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The Effects of Personal Branding, Content Quality, and Digital Interaction on Audience Engagement: The Mediating Role of Parasocial Closeness on Windah Basudara's Youtube Channel

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Abstract:

This study investigates how personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction influence audience engagement and examines whether parasocial closeness mediates these relationships among viewers of Windah Basudara's YouTube channel. A quantitative explanatory design was applied through a cross-sectional survey of 160 eligible viewers residing in Greater Tangerang. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling. The proposed model was analyzed with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4 using 10,000 bootstrap subsamples. All direct paths were positive and significant. Parasocial closeness was the strongest direct predictor of audience engagement ($\beta = 0.391$), whereas personal branding was the strongest antecedent of parasocial closeness ($\beta = 0.394$). Parasocial closeness significantly mediated the effects of personal branding ($\beta_{\text{indirect}} = 0.154$), content quality ($\beta_{\text{indirect}} = 0.120$), and digital interaction ($\beta_{\text{indirect}} = 0.117$), indicating complementary partial mediation. The study is cross-sectional and limited to one creator and one urban Indonesian context. Creators should combine a distinctive identity, consistently valuable content, and meaningful interaction to strengthen perceived closeness. The study integrates three creator-controlled antecedents and positions parasocial closeness as the psychological mechanism linking them to audience engagement in an Indonesian gaming-creator context.

Keywords: *audience engagement; content quality; digital interaction; parasocial closeness; personal branding*

INTRODUCTION

Digital video platforms have transformed audiences from passive receivers into participants who can watch, comment, share, join live chats, and organize around creator-centered communities. Consequently, the performance of a YouTube channel cannot be understood solely through subscriber or view counts. Audience engagement increasingly reflects whether viewers cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally participate in the relationship surrounding a creator and the content they produce (Gajardo & Costera, 2023). This development is particularly relevant in the creator economy, where individual creators function as recognizable person-brands and sustain attention through recurring content and interaction.

Gaming content provides an especially useful setting for examining this process. Unlike highly standardized information content, gaming videos and livestreams expose viewers to a creator's humor, spontaneous reactions, communication style, competence, and interactions with other players and viewers. Such repeated exposure can create familiarity and a sense of psychological proximity. Windah Basudara is a prominent Indonesian gaming creator whose channel combines entertainment, gameplay, expressive communication, livestreaming, and community-oriented interaction. The case therefore offers an appropriate context for examining how creator-related stimuli become audience responses.

Prior research suggests that influencer and creator characteristics matter for engagement. Personal branding can make a public figure recognizable, differentiated, credible, and authentic. Influencer credibility and social attractiveness have been associated with followers' attitudes and behavioral responses (Belanche et al., 2021), while influencer-related mechanisms may also operate through parasocial processes rather than only through direct persuasion (Farivar et al., 2021). Content characteristics are likewise important: useful, relevant, entertaining, and aesthetically appealing content can stimulate engagement and relationship outcomes (Bazi et al., 2023; Cheung et al., 2022). Digital interaction may further reduce perceived distance by allowing viewers to encounter comments, live chats, acknowledgements, and community communication.

However, evidence on direct relationships does not fully explain why audiences become engaged. A creator may have a strong identity, produce attractive content, and interact frequently, yet viewers can differ in the extent to which they feel psychologically close to that creator. Parasocial theory provides a useful explanation for this gap. Parasocial relationships describe perceived bonds with mediated figures despite the absence of ordinary reciprocal interpersonal relationships. Recent research shows that influencer attributes, repeated exposure, and mediated communication can cultivate parasocial relationships that subsequently affect behavioral outcomes (Aw et al., 2023; Balaban et al., 2022; Tyrväinen & Karjaluo, 2025).

The present study therefore proposes parasocial closeness as a mediating mechanism rather than treating it only as an antecedent or outcome. The model integrates personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction as creator-related antecedents; audience engagement as the behavioral

outcome; and parasocial closeness as the psychological pathway connecting them. This integration addresses a gap in research on Indonesian gaming creators, where studies have more frequently examined particular content, motivations, or descriptive communication phenomena than a unified structural model of creator strategies, psychological closeness, and engagement.

Accordingly, this study asks whether personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction directly influence audience engagement and parasocial closeness; whether parasocial closeness influences engagement; and whether parasocial closeness mediates the three antecedent-engagement relationships. The study contributes by explaining not only whether engagement occurs but also how creator-controlled stimuli may become sustained audience participation through perceived psychological closeness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The proposed framework is informed by the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) logic, in which external stimuli influence internal states that subsequently shape behavioral responses. In the present model, personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction operate as stimuli; parasocial closeness represents the internal psychological state; and audience engagement represents the response. The model is also compatible with uses-and-gratifications perspectives because audiences actively select media that provide entertainment, information, social connection, and other desired gratifications.

