

Impact of Instagram Food Influencers on Eating Habits and Food Preferences among Social Media Users

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of Instagram food influencers on the eating habits and food-related behaviors of youth through the lens of Parasocial Interaction Theory. Focusing on three core variables Perceived Appeal & Entertainment, Perceived Credibility & Trust, and Behavioral Influence the study explores how one-sided emotional connections with influencers shape users' perceptions and real-world actions. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 144 college students (72 males and 72 females) in Coimbatore through purposive sampling, employing Likert-scale questionnaires distributed via Google Forms and physical surveys. The findings, analyzed using Chi-square tests and Spearman's correlation in SPSS, reveal that perceived appeal has the strongest influence on behavior, followed by trust, with frequency of exposure further enhancing both. Gender differences were found to be significant in behavioral influence, and skepticism regarding influencer authenticity negatively impacted trust. The study supports Parasocial Interaction Theory based on the empirical evidence by showing how appealing and emotionally attractive content support the mimicry of behaviors, establishment of trust and how the food is chosen. These findings can be considered the addition to the growing literature on influencer marketing and can have practical implications for two groups: digital marketers and health educators.

Keywords: Food Influencers, Social Media, Digital Market, Health Educator, Quantitative Approach.

Introduction

Instagram has quickly become a powerful medium of visual communication, wherein the influencer culture dominates to influence the user preferences, patterns of consumption and broad lifestyle principles. Food-related content is one of the many categories that have experienced a breathtaking increase on Instagram, especially through the contribution of food influencers who balance the use of creativity, aesthetics, and narration to attract consumers (Von-Polheim et al., 2023; Weber et al., 2021). These influencers sell a varied food content, including everything, such traditional recipes, health-oriented diets, and celebratory cheat meals and many more, with the focus on personal transformation stories, commercial affiliates, and trendy explanations, rather than evidence-based nutritional advice (Triccas-Vidal et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2024). Now due to its evolution on Instagram, food is not the only nourishment anymore; it has become aesthetic, symbolic as well as interactive, and the way people can use it to establish emotional connections and social identities (Feldman, 2021; Drew et al., 2022). Moreover, food influencers play a significant role in assigning the consumer trust and consumer buying behavior in the relation to perceived credibility, authenticity, and engagement (Singh et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2021). These contents regularly encourage value co-creation and the engagement of users, contributing to the brand awareness and loyalty levels to promote the use of hospitality, tourism, local cuisine markets, and so on (Ingrassia et al., 2022; Chandrapal, 2024).

Nonetheless, food in Instagram is a dichotomy, since it facilitates both healthy and unhealthy food, with or without scientific confirmation (Basijokas et al., 2024). Some of the influencers focus on promoting mindfulness in eating and food experiments; however, the other ones are involved in persuasive marketing, where the appearance of their personal recommendation is no longer associated with the paid advertisement. That being the case, in the wake of this complicated media landscape, particularly so within the audience of Millennials and college-going youth who are devoted consumers of social media platforms (Tricds-Vidal et al., 2022), knowing how the aforesaid media content affects perceptions and actions via parasocial relationships which are definitely one-sided feeling wise but psychologically considerable interactions of media consumers and media manipulators. This paper thus attempts to investigate the psychological and behavioral effects of Instagram food influencer on the youth in terms of its roles of appeal, credibility, and influence as expounded by the Parasocial Interaction Theory.

Objective of the Study

In the current media saturation world, people constantly establish one-directional psychological relationships with the influencing group often resulting in affective and behavioral reactions. PSI has a strong theoretical background to support this research because it incorporates emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes that emanate when consumers address media personalities, they have no personal affiliation but have a sense of communion upon regularly encountering that person on the medium. Some of the main variables focused on in this research are based on the theoretical model, as follows: Perceived Appeal & Entertainment, being the degree to which the users consider influencer content to be appealing, engaging, and emotional satisfaction; Perceived Credibility & Trust, including a measure of such aspects as trust, authenticity, and expertise expressed towards the influencer; Behavioral Influence, or the effects of the influencer on the real-life food choices made by the users, such as newer foods being tried, or recipes being replicated, or the emergence of cravings. Through Parasocial Interaction Theory, this challenge is aimed at examining interactions of these variables and whether increased variables of appeal and trust lead to increased influence of behavior. Additionally, it examines how external factors such as frequency of exposure to food-related content, gender, and social engagement (likes and comments) moderate or influence these relationships. This paper seeks to look into the positive and negative implications of the Instagram food influencers on influencing perceptions and behaviors of the users by establishing parasocial relationships as explained under the Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI).

