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INFLUENCER MARKETING AND PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

This paper presents a systematic literature review on the relationship between influencer marketing and parasocial relationships in social media. Influencer marketing has gained significant traction as an effective marketing strategy with the advent of social media platforms. Thus, this study seeks to explore the impact of parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers on consumer trust, purchasing decisions, the factors that influence these relationships, and how influencers can enhance them to optimize marketing outcomes. The review encompasses analysis of five primary research studies, investigating factors such as interpersonal attraction, personal attributes, intimate self-disclosure, and empathy as determinants of parasocial relationships. The findings indicate that parasocial relationships exert a positive influence on consumer trust, purchase intentions, and brand evaluations. Notably, factors such as interpersonal attraction, intimate self-disclosure, and empathy emerge as key drivers in fostering and reinforcing parasocial connections. The paper concludes by discussing practical strategies that influencers can employ, including two-way communication, personal disclosures, advertising transparency, and tailored content, to cultivate and strengthen parasocial relationships, ultimately enhancing marketing effectiveness. The study underscores the need for further research to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon and its implications for influencer marketing.

Introduction

As more user-driven social media platforms rise such as TikTok and Instagram where anyone can create online content and gain a following, there has been a subsequent increase in social media influencers; SMIs are digital creators who have established credibility and reputation within social media networks. Generally, they are able to influence others as they share content online through their authenticity and reach. Content sharing comes in the form of posts online through pictures or videos, in which their followers are able to like, share, and comment on. Contrary to traditional celebrities, often certified in formal institutions, social media influencers appear more as “regular people” who have become “online celebrities” and generally have an expertise in a specific area such as healthy lifestyle, fashion, gaming, and more (Lou and Yuan, 2019). This allows for a more genuine approach to their audience and users, allowing their followers to feel more connected and drawn to their regularity of life.

Due to this increase of social media influencers, this in turn has allowed for the formation of a new marketing strategy: influencer marketing. Influencer marketing entails brands paying influencers to use their social media platforms in order to promote their brand or product to the influencer’s audience. Many marketers have begun to use this marketing strategy, especially as 2021 saw a notable increase in brands paying money to influencers with Influencer Marketing related companies growing by 26% and the Influencer Marketing Industry being set to grow to approximately \$16.4 billion in 2022 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022).

Therefore, in order for social media influencer marketing to be effective, influencers must focus on engaging their followers to endorse and market a brand’s products or services. Parasocial relationships, or PSRs, which are defined as nonreciprocal socio-emotional connections with media figures (Hoffner and Bond, 2022), can increase marketing effectiveness as SMIs increase in connection with their followers. Parasocial relationships can influence consumer’s opinions and interests, emotions and moods online and offline (Yuksel and Labreque, 2016), and can increase intentions to purchase endorsed products (Chung and Cho, 2017).

This literature review was conducted to understand the connection between parasocial relationships and influencer marketing, and how social media influencers can utilize parasocial relationships to market effectively to their followers. There is much research on influencer marketing and parasocial relationships separately, however few combine these two concepts. Therefore, this study seeks to gain a comprehensive outlook on what factors influence parasocial relationships and strategies influencers can implement in order to grow marketing skills, and further the research by connecting these two concepts together. This remains a significant topic due to the increasing rise of social media, and the growing impact of SMIs on their followers, in which parasocial relationships must be understood to further knowledge on effects and influencer marketing as a whole.

Methodology

This systematic literature review was conducted through four major steps. These steps included first identifying and specifying research questions, performing a search on various databases to find relevant studies, screening the papers, then lastly extracting and synthesizing the data.

As this study investigates parasocial relationships in regards to social media influencers as a marketing strategy, in which the following research questions reflect this purpose:

RQ1: How do parasocial relationships between social media influencers and their followers affect consumer trust and purchasing decisions?

RQ2: What factors impact the parasocial relationship between social media influencers and their followers?

RQ3: How can influencers grow their parasocial relationships with their followers to increase marketing effectiveness?

Based on the three research questions and criteria, searches were run on databases such as Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals, and more. Key phrases and words used in order to perform this search included, "influencer marketing and parasocial relationships", "social media influencer", "parasocial relationships", "influencer credibility", "parasocial relationships and influencer marketing", etc.

The following exclusion criteria were established:

- Papers that were literature reviews.
- Papers published 2010 or earlier.
- Papers published in languages other than English.
- Papers that did not have "parasocial relationships" in the title.

The only inclusion criteria established was papers that discussed both parasocial relationships and influencer marketing.

After applying the exclusion and inclusion criteria, upon scanning a multitude of sources, five primary research studies were picked to be included in this literature review as the content demonstrated close alignment with the present study's objectives. The five research papers were then split off into two categories.

