

From Followers to Buyers: Examining the Influence of Parasocial Interaction on Consumer Purchase Intentions in Influencer Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has become a popular promotional strategy, because social media platforms have developed so quickly. Influencer marketing influences personal connections between influencers and their followers, which frequently results in parasocial interactions (PSI), which acting as a bridge where follower develop one-sided emotional bonds with media personalities. This study examines how customer purchase intentions modify due to parasocial interactions in influencer-driven social media marketing. This study looks at the factors which have effect on PSI, which in turn also influences consumers' purchase intentions; like influencer credibility, perceived authenticity, and emotional involvement. This can be done by utilizing parasocial interaction theory and persuasive knowledge theory. By analyzing the existing theoretical models and making proper review of earlier empirical studies, it can be suggested that parasocial interactions working as an important psychological process which improves the link between influencer attributes and consumer purchasing intentions. The study also contributes to the body of knowledge on influencer marketing by integrating diverse data and offering a conceptual framework for future empirical research, particularly in emerging countries.

Keywords: Parasocial Interactions, Influencer Marketing, Purchase Intention, Consumer Behavior, Social Media Marketing.

Introduction

In this era, social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok has become the very unique way to communicate with the customers by presenting brands through these platforms. Influencer marketing has also become a powerful tool to promote the brands wherein individuals promote brands and products through personalized content like by storytelling. Unlike traditional advertisements, social media influencers mostly engage in continuous and interactive communication with the followers, which gives the sense of relatability and intimacy.

Parasocial interactions (PSI) refers to a kind of psychological relationship experienced by an audience in their mediated encounters with performers in mass media, particularly on television and online platforms. PSI described as an illusory experience, such that media audiences interact with personae (e.g., talk show hosts, celebrities, fictional characters, social media influencers) as if they are engaged in reciprocal relationship with them. PSI has gained renewed importance in digital environments, and this parasocial bonds enhance trust, emotional attachment and persuasion, and it ultimately influence the consumer purchasing behavior.

Social media introduces additional opportunities for PSI to intensify because it provides more opportunities for intimate, reciprocal, and frequent interactions between the user and persona. These virtual interactions may involve commenting, following, liking, or direct messaging. This paper aims to synthesize existing research and conceptually examine how PSI transforms followers into buyers in influencer marketing.

Literature Review

- **Influencer Marketing and Consumer Behavior**

Influencer marketing has grown exponentially as marketers tap into social media personalities' ability to shape opinions and buying decisions (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011).

Influencer marketing is a social media strategy where brands partner with individuals who have a dedicated following to promote product or services. Influencer marketing has become a new strategy that shapes consumer behavior and purchasing decisions through videos and posts. This is particularly shown through social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. Influencers have the ability to create personalized and interactive content for sharing with their audiences enhances brand engagement and overall purchasing intention. Social media influencers significantly impact consumers purchasing decisions by showing trust, authenticity, and overall credibility. This allows viewers to trust influencer opinions and ultimately follow what they say to be true.

- **Parasocial Interaction Theory**

While audiences may feel close to media personalities, there is no real relationship, as there is no interaction in return (Horton and Wohl, 1956).

The theory of parasocial interaction has been used to explain consumer online purchasing behaviour. Relationships with the media are often described by parasocial interaction theory. This theory describes the one way, non-reciprocal relationships which people form with favourite celebrities or media personalities. People feel as though they are friends of celebrities. The Public Service Internet is reinforced through updates, stories and a commenting feature, and the people's perception of it being responsive.

- **Parasocial Interaction and Purchase Intention**

A number of studies have investigated the positive relationship between PSI and consumer purchase intention. Intentions of consumers to buy can be described as their purchase intentions. These are the willingness and ability of a consumer to buy a particular product or service. The public's impression that they have a personal relationship with a personality boosts sales through this persona's ability to build trust and relationships with the audience.

- **PSI and Consumer Trust**

Studies have demonstrated that there is a positive relationship between PSI and levels of attachment and trust in others (Cohen, 2004). Users' trust in a website is also a powerful predictor of their purchasing intentions, as Gefen (2000) has shown. The perception that social interactions have, increases the willingness of consumers to purchase products endorsed by opinion leaders.

