From Likes to Leadership: The Role of Influencers in Building Parasocial Relationships and Consumer Behavior

Christina Zachou, Iro Kalomoiri,Efthymia Lamprou, Eleni Konsolaki
Psychology Departmemt, Deree- The American College of Greece

INTRODUCTION:

- **Social media platforms** enable ordinary users to **become Influencers** by curating a trustworthy and engaging image (Carter, 2016; Hudders et al., 2021).
- Social Media Influencers **shape followers' thoughts, attitudes, decisions** (Hudders et al., 2021) by promoting branded content, products, services (Carthy et al., 2021; Glucksman, 2017; Kalu, 2019).
- **Parasocial relationships (PSRs)** create perceived friendship, trust, and authenticity (Enke & Borchers, 2019) and lead to consumer behavior imitation (Ki & Kim, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019).
- All three types of interpersonal attraction and interactive and informative content contribute to stronger PSRs , influencer credibility and purchase intention (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019; Bond,2016; Freberg et al., 2010;).
  1. **Task** (influencer helps solve a need)
  2. **Social** (friendship/relatability)
  3. **Physical** (appearance)
- **Taste leaders**: set trends, showcase style and status (McQuarrie et al., 2012).
- **Opinion leaders**: share expertise, build trust and informed decisions (Ki & Kim, 2019).
- Influencers may be objectified for appearance (Vendemia & Fox, 2024).
- **Self-objectification**: followers internalize beauty ideals, leading to body shame and low self-esteem (Daniels et al., 2020).
- **Gender differences**: women experience more objectification and social pressure than men.

Novelty of the study:

The study fills literature gaps:

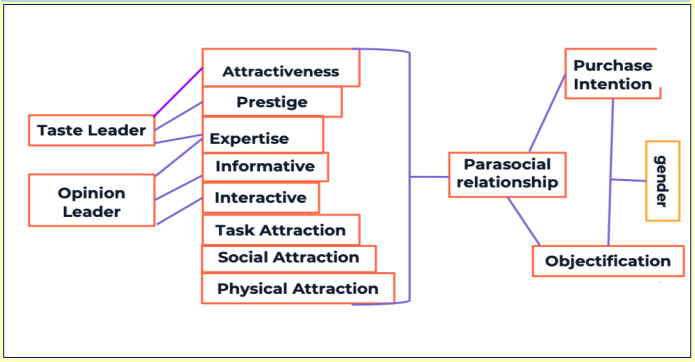
- Most PSR studies focus on outdated platforms (e.g., Facebook) (Casaló et al., 2018).
- Research treats PSR, content, and leadership as separate, missing their interaction (Aw & Chuah, 2021).
- Influencer objectification is underexamined, while male objectification is unexplored (Daniels, 2018).

AIM:

- Examine how interpersonal attraction, influencer content, and leadership predict PSRs and purchase intention.
- Analyze influencer objectification and its role in shaping follower behavior.

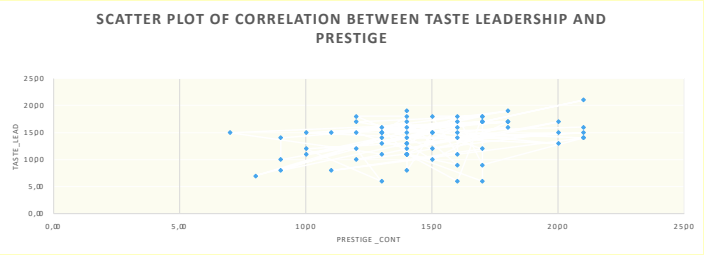
HYPOTHESES:

1. The interpersonal attraction characteristics of the influencer will predict Para-Social Relationships.
   1a. Task attraction predicts Para-social Relationships.
   1b. Social attraction predicts Para-social Relationships.
   1c. Physical attraction predicts Para-social Relationships.
2. The type of leader will be correlated with post-content and para-social relationships:
   2a. Taste leadership will be positively correlated with posts that are visually appealing, convey prestige and showcase expertise.
   2b: Opinion leadership will be positively correlated with posts showcasing expertise and having informative and interactive content
   2c: The extent to which one perceives a Social Media Influencer as a taste leader or opinion leader has a positive association with para-social relationships.
3. Opinion leader and Instagram use will predict higher purchase intention of the follower.
4. The objectification of the social media influencer will predict higher purchase intention.