The categories for the primary studies are as follows:

Factors Influencing Parasocial Relationships: this category includes papers that study various elements such as personal attributes or interpersonal attraction that can impact parasocial relationships. These studies examine the effect of various factors on the development of parasocial relationships.

Impact of Parasocial Relationships on Advertising and Persuasion: this category includes papers that study the influence of parasocial relationships on purchase intention, persuasion, advertising, and consumer behavior.

Results:

Factors Influencing Parasocial Relationships:

Of the five articles gathered, three focused on the factors that influence parasocial relationships between SMIs and their followers. These factors include elements such as interpersonal attraction, personal attributes, characterizations, intimate self-disclosure, empathy, and self-esteem that in turn affect the development of parasocial relationships. They also study how parasocial relationships influence behavioral intentions.

Su et. al (2021) looked into the effects of interpersonal attraction defined by task attraction, physical attraction, and social attraction, and how these elements enhance parasocial relationships between an influencer and their followers. Through an online questionnaire that measured participants' ratings on the different influences of interpersonal attraction, informational influence, and the effects of perceived credibility and purchase intention, they discovered that the three elements of interpersonal attraction significantly impacted parasocial relationships. The results also indicated that informational influence and perceived credibility reinforced the relationship between parasocial relationships and purchase intentions.

Masuda et. al (2022) utilized a cross-sectional analysis through a survey that measured personal attributes and characterizations as antecedents of purchase intentions. The personal attributes included attitude homophily, physical attractiveness, and social attractiveness, while the three characterizations consisted of trustworthiness, perceived expertise, and the parasocial relationship. The data was collected through an online survey after participants bought products or services upon watching YouTube advertisements promoted by influencers. The study found that parasocial relationships were significantly related to the personal attributes and that it had a positive impact on purchase intentions in comparison to the other characterizations. This demonstrates that parasocial relationships play a significant role in influencing behavioral intentions of followers, specifically purchase intentions. They also discovered that attitude homophily and especially social attractiveness had the greatest impact on parasocial relationships, while physical attractiveness had the least impact.

Leite and Baptista (2021) studied intimate self-disclosure from an influencer and parasocial relationships between influencers and consumers through an online survey. The survey consisted first of a question about two influencers the participants' followed closely online, and then the survey automatically presented one of the two influencers to the participants for the rest of the survey. Participants completed questions based on the intimate self-disclosure of their influencer, and then were told the study was conducted by researchers who wanted to

market a new brand of lotion; they consequently answered the question of whether they purchase the lotion if the influencer endorsed it. The findings revealed that a social media influencers' having high self-disclosure is an important factor in increasing the intention to purchase products of an endorse brand, as this strengthens the followers' sense of a parasocial relationship, heightens their perception of credibility, and increases the consumers' trust in the endorsed brand.

Impact of Parasocial Relationships on Advertising and Persuasion:

The following two studies examine the influence of parasocial relationships on advertising, persuasion, and consumer behavior. They investigate how parasocial relationships affect perceived credibility, source evaluation, advertising disclosures, brand evaluations, and purchase intentions.

Breves et. al (2021) performed two experiments in order to determine the interplay of parasocial relationships and advertising disclosures on social media influencers' followers. In the first experiment, female participants were randomly assigned to either follower or non-follower conditions, where they selected an influencer they followed or did not follow, respectively. Participants rated their parasocial relationship with the chosen influencer, evaluated a sponsored post from that influencer, and assessed the perceived fit between the influencer and the brand. They found whether participants followed the influencer or not significantly impacted their evaluation of credibility and persuasive content; greater levels of PSR positively influenced perceived source credibility, which in turn had a significant positive effect on the participants' evaluation of the sponsored post. In the second experiment, a 2 (follower status: non-follower or follower) x 2 (advertising disclosure presence or absence) between-subjects and online questionnaire was utilized to understand follower status and advertising disclosure. Participants chose an SMI they followed or did not follow, evaluated their PSRs with them, and subsequently were randomly assigned to view a post with or without an advertising disclosure. The results found that there was no significant main effect of the presence or absence of advertising disclosure. However, when advertising disclosure was included, followers of the influencer did indicate slightly higher brand evaluations and purchase intentions than non-followers.

Hwang and Zhang (2018) administered an online survey in order to investigate the effect of empathy, loneliness, and low self-esteem on parasocial relationships, and how PSRs affect followers' purchase intentions. Participants were given an online questionnaire that measured seven constructs: empathy, loneliness, social self-esteem, parasocial relationship, persuasion knowledge, purchase intention, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intentions through a five-point Likert scale. They found that parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers positively affect followers' purchase intentions and eWOM intentions. In regards to factors influencing PSRs, they found that empathy and low self-esteem positively affected PSRs, but loneliness did not have a positive impact.

