

The Digital Trust Loop: Parasocial Relationships and The Psychology of Influence

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – In the digital era, social media influencers (SMIs) have gained prominence as influential marketing agents, exerting a substantial impact on consumer behavior. Social media facilitates dynamic interactions between influencers and their followers, cultivating the formation of parasocial relationships (PSRs).

Design/methodology/approach - This study employs an exploratory qualitative design to investigate the effect of PSR on influencer credibility and, subsequently, how influencer credibility influences audience behavioral intentions.

Findings – The findings reveal that PSR and source trustworthiness play a crucial role in strengthening behavioral intentions. Moreover, the study highlights that PSR enhances influencer credibility when influencers are perceived as attractive, trustworthy, and experts in their respective domains, leading to favorable marketing outcomes such as purchase intention, positive word-of-mouth, and consumers' willingness to pay premium prices.

Practical Implications- These insights provide valuable suggestions for marketers, emphasizing the strategic selection of influencers who develop trust and demonstrate expertise to optimize consumer engagement and stimulate effective marketing outcomes.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Social Media Influencers, Parasocial Relationship, Influencer Credibility, Behavioral Intention.

1. Introduction

Influencer marketing is a popular strategy brands use to reach their target consumers (Jiménez-Castillo & Sanchez-Fernández, 2019; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Social media influencers serve as brand ambassadors and are now considered opinion leaders (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Yerasani et al., 2019). Influencer collaborations have been found to be more successful for promotional purposes than conventional celebrity partnerships (Schouten et al., 2021). Influencer marketing is expected to gain popularity among international brands, with an estimated \$373 million in revenue by 2027. This concept is currently the centre of retailers' digital marketing campaigns (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Influencer marketing is an advertising strategy through which influencers collaborate with brands to attract consumers (Djafarova & Bowes, 2020; Ki et al., 2020). Meanwhile, partnering with influencers is only effective when they have the ability to influence. Therefore, influencers manage their personal social media accounts as part of their work to grow their community of active followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Given that followers are more inclined to value the suggestions of social media influencers (SMIs) due to their

subject-matter expertise (De Veirman et al., 2017), it might appear that influencers must uphold their trustworthiness to foster stronger bonds with their followers.

SMIs actively share brand information through posts or videos, some of which go on to develop a significant following and serve as an inspiration for their followers. Compared to studio content, SMI-produced content is 6.9 times greater in reliability (Ki et al., 2020). SMIs are now a more credible information source for followers when it comes to making decisions (Sakib et al., 2020). SMIs generate engaging and informative content that seamlessly integrates their individuality and preferences, building a robust PSR with their audience and ultimately impacting their decision-making (Lou & Yuan, 2019). From a conceptual viewpoint, prominent SMIs could be seen as opinion leaders who can shape people's attitudes and actions around a particular product or brand (Godey et al., 2016). Since using opinion leaders to sway customer decisions has long been a marketing strategy (Lyons & Henderson, 2005), influential opinion leaders are generally well-liked by their followers and seen as credible sources.

Past studies, for instance, have demonstrated that social media influencers' effectiveness in influencing audience attitudes and behaviors toward a brand increase with their trustworthiness and attractiveness (Djafarova &

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Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2021). Through their interactions with other users on social media, social media influencers can increase the willingness of customers to spread their recommendations, facilitating rapid and effective word-of-mouth (WOM) processes (Casaló et al., 2020). According to Reinikainen et al. (2020), social media users who have developed a PSR with their preferred influencer are also inclined more to believe the advice they receive about how to use and purchase products. Thus, the current study aims to explore how SMIs impact their followers' purchase decisions and encourage word-of-mouth sharing through a conceptual framework incorporating parasocial relationships, influencer credibility, and behavioral intention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Parasocial Relationship