Personal Branding

Personal branding refers to the strategic process through which an individual develops and communicates a distinctive identity that differentiates them from others. In the context of the creator economy, a strong personal brand is associated with recognizable characteristics, authenticity, credibility, consistency, and a unique personal identity that enables audiences to distinguish and evaluate a creator (Labrecque et al., 2011; Dolbec & Smith, 2025). Previous studies have also demonstrated that the credibility and characteristics of social media personalities can influence followers' attitudes and behavioral responses (Belanche et al., 2021). Therefore, a coherent and recognizable personal brand may encourage viewers to continue following and participating in a creator's channel. Moreover, repeated exposure to a creator's distinctive personality can foster familiarity and strengthen parasocial relationships with the audience (E. Aw & Chuah, 2021; Aw et al., 2023).

Content Quality

Content quality refers to audiences' perceptions of the value and overall presentation of content provided by a creator. In social media environments, content characteristics such as relevance, usefulness, entertainment value, creativity, and aesthetic presentation can influence how audiences respond to and engage with content (Cheung et al., 2022; Bazi et al., 2023). High-quality content may encourage audiences to consume content repeatedly and participate through activities such as watching, commenting, sharing, and interacting. Repeated exposure to valuable and appealing content may also

provide audiences with more opportunities to become familiar with a creator's communication style and personality. Consequently, content quality may influence audience engagement directly while also contributing indirectly to engagement through the development of parasocial closeness (Aw et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2021).

Digital Interaction

Digital interaction refers to communication and interaction between creators and audiences through digital platform features, including comments, livestreaming, live chats, community posts, and other forms of online communication. Social media platforms provide interactive affordances that enable audiences to participate actively rather than merely consume media content (Gajardo & Costera, 2023). Perceived responsiveness and interaction with a creator may increase audiences' sense of social presence and reduce the perceived distance between the creator and viewers. Previous research has shown that interactions and social media communication can contribute to the development of parasocial relationships between audiences and mediated personalities (Aw et al., 2023; Farivar et al., 2021). Therefore, when viewers perceive that a creator actively communicates with and involves the community, they may become more willing to participate and develop stronger psychological closeness to the creator.

Parasocial Closeness

Parasocial closeness refers to an audience member's perceived sense of familiarity, emotional connection, and psychological proximity to a media personality or content creator despite the absence of a conventional face-to-face interpersonal relationship. The concept originates from parasocial interaction theory, which explains how audiences may develop a perceived relationship with mediated personalities through repeated exposure and communication (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In contemporary digital environments, social media and video-sharing platforms provide audiences with repeated opportunities to observe creator's personalities, communication styles, daily activities, and interactions, potentially strengthening feelings of familiarity and perceived closeness. Recent studies indicate that parasocial relationships have become particularly relevant in social media influencer and creator contexts. Aw & Chuah (2021) found that characteristics associated with social media influencers can facilitate the development of parasocial relationships between influencers and followers. Similarly, Aw et al. (2023) demonstrated that interactions and audience perceptions of social media influencers can contribute to the cultivation of parasocial relationships. Through repeated exposure to a creator, audiences may gradually perceive the creator as familiar and psychologically accessible, even though the relationship remains predominantly one-sided.

In the context of YouTube, parasocial closeness may develop when viewers repeatedly watch a creator's videos, become familiar with the creator's personality, and perceive a sense of connection through mediated communication. Features such as livestreaming, comments, and community interaction may further support the perception of accessibility and social presence. Farivar et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of parasocial relationships in explaining how audiences respond

to social media influencers, while Sokolova & Kefi (2020) also demonstrated the relevance of parasocial interaction in digital influencer environments. Parasocial closeness is particularly important because perceived psychological proximity may influence audiences' subsequent attitudes and behavioral responses. Recent research suggests that stronger parasocial relationships can encourage greater involvement and engagement with mediated personalities (Aw et al., 2023; Tyrväinen & Karjaluoto, 2025). Therefore, in this study, parasocial closeness is positioned as a psychological mechanism that connects creator-related characteristics namely personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction with audience engagements.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative explanatory research design to examine the relationships between personal branding, content quality, digital interaction, parasocial closeness, and audience engagement. Explanatory research was considered appropriate because the study aimed to test the proposed relationships among variables and explain the mechanisms through which personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction influence audience engagement. In particular, the study examined parasocial closeness as a mediating variable in the relationship between the three independent variables and audience engagement. A cross-sectional survey design was used, in which data were collected from respondents at a single point in time. This design was appropriate for examining respondents' perceptions of the relationships among the proposed variables without conducting repeated measurements over different periods. Cross-sectional designs are commonly used in quantitative survey research to investigate associations among variables within a particular period (Creswell, 2023).

The population of this study consisted of viewers of Windah Basudara's YouTube channel who reside in Greater Tangerang. Greater Tangerang includes Tangerang City, Tangerang Regency, and South Tangerang City. Because the exact number of Windah Basudara's viewers in Greater Tangerang could not be determined, the population was treated as an unknown or indefinite population. The sample size was determined using the inverse square root method, which has been recommended for estimating the minimum sample size in PLS-SEM research (Kock & Hadaya, 2018; Hair et al, 2022). This approach considers the minimum path coefficient expected to be statistically significant. Using a prospective approach with a minimum expected path coefficient of 0.20, a statistical power of 80%, and a significance level of 5%, the minimum sample size was determined to be approximately 155 respondents. Therefore, this study used 160 respondents, which exceeded the minimum sample requirement.

