

The Dynamics of Parasocial Relationships and Their Impact on Purchase Intentions: The Perspective of Active Social Media Users

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ABSTRACT

The parasocial relationship between influencers and followers on Instagram has become a crucial factor in digital marketing. This study aims to explore how parasocial relationships are formed, the factors that strengthen them, and their impact on followers' purchase intentions. Using a netnographic method, this research observes digital interaction patterns between influencers and followers through content analysis of posts, comments, and engagement with Instagram features. The findings indicate that parasocial relationships develop through personal communication, self-disclosure, and consistent interaction. The factors that strengthen this relationship include interaction frequency, influencer authenticity, identity similarity with followers, and influencer credibility. A strong parasocial relationship increases followers' trust in product recommendations, reduces skepticism towards advertisements, and encourages purchase decisions and brand loyalty. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of relationship-based marketing strategies in influencer marketing, where marketers need to collaborate with influencers who have active and authentic engagement with their audience. This study provides new insights for academics and marketing practitioners regarding the role of parasocial relationships in shaping consumer behavior in the digital era.

Keywords: Parasocial Relationship, Social Media, Purchase Intentions, Influencer Marketing, Netnography

INTRODUCTION

Background

The development of digital technology has transformed the landscape of communication and social interaction, particularly with the growing popularity of social media. Instagram, as one of the most widely used platforms, has more than 2 billion active monthly users worldwide, with the majority of its users belonging to the millennial generation (Statista, 2023). The uniqueness of Instagram lies in its highly visual content, enabling individuals, especially influencers, to build a digital identity and create relationships with their audience. One of the emerging phenomena from this interaction is the parasocial relationship, where users feel a strong emotional connection with influencers despite the relationship being one-sided (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

The phenomenon of parasocial relationships is becoming increasingly relevant in the context of digital marketing, particularly with the rise of influencer marketing. Influencers, whether celebrities or micro-influencers, leverage these emotional connections to influence audience perceptions and purchasing decisions (Zhang et al., 2022). Recent studies suggest that followers with strong parasocial connections to an influencer are more likely to trust product recommendations, even when they are aware that the content is part of a marketing strategy (Schouten et al., 2020). This finding indicates that parasocial relationships can reduce skepticism towards advertisements and enhance the effectiveness of digital promotions.

The trust developed through parasocial relationships significantly influences consumer behavior. Consumers who feel emotionally close to influencers tend to perceive them as credible and reliable sources of information (Kim & Kim, 2021). In some cases, followers adopt the values and lifestyle promoted by influencers, creating a consumption pattern guided by social recommendations (Chung & Cho, 2017). Moreover, this phenomenon is reinforced by social media algorithms, which continuously expose users to relevant content, deepening engagement and increasing loyalty toward specific influencers (Buchanan et al., 2021).

Although many studies have examined the impact of parasocial relationships in traditional media such as television, research on the dynamics of these relationships in social media, particularly Instagram, remains limited (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Most studies have focused on celebrity-fan relationships in entertainment, while research on the impact of parasocial relationships on purchase decisions in digital marketing still needs further exploration. Additionally, most existing studies employ a quantitative approach, which, while providing an overall understanding of parasocial relationships, is less capable of deeply exploring how these relationships form in daily social media interactions (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019).

The urgency of this research increases with the shift in marketing strategies from traditional advertising to relationship-based marketing. As more consumers trust individuals over brands, companies increasingly rely on influencers to bridge their communication with consumers (Casaló et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding how parasocial relationships form and how they influence purchase intentions is crucial for both academics and marketing practitioners.

Based on this phenomenon, this study aims to explore the dynamics of parasocial relationships between influencers and followers on Instagram and their impact on purchase intentions. Using a qualitative netnographic method, this study will observe interaction patterns on Instagram, identify factors that strengthen parasocial relationships, and understand how these relationships drive purchase decisions. The findings from this research are expected to contribute to the academic literature on digital marketing and provide insights for brands in designing more effective marketing strategies through influencers.

Research Questions

Social media, particularly Instagram, has become a platform for influencers to build close connections with their followers. One emerging phenomenon from this interaction is the parasocial relationship, where followers feel emotionally attached to influencers despite the one-sided nature of the relationship. This attachment has the potential to affect trust and purchase decisions, especially among millennials.

However, further understanding is needed on how these relationships form and what factors strengthen them.

Based on this phenomenon, this research focuses on three main questions:

1. How are parasocial relationships formed in the interaction between influencers and followers on Instagram?
2. What factors strengthen parasocial relationships in the context of social media?
3. How do parasocial relationships influence followers' purchase intentions?

