

Chapter 10

The Effects of Consumer– Influencer Parasocial Interactions on Purchase Intentions

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of digital influencers' recommendations on consumer purchase intentions. It posits that influencer credibility and the quality of the relationship with followers influence the preference for brands/products they recommend, examining potential synergies between these forces. It includes a study with 389 Brazilian consumers using descriptive analysis, exploratory-confirmatory analysis, and structural equation modeling via the JAMOVI package. Results confirm the positive influence of three influencer attributes on parasocial interaction, with expertise directly affecting consumers' purchase intentions. The study also confirms the mediating effect of social interaction, which influences purchase intention both directly and indirectly. The findings contribute to academic knowledge by identifying a synergistic effect between influencer attributes and parasocial interaction, offering insights for influencer marketing decisions.

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INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of the internet and social networks has enabled the emergence of a new social order, an interconnected society, in which many interactions that previously required personal contact now take place in a virtual environment. In the new interconnected society, face-to-face interaction, and the dissemination of information through conventional media and other forms of communication, have been replaced by digital communication, allowing new celebrities and new forms of persuasion to emerge: the digital influencers and the influencers' marketing. Influencer marketing generated US\$16.4 billion in the global economy in 2022, a volume 10 times greater than it was six years ago.

The persuasive power of digital influencers over their followers can be analyzed from the perspective of parasocial interactions, a type of psychological relationship association, structured unilaterally by the fan with media figures or celebrities, which establishes an imaginary feeling of intimacy, as if a real social relationship had existed.

According to Ooi et al. (2023), despite the abundance of studies on the influence of recommendations on the choice of brands or products, the relationship-building mechanism between influencers and consumers, and how it affects consumers' judgment of endorsement content, has received little attention. Mechanisms such as admiration of the source, parasocial interaction, perceived similarity, sense of belonging, intimacy, and psychological closeness still require further study (Ye, Hudders, Jans, & Veirman, 2021).

This study explores some theoretical dimensions of digital influencer credibility - sincerity, truthful endorsement, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness (Agnihotri, Chaturvedi, Kulshreshtha, & Tripathi, 2023) - to understand their influence on information acceptance and purchasing attitude (Lou & Kim, 2019). In particular, it evaluates the effects of internet users' parasocial interaction with their favorite influencers (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008), to influence attitudes and purchasing decisions.

Like traditional celebrities, digital influencers enjoy both fame and popularity, and this allows them to earn money by endorsing brands and influencing the purchasing attitudes of their followers/fans (Lou & Kim, 2019). Because they are present on various digital media platforms (YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook...), influencers seek to identify segments whose consumers they can influence by their style or recommendations (Varsamis, 2018), and thus gain more and more fans. To gain visibility, influencers play the role of "ordinary people" who post their content based on certain experiences, such as fitness, travel, food, beauty, and fashion, among others (Lou & Yuan, 2019), and the content is used to develop the image and promote the endorsed brands.

Influencer credibility derives from the trust they convey to the consumer (Sokolova & Perez, 2021): the greater their credibility, the greater their power of persuasion. The expertise demonstrated by the influencer is just one of the attributes responsible for attributing credibility. According to Masuda, Han, & Lee (2022), expertise corresponds to the degree of perceived understanding, skills, and knowledge demonstrated by the endorser about what they are recommending. Sincerity, on the other hand, is an important value in the promotion of products or brands, as it allows the influencer to be perceived as realistic, authentic, kind, and good-hearted, someone who cannot adopt unethical, inappropriate or dramatic behavior (Agnihotri et al., 2023). The omnipresence of influencers on digital platforms, combined with the constant production of interesting content, can impact positively the purchase intention of specific segments, who, due to their sincerity, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness, recognize their endorsement as genuine.

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