The respondents were selected using non-probability sampling with a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling was used because the study required respondents who possessed specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. The eligibility criteria were: (1) residing in Greater Tangerang, including Tangerang City, Tangerang Regency, or South Tangerang City; (2) having watched or followed content from Windah Basudara's YouTube channel; (3) being familiar with Windah Basudara's YouTube channel; and (4) being willing to participate voluntarily in the study. These criteria were applied to ensure that respondents had sufficient experience and familiarity with

the research object. Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to eligible respondents. The questionnaire was designed to measure five latent constructs: personal branding, content quality, digital interaction, parasocial closeness, and audience engagement. The measurement items were developed based on the conceptual definitions and relevant literature related to each construct and were adapted to the context of Windah Basudara's YouTube channel.

Personal branding was measured through respondents' perceptions of the creator's distinctive identity, consistency, authenticity, reputation, and ability to build trust. Content quality was assessed based on the perceived relevance, informativeness, attractiveness, clarity, audiovisual quality, and consistency of the content. Digital interaction reflected the extent to which respondents perceived communication and interaction between the creator and the audience through digital platform features, such as comments, livestreaming, and community interaction. Parasocial closeness was measured by assessing respondents' perceived familiarity, emotional connection, and psychological proximity to the creator. Audience engagement reflected the extent of viewers' involvement and participation in relation to the YouTube channel. All measurement items were assessed using a Likert-type scale.

The proposed research model was analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. PLS-SEM was selected because the study involved multiple latent variables and examined both direct and indirect relationships within a mediation model. The analytical procedure consisted of two main stages: evaluation of the measurement model and evaluation of the structural model. The measurement model was evaluated to assess the reliability and validity of the constructs. The evaluation included indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Indicator reliability was assessed using outer loadings, whereas internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Convergent validity was assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Discriminant validity was evaluated to determine whether each construct was empirically distinct from the other constructs.

After establishing the adequacy of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated to examine the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. The assessment included collinearity diagnostics, path coefficients, the coefficient of determination (R^2), and hypothesis testing. The significance of the direct and indirect relationships was assessed using the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS. The mediation effects of parasocial closeness were examined by analyzing the indirect effects of personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction on audience engagement through parasocial closeness. A mediation effect was considered significant when the bootstrapping results indicated that the indirect effect was statistically significant. The type of mediation was subsequently interpreted by considering the significance and direction of both the direct and indirect effects, following the recommendations for mediation analysis in PLS-SEM (Hair et al, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 160 valid responses were included in the final analysis. The respondents consisted of viewers of Windah Basudara's YouTube channel residing in Greater Tangerang. The sample included respondents from Tangerang Regency, Tangerang City, and South Tangerang City. The respondents

were predominantly female, accounting for 53.8% of the sample, while male respondents accounted for 46.2%. Most respondents were between 22 and 25 years old (48.1%), followed by respondents aged 17-21 years (31.3%), 26-30 years (18.8%), and 31-35 years (1.9%). The respondents were relatively evenly distributed across the three areas of Greater Tangerang: Tangerang City accounted for 33.8%, while Tangerang Regency and South Tangerang City each accounted for 33.1%.

Regarding YouTube usage, most respondents reported using YouTube for one to two hours per day (42.5%). This was followed by respondents who used YouTube for less than one hour per day (32.5%), three to four hours per day (18.8%), and more than four hours per day (6.3%). These characteristics indicate that the respondents had regular exposure to YouTube as a digital video platform. The analysis supported the adequacy of the reflective measurement model after the reliability and validity evaluation.

Measurement Model Assessment

The reflective measurement model was evaluated before testing the structural relationships among the constructs. The assessment included indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The results of the PLS Algorithm indicated that all indicators met the recommended threshold for indicator reliability. The outer loading values ranged from 0.704 to 0.836, indicating that all indicators adequately represented their respective latent constructs. Therefore, no indicators were removed from the final measurement model. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (ρ_A), and composite reliability (ρ_C). All constructs demonstrated satisfactory reliability because the values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70.

Table 1. Internal Consistency Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	ρ_A	Composite Reliability (ρ_C)	AVE
Personal Branding	0.912	0.917	0.926	0.557
Content Quality	0.901	0.905	0.920	0.591
Digital Interaction	0.888	0.894	0.910	0.559
Parasocial Closeness	0.922	0.924	0.935	0.589
Audience Engagement	0.867	0.869	0.898	0.556

As shown in Table 1, Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.867 to 0.922, rho_A values ranged from 0.869 to 0.924, and composite reliability values ranged from 0.898 to 0.935. These results demonstrate satisfactory internal consistency across all constructs. Convergent validity was evaluated using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All constructs obtained AVE values above 0.50, ranging from 0.556 to 0.591. Therefore, each construct explained more than 50% of the variance in its indicators, confirming adequate convergent validity. Discriminant validity was subsequently assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT). The HTMT values ranged from 0.191 to 0.779, and all values were below the recommended threshold of 0.90. The highest HTMT value was observed between Parasocial Closeness and Audience Engagement (0.779), but it remained below the threshold. Therefore, the constructs demonstrated adequate empirical distinctiveness. Overall, the measurement model satisfied the criteria for indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Consequently, the analysis proceeded to the evaluation of the structural model.