Influencer Attributes Enhancing Parasocial Interaction

Key influencer characteristics that strengthen PSI includes:

- Those who present authentic personalities are considered to have a more genuine relationship with their audience.
- Influencers who are knowledgeable about and have experience in the products or services they recommend are more persuasive. This is because their followers are likely to have greater faith in recommendations made by influencers who are trustworthy.
- Using narratives and sharing personal experiences helps to increase a relationship with the audience. This is achieved by openly expressing emotions.
- In order to engage in fair interactive dialogue with site visitors, two-way communication methods should be used. These include question and answer sections as well as comment boxes.

Research Gaps

While current research has established the significance of the psychological service insecurities in the influencer marketing sphere, areas remain where further research is required. These include the cultural context, the platform and its dynamics, and emerging markets. By presenting a single unified concept framework this article overcomes these deficiencies.

Discussion

Through the concept of parasocial interaction, influencer marketing has evolved from a purely transactional relationship to one which offers a more persuasive relationship. Influencer marketing is often motivated by a psychological response known as the Parasocial Instinct. The customers of a brand are much more likely to make a purchase of the brand's products if their favourite personality endorses it.

The phenomenon of people feeling as though they have a relationship with a media personality has substantial real world effects, influencing personal attitudes, social interactions and marketing techniques.

- **Theoretical Implications**

In mediated relationships the parasocial theory applies concepts from real life relationships like attachment theory and social exchange theory to the celebrity viewer relationship.

Media figures can serve as reference points for individuals as they develop their identities. People may use celebrities as role models or mentors in exploring and forming their attitudes and behaviour.

According to social learning theory, PSI allows for learning through observing. This observation learning can be facilitated by the parasocial relationship.

When people watch TV, a Psychological Study Model helps us to understand what impacts viewers so that they are not just passive spectators.

- **Practical Implications**

It can be beneficial to users to have a virtual means of obtaining companionship and social support, such as the PSI. This can be especially true during isolation or loneliness. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen numerous instances of isolation.

Severe pressure from the media, particularly from celebrity models and social media personalities, can cause psychological harm in various ways. This includes low self-esteem or the creation of unrealistic expectations about the way one looks.

Educational content can benefit from the application of PSI principles when animated characters are used, to enhance the learning motivation of students and the effectiveness of the educational material itself. Using well-known celebrities can also encourage the public to engage in certain healthy actions and reduce the stigma surrounding health issues such as depression.

- **Managerial Implications**

By sharing personal anecdotes or narratives brands can increase audience engagement, as the human brain responds better to stories than facts and figures.

Frequent interaction helps in maintaining relationships where the audience feels close to the media personality.

Transparency is also required to build trust among the followers and to maintain their credibility.

While a high number of followers might be attractive, influencer authenticity is of more importance for brands.

- **Limitations and Future Research**

The information contained in this study is secondary data. Further research is necessary to test the proposed model in various media channels, different product types and cultural settings. Future studies could examine the development of parasocial relationships over the course of time using longitudinal stud

Conclusion

Relationships between a consumer and a product supplier are not always face to face. They could instead be formed via the media. This relationship is termed as parasocial relationship. Companies have been trying to gain the trust of their customers for a long time, using different marketing techniques. Trust of consumers can be significantly influenced by the reliability and credibility of a company. The way that a firm appears to a consumer can affect their purchasing intentions. This research offers insights by integrating the concepts of parasocial interaction theory and its relationship to consumer behaviour and influencer marketing. The findings of this research highlight how viewers can form a strong bond with media celebrities, eventually leading them to become active customers.

A mediating effect of trust in the relationship between the persuasiveness of the celebrity and the consumer's intention to buy is found by the research. People tend to respond better to recommendations from those they consider knowledgeable, genuine and trustworthy. In order to be persuasive, sponsored content needs to be accompanied by trust indicators such as the blogger sticking consistently to their viewpoint, a transparent declaration of who is paying for the content and the brand characteristics fitting in with the personality of the blogger. Trust enables a bridge between the emotional bond with a brand and actual purchase.

Influencers who cultivate relationships with their followers generate greater purchase intentions. This occurs due to the parasocial relationship which has developed between the consumer and the media figure. Influencers who are successful in their niche will always need to form emotional bonds with their audience. The way that digital media operates will keep changing, but that won't change. Research may be continued in the future to investigate other aspects of social influence. This could include how consumer attitudes change over time following exposure to PSI, comparing consumer responses in different cultures to PSI and looking at the influence of modern communication tools on consumer attitudes towards advertising.

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