Review of Literature

• Credibility and Trust in Social Media Influencers

In the context of social media, influencer credibility plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer attitudes, trust, and behavioral intentions. Trustworthiness, expertise, authenticity, relatability, attractiveness, and likeness to the audience are some of the factors that in most cases lead to credibility in this environment (Lou et al., 2019; Balaban et al., 2019). Perceived authentic and informative influencers build stronger emotional ties to their fans, which can result in trust toward them and the products they advertise that is on average higher than toward the non-authentic and non-informative influencers (Wang et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2021). Once created, trust mediates the flow of positive effects transferred by the influencer to the brand and increases the purchase intentions, brand loyalty, and word-of-mouth actions (Saima et al., 2020; Coutinho et al., 2023). The process of generating confidence in the context of influencer marketing is fragile though. Research has shown that the credibility of influencers remains to be a significant integrity value that drops when their followers consider content too commercial or inauthentic, specifically on sponsored posts based on commercial goals rather than authenticity (Kiatkawsin et al., 2022). Moreover, Shamim et al. (2024) also note that the factor of the message and media credibility and influencer credibility is a significant factor in the context of social commerce environments in terms of impulse buying. According to Vu et al. (2024), the influence of parasocial interaction on stickiness of the influencer relationship occurs only where influencers are perceived to be credible sources. What is more, the cultural and regional variation impacts user assessment of influencer credibility and such aspects as similarity and trust also differ between nations, such as Germany and Romania (Balaban et al., 2019). All of this evidence supports the notion that credibility is multidimensional in the Parasocial Interaction Theory, and in the context of defining how influencers by using social media resources may control trust, persuasion, and user behavior very well.

- **Behavioral Influence and User Decision-Making**

There has been an increasing influence of the social media influencers in shaping the user behavior particularly in aspects of food choices, cravings and buying choices. Studies also indicate that there is a consistent likelihood of the content created by an influencer to lead people into rational and impulsive actions especially when the influencer is perceived to be credible, relatable, and clear with regard to sponsorship (Weismueller et al., 2020; Masuda et al., 2022). The influencers do not only make the users change their thoughts about food but their emotions and behavior as a result of which there are extra food cravings, purchases against their wishes, and sometimes gluttony (Lee et al., 2023). Such actions are likely to be supported by the concept of parasocial relationships since the user is likely to believe there is a personal relationship with the influencer though there is no actual interaction between the two which would encourage trust and mimicry further. It is also shown that disclosure and the type of influencer play a vital role in the formation of behavior. According to the study conducted by Kay et al. (2020), product knowledge and the intention to purchase was more efficiently driven by micro-influencers who disclosed the fact that they were sponsored than by macro-influencers. Likewise, Satı et al. (2020) defend the idea that attitudes moderate the influence of the influencer recommendation, especially in the cases when users consider the content to be helpful or consider it consistent with their ideals. Entertainment and credibility are also noted as most powerful predictors of the behavioral influence and the user more willingly responds to those who are not merely informative but also interesting (Ao et al., 2023).

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Even the recent results indicate the presence of harmful influences, as junk food Instagram posts drive the cravings and affective problems among young adults (Zeeni et al., 2024). As a whole, this collection of studies demonstrates that influencer content is multifaceted in its effect on the decision-making process of youth concerning food consumption and that the issue of behavioral change should be paramount when studying the aspect of Parasocial Interaction Theory. With the advent of social media, parasocial relationships (PSRs) have undergone tremendous changes and, in many ways, are much more prominent and accessible to the end-user, especially in a setting with such use as Instagram, where influencers present an extremely permeable and relatable entity. The perceived similarity, emotional identification, physical attractiveness, and trustworthiness are the grounds that form these one-sided psychological connections, which enable followers to connect personally to the influencers without having any direct communication (Breves et al., 2021; Kim, 2021). Intimate self-disclosure, direct address, and curated aesthetics have been frequently used by the influencers on Instagram to develop social presence, which also increases the perceived intimacy deepening and strengthens the illusion of a reciprocated relationship (Farivar et al., 2022; Copeland et al., 2021).