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was evaluated by examining collinearity, explanatory power, and the significance of the hypothesized relationships. First, collinearity was assessed using the inner Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The VIF values ranged from 1.060 to 1.857, indicating that collinearity was not a concern in the structural model. The results therefore suggest that the relationships among the predictor constructs could be examined without substantial multicollinearity problems. The explanatory power of the model was assessed using the coefficient of determination (R^2). The R^2 value for Parasocial Closeness was 0.461, indicating that Personal Branding, Content Quality, and Digital Interaction jointly explained 46.1% of the variance in Parasocial Closeness. The R^2 value for Audience Engagement was 0.606, indicating that Personal Branding, Content Quality, Digital Interaction, and Parasocial Closeness jointly explained 60.6% of the variance in Audience Engagement. These results indicate that the proposed model provides meaningful explanatory power, particularly for Audience Engagement.

Research Framework

Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) perspective and the relationships discussed in the literature review, this study proposes a research framework linking personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction with audience engagement through parasocial closeness as a mediating variable.

Picture 1. Research Framework

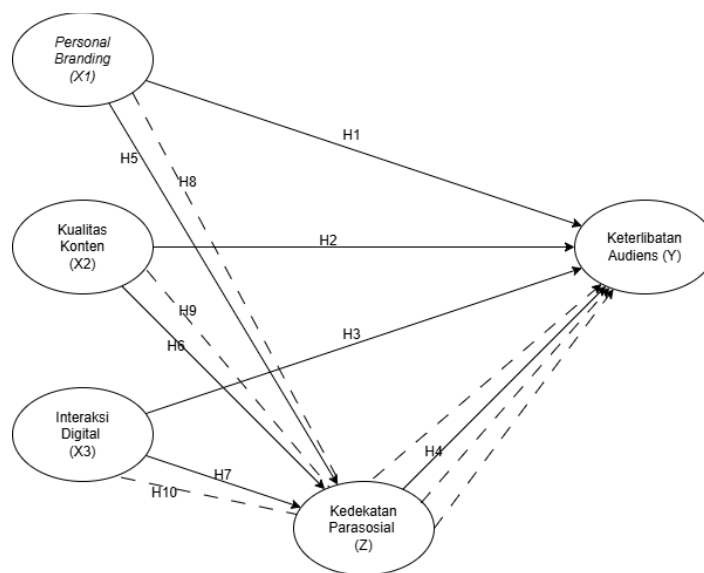


Figure 1 presents the proposed research framework, illustrating the direct and mediated relationships among the study variables. Based on this reasoning, the study tests the following hypotheses: H1: Personal branding positively affects audience engagement. H2: Content quality positively affects audience engagement. H3: Digital interaction positively affects audience engagement. H4: Parasocial closeness positively affects audience engagement. H5: Personal branding positively affects parasocial closeness. H6: Content quality positively affects parasocial closeness. H7: Digital interaction positively affects parasocial closeness. H8: Parasocial closeness mediates the effect of personal branding on audience engagement. H9: Parasocial closeness mediates the effect of content quality on audience engagement. H10: Parasocial closeness mediates the effect of digital interaction on audience engagement.

Direct Effects and Hypothesis Testing

The direct effects were tested using the bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 subsamples. The significance of each relationship was assessed using the 95% confidence interval. A relationship was considered statistically significant when the confidence interval did not include zero.

Table 2. Results of Direct Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	95% CI	Decision
H1	Personal Branding →	0.250	0.142–0.349	Supported

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	95% CI	Decision
H2	Audience Engagement Content Quality → Audience Engagement	0.233	0.126–0.335	Supported
H3	Digital Interaction → Audience Engagement	0.193	0.085–0.299	Supported
H4	Parasocial Closeness → Audience Engagement	0.391	0.261–0.521	Supported
H5	Personal Branding → Parasocial Closeness	0.394	0.260–0.515	Supported
H6	Content Quality → Parasocial Closeness	0.306	0.182–0.419	Supported
H7	Digital Interaction → Parasocial Closeness	0.299	0.167–0.418	Supported

Parasocial closeness was the strongest direct predictor of audience engagement ($\beta = 0.391$). This result indicates that the extent to which viewers feel familiar with and psychologically close to Windah Basudara is strongly associated with their willingness to remain involved with the channel. The finding is consistent with contemporary evidence that parasocial mechanisms are consequential in digital creator environments (Aw et al., 2023; Tyrväinen & Karjaluo, 2025). Engagement in this setting is therefore not merely a reaction to technical content attributes. It is also connected to the relationship viewers believe they have with the creator.

Personal branding had a positive direct effect on audience engagement ($\beta = 0.250$) and was the strongest predictor of parasocial closeness ($\beta = 0.394$). The result suggests that a recognizable and consistent creator identity is particularly important for transforming repeated media exposure into perceived familiarity. Windah Basudara's public persona is characterized by expressive communication, humor, spontaneity, and a recognizable style. When audiences repeatedly encounter a

coherent identity, they may feel that they know the person behind the content even without interpersonal contact. This interpretation aligns with research emphasizing the importance of influencer credibility and relational mechanisms in shaping follower responses (Belanche et al., 2021; Farivar et al., 2021).

