

From Fans To Fit - The Influence Of Parasocial Relationships On Brand-User Imagery Fit

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to explore influence of ‘Parasocial Interaction’ on ‘Brand-User Imagery Fit’. ‘Brand-User Imagery Fit’ is congruence of image of a brand and self-image of a consumer. It is hypothesized that ‘Parasocial Interaction’ is positively affecting ‘Brand-User Imagery Fit’. In the world of social media influencers, this is significant as the brands can use the route of social media influencers to create a better ‘Brand-User Imagery Fit’.

Design/methodology/approach – Data has been collected through a self-administered online survey. Sampling method used is random sampling. Validated scales of measurement of the constructs used in this research are adapted or adopted from previously established researches. Data analyses has been carried out using structural equation modeling. This allows for studying the complex relationships among the variables and better understanding of the relationships among them.

Findings – The research established that strong parasocial interaction with influencers positively impacts brand-user imagery fit. The study underlines the need for partnership with an authentic influencer. It also highlights leveraging of parasocial relationships for effective marketing campaigns.

Research limitations – This is not a longitudinal study and it takes a cross-sectional approach. The observed relationships need not necessarily reflect causal effects and may be indicative of mere correlations. The study also doesn’t emphasize on ‘Para-Social Interaction’ in the context of influencers of a particular brand or category of products but tries to examine the overall influence of ‘Para-Social Interaction’ on ‘Brand-User Imagery Fit’.

Practical implications – This research holds several practical implications for marketers and brand managers. It can enhance the brand building strategies. It can also be used for targeted marketing campaigns. It will also be useful in better brand image management. This research can highlight the importance of emotional connection with the influencer and brand-user imagery fit, which can be indicators of effective customer engagement and long-term brand health.

Originality/value – The paper is original and based on the collection of primary data from the respondents specifically collected for this study.

Keywords – Brand-User Imagery Fit, Internet Influencer, Parasocial Interaction, Brand Image, User Fit.

Introduction

The lines between the consumer and the brand are fast blurring in the contemporary marketing scenario. It is seen in case of successful brands that consumers are connecting with these brands at emotional level. The relation between consumers and these brands is not merely transactional but is also significantly emotional. This relationship is beyond just the product consumption. In this era of social media, this is getting facilitated by internet influencers. Audience is engaging more and more with the social media content and they are also developing parasocial relationship with the social media influencers. Concept of parasocial relationship was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) in the context of affiliation or the illusionary connection that the audience feels with the

television personalities. In this digital era the concept of parasocial relationship and parasocial interaction is again observed in the context of internet personalities. These internet personalities can be YouTubers, Instagrammers or bloggers of other kind. These are popularly known as internet influencers and they share their lives with their followers and interweave the brand communication. What was initially observed in case of television media personalities is also observed in every scenario where the consumers invest emotionally into a brand, identify with their persona and relate with their values (Bargh & McKenna, 2002). This emotional investment develops a sense of connection influencing consumers' decision making (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Social media provides several forums, where parasocial relationship can be developed, nurtured and direct, indirect communication between the brands and consumers is facilitated (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Brands possess distinct personality traits like human beings. These personality traits in a brand can lead to better understanding of the brand image and can lead to better management of the brand image. (Aaker, 1997). Previous research has established the positive impact of parasocial interaction on consumer behavior. Labrecque (2014) found that parasocial interactions with brands on social media platforms leads to better brand loyalty. Another study investigates the impact of social media interactions on the effectiveness of brand endorsements. It establishes that the parasocial relationship with the celebrities via social media positively impacts the brand endorsements. The model of this research uses self-disclosure by the celebrity as mediator in such parasocial interaction. The findings of this study suggest that social media's interactive nature significantly influences consumer perceptions about the brand. (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Parallely researches were also continued in the area of brand-user user imagery fit. It emerged as a significant factor in consumer decision making. This construct studies the congruence between self-image of a consumer and brand's perceived image. (Sirgy, 1982). Research by Sirgy et al. (1997) established that self-congruence with brand image influences brand preference and positively influences purchase intention. When consumers feel that their self-concept aligns well with the brand image, they are more likely to develop the positive attitudes with the brand. It also develops stronger purchase intention and better brand loyalty (Kressmann et al., 2006). More recently, Liu et al. (2012) found that brand-image user fit positively affects brand love and brand loyalty in the context of luxury fashion brands. A strong brand-user imagery fit develops consumer self-identification and a sense of belonging. It strengthens the parasocial relationship and increases consumer commitment (Swann et al., 1992). Consumers are better likely to develop parasocial relationship with a brand whose brand image is congruent with their self-concept. It also leads to positive word-of-mouth (Slater & Olson, 2000). Another research also contended that brand storytelling resonates with consumers' values and aspirations (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

Brand-user imagery fit emerges as a critical factor in consumer decision making. It is consumers' degree of compatibility between his self-image and the perceived brand image. The impact of parasocial relationships and brand-user imagery fit is an interesting area of research. It will have significant implications for designing marketing strategy and understanding consumer behavior. Consumers are forming parasocial relationships with the internet influencers, it is interesting to study impact of these relationships on brand-user imagery fit.