Other studies focus on the use of influencer qualities as credibility, authenticity, and likability in enhancing the PSRs. The results obtained by Sokolova et al. (2020) also indicated that credibility and parasocial interaction could better predict the purchase intention than that of just physical attractiveness, thus indicating the presence of psychological and not the visual appeal in follower involvement. The

intensity of the parasocial bonds is also mediated by product involvement and emotional appeal, whereby people who are more interested in content that an influencer may be promoting or their output will have a stronger degree of follower engagement (Balaban et al., 2022; Ballester et al., 2025). Moreover, recognition of influencers and perceived emotional fit makes users more easily internalize messages of influencers (Copeland et al., 2021). It is also observed that even among virtual influencers, anthropomorphism, trustworthiness and so called perceived autonomy have the ability to stimulate parasocial engagement (Liu et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the increased persuasion and brand loyalty can be reduced by the decreased capability of users to critically analyze the content when PSRs are involved, particularly in case with advertising disclosures, resulting in blind faith and decreased resistance to persuasion (Breves et al., 2021). Such results indicate the prevalence of parasocial relations in the sphere of studying user behavior on Instagram as a kind of connection between content exposure, emotionally related connections, and efficiency of marketing. Even though there is an increasing amount of literature on influencer marketing and parasocial relationships, there are still some essential gaps to fill, and this paper strives to do it. First, even though some previous studies have addressed the phenomenon of parasocial interaction in the fashion industry, tourism, and overall influencer activity, it is possible to note that not much attention has been paid to the topic of the influence of the food-related influencer activity on young people and their eating habits and desires. Second, the influences of the variables of perceived appeal and trust, and their independence with the effectiveness of an influencer, have been upheld independently; however, no findings are available on how these variables individually or combined make a contribution in the process of behavioural influence, hence the study fulfills the gap through the analyses of behavioural influence as exhibited in the corresponding relationships between appeal and perceived trust and their influences in predicting behaviour determination based on the correlation levels of each variable and their collective contribution. Third, little is known about gender differences in the parasocial influence, although the findings in the present study indicate that men and women show great variation in the extent to which they are led to behavioral change by the presence of the food content. Fourth, there is insufficient empirical support on the connection between the frequency of exposure to perceived appeal, which the current research establishes with a statistically significant connection. Moreover, the effect of skepticism or scam perception as a repellant to trust in influencers has been mostly unconsidered; this study will cover that by showing that there is indeed a powerful negative relationship between scam perception and credibility. And finally, very little of the Parasocial Interaction Theory has been applied in a qualitative or conceptual way and limited attempts to operationalise PSI variables into quantitative models, usually in the form of structured, testable models, a factor that filled in these gaps here by creation of a Likert-scale questionnaire and utilisation of statistical analysis, including Chi-square and Spearman correlations. Contributing to the knowledge of these research gaps, the obtained results can also lead to a more sophisticated perception of the influence of Instagram food influencers on the perception and behavior of youth based on a parasocial approach.

Theoretical Framework

- **Parasocial Interaction Theory**

This study is grounded in Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI), which provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the psychological and behavioral dynamics that emerge between individuals and media figures, particularly social media influencers.

PSI is a concept coined by Horton and Wohl but it defines the fact that media consumers experience an illusion of face-to-face relationships, when really there is nothing reciprocal going on. This theory has changed with time to accommodate its applicability in the modern digital world, especially on the social media. The concept of parasocial interaction has currently been accepted as a type of one-sided yet significant contact that consumers develop with influencers and is typified by a perception of intimacy, trust, and loyalty (Giles, 2002). Such interactions may influence the attitude, beliefs and actions up to form a powerful mechanism in online communication without direct interpersonal contact. Relational goals and mediated forms of communication lead to the development of parasocial engagement that is a dynamic process that predisposes user outcomes, including the satisfaction of emotions, behavioral imitation, and purchase decisions (Tukachinsky et al., 2018). In IG food influencing context, the parasocial interaction is an important aspect of consumer behavior creation. Entertaining or attractive influencer content could create such emotional resonance and develop notions of credibility that predisposes behavioral change, like eating something new, altering eating habits or adapting the proposed recipe (Yuksel et al., 2016; Aw et al., 2020). These connections are particularly powerful when

