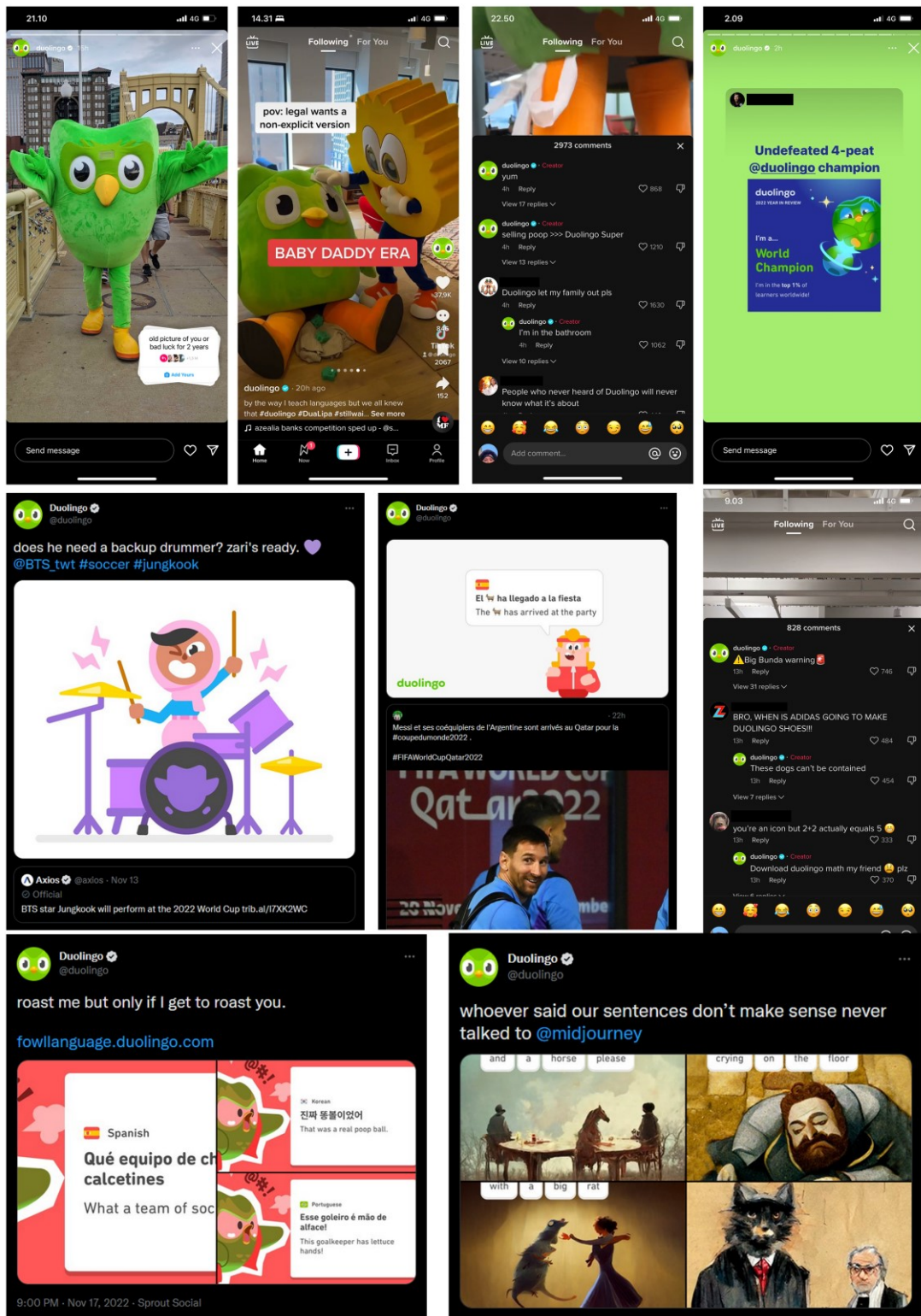
APPENDIX 2: DATA MATERIAL SAMPLE VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

APPENDIX 3: DATA MATERIAL SAMPLE CASETIFY