Several earlier researches have studied parasocial interaction, parasocial relationship, and brand-user imagery fit in isolation. How parasocial interaction impacts brand-user imagery fit is an unexplored area of study. This study hypothesizes that a stronger parasocial interaction has positive impact on brand-user imagery fit. It further contends

that the consumers who develop better emotional connect with the brands is due to stronger congruence between the brand's image and their self-image. This research paper aims to explore the relationship between parasocial relationships and brand-user imagery fit. By investigating this relationship, this research seeks to contribute to the literature on influencer marketing, consumer-brand relationships, and the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer decision-making in the digital age.

Figure 1: Current and Projected Size of Influencer market



(Source: <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report/>)

The relevance of this research is underscored by the rapid growth of influencer marketing, which was at \$16.4 billion in 2022, \$ 21.1 billion in 2023 and slated to increase to \$ 24 billion by the end of 2024 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). This research shall also enable understand parasocial interaction as the psychological element of consumer engagement leading to a stronger brand-user imagery fit. It can lead to more meaningful marketing campaigns.

However, while both parasocial relationships and brand-image user fit have been studied extensively in isolation, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding their combined effects on consumer behavior. This research seeks to address this gap by examining how parasocial relationships with influencers and celebrities may moderate or mediate the relationship between brand image and consumer self-image, ultimately influencing the perceived brand-image user fit.

This research will employ a quantitative approach, will collect data through online survey to collect measures of parasocial interaction and brand-user imagery fit. The analyses will be carried out using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using SmartPLS 4 software.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Man is a social animal. He has need to belong. Exactly this need is a driver in developing a parasocial relationship with a person in the machine, in this case, internet personality (Dibble et al., 2016). The concept of para-social interaction was first put forth by Horton and Wohl in 1956. They developed this concept in the context of television personalities.

They observed during their research that audience developed affinity and feeling of friendship towards television personalities. For years core human feelings haven't changed. In this era of internet, audience of social media re developing similar kind of affinity and feeling of friendship with the internet personalities. Therefore several researchers have extended this concept of para-social interaction with the internet personalities. Millennials are more likely to learn from internet personalities with whom they develop parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship (Bond, 2016). The parasocial interaction also exerts a positive impact on impulse buying behavior. These parasocial interactions can be fostered by a brand using their social media accounts (Labrecque, 2014).

The attachment theory explains human bonding (Bowlby, 1969). This theory was extended to relationship between consumers and brands (Thomson et al., 2005). It provides insights on the emotional attachment consumer forms with brands through parasocial interactions. Brand-user imagery fit refers to the alignment between the brand image and the self-image of the consumer. This concept studies how consumers relate to a brand. When there is a strong fit between the two, customers have better affinity towards the brand. Research by Sirgy (1982) highlights that self-congruity influences consumer behavior. A study by Aaker (1997) indicates that brands often develop personalities that appeal to specific target audiences. A consumer derives part of his self-concept from the social group he or she is part of. This social group contributes to part of his or her self-concept. This is also one more perspective on brand-user imagery fit which is part of self-Social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1979). Brands serve as markers of a social identity of a person; consumers choose brands that align with their social group (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Belk (1988) introduced the concept of extended self. This concept explains how consumers incorporate brand into their concept about self. This theory suggests that brands can become part of an individual's identity. Parasocial interaction can create a sense of intimacy and familiarity with the brand which in turn facilitate this process. Belk (2013) related his own concept of extended self to digital world. The articles explains how the concept of extended self is still relevant in the digital environment.

Gerbner et al. (1986) explained Cultivation Theory. It elaborates that repeated exposure to media content, for e.g., brand communications, shapes consumers' perception of reality. This theory can help us to understand how frequent parasocial interactions with brand influencers can influence consumers' beliefs, especially the beliefs about the brand and the brand's place in their lives.

More recent studies, such as that by Escalas & Bettman (2003), emphasize the importance of brand stories that create brand identities and boost the consumer engagement.

Ultimately, achieving brand-user imagery fit is crucial for marketers aiming to build lasting relationships with consumers, enhance brand loyalty, and increase market share. Understanding how consumers perceive brand identities can help organizations tailor their marketing strategies more effectively. This brings us to the area of research of this paper, which intends to examine the impact of parasocial interaction with brand-user imagery fit.