it comes to cultures where social media personalities are seen as brand and lifestyle ambassadors, who tend to sell products or lifestyles their audiences desire (Aw et al., 2021; Bhattacharya, 2022). In addition, the involvement in parasocial relationships is not just a passive via spectation, sometimes it requires to be an interactive psychological experience reflecting the social interactions in the real life. It has been demonstrated that the user can make cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes due to information on the blogger, such as increased trust, the development of identity, and even consumption due to impulse (Xiang et al., 2016; Shen et al., 2022). Notably, the effectiveness of skepticism can be mediated by the intensity of parasocial relationships as well. As an illustration, the view about manipulateness or commercialism of influencers can undermine trust and behavioral results pointing to the fragile relationship between genuineness and persuasiveness in parasocial connections (Aw et al., 2021). Summarily, Parasocial Interaction Theory offers a strong perspective through which viewed entertainment value, credibility, and user behavior can be probed on Instagram food influencers. Since the consumer of media has ended up eliminating the demarcation between real and mediated forms of interactions, the process of decoding the persuasive essence of digital contents becomes extremely dependent on the realization of the non-bidirectional, but nonetheless influential relations.

- **Perceived Appeal**

In the context of the Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI), the perceived attraction and entertainment are a major determinant in facilitating the creation of one-sided but meaningful emotional relationships with media persons. Reputations of influencers being entertaining, attractive, and authentic contribute to strengthening the psychological connections between them and their audience, which further increases message receptivity, brand evaluations, and intentions to act (Aw et al., 2021; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Examples of performer traits that contribute to a substantial increase in parasocial appeal include physical attractiveness, self-disclosure, relatability, and social presence. According to the study conducted by Liu et al. (2019), physical and social attractiveness lead vloggers to a more intense brand evaluation through parasocial connections. In the same light, Hartmann et al. (2011) stated that media personalities, who directly appeal to viewers, not only physically but also verbally, cause more interactive parasocial connections, which enhances the terms of increased pleasure and identification. This is what drives the parasocial dynamic and this is under the entertainment value particularly in the digital contexts. Instagram makes a great package that increases pleasure, as it consists of aesthetically good material, jokes, narratives, and sharing together. This entertainment value invites the audience to pay attention to the influencers, to watch them regularly, and to accept their messages and ideas (Bi et al., 2021; Nah, 2022). Self-disclosure also has a part in perceived authenticity and brings an increment in interpersonal liking two antecedents of parasocial engagement. Nah (2022) revealed that the common ability of influencers to post personal narratives or behind-the-scenes stories creates a sense of authenticity, which lead to the longed-for acceptance of messages by viewers. This implies that content that is amusing and real reinforces the parasocial relationship and its effect in persuasion. Entertaining materials in terms of influencer marketing have been found to be effective in influencing both affective as well as behavioral engagement particularly in food and lifestyle sectors. According to the study by Xiang et al. (2016), entertaining contents about influencers in social commerce environment leads to the increase of perceived enjoyment which induces the purchase impulse. Similarly, Aw et al. (2020) pointed out that the parasocial relationship through perceived entertainment and the need to belong has the capability of promoting purchase intentions on a large scale. New trends in the research area advance the idea of a so-called trans-parasocial model according to which users do not only perceive influencers as role models but also as their digital companions. In the view of Lou (2021), followers tend to view advertising material provided by influencers as authentic, especially because the amusing and satisfying emotional content of regularly provided material is an enjoyable phenomenon. This complements the idea that perceived interest and enjoyment bring both relationship satisfaction as well as responsiveness in behavior. Therefore, on the example of food influencers on Instagram, perceived attractiveness and amusement serve as affective doorways into the parasocial interaction process. Not only do they attract attention, but also give a feeling of trust and likability that makes influencing a lot easier. It is an essential variable to impact the influences of food choices, the development of cravings, and behavior aligned with the relevant recommendations of influencers.