Content quality positively affected audience engagement ($\beta = 0.233$) and parasocial closeness ($\beta = 0.306$). The first relationship indicates that audiences respond to content that they perceive as relevant, creative, understandable, entertaining, and well presented. The second relationship adds an important mechanism: quality content can increase repeated exposure and deepen audiences' familiarity with the creator's communication patterns. Thus, content quality may perform a dual function. It provides immediate value that encourages engagement while also creating repeated opportunities for viewers to learn the creator's personality. This finding is consistent with research linking content characteristics and aesthetic quality to engagement and relational outcomes (Bazi et al., 2023; Cheung et al., 2022).

Digital interaction also positively influenced audience engagement ($\beta = 0.193$) and parasocial closeness ($\beta = 0.299$). Although its direct effect on engagement was the smallest among the four direct predictors, the relationship remained meaningful. Platform features such as livestreaming and live chat can create moments in which viewers perceive communication as immediate, responsive, and socially present. Even when a creator addresses a large audience rather than one individual, viewers may interpret greetings, responses, or community participation as signs of accessibility. Such experiences can make the mediated relationship feel less distant and support further participation.

Mediation Analysis

The mediating role of Parasocial Closeness was examined through the specific indirect effects of Personal Branding, Content Quality, and Digital Interaction on Audience Engagement. The results demonstrated that all three indirect relationships were positive and statistically significant. Parasocial Closeness therefore mediated the relationships between the three antecedent variables and Audience Engagement.

Table 3. Summary of Mediation Effects

Hypothesis	Indirect Relationship	Indirect Effect (β)
H8	Personal Branding → Parasocial Closeness → Audience Engagement	0.154
H9	Content Quality → Parasocial Closeness → Audience Engagement	0.120
H10	Digital Interaction → Parasocial Closeness → Audience Engagement	0.117

The mediation analysis provides the principal contribution of the study. All three indirect effects were positive and significant. Personal branding influenced engagement through parasocial closeness with an indirect coefficient of 0.154. Content quality had an indirect effect of 0.120, while digital interaction had an indirect effect of 0.117. Because the corresponding direct effects also remained significant and positive, all three mechanisms represent complementary partial mediation.

The complementary partial mediation pattern means that parasocial closeness is an important pathway but not the only route through which creator-related stimuli produce engagement. A strong personal brand can directly encourage viewers to follow and participate, while simultaneously creating familiarity that develops into closeness and further engagement. High-quality content can directly motivate viewing and interaction, while repeated consumption can strengthen perceived knowledge of the creator. Digital interaction can directly activate participation and also create a psychological sense of recognition that intensifies closeness. This finding advances a more integrated explanation of engagement by showing that external creator strategies and internal relational experiences operate together.

Among the three antecedents, personal branding produced the largest indirect effect and the largest total effect on audience engagement. Its total effect was 0.404, compared with 0.352 for content quality and 0.310 for digital interaction. The result suggests that, in this case, the creator himself is not separable from the content experience. Viewers do not only evaluate what is uploaded; they also respond to who repeatedly appears in the content and how that person communicates. This is particularly relevant for gaming creators, whose reactions, personality, and spontaneous communication may be as central to the viewing experience as gameplay itself.

The results also offer implications for creator strategy. First, personal branding should not be treated as a superficial visual identity. A distinctive brand becomes relationally meaningful when it is consistently expressed across content and interactions. Second, content quality should extend beyond technical production. Relevance, entertainment, creativity, and fit with audience interests can support both direct engagement and repeated exposure. Third, interaction should be designed as meaningful community communication rather than merely maximizing response volume. The psychological value of interaction may arise from the perception that the creator and audience share a communicative space.

The findings should nevertheless be interpreted within the study's boundaries. The design was cross-sectional and therefore cannot establish changes in parasocial closeness over time. The sample was restricted to viewers in Greater Tangerang and the empirical context involved one Indonesian gaming creator. The results may therefore differ for creators in education, beauty, music, or other cultural contexts. In addition, the model relied on self-reported perceptions rather than platform-level behavioral records. Future research could use longitudinal designs, behavioral analytics, multi-creator comparisons, or additional psychological mechanisms such as authenticity, trust, identification, and community identification.

The Effect of Personal Branding on Audience Engagement

The results demonstrate that Personal Branding has a positive and significant effect on Audience Engagement ($\beta = 0.250$). This finding indicates that a recognizable and well-established personal identity can encourage viewers to become more actively involved with a creator's YouTube channel. In the context of Windah Basudara's YouTube channel, viewers may respond not only to the videos themselves but also to the distinctive personality and identity represented by the creator. Personal branding is particularly important in the creator economy because creators themselves become a central part of the media product. A distinctive identity enables audiences to recognize and differentiate a creator from numerous other content creators. Dolbec & Smith (2025) explain that person-brands have become increasingly important in the creator economy, where individuals create value through their identity, reputation, and relationships with audiences.