Parasocial Interaction

Horton and Richard Wohl first coined the term parasocial interaction in their research paper published in 1956. This relationship was explained in the context of television stars. It was explained as affinity and familiarity audience experiences towards their favorite television stars (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In this parasocial interaction, the media persona of an influencer is perceived to be as a friend, as a counselor, as a comforter, or sometimes even as a role model (Gleason et al., 2017; Perse & Rubin, 1989). It doesn't happen in a

single instance. Audience is repeatedly exposed to the content of an influencer and develops parasocial relationship with the influencer over a period of time (Schmid & Klimmt 2011; Rasmussen, 2018). It is a “ ... pseudo-intimate relationship between the audience and the media personalities” (Lim & Kim, 2011). After the advent of social media, parasocial interaction has been observed in online communities (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). Social media interactions can be a two-way communication. It is interactive in nature. In this context parasocial interaction is also observed in the context of internet influencer (Labrecque, 2014; Yuan et al., 2016; Chung & Cho 2017). Researches by Powell et al., 2011; Xiang et al., 2016; Colliander and Dahlen, 2011; Lueck, 2015 have acknowledged parasocial interaction as a research construct in the context of internet personalities. Based on this literature, following is hypothesized:

H4. Parasocial Interaction positively influences Brand-User Imagery Fit

Entertaining

Audience, consumers connect much effectively with a social influencer, who provides entertainment. The message by such influencers is transmitted in an entertaining manner (Yuan et al., 2016; Utz, 2015). Consumers pay attention to any message that satisfies their immediate motive (Rubin & Step, 2000). The social media influencers often disseminate their marketing message in an entertaining way. Entertainment value is a key factor in attracting and retaining the audience on social media. Rasmussen (2018) researched that audience is better engaged in a content which they find entertaining. This is likely to develop better parasocial relationships with influencers.

The entertaining aspect of influencers can contribute to parasocial interaction in many ways. It can be emotional engagement elicits positive emotions (Ferchaud et al., 2018); it can be an Increased exposure where, followers are more likely to spend more time consuming the content (Chung & Cho, 2017); it can be perceived intimacy, where influencers may share personal stories, creating a sense of intimacy (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

To conclude, the entertaining quality of an influencer is an enabler of powerful parasocial interactions. Thus, it is hypothesized:

H1. The entertainment by influencer positively affects parasocial interaction

Attractive

The best appeal is always a visual appeal. If an influencer is attractive then he or she can grab much better attention of the audience and can exert better influence on the consumers. The quality of social media influencer of being entertaining while delivering his or her content, plays a very significant role in developing and nurturing parasocial interaction with their followers. It is researched that ‘entertaining’ aspect of an internet influencer plays a major role in attracting and retaining the followers on various social media. Rasmussen (2018) established that the audience will be more likely to engage in the content it finds entertaining. This increases the chances of developing parasocial relationships with the influencers. There can be various forms of entertainment such as humor, storytelling, or engaging visuals. Also, physical attractiveness is about physical characteristics of the influencer and his overall personality (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Physically attractive influencer is generally considered as intelligent and one possessing integrity (Till & Busler, 2000). Such influencer creates a positive perception about the influencer (Gong & Li 2017). Researches like Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020 attribute attractiveness as a contributor to parasocial interaction.

Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H2. Attractiveness of the influencer positively affects parasocial interaction

Reliable

If a celebrity or an influencer is perceived to be reliable, it positively affects and strengthens the parasocial relationship Chung & Cho (2017). Influencers who are considered to be reliable consistently deliver on their promises. They also maintain a consistent persona. This helps them in building trust with their audience. Lou & Yuan (2019) found that influencer trustworthiness, which includes reliability, significantly impacts followers' trust in branded posts and purchase intentions. In essence, reliability is trustworthiness of a person. If a social media influencer is perceived to be true and honest, he is considered as trustworthy (Moorman et al., 1993). Due to explosion of content on social media it is not easy to consider every influencer as reliable. Park, 2009 explains the link between acceptance of oral dissemination of information and its effect on attitude and purchase intention of the audience. Reliability enhances an influencer's credibility. Credibility of an influencer makes their recommendations and opinions more valuable to their followers. Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) noted that followers' purchase decisions are positively affected by the perceived credibility of Instagram influencers. Such credibility is partly based on their reliability. Reliability also encourages long-term engagement. The influencers who are perceived as dependable get repeat audience and consistent followers. Repeated exposure to an influencer is very important for developing and maintaining parasocial relationships (Bond, 2018). Reliable influencers are often perceived as more authentic. Thus, it is hypothesized:

H3. Reliability of the influencer positively affects parasocial interaction

Brand-User Imagery Fit

Consumer has certain self-image. Brand-user imagery fit is also known as self-congruity with a brand or self-image congruence. It is exploring the relationship between a consumer's self-image and the perceived image of a brand's user. This concept is a big step in understanding consumer behaviour, consumer's brand preferences and also the effectiveness of marketing efforts. Brand-user imagery enhances a consumer's relationship with a brand (Aaker, 1997; Parker, 2009). When self-image of a consumer aligns with the brand image, he senses better resonance with the brand. This feeling creates Brand-User Imagery Fit. Brand-user imagery fit is overall assessment of the compatibility or match between themselves and users of the brand (Miller & Mills, 2012). The theory of brand-user imagery fit stipulates that consumers are more likely to buy and / or prefer brands that are consistent with their own self-image or ideal self-image. This alignment between brand image and self-image can lead to increased brand loyalty, positive attitudes towards the brand, and higher purchase intentions.