- **Perceived Credibility**

The theory of Parasocial Interaction (PSI) offers a strong discourse regarding the production and constructions of perceived credibility and trust achieved by social media influences through

mediated, one-sided relationships. Such connections are not founded just on repeated exposure but on a sense of honesty, authority and emotional closeness and can decide the belief of the fanatics in the person himself/herself and also the brands he/she supports. Parasocial interaction improves the source credibility of a media personality which incorporates trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness valued elements of message acceptance and consumer persuasion as studies review (Yilmazdogan et al., 2021; Han et al., 2023). Parasocial interaction also affects trusting because of the emotional and rational processes that followers pass through when watching influencer content. Meng et al. (2024). As an illustration, the article accentuates that parasocial relationships in tourism could occur as the result of rational ratings (e.g., knowledge) and emotional indications (e.g., friendliness, relatability), which causes trusting information and information endorsements. The given results can be attributed to the findings of Reinikainen et al. (2020), which claimed that parasocial relationships, with the contribution of audience interactions, comments, and engagement, increase influencer credibility and trust. Such confidence is converted into brand loyalty, information sharing, and increased behavioral intention and this fact proves the persuasive powers of influencers who are perceived as authentic and knowledgeable (Lacap et al., 2023; Vu et al., 2024).

• **Behavioral Influence**

The theory of Parasocial Interaction also has a firm base to explain how behavioral influence routes out of the perceived relations with the officials. Such interactions have caused the development of emotional attachment and perceived intimacy that might result to behavioral consequences in terms of purchase intentions, brand loyalty, content sharing, behavioral compliance. Parasocial relationships act as a replica of the true relationships, and therefore viewers will tend to take recommendations or imitate the behavior they see in the content of the influencer (Yuksel et al., 2016; Majeed Nadroo et al., 2024). Emerging research evidence shows that parasocial interactions forecast cognitive and behavioral participation in diverse fields such as health, tourism, retail, and social media. As an example, Sakib et al. (2020) concluded that parasocial relationships between health vloggers and consumers had massive effects on adhering to prescribed diets, based on the modifier of perceived vlogger credibility and audience preparedness. In the same vein, Xiang et al. (2016) demonstrated that amusing and culturally relevant influencer posts stimulated parasocial relationships, which in due course increased impulsive purchasing and experimenting with goods. These observations are repeated in the studies of Kim (2021) and Tan-intaraarj (2024), who speak of the strength of the parasocial connection on behalf of behavioral loyalty and readiness to do anything a person says. Thus, such a psychological mechanism as parasocial dynamics impels user behavior in digital settings, especially when there is an influencer-based marketing environment.

Research Methodology

The researcher used quantitative research design in his study to examine the effect of Instagram food influences on the behavioral patterns of the youth using Parasocial Interaction Theory. The study considered three principle variables Perceived Appeal & Entertainment, Perceived Credibility & Trust, and the Behavioral Influence all the variables were brought up by the theoretical constructs. The study population included college going youth in Coimbatore; the group was chosen because they are most exposed to social media sites. Purposive sampling technique was used and a total of 144 respondents represented the sample size and they were equally divided into 72 males and 72 females to provide the most viable gender balance and comparability. In a bid to capture a large demographic of participants, both on-line Google Forms and off-line physical paper questionnaires were used to gather the data. The survey tool contained demographic questions and Likert-scale items that aimed at measuring the three variables, and it was rated on a five-point scale by each item, with the score ranging as Strongly Disagree=1 to Strongly Agree=5. These were purposefully-designed in order to capture the psychological aspects of the parasocial relationships including perceived content appeal, the food influencer credibility, and the behavioral outcome on food. The data collected were analyzed using IBM SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participant characteristics, while Chi-square tests assessed associations between categorical variables, and Spearman's rank-order correlation measured relationships among the main constructs. All analyses were interpreted at appropriate significance level, with the results contextualized within the theoretical framework to assess how parasocial interactions drive user trust, perception, and behavioral change in response to influencer content.

Data Analysis and Interpretation**Table 1: Chi-square Test Between Gender and Behavioural Influence**

Variable 1	Variable 2	χ^2 Value	df	Sig. (p-value)	Interpretation
Gender	Behavioural Influence	6.430	2	0.040	Significant. Gender differences exist in how influencers impact behaviour.

Males reported higher behavioral influence, with more males (42) experiencing medium impact compared to females (28), while females were more likely to report less impact (34 females vs. 20 males). Both genders had an equal number of participants (10 each) reporting high impact, indicating that males are generally more influenced by food content on Instagram than females. The Chi-square test results indicated a statistically significant association between gender and behavioral influence ($\chi^2 = 6.430$, $p = 0.040$), suggesting that gender plays a role in how users respond to food influencer content. This supports the idea that male and female users may differ in their likelihood to act on influencer recommendations, aligning with prior studies that highlight gender as a moderating factor in parasocial engagement and online behavior.