Research Objectives

Parasocial relationships between influencers and followers on Instagram have become a critical aspect of digital marketing. The emotional closeness established in this one-sided interaction has the potential to increase followers' trust in influencers, which ultimately influences purchase decisions. However, further understanding is required on how these relationships develop, what factors strengthen them, and how they affect purchase intentions. Therefore, this research aims to:

1. Analyze how parasocial relationships are formed in the interaction between influencers and followers on Instagram.
This study will examine digital communication patterns and user engagement that contribute to building parasocial relationships.
2. Identify factors that strengthen parasocial relationships in the context of social media.
This research will investigate elements such as interaction frequency, influencer authenticity, community engagement, as well as influencer attractiveness and credibility that enhance parasocial bonds.
3. Explain the impact of parasocial relationships on followers' purchase intentions.
This study will explore the extent to which emotional attachment with influencers increases trust in product recommendations and influences purchase decisions.

The findings from this research are expected to provide in-depth insights for academics and digital marketing practitioners in designing more effective influencer marketing strategies based on relationships and trust.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parasocial Relationships and Social Media

The concept of parasocial relationships was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) as a one-sided relationship between an audience and a media figure, where the audience feels an emotional connection despite the absence of real interaction. In traditional media, this relationship was commonly observed between television viewers and celebrities or hosts. However, with the evolution of social media, parasocial relationships have become more dynamic, as users can now engage with media figures more directly through features such as comments, direct messages, and live streaming (Yuan & Lou, 2020).

Instagram, as one of the most popular social media platforms, has become a space where influencers build digital communities and establish parasocial relationships with their followers (Casaló et al., 2020). Through personalized content and consistent interaction, influencers can create a sense of closeness and familiarity,

making followers feel like they are part of the influencer's daily life (Buchanan et al., 2021). This relationship is further strengthened by social media algorithms, which automatically prioritize and display content from accounts that users frequently follow or engage with, thereby increasing exposure and reinforcing emotional attachment (Zhang et al., 2022).

Factors Strengthening Parasocial Relationships

Several key factors influence the strength of parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers. These factors include:

1. **Frequency and Intensity of Interaction**
The more frequently a follower interacts with an influencer's content, the higher the likelihood of forming an emotional bond (Kim & Kim, 2021). Instagram's algorithm, which curates content based on user engagement, further reinforces this by continuously displaying posts from frequently visited accounts (Schouten et al., 2020).
2. **Authenticity and Self-Disclosure**
Influencers who share personal experiences and authentic moments are more likely to establish stronger parasocial relationships (Chung & Cho, 2017). Followers feel a deeper connection with influencers who share their daily lives, struggles, and emotions, as this creates a sense of relatability and trust (Casaló et al., 2020).
3. **Attractiveness and Shared Identity**
Physical attractiveness, personality traits, and shared interests or values between influencers and followers contribute significantly to parasocial relationships (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Followers tend to engage more emotionally with influencers they find appealing or similar in lifestyle, values, or interests (Buchanan et al., 2021).
4. **Credibility and Trust**
The credibility of an influencer plays a crucial role in strengthening parasocial bonds. Influencers who are perceived as honest and not overly commercialized tend to gain higher levels of trust from their followers (Kim & Kim, 2021). Followers are more likely to remain loyal to influencers who provide objective and balanced product reviews rather than solely promotional content (Zhang et al., 2022).

Parasocial Relationships and Purchase Intentions

Strong parasocial relationships have significant implications for consumer behavior, particularly in terms of purchase intentions. Several studies indicate that trust built through parasocial relationships increases the likelihood of followers purchasing products recommended by influencers (Schouten et al., 2020).

1. **Influence of Trust on Product Recommendations**
Followers with strong parasocial connections to influencers tend to trust their product recommendations more (Casaló et al., 2020). Influencer endorsements are often perceived as more authentic than traditional advertisements, thereby reducing hesitation in making purchasing decisions (Zhang et al., 2022).
2. **Reduction of Skepticism Toward Advertising**
Studies suggest that parasocial relationships reduce skepticism toward

influencer marketing (Buchanan et al., 2021). Even when followers recognize that influencers are being paid for promotions, they are still likely to trust their recommendations due to the emotional bond they have established (Schouten et al., 2020).

3. **Increased Loyalty and Purchase Decisions**
Parasocial relationships not only influence immediate purchase decisions but also enhance long-term brand loyalty (Chung & Cho, 2017). Followers who develop strong emotional attachments to influencers are more likely to continue following their recommendations over time, creating a brand advocacy effect (Kim & Kim, 2021).