Discussion

The research questions can thus be answered based upon the results section.

The first research question seeks to understand how parasocial relationships affect consumer purchasing decisions. The studies display that parasocial relationships positively increase trust and purchasing decisions of followers. Su et al. (2021) and Leite and Baptista (2021) compare the PSRs to friendships in real life, in which consumers usually trust friends' recommendations and connect this to influencers which causes high levels of trust and less risk in regards to purchases. Consumers who had PSRs with influencers on social media demonstrated more belief and understanding with influencers on social media than other consumers who did not have PSRs, displaying more trust and thus driving purchase intention (Su et al., 2021). Masuda et al. (2022) and Hwang and Zhang (2018) found that parasocial relationships had a positive impact on purchase intentions. Breves et al. (2021) indicated that higher levels of PSRs lead to less critical evaluation of advertising content, which positively influences the consumer's purchasing decisions.

The second research question is concerned with the various factors that impact the parasocial relationship between SMIs and their followers. The factors identified in the research studies include interpersonal attraction (Su et al., 2021), personal attributes (Masuda et al., 2022), intimate self-disclosure (Leite and Baptista, 2021), empathy, and low self-esteem (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). These factors contribute to the growth and development of parasocial relationships. Physical attraction, task attraction, and social attraction, combined to be interpersonal attraction, all showed a crucial role in impacting parasocial relationships. Physical attraction was shown to have the biggest impact on consumers (Su et al., 2021). Masuda et al. (2022) had similar yet differing results; personal attributes defined as social attractiveness, attitude homophily, and physical attractiveness all combined had an important role in influencing PSRs, however social attractiveness had the most significant impact, while physical attractiveness had little influence. The discrepancies on physical attractiveness might be due to variables being unaccounted for, such as the gender of the influencer or follower having impact perceived physical attractiveness or because of the differing demographics of the participants. Masuda et al. (2022) collected data from South Korea while Su et al. (2021) was sent out to Instagram users in Taiwan. The contrast in countries and cultures might have an impact on beauty standards and therefore perceived attractiveness, which demonstrates the need for further research in this area and understanding how physical attractiveness affects parasocial relationships. High intimate self-disclosure also demonstrated an important variable in enhancing PSRs as it increased followers' perceived trust due to the sharing of personal information from the influencer, also allowing for long-lasting relationship building (Leite and Baptista, 2021). Followers' empathy with influencers and low self-esteem was shown to have a positive impact on their parasocial relationship, inferring that developing connections between followers and influencers are important (Hwang and Zhang, 2018).

The final research question applies parasocial relationships to influencer marketing, and discusses the question of how influencers can grow their parasocial relationships. According to Su et. al (2021), fostering interpersonal attraction by building on task attraction, social attraction, and physical attraction remains a key component in growing parasocial relationships and therefore trust and credibility from influencers' followers. This can include engaging in two-way communication with followers, and not just generating content, to grow social attraction or providing valuable information on how to achieve a goal or finish a goal to grow task attraction. Secondly, by implementing intimate self-disclosure, influencers that disclose personal information or experiences create a sense of closeness and authenticity with their followers. This allows for heightened perceptions of credibility, then thereby increasing followers' trust in the promoted brand. Intimate self-disclosure can include sharing personal stories, insights, or behind-the-scenes content (Leite and Baptista, 2021). Thirdly, influencers can grow parasocial relationships by clearly disclosing advertising and sponsorships to followers; influencers can establish trust and credibility through transparency and authenticity in their sponsored content (Breves et. al, 2021). Considering followers' attributes, especially attitude homophily, and tailoring content and engagement to align with their audience's interests or preferences can also strengthen the parasocial relationship (Masuda et. al, 2022). Tailoring to followers allows for effective marketing, as the influencer can accommodate sponsored posts to their followers' interests. Lastly, influencers can also demonstrate empathy towards their followers to create a supportive online community (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). This can be achieved through engaging in conversations, responding to comments or followers' questions that can contribute to more connection and foster strong parasocial relationships.

However, admittedly this literature review is not holistic enough to provide an accurate representation of all the research on parasocial relationships and influencer marketing. As only five studies were studied, this results in selection bias by having a limited sample size and the inclusion and exclusion of various articles. Looking forward, future research studies should contain more articles on parasocial relationships and influencer marketing, and study further into each factor of PSRs and SMIs and how they might coalesce into differing marketing effectiveness.

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