Table 2: Chi-square Test Between Perceived Appeal & Entertainment and Behavioural Influence

Variable 1	Variable 2	χ^2 Value	df	Sig. (p-value)	Interpretation
Perceived Appeal & Entertainment	Behavioural Influence	17.139	4	0.002	Highly significant. Appeal strongly influences behaviour.

A highly significant relationship was found between Perceived Appeal & Entertainment and Behavioral Influence ($\chi^2 = 17.139$, $p = 0.002$). This indicates that users who find influencer content more visually appealing, entertaining, or engaging are more likely to be influenced in their food-related decisions. These findings affirm one of the core assumptions of Parasocial Interaction Theory that emotional and aesthetic appeal enhances user identification and behavioral response.

Table 3: Chi-square Test Between Frequency of Seeing Food Content and Perceived Appeal

Variable 1	Variable 2	χ^2 Value	df	Sig. (p-value)	Interpretation
Frequency of Food Content Seen	Perceived Appeal & Entertainment	17.275	2	0.000	Very significant. More content exposure increases perceived appeal.

The Chi-square test shows a very significant association between the frequency of seeing food-related content on Instagram and perceived appeal and entertainment ($\chi^2 = 17.275$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.000$). This indicates that users who frequently encounter food content are more likely to find influencer content appealing and entertaining, supporting the idea that repeated exposure enhances parasocial engagement.

Table 4: Chi-square Test Between Frequency of Seeing Food Content and Perceived Credibility & Trust

Variable 1	Variable 2	χ^2 Value	df	Sig. (p-value)	Interpretation
Frequency of Food Content Seen	Perceived Credibility & Trust	6.717	2	0.035	Significant. More exposure to food content increases perceived trust.

Two notable findings emerged regarding exposure to food-related content. First, there was a very significant association between content exposure frequency and perceived appeal ($\chi^2 = 17.275$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that greater exposure to food content increases users' perception of its entertainment value. Second, a significant relationship was also observed between content exposure and perceived trust ($\chi^2 = 6.717$, $p = 0.035$), indicating that repeated encounters with food influencer content can enhance perceived credibility and trustworthiness. These results underscore the role of media exposure in reinforcing parasocial connections over time.

Table 5: Chi-square Test Between Scam Belief and Perceived Credibility & Trust

Variable 1	Variable 2	χ^2 Value	df	Sig. (p-value)	Interpretation
"I feel food influencers scam the audience"	Perceived Credibility & Trust	30.638	8	0.000	Strong negative relationship. Scam perception reduces trust.

An important finding was the strong negative relationship between users' belief that influencers are deceptive and their perceived trust levels ($\chi^2 = 30.638$, $p = 0.000$). Users who suspect influencers of being inauthentic or commercially manipulative are less likely to trust their recommendations. This highlights the fragile nature of trust within parasocial relationships and supports previous research suggesting that perceived sincerity and transparency are crucial to influencer credibility.

Table 6: Near-Significant or Supportive Trends

Variable 1	Variable 2	χ^2 Value	df	Sig. (p-value)	Interpretation
Instagram Usage (per day)	Behavioural Influence	11.789	6	0.067	Nearly significant. Higher usage may influence behaviour.
Instagram Usage (per day)	Perceived Appeal	11.212	6	0.082	Trend exists. More time = more perceived appeal.
Likes & Comments Affect Food Decision	Behavioural Influence	14.296	8	0.074	Marginal trend. Social proof may impact food behaviour.

Several relationships approached statistical significance and are worth noting. There was a near-significant association between Instagram usage (per day) and behavioral influence ($\chi^2 = 11.789$, $p = 0.067$), as well as between Instagram usage and perceived appeal ($\chi^2 = 11.212$, $p = 0.082$). These findings suggest that more time spent on Instagram may enhance user susceptibility to influencer impact, though the results fall just short of conventional significance thresholds. Additionally, likes and comments on influencer posts showed a marginal association with behavioral influence ($\chi^2 = 14.296$, $p = 0.074$), indicating that social proof elements such as engagement metrics may influence user decisions.