The present finding is also consistent with Belanche et al. (2021), who found that characteristics contributing to an influencer's credibility can influence followers' attitudes and behavioral responses. A creator who is perceived as authentic, consistent, and credible may therefore encourage viewers to continue following and engaging with the creator's content. In the case of Windah Basudara, a recognizable communication style and personality may function as important elements of personal branding. When viewers repeatedly encounter a consistent personality, they may develop stronger interest in following the channel and participating in activities associated with it. Such participation may include watching videos, following new uploads, commenting, sharing content, and participating in the creator's online community. The finding suggests that audience engagement is influenced not only by the functional characteristics of digital content but also by the personal identity of the individual delivering that content. Therefore, H1 was supported.

The Effect of Content Quality on Audience Engagement

The results show that Content Quality has a positive and significant effect on Audience Engagement ($\beta = 0.233$). This result suggests that viewers are more likely to engage with a YouTube channel when they perceive the content as valuable, relevant, interesting, entertaining, and well presented. This finding is consistent with Cheung et al. (2022), who demonstrated that the characteristics of social media content can influence consumers' online brand-related activities. Content that provides value to audiences may encourage individuals to interact with and respond to the content. Similarly, Bazi et al. (2023) found that the aesthetic quality of social media content can influence customer engagement. The findings emphasize that audiences respond not only to the information contained in digital content but also to how the content is presented. Therefore, visual quality, creativity, entertainment value, and relevance can contribute to audience responses.

In the context of Windah Basudara's YouTube channel, content quality may involve several dimensions. These include the relevance of the gaming content, the entertainment provided by the creator's reactions and communication style, the quality of audiovisual presentation, and the ability to maintain viewers' interest. Gaming content is often experienced not only as information about a game but also as a form of entertainment. Therefore, viewers may continue watching and interacting when the content consistently provides an enjoyable experience. The positive relationship between Content Quality and Audience Engagement indicates that content remains a fundamental component of

engagement. Although the personal characteristics of a creator are important, audiences still require content that provides sufficient value to maintain their attention. Therefore, H2 was supported.

The Effect of Digital Interaction on Audience Engagement

The results indicate that Digital Interaction has a positive and significant effect on Audience Engagement ($\beta = 0.193$). This finding suggests that opportunities for communication between the creator and the audience can encourage viewers to become more actively involved with the channel. Digital platforms differ from traditional media because audiences can participate in communication through comments, live chats, livestreaming, and community features. These interactive affordances enable viewers to move beyond passive media consumption. Gajardo & Costera (2023) emphasize that audience engagement should be understood as a dynamic process involving different forms of audience participation.

That result also supports previous research on the importance of interaction in digital creator environments. Aw et al. (2023) demonstrated that social media characteristics and interactions can contribute to the development of relationships between influencers and their followers. Digital communication can create opportunities for audiences to feel involved in a creator's online environment. In the context of Windah Basudara's YouTube channel, interaction may occur through livestreaming, live chat, comments, and other forms of communication. Although it may not be possible for a creator to respond personally to every viewer, interaction with the broader audience can still create a sense of participation. Viewers may feel that they are part of an active community surrounding the channel. However, the coefficient for Digital Interaction was smaller than those of Personal Branding and Content Quality in predicting Audience Engagement. This finding may indicate that interaction alone is not sufficient to generate strong engagement. Interaction may be more effective when it is supported by a strong creator identity and valuable content. Therefore, H3 was supported.

The Effect of Parasocial Closeness on Audience Engagement

Parasocial Closeness had the strongest direct effect on Audience Engagement ($\beta = 0.391$). This finding indicates that viewers who experience greater psychological closeness to Windah Basudara are more likely to demonstrate stronger engagement with the YouTube channel. The result supports the fundamental idea of parasocial relationships, which explains how audiences can develop perceived relationships with media personalities through repeated mediated exposure. Horton & Wohl (1956) originally introduced the concept to explain the apparent intimacy that audiences may experience with mediated personalities despite the absence of conventional face-to-face relationships.

In contemporary digital environments, parasocial processes may become particularly relevant because social media and YouTube provide repeated and continuous access to creators. Viewers can observe a creator's personality, communication style, reactions, and interactions over an extended period. Aw and Chuah (2021) found that characteristics associated with social media influencers can facilitate the development of parasocial relationships with followers. The present result is also consistent with Aw et al. (2023), who demonstrated the importance of parasocial relationships in

social media influencer contexts. When audiences perceive a creator as familiar and psychologically accessible, they may become more motivated to remain involved with the creator's content and community.

In the context of Windah Basudara, repeated exposure to videos and livestreams may allow viewers to become increasingly familiar with the creator's personality. This familiarity can develop into a perceived sense of closeness, even though the majority of viewers do not have direct interpersonal relationships with the creator. The strong effect of Parasocial Closeness suggests that audience engagement is not solely determined by external content characteristics. Psychological and relational processes also play an important role. Therefore, H4 was supported.

The Effect of Personal Branding on Parasocial Closeness

The results show that Personal Branding has a positive and significant effect on Parasocial Closeness ($\beta = 0.394$). This was the strongest predictor of Parasocial Closeness among the three antecedent variables. This finding indicates that a distinctive and consistent personal identity can facilitate the development of psychological closeness between audiences and a content creator. When a creator consistently communicates particular characteristics, values, and personality traits, viewers may gradually become familiar with that identity. The result is consistent with Aw & Chuah (2021), who found that social media influencer characteristics can contribute to the development of parasocial relationships. Repeated exposure to an influencer's personality can enable followers to develop a sense of familiarity and perceived connection.

