

Influencer Culture's use of Parasocial Relationships

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Abstract.

With the rise of social media, celebrities and media personalities have never been more accessible to the public. This study investigates how a parasocial relationship between a celebrity and their audience develops and affects the interaction between the celebrity and their audience within the context of influencer culture. A parasocial relationship is defined as a one-sided relationship in which an audience member feels as though they have a personal connection with a celebrity or media figure who is unaware of the individual existence of the audience member. With the prevalence of social media, parasocial relationships have become increasingly common on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. This study explored the manner in which audience members interact with influencers online and how their parasocial relationship with the celebrity may have an effect on their engagement and trust toward the celebrity. The qualitative study employed content analysis on social media comments and audience engagement toward four social media influencers. The influencers included in this research were Emma Chamberlain and MrBeast. The study found that celebrities and media personalities often engage in a one-sided relationship with their followers which leads to a parasocial connection, resulting in a high level of engagement toward the celebrity and an enhanced perception of authenticity and credibility of the celebrity. This study addresses some of the other important issues that arise from the parasocial relationship within the context of social media, such as dependency, celebrity accountability and transparency.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, influencer culture, social media influencers, audience engagement, digital trust, authenticity, online communities.

Introduction

The advancement of social media has brought about large scale changes in the way people interact with each other, share information and access media content. Transforming the relatively passive role of the media audience into an interactive environment in which audiences can converse with media creators and participate in online discussions. Social media influencers have become significant in today's digital media environment.

Influencers are individuals who gain large followings by posting content about their opinions, lifestyles, or areas of expertise. By releasing content frequently and interacting directly with their fans, influencers often create a feeling of familiarity and relatability that distinguishes them from traditional celebrities. This seeming familiarity has a significant impact on how consumers engage with influencer content and comprehend ideas shared in online communities.

Parasocial interaction is a term coined by social scientists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956. It is a very relevant term in relation to the influencer-audience relationship. A parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship in which the audience member feels a personal connection with a media figure (such as a TV or radio host or celebrity) without there being a mutual interpersonal relationship. Audiences would typically form such relationships with radio hosts, TV personalities and celebrities. Social media has complicated and intensified this phenomenon.

Influencers can engage their audience through comments, live streams and other types of social media content such as YouTube and Instagram. They often act as a trusted source who provides appropriate and credible information about products due to their authentic and relevant

form of communication, as highlighted by Karen Freberg and colleagues (2011). Authenticity is one factor that increases the engagement of an influencer's content and increases trust within the audience.

This paper investigates the impact of parasocial relationships on the engagement and trust of the audience within the context of the influencer culture. It focuses on the emotional connection, perceived authenticity, and trustworthiness that develop between the audience and the influencers, and it examines the audience's engagements, as well as the case studies of the influencers, supported by existing literature.

Understanding this will be important to communicators and digital media practitioners interested in how audience trust, brand image and relationships are constructed online.

Parasocial relationships in digital age

According to the parasocial interaction theory, through frequent exposure and emotional engagement, viewers form perceived connections with media characters. This phenomenon was first defined by Horton and Wohl (1956) as the appearance of in-person engagement that viewers encounter when ingesting media information.

Because social media has made it possible for fans to communicate directly with producers, parasocial relationships have become more intense. Influencers can reply to comments, share personal stories, and interact with followers in a reciprocal manner on social media platforms.

As Sora Chung and Han-Sung Cho discussed in their 2017 study, social media interactions such as commenting, retweeting and even liking have increased the strength of parasocial relationships between influencers and audiences, as the followers often regard the little interactions the influencers provide as very important and personal, and meaningful.

By sharing their daily routines, emotional experiences, and personal stories, influencers frequently deepen these connections. This behavior is a type of "visibility labor," according to Crystal Abidin (2016), in which influencers purposely present their lives in order to seem genuine and sympathetic to their viewers. Influencers urge followers to see them as relatable people rather than detached celebrities by disclosing parts of their personal identities.

Because of this, viewers may form emotional bonds that influence how they engage with influencer material and how they see influencers' legitimacy in online communities.

Research question

What effects do parasocial relationships have on audience engagement and trust in social media influencers?

Analytical approach

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the manner in which audiences negotiate a parasocial relationship and how the relationship impacts their involvement and trust in the context of the influencer culture. The study focused on the audience interactions on the social media platforms of Instagram and YouTube through the analysis of the comments on the Instagram posts and the YouTube videos.

This study employs qualitative analysis, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of parasocial relationships, supplemented by real-life examples from social media platforms, including Instagram and YouTube. The objective of this study is to explore audience comments on social media and to comprehend the dynamics of the relationships between the audience and celebrities. This objective indicates the audiences' feelings regarding the celebrities referenced in the comments, highlighting attributes such as closeness, trustworthiness, and intimacy, as established by previous research.

This study analyzed the relationship between social media influencers, such as Emma Chamberlain and MrBeast, and their audiences. The goal was to analyze and understand the relationship between these influencers and their audiences. The influencers chosen for this study post about their personal lives on social media frequently and have large followings. Because of this, they are able to develop a strong connection with their audience which is a major factor in creating a parasocial interaction.

The particular social media influencers named (such as Emma Chamberlain and MrBeast) were named because they are influencers who have been the subject of work looking in some detail at the issues being argued for here. While their influence, large followings, engagement with audiences and other social media metrics do not directly speak to the research, they serve as illustrative examples because they are often cited in existing research.