Table 7: Spearman's correlation between Perceived Appeal and Entertainment and Perceived Credibility and Trust

Variable Pair	Correlation Coefficient (ρ)	p-value (2-tailed)	Significance
Appeal & Entertainment ↔ Credibility & Trust	0.177	0.034	Significant

Spearman's correlation revealed a statistically significant but weak positive relationship between Perceived Appeal & Entertainment and Perceived Credibility & Trust ($\rho = 0.177$, $p = 0.034$). This implies that users who find influencer content more appealing are more likely to trust the influencer. While the strength of this relationship is modest, it supports the theoretical claim that aesthetic and emotional engagement contributes to credibility formation within parasocial dynamics. When combined, these results indicate that the perceived appeal and trust, as well as the frequency of exposure, are important parasocial reactions affecting user behavior on Instagram, especially which food influencer are concerned. Although it has been found that there is no direct linkage between trust and behavioral action but in combination with interaction of the content appeal and the level of exposure the impact is enhanced. These findings confirm the main assumptions of Parasocial Interaction Theory, as it provides empirical evidence of the interpersonal relationship between single individuals and the media and how it affects the consumer perceptions and behaviors in virtual environments. This research aimed to determine how Instagram food influencers affected perceptions and behavior in the context of the Parasocial Interaction Theory of three key variables, including Perceived Appeal & Entertainment, Perceived Credibility & Trust, and Behavioral Influence. The figures were examined on the basis of Chi-square analyses and Spearman rank-order correlation and the results have been discussed below in the context of research aims of the study.

Discussion

The findings of the current research offer significant evidence of using Parasocial Interaction Theory as the concept that can be applied to the interpretation of the role of influencers on Instagram in the context of forming perceptions of the target and making subsequent decisions or actions. Close connection between perceived appeal and behavioural influence implies that entertaining, visually appealing, and emotionally appealing content helps to build a higher parasocial connection, and this results in users imitating the food selections, new cuisines, or the development of cravings by following the suggestions of the influencers. The conclusion indicates as well that the level of exposure to content has a positive influence on the appeal and trust levels, which implies that the more one gets in touch with

posts related to food, the more they will be emotionally involved and the more they will trust the credibility of such posts. Interestingly, though the perceived credibility was significantly correlated with the appeal, it did not directly predict behavioural influence which implies that the aesthetic and emotional appeal could be of greater influence than trust in the determination of consumer behavior. This pattern of very low scam perception and trust also demonstrates the easily threatened credibility of influencer trust, with a perception that an influencer is manipulative or fake enough to threaten any parasocial relationship. These findings complement and support previous studies putting forward the conviction that parasocial relations are not solely constrained by semblance of intimacy and dependability, but also by the proficiency and occurrence of content in the mediated articles.

Limitations of the Study

This research, although it presented very useful findings regarding the parasocial power of Instagram food influencers, has some flaws. To begin with, purposive sampling and confinement in a single geographic setting (Coimbatore) can be a restriction when using and extrapolating the results to the generalized populations. Second, while the sample size of 144 students ensures statistical reliability, it may not fully capture the variability in user engagement patterns across different age groups, professions, or cultural contexts. Third, self-reported measures used in the Likert-scale questionnaire may be subject to response bias, as participants may overstate or understate their engagement with influencer content. Fourth, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences or long-term behavioral tracking. Additionally, the reliance on quantitative analysis may overlook the depth and nuance of individual experiences with influencer content that qualitative methods could provide. Lastly, variables such as emotional state, personality traits, or prior brand loyalty were not controlled for, which could have moderated the observed relationships between parasocial interaction variables and behavioral outcomes. Future research should consider a mixed-methods approach, a broader demographic scope, and longitudinal analysis to build on the findings of this study.

Conclusion

This study concludes that parasocial interactions with Instagram food influencers significantly influence user behavior, particularly when the content is appealing and frequently encountered. Among the key variables examined Perceived Appeal & Entertainment, Perceived Credibility & Trust, and Behavioral Influence the most consistent and powerful predictor of influence was content appeal, supported by significant statistical relationships. The role of trust, while important in shaping users' attitudes, appears to be more nuanced and sensitive to skepticism regarding influencer authenticity. The application of Parasocial Interaction Theory has proven effective in explaining how one-sided relationships formed through social media platforms can impact real-world behaviors such as eating habits and food purchasing decisions. This study contributes to the growing literature on influencer marketing by offering empirical evidence that parasocial factors especially emotional engagement and perceived entertainment are central to digital influence. Future research could build on these findings by exploring how different types of influencers, content strategies, and audience demographics further moderate the strength of parasocial relationships and their behavioral effects.

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