Farivar et al. (2021) also highlighted the importance of parasocial relationships in explaining audience responses to social media influencers. Unlike conventional advertising, creator-based communication often places the individual at the center of the audience experience. Consequently, the creator's personality can become an important source of relational value. The present finding suggests that personal branding serves a role beyond differentiation. A strong personal brand may also provide audiences with a consistent basis for understanding and becoming familiar with the creator. In other words, consistency and recognizability may reduce psychological distance between the audience and the creator. For Windah Basudara's channel, the repeated presentation of a recognizable personality may allow viewers to feel that they know the creator. Although this perceived familiarity does not represent an actual reciprocal interpersonal relationship, it may contribute to parasocial closeness. Therefore, H5 was supported.

The Effect of Content Quality on Parasocial Closeness

Content Quality was found to have a positive and significant effect on Parasocial Closeness ($\beta = 0.306$). This finding indicates that high-quality content can contribute not only to direct audience responses but also to the development of psychological closeness. This relationship can be understood through repeated exposure. When audiences consider content to be valuable, interesting, or entertaining, they may be more likely to continue watching the creator's videos. Repeated consumption

subsequently provides more opportunities for viewers to observe the creator's personality, communication style, reactions, and behavior.

Bazi et al. (2023) demonstrated that the quality of social media content can contribute to engagement-related outcomes. Similarly, Cheung et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of content characteristics in influencing audience responses and online activities. In creator-based media, content also serves as the primary channel through which audiences encounter the creator. Therefore, content quality may influence parasocial closeness by increasing both the frequency and quality of audience exposure. Content that is entertaining and relevant may encourage viewers to spend more time watching, which can strengthen their familiarity with the creator. This finding complements previous parasocial relationship research by demonstrating that the relationship between content and audiences may extend beyond immediate behavioral responses. Content can also create the conditions through which psychological closeness develops. Therefore, H6 was supported.

The Effect of Digital Interaction on Parasocial Closeness

The results indicate that Digital Interaction has a positive and significant effect on Parasocial Closeness ($\beta = 0.299$). This result suggests that interaction through digital platforms can reduce the perceived psychological distance between audiences and creators. Digital interaction provides audiences with opportunities to observe or participate in communication with the creator. Features such as livestreaming, comments, live chats, and community posts can make communication appear more immediate and socially present. Aw et al. (2023) demonstrated that social media characteristics and audience perceptions can contribute to the cultivation of parasocial relationships. The interactive characteristics of digital platforms may therefore strengthen audiences' perception that a creator is accessible.

The finding is also consistent with Farivar et al. (2021), who identified parasocial relationships as an important mechanism in influencer contexts. Although communication between creators and audiences may not always involve direct reciprocal interaction, even perceived responsiveness can contribute to feelings of connection. In the context of a large YouTube channel, it is not realistic to expect direct interaction between the creator and every individual viewer. Nevertheless, interaction with the broader audience may still create a collective sense of connection. For example, a creator's response to comments or participation in livestreaming can signal accessibility to the audience. Therefore, Digital Interaction can contribute to Parasocial Closeness by making mediated communication feel more socially meaningful. Thus, H7 was supported.

The Mediating Role of Parasocial Closeness in the Relationship Between Personal Branding and Audience Engagement

The results demonstrate that Parasocial Closeness significantly mediates the relationship between Personal Branding and Audience Engagement, with an indirect effect of $\beta = 0.154$. The direct effect of Personal Branding on Audience Engagement remained positive and significant. Therefore, the mediation was classified as complementary partial mediation. This means that Personal Branding

influences Audience Engagement through two pathways: directly and indirectly through Parasocial Closeness. The indirect pathway indicates that a strong personal brand can contribute to engagement by strengthening viewers' psychological closeness to the creator. A recognizable and authentic identity may encourage viewers to become familiar with the creator, while this familiarity subsequently contributes to stronger engagement.

This interpretation is consistent with Aw & Chuah (2021), who demonstrated the importance of influencer characteristics in the development of parasocial relationships. It is also consistent with Farivar et al. (2021), who emphasized that parasocial mechanisms are important in explaining how audiences respond to influencers. The finding contributes to the understanding of personal branding by suggesting that its influence extends beyond direct audience evaluation. Personal branding can also function as a relational mechanism. When viewers repeatedly encounter a distinctive and consistent creator identity, they may develop perceived familiarity that encourages continued participation. Therefore, H8 was supported.

The Mediating Role of Parasocial Closeness in the Relationship Between Content Quality and Audience Engagement

Parasocial Closeness also significantly mediated the relationship between Content Quality and Audience Engagement, with an indirect effect of $\beta = 0.120$. The direct effect of Content Quality on Audience Engagement remained significant. Therefore, the mediation was classified as complementary partial mediation. Content Quality consequently affects engagement both directly and indirectly through Parasocial Closeness. The direct effect indicates that valuable and attractive content can immediately encourage viewers to watch and interact. The indirect effect demonstrates an additional psychological pathway. High-quality content can encourage repeated consumption, which provides audiences with more opportunities to become familiar with the creator.