Sirgy (1982) contended that brands are used by consumers as self-expression and self-enhancement. Kressmann et al., 2006 established that higher the levels of brand-user imagery fit, higher the purchase intentions, higher will be the brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth.

Research Methodology

Sample Selection Method

The sampling method used here is stratified sampling. The sample size determination is done as per several earlier researches (Cochran, 1977; Morgan, 1970; Israel, 1992, Bartlett & Higgins, 2001). The recent research papers conducting similar type of research are referred to. The age ranges of respondents were used in similar researches in India have been 18-34 years (Arora et al., 2019); 18-34 years (Chopra et al., 2021); 18-29 years (Dhanesh & Duthler 2019). The age ranges used in similar type of researches, which were not India specific are 20-35 years (Reinikainen et al., 2020) and 18-40 years (Trivedi &

Sama, 2020). This research demanded a little narrower margin than that as commercial broadband internet and social media usage started extensively after 2010 in India. Therefore an age range of 18 to 25 years is selected for this research.

The last official census was conducted in India in 2011. The population between 18 and 25 years of age as per the Census 2011 of India was 121.3 million. Also, this population was 10% of the total population.

To calculate the sample size for a research study on the impact of internet influencers on youth between 18 and 25 years of age from urban and semi-urban localities of India, we can use the following formula:

Given:

Population size (N) = 121.3 million (as per 2011 census)

Estimated proportion (p) = 0.1 (10% of the population)

Confidence level = 95% (Z-score = 1.96)

Margin of error (e) = 5% (0.05)

To calculate the sample size (n), we can use the following formula:

$$n = (Z^2 * p(1-p)) / (e^2)$$

Replacing the values:

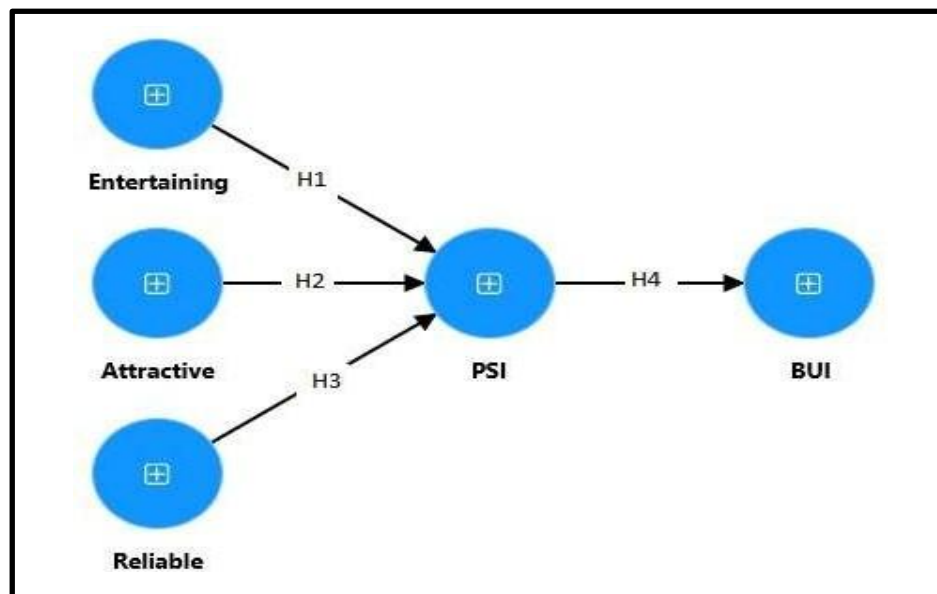
$$n = (1.96^2 * 0.1(1-0.1)) / (0.05^2)$$

$$n = 0.3457 / 0.0025 \quad n = 138.29$$

Rounding up, the sample size required is 139 participants. The actual responses collected are 163. 92.6% of these responses are from 18 to 25 years age range. That totals up to 149 responses therefore the sample requirements are fulfilled.

Conceptual Model

Figure 2: Conceptual Model



The relationship between constructs and entities are defined by a structural model. Figure 2 defines the hypothetical relationships among the constructs that are selected for the purpose of this research. The arrows show the direction of the relationship. They also connote which construct gets affected by which other construct or constructs. In this model parasocial interaction is a dependent variable, which is defined by three other constructs, viz., entertaining, attractive and reliable. Here, brand-user imagery fit is also a

secondary dependent variable on parasocial interaction. The model is constructed to substantiate that parasocial interaction has positive and definitive influence on brand-user imagery fit.