Summary of Literature Review

Based on the literature, parasocial relationships have become a key factor in digital marketing, particularly in the influencer marketing strategy. Understanding the mechanisms behind these relationships will help marketers design more effective communication strategies and build long-term relationships with their audience. This study aims to further explore the formation, strengthening factors, and impact of parasocial relationships on consumer purchasing behavior within the context of Instagram influencers.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative approach using the netnographic method, which is an adaptation of ethnographic methods for studying online communities (Kozinets, 2019). Netnography allows researchers to observe and analyze user interactions on social media without direct intervention, ensuring that the collected data remains natural and reflective of actual user behavior (Costello et al., 2017). In this research, the netnographic approach is used to explore the dynamics of parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers on Instagram and their impact on purchase intentions.

This study is exploratory in nature, aiming to understand how parasocial relationships develop and evolve in digital interactions and how these relationships influence consumer purchase behavior. Data is collected through direct observation of influencer-follower interactions on Instagram, including content analysis of posts, comments, and user engagement patterns.

Selection of Research Participants and Study Scope

The subjects of this study are active Instagram users from the millennial generation who follow influencers in lifestyle, beauty, and fashion industries. Millennials were selected as the target demographic because they constitute the largest segment of Instagram users and exhibit high levels of engagement in digital interactions (Statista, 2023). The influencers observed in this study meet the following criteria:

- More than 100,000 followers
- High engagement levels (likes, comments, and responses in Instagram Stories)
- Consistently share personal content and product recommendations

The selection of influencers was conducted using purposive sampling, with the following inclusion criteria:

- Active engagement with followers, indicated by a significant number of comments on each post and participation in Q&A sessions or discussions via Instagram Stories.
- Frequent sharing of personal content, including daily life stories, personal opinions, and real-life experiences with products.
- Promotion or endorsement of products, allowing for observation of how followers respond to influencer recommendations.

The study was conducted over two months, with researchers observing posts, comments, and user responses throughout the period.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out through passive observation on Instagram, involving the following methods:

1. Analyzing influencer content, including posts, photos, videos, Instagram Stories, and live streaming to understand how they build relationships with followers.
2. Examining follower comments, identifying engagement patterns, emotional expressions, and responses to product promotions.
3. Recording interaction patterns, such as how influencers respond to followers, communication styles, and elements that strengthen parasocial relationships.

To supplement the data, digital documentation (screenshots of posts and interactions) was used as reference material for further analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns and key themes related to parasocial relationships and their impact on purchase intentions. The analysis process included:

1. Data Coding
Identifying keywords, expressions, and interaction patterns that describe parasocial relationships and purchase intentions.
2. Theme Categorization
Grouping coded data into key themes, such as influencer-follower interaction patterns, factors strengthening parasocial relationships, and the influence of parasocial relationships on purchase intentions.
3. Interpretation of Findings
Examining how parasocial relationships develop, evolve, and influence followers' purchasing behavior.

Data Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this study employed source triangulation, comparing interaction patterns from multiple influencers to identify similarities or differences in how parasocial relationships are formed. Additionally, an audit trail was maintained to systematically record all data analysis processes, ensuring research transparency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in compliance with ethical principles for online studies, ensuring that data collection and analysis adhered to ethical standards. Key ethical considerations included:

1. Using publicly available data, meaning only interactions on public accounts were observed, without accessing private user information.
2. Anonymizing research subjects, ensuring that both influencers and followers remain unidentifiable in the reporting of results.
3. No direct intervention, allowing interactions to occur naturally without researcher interference.

By following these ethical guidelines, this study aims to provide comprehensive insights into the dynamics of parasocial relationships on Instagram and their role in shaping consumer purchase behavior.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings of the study regarding parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers on Instagram and their impact on purchase intentions. The data analysis was conducted using a netnographic approach, focusing on digital interactions, follower engagement, and influencer communication patterns in building parasocial relationships. The findings are categorized into three main themes: (1) Interaction Patterns That Form Parasocial Relationships, (2) Factors That Strengthen Parasocial Relationships, and (3) The Influence of Parasocial Relationships on Purchase Intention.

Interaction Patterns That Form Parasocial Relationships

The parasocial relationship between influencers and followers on Instagram is formed through consistent and repetitive interactions. The study found several key communication patterns that create emotional attachment between influencers and their followers:

1. **Personal Communication Style**

Influencers who build strong parasocial relationships tend to use a personal and friendly communication style when addressing their followers. Posts that begin with greetings such as "Hey besties!", "How are you today?", or "I have something exciting to share with you" create the illusion that the influencer is speaking directly to each follower. This communication style fosters a sense of closeness, making followers feel acknowledged despite the one-sided nature of the relationship.