This study examined social media audience comments, the indicators of emotional connection, loyalty and intimacy between the influencer and their social media audience. The research analyzed the language used in the audience comments to understand the words and phrases that are associated with the audience's personal connection with the influencer. Examples of these are when an audience member calls the celebrity their 'friend' or that they 'can't live without' the celebrity.

The research also analyzed the likes, shares and audience reactions for the negative comments and the type of comments that were being posted. This made it easier to understand the audience's behavior and how they respond to defend, support or trust in an influencer when facing public scrutiny.

Findings:**Emotional attachment and audience engagement.**

The study revealed significant evidence of an emotional connection between followers and influencers. Numerous comments expressed feelings of intimacy and familiarity with influencers. Followers frequently characterized influencers' content as comforting or encouraging, suggesting that these influencers played important roles in their daily lives.

Increased engagement was associated with these emotional connections. Intense parasocial connections were linked to an increased probability of leaving frequent comments, posting videos, and engaging in discussions within online communities

Consistent with existing research conducted by Lauren Labrecque (2014) reinforces these results, showing that parasocial relationships enhance consumer involvement in social media settings. When viewers develop an emotional bond with a media figure, they are more inclined to engage with the content and stay loyal to the creator

Trust and Loyalty

Parasocial connections also aid in fostering trust between influencers and their followers. Due to influencers frequently sharing personal stories and engaging directly with their followers, audiences might view them as genuine individuals instead of remote celebrities.

This view of authenticity enhances the trustworthiness of influencers in online communities. Freberg et al. (2011) state that audiences frequently regard influencers as reliable sources for recommendations and views. Consequently, followers might endorse products promoted by influencers, engage in campaigns, or stand up for influencers during times of scrutiny

These patterns demonstrate how parasocial relationships can convert influencers into significant characters in digital settings

Audience Reactions During Controversies

Parasocial connections can greatly influence audience responses during influencer controversies. Often, devoted fans protect influencers from criticism due to the emotional connections they have with them.

For instance, when Emma Chamberlain faced backlash over her coffee brand's pricing, numerous followers came to her defense by highlighting her genuineness and the strong connection she had established with her audience. These answers demonstrate how parasocial loyalty can shield influencers from instant reputational harm.

When influencers betray audience trust, the emotional commitment of followers can result in significant backlash. When audiences feel that influencers have acted dishonestly or endorsed deceptive products, their disillusionment can lead to adverse reactions and reduced engagement

Analysis

Parasocial interaction theory sheds light on the effectiveness of influencer culture in digital settings. Numerous people look for connection, affirmation, and belonging via digital platforms. Influencers who portray themselves as genuine and relatable can meet these emotional needs by sharing their own experiences and interacting directly with their audiences.

Minor exchanges like replying to comments, recognizing followers, or discussing personal struggles can strengthen the feeling of closeness between influencers and their audiences. Such behaviors reinforce parasocial connections and motivate audiences to become emotionally engaged with influencer content

However, influencer culture brings forth significant ethical concerns. A study by Alice Audrezet and her team (2020) indicates that authenticity plays a crucial role in the credibility of influencers. When audiences view influencers as valuing commercial deals more than authentic interaction, trust can diminish.

This dynamic emphasizes a significant obstacle in influencer culture. Though parasocial relationships assist influencers in forming devoted communities, they also generate expectations for genuineness and openness that may be hard to uphold. Moreover, audiences that are emotionally engaged could be more easily swayed in terms of consumer habits and lifestyle impact.

Grasping these dynamics is crucial for assessing the wider social and cultural effects of influencer culture in digital media contexts.

The engagement patterns and social media examples that are referred to in this paper are drawn from empirical data and are used to exemplify the points that are being made. However, in future research it is intended that the content analysis will be structured content analysis methods with defined sampling criteria with best practice, and that it will involve the use of systematic random sampling, using pre-defined time periods and keyword codes in order to produce more quantifiable and statistically reliable data.

Implications for digital media

The results of this research explains the increasing impact of parasocial relationships in modern digital media settings. Influencers are progressively seen as reliable opinion leaders who influence audience views, consumer choices, and online cultural movements.

For professionals in digital media and journalism, these dynamics pose significant questions regarding credibility, transparency, and ethical accountability in online communication.

As social media figures vie with conventional media organizations for audience engagement, grasping how trust and authenticity are built online becomes more crucial.

Acknowledging the importance of parasocial relationships can assist media professionals in creating more ethical and responsible communication approaches in digital settings.

Conclusion

Parasocial connections are crucial in defining influencer culture and have a major impact on audience engagement, trust, and loyalty. Social media platforms enable influencers to build perceived personal connections with followers by engaging directly, sharing personal stories, and using relatable communication methods.

Though these connections can cultivate vibrant online communities and significant interactions, they also present difficulties surrounding authenticity, influence, and emotional reliance. As influencer culture progresses, grasping the psychological and social aspects of parasocial interaction will be crucial for researchers, media experts, and audiences.

Future studies could examine how these connections affect mental well-being, purchasing behavior, and online communication trends in various cultural settings. Acknowledging the advantages and dangers of parasocial interaction will be crucial for fostering healthier and more sustainable digital media landscapes

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