Survey Instrument and measurement

The research has been conducted based on the responses to an online google form circulated. It was mailed to about 200 respondents. A filtering question was incorporated to qualify the responses for the study purposes. After filtering 163 responses were found to be complete and qualified for the objectives of the research. The survey instrument used was based on already established scales in earlier peer reviewed researches with minor modifications needed for the objectives of the research. The questions in the survey instrument have either been adapted or adopted. Scales for entertaining, attractive and parasocial interaction were adopted from Liu et al. (2019). Scale of reliability is adapted from trustworthiness and credibility scale by Choi & Lee (2019) and Fitriani et al. (2020) respectively. Scales for Brand-user imagery fit and purchase intention were adopted from Lee and Watkins (2016). Scale items were measured on 7-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree).

Data Analysis

The table below shows the respondents' demographics. Total 181 responses were received. 18 responses were rejected as they did not pass through the filtering question. 163 responses were qualified for the data analyses. The entire pool of respondents is Indians from urban and semi-urban areas.

Table: Respondent Characteristics

Table 1: Respondent Characteristics

Sample Profile	Sample %
Gender (N = 163)	
Male	47.9
Female	52.1
Age	
18-25	92.6
26-35	6.7
36-45	0.7
Education Level	
Bachelor's degree	75.5
Post-graduate or above	24.5
Number of Social Media Accounts	
One	6.7
Two to five	78.5
More than five	14.8

Model Analysis

The data collected has been coded and the data analysis has been carried out using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). SmartPLS (version 4) software has been used to carry out the data analysis. Structural Equation Modeling is a useful technique of data analysis because it analyses interrelated dependence of constructs. SEM has been used in

some of the erstwhile researches, which were in the context of parasocial interaction (Sakib et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Xiang et al. 2016).

Establishment of reliability and the validity of the survey instrument is one of the crucial steps in researches. After reliability of validity, the relationships shall be established using SEM technique.

Reliability and Validity of the Instrument

Statistical Analyses has been carried out to establish reliability and validity of the instrument. It can be observed from the following table that Cronbach's alpha values for all the constructs used in this research are greater than 0.7. Values for Composite reliability (rho_a) are above 0.7. Values for Composite reliability (rho_c) are also above 0.7 which is desirable in advanced researches. After running these tests, it can be mentioned with reasonable confidence that the instrument used for this study is sufficiently reliable and valid.

Table 2: Construct Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)
Attractive	0.914	0.916	0.931
BUI	0.909	0.911	0.932
Entertaining	0.784	0.798	0.844
PSI	0.871	0.874	0.901
Reliable	0.898	0.904	0.919

Measurement Model

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity is an important concept in psychological measurement. It refers to the degree to which two measures, which theoretically should be related are, actually related to each other. Convergent validity is a sub-type of construct validity. The table below clearly shows that the convergent validity of the model is established.

Table 3: Convergent validity

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Attractive	0.605	0.605	0.027	22.217	0.000
BUI	0.734	0.733	0.032	22.716	0.000
Entertaining	0.441	0.439	0.036	12.110	0.000
PSI	0.566	0.567	0.032	17.515	0.000
Reliable	0.619	0.619	0.032	19.093	0.000

Discriminant Validity

The discriminant validity assessment establishes that a construct and its indicators have strong relationship (e.g., in comparison to other constructs) in the PLS path model (Hair