2. **Self-Disclosure Through Personal Content**

Parasocial relationships are also strengthened through self-disclosure, where influencers share personal experiences, daily routines, and emotional reflections. The study observed that influencers who frequently post personal stories, such as life challenges, everyday activities, or their thoughts and feelings, tend to have loyal and highly engaged followers. Followers often respond to these posts with supportive comments such as "I've been through the same experience, stay strong!" or "Thank you for sharing this, I can totally relate", indicating emotional connection.

3. **Engagement via Instagram Stories and Live Streaming**

The Instagram Stories and Live Streaming features play a crucial role in strengthening parasocial relationships. Stories allow influencers to share more spontaneous and unfiltered content, creating a more authentic impression. Meanwhile, Live Streaming sessions enable followers to interact in real-time,

asking questions and receiving direct responses. The study found that influencers who actively engage with their followers during live sessions—mentioning their names, replying to their questions, and showing appreciation—tend to have stronger parasocial bonds.

4. Responses to Comments and Messages from Followers
One of the indicators of a strong parasocial relationship is the extent to which an influencer acknowledges and interacts with their followers. Influencers who frequently reply to comments with a friendly and personal tone, recognize their followers' contributions, or use emoji-based responses that reflect warmth tend to create a more loyal and emotionally invested follower base.

Factors That Strengthen Parasocial Relationships

The study identified several factors that significantly influence the strength of parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers on Instagram:

1. Frequency and Consistency of Interaction
The more frequently a follower sees and engages with an influencer's content, the stronger the likelihood of forming an emotional bond. Instagram's algorithm further reinforces this by prioritizing content from accounts that users frequently interact with, ensuring continuous exposure to influencer posts.
2. Authenticity and Credibility of Influencers
Influencers perceived as authentic and not overly commercialized tend to have stronger parasocial relationships with their followers. The study found that followers trust influencers more when they provide honest product reviews, even when discussing both positive and negative aspects of a product. In contrast, influencers who constantly promote products without transparency lose credibility and struggle to maintain a strong parasocial bond.
3. Shared Identity and Values
Followers are more likely to form parasocial relationships with influencers who share similar values, lifestyles, or interests. For example, influencers who focus on health-conscious lifestyles tend to attract followers who are also interested in fitness and well-being. This sense of shared identity creates a community-like atmosphere, where followers feel connected to both the influencer and other members of the influencer's audience.
4. Influencer Attractiveness and Personality
Both physical attractiveness and personality traits influence the formation of parasocial relationships. The study found that influencers with charismatic, humorous, or inspirational personalities tend to attract stronger emotional engagement from followers.

The Influence of Parasocial Relationships on Purchase Intentions

The findings indicate that strong parasocial relationships significantly impact purchase intentions among followers. The key effects include:

1. Increased Trust in Product Recommendations
Followers who feel emotionally connected to an influencer tend to trust their product recommendations more. This trust leads followers to perceive sponsored content as genuine advice, rather than just advertisements.
2. Reduced Skepticism Toward Advertising

Consumers generally exhibit skepticism toward advertisements, but parasocial relationships reduce this skepticism. The study found that even when followers recognize influencer promotions as paid endorsements, they still believe in the influencer's judgment and are more willing to consider the product.

3. **Strengthened Brand Loyalty and Repeat Purchases**
Parasocial relationships do not only influence one-time purchases but also contribute to long-term brand loyalty. Followers who develop strong emotional ties with influencers are more likely to continue purchasing recommended products and even share their experiences with others.
4. **Digital Word-of-Mouth (WOM) Effect**
Beyond purchasing products, followers tend to share their product experiences on social media, reinforcing a digital word-of-mouth (WOM) effect. This organic promotion extends the reach and impact of influencer marketing beyond the initial audience.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with previous research suggesting that parasocial relationships enhance digital marketing effectiveness through influencers (Casaló et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). The study also supports the theory that parasocial relationships on social media are influenced by authenticity, interactive engagement, and shared values with the audience (Schouten et al., 2020).

From a practical perspective, these findings provide valuable insights for marketers in designing more effective influencer marketing strategies. Brands can leverage parasocial relationships by:

- Partnering with influencers who have strong engagement with their audience rather than solely focusing on follower count.
- Encouraging influencers to maintain authenticity in their content and avoid overly commercialized messaging.
- Promoting interactive features such as Q&A sessions, live streams, and user-generated content to strengthen audience engagement.