Influencers play an important role in facilitating indirect communication between marketers/brands and their followers (Yuan and Lou, 2020). Influencer marketing differs from other forms of indirect communication in the way it uses influencer relationships to achieve marketing objectives, such as influencing consumer opinions of corporate brands (Booth and Matic, 2011). Therefore, it is critical to understand the interaction between influencers and their followers. Horton and Wohl (1956) defined parasocial interaction as the audiences' perceived social connections with media characters. Several works of literature (e.g., Escalas and Bettman, 2017; Kim & Song, 2016) use the concept of parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationship (PSR) alternately. PSR, derived from PSI, is defined as a socio-emotional bond formed between media characters and viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Giles, 2002). PSR describes a long-term relationship between media personalities and audiences, whereas PSI refers to audiences' relationship perceptions after a single engagement with media content (e.g., show, movie) (Dibble et al., 2016).

2.2 Influencer Credibility

The study utilized Hovland and Weiss' (1951) source credibility theory. Hovland et al. (1953) introduced the source credibility theory, which included expertise and trustworthiness. Ohanian (1991) expanded on this notion by introducing attractiveness as a third component. Erdogan (1999) used the terms "trustworthiness" and "expertise" to describe the extent to which a customer believes the endorser's moral character

and integrity. Finally, Ohanian (1991) refers to appearance or likability as attractiveness. Prior research has shown that endorser support requires credibility, as the source's truthfulness influences the message's impact (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Weismueller et al., 2020). For example, Weismueller et al. (2020) examined the associations among buying intent, expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness; their results reveal that followers who view SMIs as trustworthy and credible are more likely to purchase brands suggested by SMIs. This cognitive mechanism involves determining whether SMIs can be relied upon to provide beneficial content and credible insights, and whether they should be trusted to have significant brand expertise or general experience (Handayani et al., 2020).

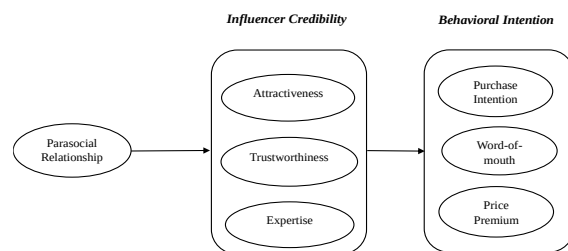


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Attractiveness

Numerous researches in advertising and communication suggests that cues related to physical attractiveness influence a person's first impression of another person (Chaiken, 1979; Joseph, 1982; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Widgery & Ruch, 1981). Several definitions are employed to explain attractiveness, and an examination of the literature demonstrates that the term is not a single-dimensional. Various instances of the construct have been provided, such as sensuality (Steadman, 1969), chicness (Mills & Aronson, 1965), physical attractiveness operationalized as model attractiveness (attractive-unattractive), likability (Maddux & Rogers, 1980), and facial and physical attractiveness (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Patzer, 1983).

Joseph (1982) conducted a thorough analysis of experimental findings about the impact of physically appealing communicators on dependent variables like opinion change and product appraisal from the advertising industry and associated fields. He concluded that communicators who are visually pleasing are

more admired primarily and have a favorable effect on the products they collaborate with. Increasing the communicator's attractiveness facilitates a shift in attitude toward positivity (Kahle & Homer, 1985). An individual's physical appearance is connected with their attractiveness. Yılmazdoğan et al. (2021) assert that attractiveness plays a crucial role in the first impression that one develops on others.

2.2.2 Trustworthiness

The trust paradigm in communication pertains to the level of acceptance and confidence the listener has in the communicator and the message. Giffin (1967) reviewed the concept of trust across several centuries, from Aristotle to King, and concluded that listeners' faith in a speaker is equal to the idea of trust, which Aristotle called "ethos," and Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) called "source credibility." Several research findings support the effect of trustworthiness in changing attitudes. For example, Miller and Baseheart (1969) examined the relationship between a communication's persuasiveness and the source's trustworthiness about terrifying communications. The results demonstrated that when the communicator was viewed as extremely reliable, strong-opinioned communication was more impactful in encouraging shifts in perspective than non-opinionated communication. According to McGinnies and Ward (1980), the source that resulted in the most degree of attitude change was thought to be trustworthy and knowledgeable. Furthermore, Friedman and Friedman (1976) looked at numerous correlates of trustworthiness and concluded that people would trust well-liked celebrities. Furthermore, Ohanian (1990) highlighted that the communicator's credibility is vital in persuasion and attitude modification studies.