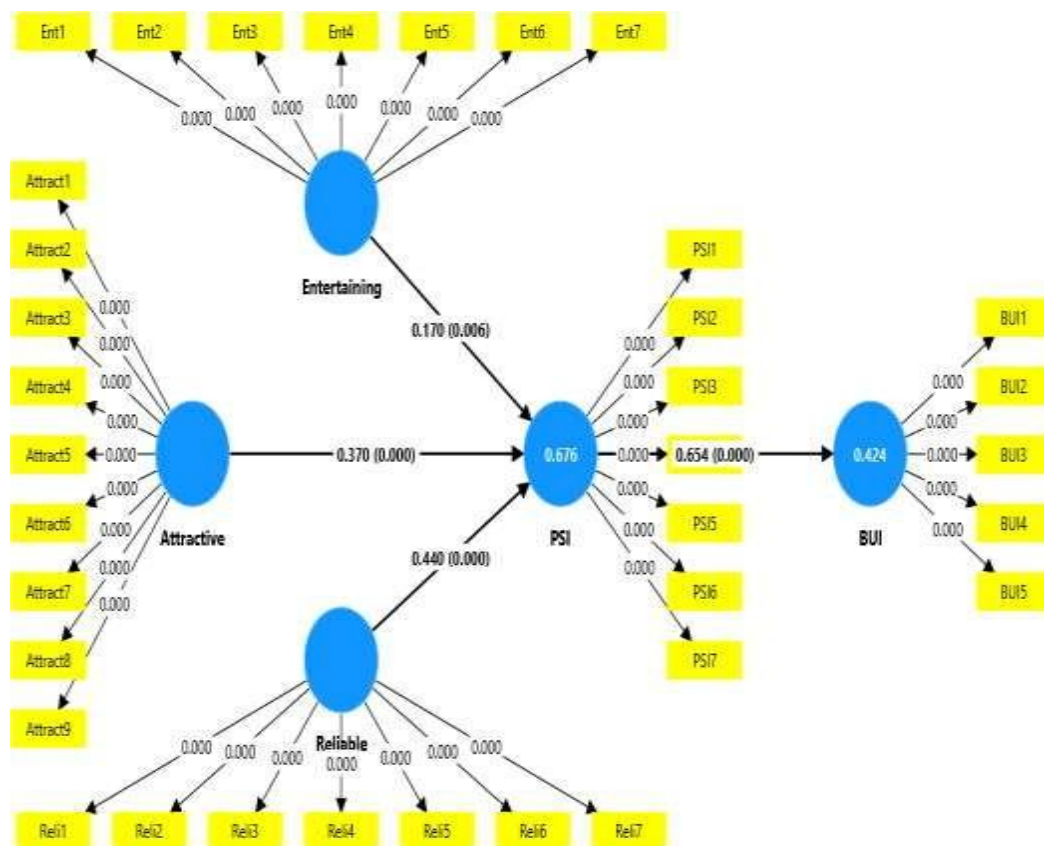
et al., 2022). HTMT value of less than 0.9 establishes discriminant validity between two reflective constructs.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio)

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	2.5%	97.5%
BUI <-> Attractive	0.531	0.531	0.375	0.667
Entertaining <-> Attractive	0.553	0.554	0.397	0.696
Entertaining <-> BUI	0.617	0.618	0.490	0.737
PSI <-> Attractive	0.761	0.760	0.655	0.849
PSI <-> BUI	0.732	0.732	0.611	0.837
PSI <-> Entertaining	0.735	0.733	0.592	0.848
Reliable <-> Attractive	0.578	0.576	0.393	0.727
Reliable <-> BUI	0.658	0.657	0.518	0.772
Reliable <-> Entertaining	0.720	0.721	0.587	0.836
Reliable <-> PSI	0.824	0.822	0.732	0.899

Structural Model

Figure 3: Structural Model



Structural model is a diagrammatic representation of the conceptual model. The above structural model is shown after the data analysis is completed. Each question in the survey acts as an indicator for defining the construct for which the question is designed for. Structural model exhibits the p values of the indicators and how significant they are in describing the construct. These constructs are dependent or independent variables. The structural model also defines the significance of relationships between independent and dependent variables.

Hypotheses Testing and Path Analysis

Table 5: Hypotheses Testing and Path Analysis

Hypotheses	Path Coefficient	p-Values	Interpretation
H1. Attractive -> Parasocial Interaction	0.370	0.000	Significant
H2. Entertaining -> Parasocial Interaction	0.170	0.006	Significant
H3. Reliable -> Parasocial Interaction	0.440	0.000	Significant
H4. Parasocial Interaction -> Brand-user Imagery Fit	0.654	0.000	Significant

As can be observed from the above table that the p-values for H1 to H4 are significant therefore all relationships are interpreted as significant.

Discussion

General Discussion

The study is conducted in India. The dominant respondent group is from generation Z. Entertaining, attractive and reliable are the three independent variables studied in the context of dependent variable parasocial interaction. Utz, 2015 and Yuan et al., 2016 substantiated that entertainment value of influencer is a significant factor. One of the earlier researches substantiated that physical characteristics make the influencer attractive (Sokolova and Kefi 2020). The source is perceived to be trustworthy when it is considered as true and honest (Moorman et al. 1993). Trustworthiness of an influencer makes him reliable. It has been hypothesized that entertainment value, attractiveness and reliability of an influencer positively influences parasocial interaction. In fact, they strengthen the parasocial interaction. This reliability influences the parasocial interaction positively. This study also establishes that parasocial interaction positively and significantly influences brand-user imagery fit.

Implications for Researchers and Opportunities for Future Research

As this research deals with media psychology and consumer behaviour, it is an interdisciplinary research. The findings of this research highlight the need for more such interdisciplinary researches. This study has taken a cross-sectional approach. This approach has definitively provided the insights. This study takes into consideration general impact of influencer and does not consider a particular social media platform. Here are some detailed implications for researchers:

1. Expanding the Scope of Parasocial Interaction Research:

- **Constructs:** This research has confirmed the significance of the three constructs, viz., attractive, entertaining and reliable as contributors to construct, parasocial

interaction. Future research may explore additional and other potential constructs, such as authenticity, expertise or similarity between the influencer and the consumer.