The study highlights the need for marketers to shift from transactional marketing approaches to relationship-driven strategies, as fostering long-term emotional connections with consumers leads to higher trust, increased engagement, and stronger purchase intentions.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the dynamics of parasocial relationships between influencers and followers on Instagram and their impact on purchase intentions. Using a netnographic method, this research observes how digital interactions foster emotional attachment and build trust in influencer recommendations.

The findings reveal that parasocial relationships develop through personal communication, self-disclosure, and consistent interaction. Several key factors strengthen these relationships, including interaction frequency, influencer authenticity, shared identity with followers, and influencer credibility.

Additionally, strong parasocial relationships significantly influence purchase intentions. Followers who trust influencers as credible sources of information are

more likely to follow their product recommendations. This relationship also reduces skepticism towards advertising, increases brand loyalty, and encourages digital word-of-mouth marketing, where followers actively share their product experiences with others.

Thus, this study confirms that parasocial relationships play a crucial role in digital marketing, particularly in influencer marketing strategies. Brands looking to optimize their marketing efforts must understand how to build authentic connections with audiences to enhance marketing effectiveness.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature on parasocial relationships in the context of social media, particularly Instagram. Theoretical contributions include:

1. Expanding the understanding of parasocial relationship formation in social media, identifying key interaction patterns that contribute to emotional attachment between influencers and followers.
2. Confirming the role of authenticity and interactive engagement in strengthening parasocial relationships, consistent with prior studies (Casaló et al., 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020).
3. Explaining the impact of parasocial relationships on purchase intentions, highlighting how emotional bonds increase trust in influencer recommendations and reduce advertising skepticism.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for marketers and businesses in developing more effective influencer marketing strategies:

1. Selecting Authentic and Relevant Influencers
 - Brands should collaborate with influencers who have high engagement levels with their audience rather than simply focusing on follower count.
 - Influencer credibility is essential; those who provide honest and balanced reviews are more likely to build trust with their audience.
2. Enhancing Engagement in Digital Interactions
 - Influencers should use a personalized communication style, addressing followers in a friendly and relatable manner to build emotional connections.
 - Interactive features like live streaming, Q&A sessions, and Instagram Stories polls can be utilized to increase engagement and foster a sense of community.
3. Developing Relationship-Based Marketing Strategies
 - Marketing effectiveness is not only driven by exposure but also by emotional attachment and trust between influencers and followers.
 - Brands should focus on storytelling and authentic experiences rather than transactional advertising.
4. Leveraging Digital Word-of-Mouth (WOM)
 - Encouraging followers to share their experiences with influencer-recommended products, thereby creating organic brand advocacy.
 - Utilizing user-generated content and campaign-specific hashtags to amplify influencer marketing reach.

Implications for Consumers

For consumers, this study provides insights into how parasocial relationships influence their perceptions and purchase decisions. Being aware of the emotional impact of influencer interactions can help consumers make more critical and informed purchasing decisions rather than relying solely on influencer endorsements.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Research Limitations

Although this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged:

1. **Focus on a Single Social Media Platform (Instagram)**
This research only examines interactions on Instagram, so findings may not be entirely applicable to platforms like TikTok or YouTube.
2. **Passive Observation Without Direct Interviews**
Since this study uses a netnographic approach, the findings are based solely on observed interactions, without direct input from followers or influencers regarding their motivations.
3. **Limited to Specific Influencer Niches (Lifestyle, Fashion, and Beauty)**
The focus on certain industry categories may limit the generalizability of results to other product sectors, such as technology or financial services.

Recommendations for Future Research

To expand knowledge in this field, future studies should:

1. **Conduct cross-platform research** comparing parasocial relationships across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to identify differences in engagement dynamics.
2. **Utilize interviews or surveys** to gain deeper insights into followers' psychological motivations in forming parasocial relationships and their impact on consumer behavior.
3. **Examine the long-term effects** of parasocial relationships, investigating whether these relationships contribute to brand loyalty or only influence short-term purchase decisions.

FINAL CONCLUSION

Parasocial relationships between influencers and followers on Instagram significantly impact consumer trust and purchase intentions. Factors such as consistent interaction, influencer authenticity, and personal communication styles play a critical role in strengthening emotional bonds.

For marketers, understanding the dynamics of parasocial relationships is essential in optimizing influencer marketing strategies. By focusing on authenticity, interactivity, and relationship-building, brands can create more meaningful engagement with consumers, leading to higher trust, increased engagement, and stronger purchase intentions.

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