Repeated exposure is important in the development of parasocial relationships because audiences gradually observe and interpret the characteristics of a mediated personality. Aw et al. (2023) demonstrated that parasocial relationships can be cultivated within social media environments through audience perceptions and interactions. The present finding suggests that content quality should not be viewed exclusively as a technical or functional attribute. In creator-based media, content is also a medium through which audiences encounter and become familiar with the individual behind the content. Thus, high-quality content may simultaneously provide immediate value and create relational value. The immediate value encourages engagement, whereas the relational value contributes to parasocial closeness, which subsequently increases engagement. Therefore, H9 was supported.

The Mediating Role of Parasocial Closeness in the Relationship Between Digital Interaction and Audience Engagement

The results show that Parasocial Closeness significantly mediates the relationship between Digital Interaction and Audience Engagement, with an indirect effect of $\beta = 0.117$. Because the direct effect of Digital Interaction on Audience Engagement remained positive and significant, the

relationship was classified as complementary partial mediation. This indicates that Digital Interaction affects Audience Engagement directly while also influencing engagement indirectly through Parasocial Closeness. The direct pathway suggests that digital communication encourages audiences to participate more actively. Interaction opportunities can motivate viewers to comment, participate in live chats, and become involved in online communities. The indirect pathway suggests that interaction also has psychological consequences. When audiences perceive that a creator communicates with the community and is accessible through digital features, they may experience a stronger sense of psychological proximity.

This interpretation is consistent with Aw et al. (2023), who highlighted the importance of social media environments in cultivating parasocial relationships. Digital platforms provide communication features that can make relationships between audiences and mediated personalities feel more immediate. The results therefore demonstrate that Digital Interaction is not merely a mechanism for increasing activity on a platform. It can also contribute to the relational experiences of audiences. Through increased Parasocial Closeness, the effects of Digital Interaction may extend beyond immediate participation and encourage deeper and more sustained engagement. Therefore, H10 was supported.

Overall, all ten hypotheses were supported. The findings demonstrate that Personal Branding, Content Quality, and Digital Interaction directly influence Audience Engagement. These three variables also positively influence Parasocial Closeness. Parasocial Closeness was found to be the strongest direct predictor of Audience Engagement, indicating the importance of psychological and relational processes in creator-based digital environments. Furthermore, Parasocial Closeness partially mediated all three relationships between the antecedent variables and Audience Engagement. The results support the proposed Stimulus-Organism-Response logic. Personal Branding, Content Quality, and Digital Interaction function as external stimuli. Parasocial Closeness represents the internal psychological mechanism through which audiences develop a perceived relationship with the creator. Audience Engagement represents the behavioral response.

The findings therefore suggest that sustainable audience engagement cannot rely exclusively on frequent content production or platform interaction. Engagement may be strengthened when creators simultaneously develop a distinctive personal identity, provide valuable content, facilitate meaningful digital interaction, and create conditions that allow audiences to develop a sense of psychological closeness.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effects of personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction on audience engagement, with parasocial closeness as a mediating variable, in the context of Windah Basudara's YouTube channel. Using data from 160 viewers in Greater Tangerang and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the study found support for all ten proposed hypotheses. The findings demonstrate that personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction have positive and significant direct effects on audience engagement. Among these antecedents, personal branding showed the strongest direct influence on parasocial closeness, indicating that a

distinctive, consistent, and recognizable creator identity plays an important role in developing viewer's perceived psychological connection with a content creator. Content quality and digital interaction were also found to positively influence both parasocial closeness and audience engagement.

Parasocial closeness was the strongest direct predictor of audience engagement. This finding highlights that audience engagement in the creator economy is influenced not only by the characteristics of content and digital communication but also by the psychological relationship that audiences develop with creators. Viewers who perceive greater familiarity and psychological proximity to a creator are more likely to demonstrate stronger involvement with the creator's content and online community. Furthermore, parasocial closeness significantly mediated the effects of personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction on audience engagement. All three mediation relationships were classified as complementary partial mediation, indicating that the three antecedent variables influence audience engagement both directly and indirectly through parasocial closeness. These findings support the proposed Stimulus-Organism-Response framework, in which personal branding, content quality, and digital interaction function as external stimuli, parasocial closeness represents an internal psychological mechanism, and audience engagement represents the behavioral response.

The findings provide practical implications for content creators and digital media practitioners. Sustainable audience engagement should not rely solely on increasing content frequency or maximizing platform interactions. Instead, creators should develop a distinctive and authentic personal identity, maintain relevant and high-quality content, and facilitate meaningful interaction with audiences. These strategies may strengthen parasocial closeness and subsequently encourage deeper audience engagement. This study is subject to several limitations. The cross-sectional design does not capture changes in audience perceptions and parasocial closeness over time. In addition, the study focused on a single Indonesian YouTube creator and respondents residing in Greater Tangerang, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, compare different categories of digital creators, and include additional relational variables, such as authenticity, trust, identification, or community identification, to provide a broader understanding of audience engagement in digital creator environments.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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