- **Exploring Different Media:** The current study focuses on internet influencers in general. Researchers may choose a particular social media platform like Instagram, YouTube etc. and may explore how parasocial interaction is similar or different across these platforms. It will also be interesting to explore if there are any platform specific contributors to parasocial interaction.
- **Cross-Cultural Studies:** The sample taken in this research is entirely from India. Future researchers may conduct a cross-cultural study to assess if the model is relevant in different cultural contexts. Are there any implications of cultural values and norms on perception towards influencers and how audience from different culture develops parasocial relationships? A comparative study may also be conducted.

2. Mediating and Moderating Effects:

- **Mediating Roles:** Future research may examine if there are any mediators in the relationship between parasocial interaction and brand-user imagery fit. Some of the constructs that may be considered can be brand trust, perceived brand authenticity or consumer engagement.
- **Moderating Roles:** Future research may examine if there are any moderators that influence the strength of the relationship between parasocial interaction and brand-user imagery fit. Some of such moderators may be, consumer involvement, brand familiarity etc.

3. Longitudinal Studies:

- **Long-Term Effects:** This is a cross-sectional study. In today's world of instant gratification it would be interesting to examine the long-term effects of parasocial interactions on consumer behaviour and also on brand loyalty and purchase intentions.
- **Dynamic Relationships:** Longitudinal research could also explore how parasocial relationships evolve over time and how changes in influencer behaviour or brand messaging affect these relationships.

4. Negative Impact of Parasocial Interactions:

- **Negative Impact:** Potential negative consequences, such as excessive spending due to parasocial relationship, unrealistic expectations or feelings of inadequacy brought about by such a relationship may also be studied.
- **Ethical Aspects:** Researchers may examine the ethical aspects of influencer marketing, particularly where children and adolescents are part of the followers.

5. Use of Alternate Methodologies:

- **Qualitative Research:** Qualitative research (e.g., interviews, focus groups etc.) may provide more insights into the finer aspects of parasocial interactions and its impact on consumer behaviour.
- **Use of Big Data Analytics:** Researchers may use big data analytics to examine parasocial interactions at a very large scale and identify patterns and trends in consumer behaviour.

6. Refining Measurement Scales:

- **Context-Specific Scales:** Researchers could develop more context-specific scales to measure parasocial interaction and brand-user imagery fit in the context of influencer marketing.
- **Multi-Item Scales:** The study uses multi-item scales for measurement. Researchers could further refine these scales to improve their reliability and validity.

By addressing these implications, researchers can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of influencer marketing and its impact on consumer behaviour in the ever-evolving digital landscape.

Implications for Practitioners

This research provides actionable insights to brand managers, marketers etc. who intend to leverage influencer marketing. Following are the detailed implications of this study for the practitioners:

1. Selection of an Influencer and Partnering Strategies:

- **Giving Priority to Attractiveness, Entertaining Content, and Reliability of an influencer:** The study confirms that these three characteristics are significant for developing and nurturing parasocial interactions. While selecting influencers for the brands, priority should be given to those influencers, who are perceived as attractive, create entertaining content, and are also seen as reliable and trustworthy.
- **Aligning with the Target Audience:** It is important that the influencer's audience aligns with the target audience of your brand. This will definitely enhance the possibility that these followers will likely develop parasocial relationships with this influencer and eventually develop a brand-user imagery fit.

2. Content Creation, Messaging:

- **Entertaining Content:** Select those influencers who create informative content in an entertaining manner. Humour, storytelling or interaction are good elements to be incorporated in the content to make it engaging.
- **Personal Connection:** It may be suggested to the influencer to create a personal connect with the audience by sharing personal experiences and stories. Usually this type of content creates better resonance with the audience which in turn leads to stronger parasocial interaction.
- **Consistent Messaging:** Your brand's message and the message of the influencer that you are selecting for your brand needs to be consistent with each other. This is necessary to create better brand-user imagery fit and build brand loyalty in the longer run.

3. Building Brand-User Imagery Fit:

- **Understand Audience's Self-Image:** Self-image of target audience plays a very important role in building brand-user imagery fit. A good research is needed to understand the aspirations and self-image of the target audience. This will enable the selection of appropriate influencer.
- **Brand Values:** Underline the brand values in brand communication. This will help consumers relate to your brand better and they can see their values aligning with the brand values. This shall enable to create a stronger brand-user imagery fit.
- **User Generated Content:** Let consumers create and share their own content around the brand. This helps in creation of a kind of a community feeling and reinforces the brand-user imagery fit.

By implementing strategies like these, practitioners can take full advantage of influencer marketing. It will lead to stronger relationships with consumers. Ultimately that is going to enhance brand-user imagery fit.