2.2.3. Expertise

Expertise is the third factor that adds to the credibility of a source, according to Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953). Expertness (Applbaum & Anatol, 1972), competence (Whitehead, 1968), authoritativeness (McCroskey, 1966), and qualification (Berlo et al., 1969) are among the names utilized to characterize this dimension. Based on studies on sources perceived persuasive communication expertise, customer perceptions change favorably when sources are viewed as having persuasive communication expertise (Maddux & Rogers, 1980; Mills & Harvey, 1972). For instance, Crisci and Kassino

(1973) analyzed the relationship between behavioral compliance and communicator-perceived proficiency. The study's results demonstrated a direct relationship between respondents' perceptions of the advice's strength and level of expertise and their compliance with the source's suggestions. In an experiment modifying the elements of expertise, Crano (1970) discovered that individuals disclosed to sources with high levels of competence agreed more with the perspective being promoted than those exposed to sources with low expertise. Finally, a skilled salesperson induced more consumers to buy a product than a less skilled salesperson (Woodside & Davenport Jr., 1974).

2.3 Behavioral Intention

Behavioral intentions are identifiers of an individual's preparedness to participate in specific actions (Ajzen, 1991). Lam and Hsu (2006) define it as the likelihood of acting and signifies an individual's anticipation of a specific action in certain situations. Actual actions and behavioral intentions on Instagram are significantly correlated. Persuasion is dependent on the impression of one's credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). The degree to which followers view endorsers as credible, therefore, affects the followers' behavioral intentions (Argyris et al., 2021; Cosenza et al., 2015; Schouten et al., 2021). The willingness of followers to purchase the recommended products is greatly influenced by the credibility of influencers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Research has shown that followers' behavioral intentions to follow endorsers and work on the details they share on their blogs are influenced by their credibility evaluations (Cosenza et al., 2015). Moreover, followers think an influencer is an expert on the topic and can provide trustworthy guidance, so they are more inclined to recommend an influencer (such as their account) (Thakur et al., 2016). Due to the influencer's perceived credibility, their overall impacts result in higher favorable behavioral intentions toward them (Belanche et al., 2021).

2.3.1 Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is a psychological procedure associated with the decision to acquire a specific brand (Shah et al., 2012). It is a person's conscious attempt to build and establish a brand (Spears & Singh, 2004). According to Filieri et al. (2018), purchase intention denotes a follower's readiness to try a brand, service, or product that the influencer has endorsed. Nonetheless, since this insight can be used to predict the purchasing

process, it is imperative to understand customer purchase intention in connection to consumer behavior. Identification of needs, information search, assessment of alternatives, choice to buy, and post-purchase behavior are the stages in the consumer decision-making process (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Based on existing research, businesses should take into account the impact that consumers' intents to buy have on their actual purchasing decisions. This is because it can lead to higher sales and more profit optimization (Hosein, 2012).

2.3.2 Word of mouth (WOM)

In the context of marketing, word-of-mouth recommendations-also referred to as referrals to others-are described as "informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and their sellers" (Westbrook, 1987, p. 261). Word-of-mouth is described by Arnd (1967) as oral, person-to-person conversations between a communicator and a recipient that the recipient views as non-profit and about a brand, product, or service. Customers convey this non-commercial message throughout conversations (Singh & Sarma, 2018). It has long been known to have an enormous impact on people's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. WOM has a major influence on customer behavior in marketing communications, in accordance to research on WOM in the context of social media platforms (Chung & Tsai, 2009). WOM draws new audience to SMIs' social media accounts, increasing the number of followers and engagement among followers (Taillon et al., 2020). Word-of-mouth marketing and psychological changes in consumers can result from the words of an influencer (Purbohastuti et al., 2023).

2.3.3 Price Premium

Customers' willingness to pay more for a brand than for another is referred to as a price premium (Netemeyer et al., 2004). According to Godey et al. (2016), it has a direct effect on how customers behave when making purchases. The readiness to pay a premium or additional amount reflects an individual's estimation of the amount they would be prepared to spend in order to obtain a good or service or prevent the loss of one (Bateman et al., 2002, p. 6; Şahin, 2013). The premium price is the amount paid over what is deemed to be the fair price, and the main element determining the high price is the consumer's

demand for the good or service at a specific level (Jeong & Jang, 2019). As stated by Dwivedi et al. (2018), when there isn't a superior substitute, consumers are more prepared to pay for their favored brand. Because of this, consumers are influenced by premium prices while making purchases; they are more prone to acquire specific brands and are ready to pay a higher price when the benefits outweigh the drawbacks (Rahmanisah & Fadli, 2022).

3. Discussion and Findings

Lately, a rising trend has emerged of brands working with influencers to advertise their products to prospective consumers in a more organic manner (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Ki et al., 2020). Researchers have examined the significance of SMIs from various perspectives, including marketing, communication, and advertising, as their popularity continues to rise. Thus, it is critical to comprehend the underlying mechanisms and factors that determine influencer value while investigating the role of influencers in influencer marketing. Furthermore, social media influencers-as opposed to celebrities-are content creators who primarily depend on mediated connections, primarily engaging in two-way interactions with their audience in order to establish their fame and status. Understanding how these interactions shape followers' perceptions of the influencer is crucial. Ong et al. (2024) found that the power of PSR boosts the effects of source trustworthiness, leading to a direct positive impact on behavioral intentions. This occurs because PSR fosters a stronger sense of authenticity and emotional connection with the influencer, reinforcing trust and improving the likelihood of positive behavioral intention.

PSR plays a pivotal role in how social media users perceive the trustworthiness of endorsers. Customers consider the nature and depth of their connections with influencers when assessing the endorser's credibility. In turn, source trustworthiness enhances credibility, ultimately increasing purchase intention. This implies that influencer-based social media marketing techniques effectively drive product sales (Chung & Cho, 2017). Followers of SMIs are likely to develop PSRs with influencers they find attractive, trustworthy, and who resemble their appearance and personality. Additionally, influencers with expertise in the product they endorse further strengthen this bond. The developed PSR between SMIs and their followers

often leads to the marketing result of increased purchase intentions (Ashraf et al., 2023).

Tran et al. (2024) highlights the significant effect of source trustworthiness and PSR on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This is because PSR and trustworthy sources create an emotional bond and sense of reliability, increasing followers' willingness to engage in and trust WOM recommendations. Similarly, Lin et al. (2021) argue that consumers are more inclined to engage in pseudosocial interactions with influencers who are regarded as experts in their domain, providing specific knowledge and information that boosts credibility. Expert influencers deliver personalized guidance, motivating consumers to establish stronger pseudosocial connections, particularly when the influencer is perceived as an attractive brand spokesperson. Dwivedi et al. (2018) propose that establishing credibility can be a powerful strategy for attracting customers, making them feel more comfortable paying a premium price for the brand experience.

4. Theoretical Contributions

The current study developed an original theoretical model to examine the impact of SMIs on followers' behavioral intentions by integrating the Parasocial Relationship Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) with the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953). It advances Source Credibility Theory by revealing how credibility factors such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise affect behavioral intentions (Erdogan, 1999; Holland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1991; Filieri, Hofacker, & Alguezaui, 2018). By exploring how these dimensions of influencer credibility are influenced by parasocial relationships, this research provides a fresh perspective on the psychological mechanisms driving consumer engagement with influencers.