Limitations

This research provides valuable insights into the relationships between characteristics of influencer, parasocial interaction developed due to these characteristics and brand-user imagery fit. Like every social research, even this research has its own limitations. It is important to acknowledge these limitations.

1. **Sample Limitations:** The sample is Indian young adults aged between 18 and 25 years of age. The respondents selected are from urban and semi-urban areas of India. This sampling limits the generalizability of the findings to other age groups, geographic regions, and cultural contexts. Future research should include more diverse samples to examine whether the observed relationships hold true across different populations.
2. **Cross-Sectional Design:** The study employs cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the variables. While the results suggest that characteristics of influencer impact parasocial interaction and parasocial interaction influences brand-user imagery fit, there is a possibility that these relationships are reciprocal or that other variables may be influencing the observed associations. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the order of these relationships and to establish causality.
3. **Self-Reported Data:** The data were collected using self-report questionnaires. All self-reported data are subject to desirability bias and recall bias. Participants may have provided responses that they believed were socially acceptable. There is also a possibility that the participants provided the responses that they thought the researchers were looking for. Future research could use alternative data collection methods to avoid, minimize these biases.
4. **Focus on Specific Influencer Characteristics:** The study focuses on three specific influencer characteristics: attractiveness, entertaining content, and reliability. These characteristics are important but they are definitely not exhaustive. Other influencer characteristics, such as expertise, authenticity, or similarity to the consumer, may also play a role in developing parasocial interaction and influencing brand-user imagery fit. Future research should explore the role of these other characteristics.
5. **Limited Scope of Brand-User Imagery Fit:** The study examines the overall brand-user imagery fit. Future research may explore specific dimensions of brand-user imagery fit. These aspects may be functional dimension, symbolic dimension, or experiential fit. It may provide more detailed understanding of how parasocial interaction influences consumer perceptions of brand alignment.
6. **Possibility of Unmeasured Confounders:** While the study controls for some potential confounders, there is a possibility that other unmeasured variables may be influencing the observed relationships. Future research should consider including additional control variables to take into consideration these potential confounders.

These limitations should be considered while interpreting the findings of this research. Future research may address these limitations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between influencer characteristics, parasocial interaction, and brand-user imagery fit.

Conclusion

This research explored the relationship between parasocial interaction and brand-user imagery fit. This research explores this relationship in the context of influencer marketing. This study addresses a notable gap in the existing literature. This study investigated how parasocial relationship with the influencer impacts the congruence between a consumer's self-image and the perceived image of a brand. The findings provided compelling evidence to support the hypothetical relationships.

The study confirmed that the perceived attractiveness, entertainment value and perceived reliability of a social media influencer are significant drivers of parasocial interaction. Consumers are more likely to develop a connection with influencers that they find attractive, entertaining, and reliable. This also develops a familiarity between consumers and the influencer. This emotional investment, in turn strengthens the stronger parasocial relationship. This research highlights the need for careful selection of the influencer for the brand. Such influencer should genuinely resonate with his audience to create a better brand-user imagery fit. The research also underlines the importance of leveraging the parasocial relationship for impactful marketing campaigns.

Most importantly, the research established that the parasocial relationship has a positive and significant impact on brand-user imagery fit. Consumers who develop stronger emotional connections with influencers are more likely to perceive a congruence between their own self-image and the perceived image of a brand that is promoted by the influencer. This finding supports the idea that parasocial interaction can bridge the gap between brand identity and consumer identity, ultimately influencing consumer perceptions and preferences.

The implications of these findings are significant for developing a marketing strategy and also in understanding of consumer behaviour. Marketers should prioritize influencer selection based not only on reach and engagement metrics but also on attributes that develop and enhance parasocial relationship. The research emphasizes authenticity, creating engaging content, and maintaining a consistent persona can enhance an influencer's ability to connect with their audience on an emotional level. This, in turn, can lead to stronger brand associations and improved brand-user imagery fit.

While this research provides significant insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The study was focused on a specific demographic (18-25 year olds in urban and semi-urban India) and it utilized a quantitative approach. Future researches may explore these relationships in different cultural contexts, or among different age groups and may also use qualitative methodologies to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms. Further researches could also explore the possibility of mediating or moderating roles of other variables, such as brand involvement or product category.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a growing body of knowledge on the psychological factors driving consumer behaviour in the digital age. By demonstrating the positive impact of parasocial interaction on brand-user imagery fit, this research provides valuable insights for marketers seeking to build lasting relationships with consumers and enhance brand loyalty in the competitive landscape of social media marketing.

The digital landscape is ever evolving phenomenon. While this study analyses the impact of parasocial interaction with human influencers, the internet already has welcomed virtual influencers. Till consumers are human beings driven by the emotions, they are going to get influenced and the academic pursuit remains constant.

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