The study builds on the notion that when an influencer is considered as an expert, they can persuade customers regardless of the strength or weakness of the arguments presented (Erdogan, 1999; Ohanian, 1991). However, Filieri et al. (2023) found that while perceived expertise significantly influences behavioral intentions for utilitarian products, this effect does not extend to hedonic products. This study also reveals that the impact of influencer endorsements is formed by both the attributes of the influencers (such as attractiveness) and the quality of interactions

between influencers and their followers, including parasocial relationships. Social interaction tools like vlogs, audio/video chats, and podcasts are instrumental in fostering these parasocial relationships, with real-time mediums enhancing the realism and authenticity of interactions.

This research recommends that marketers focus on strategies that develop greater emotional connections between influencers and their audiences, underlining the critical role of parasocial relationship in enhancing influencer credibility. Techniques such as personalized content, ongoing engagement, and transparency may be utilized to deepen these connections, thereby boosting the influencers' attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise. Furthermore, the study suggests that marketers may utilize these enriched credibility elements to stimulate certain consumer behaviors, such as higher purchase intentions, increased word of mouth, and a willingness to pay premium prices. Using these insights, marketing strategies may be more effectively transformed to maximize the effectiveness of social media personalities, causing more significant and measurable impact in digital campaigns.

5. Managerial Implications

The present study provides social media managers with valuable insights, enabling them to focus on the critical components that most strongly affect consumers' behavioral intentions after interacting with SMI content. The current analysis highlights the importance of the PSRs that audiences create with SMIs. Understanding the interaction between audiences and influencers can help marketers compete for the most prominent influencers. This suggests that for influencers to be effective endorsers, they must cultivate PSR by transparently disclosing aspects of their personal lives and building trust with their audience.

This study shows that followers' purchasing decisions can be greatly influenced by SMIs who are considered as reliable experts. When choosing SMIs for collaborations, marketing managers should prioritize source expertise because influencers with recognized knowledge and authority in their industry are more likely to foster trust, increase brand credibility, and effectively drive consumer action. Companies can develop more persuasive and impactful

promotions that engage with their target audience by partnering with expert influencers. Influencer marketing agencies should focus choosing influencers that are viewed as credible by their audience in order to strengthen campaign efficacy and generate customer trust and engagement. Credible influencers' messages often drive followers' actions. These influencers have a more committed audience who follow their updates, seek advice, and suggest their advice. Recent study indicates that influencer credibility can improve the success of brand efforts (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Schouten et al., 2021). Therefore, these agencies can help companies reach a more diverse and targeted audience by partnering them with credible influencers.

6. Conclusion and Scope for Future Research

This study emphasizes the significant role of PSRs in influencing influencer credibility and its impact on consumer behavioral intention. Influencers who develop strong PSRs by being authentic with their audience gain the audience's trust, strengthen their emotional bonds, and enhance perceived credibility. The results highlight the significance of influencer credibility in enhancing consumer engagement, ultimately driving positive marketing outcomes such as increased sales and brand recommendations. The analysis provides essential insights for marketers, emphasizing the need to prioritize credible influencers to develop more effective and trustworthy marketing strategies.

Several avenues for future research can be explored to expand on the analysis presented in this work. Firstly, in order to obtain a better understanding of follower behavior, researchers can look into additional outcome variables influenced by the credibility of SMIs, like brand awareness and consumer loyalty. Furthermore, the conceptual framework of this study should be used for cross-cultural assessments to evaluate the model's generalizability in various cultural contexts. A longitudinal method, which investigates how followers' perceptions of influencer credibility change over time, could also be useful. Future research might also assist from qualitative methodologies, such as interviews or triangulation techniques, to provide more detailed insights into how influencer credibility affects follower intentions. Finally, future studies should look at influencers in a variety of sectors, including entertainment,

fashion, and tourism, to investigate how PSR affects influencer credibility and how these factors vary by industry. Examining the significance of PSRs in developing credibility across industries can provide further insights into how followers' engagement and behavior differ with regard to the type of the influencer's expertise and the industry context.

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