RESULTS:

- A regression model with interpersonal attraction characteristics significantly predicted PSRs, $F(3, 67) = 4.20$, $p = .009$, $R^2 = .158$. However, none of the individual predictors (task, social, physical attraction) were significant. A second model combining interpersonal and content characteristics was also significant, $F(8, 60) = 4.15$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .356$. **Interactive content** was the **only significant predictor** ($B = 0.181$, $p = .008$), making it the **strongest unique contributor to PSRs**. All other predictors (attraction, prestige, expertise, informative content) were non-significant.
- Pearson's correlation analyses showed that taste leadership was significantly correlated with prestige content ($r = .33$, $p = .004$), but not with visually attractive ($r = .19$, $p = .104$) or expertise-based content ($r = .13$, $p = .271$). Also opinion leadership showed significant positive correlations with both interactive ($r = .29$, $p = .011$) and informative ($r = .49$, $p < .001$)content but not with expertise content ($r = .16$, $p = .180$).
- One way ANOVA showed that Influencer gender had a significant effect on PSRs, $F(2, 70) = 3.68$, $p = .030$, $\eta^2 = .095$. Participants reported stronger PSRs with female influencers (M = 21.21) than with non-specified gender influencers (M = 18.11).However, no significant differences were found between other gender groups.Also, Pearson correlation showed no significant correlation between influencer leadership style (taste leader: $r = .080$, $p = .509$ and opinion leader: $r = .010$, $p = .937$) and PSRs.
- Informational influence was the strongest predictor of purchase intention, $F(1, 72) = 45.13$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .385$. Higher informational influence was significantly associated with greater intention to purchase ($B = 0.485$, $t(72) = 6.718$, $p < .001$).In contrast, a regression model testing opinion leadership ($B = 0.044$, $p = .804$ and Instagram use ($B = 0.786$, $p = .104$) did not significantly predict purchase intention, $F(2, 69) = 1.36$, $p = .26$, $R^2 = .038$.
- **Influencer objectification** did **not** significantly predict **purchase intention**, $F(1, 70) = 0.885$, $p = .350$, $R^2 = .012$.However, influencer objectification **significantly predicted self-objectification**, $F(1, 71) = 9.84$, $p = .002$, $R^2 = .122$. Also, no significant **gender differences** were found in levels of influencer objectification.



LIMITATIONS:

- Sample: Undergraduate Greek Students
- Self- reported measures
- Cross – sectional design

FUTURE STUDIES:

- Longitudinal designs
- Study non-binary and male objectification
- Study Ai Influencers (e.g. Lil Miquela)
- Influencers on social marketing to restore trust and authenticity

CONCLUSION:

- This study explored how **interpersonal attraction**, **content characteristics**, and **objectification** influence **parasocial relationships (PSRs)** and **consumer behavior**.
- **Interactive and informative content** were key drivers of both **PSRs** and **purchase intention**.
- As social media merges **authenticity with self-commodification**, more research is needed on its **emotional, social, and ethical consequences**.

SAMPLE:

- **79** undergraduate students (N_{males}=29 ,$N_{Females}$ = 50)
- All participants were adults (M= 22.98, SD= 1.69)
- Most used social media platforms were :

1. **Instagram** (N= 58, 73.40%)
2. **TikTok**(N=41, 51.90%)
3. YouTube(N =40, 50.60%)

METHODS:

- Voluntary participation
- Fill in online questionnaire
- The questionnaire included:

a. Informed consent
b. Demographic Questions
c. Scales
d. Debriefing form

SCALES USED:

- Interpersonal Attraction Scale (Su et al.,2021).
- Parasocial Relationship Scale (Su et al.,2021).
- Purchase Intention Scale (Ki & Kim ,2019).
- Informational Influence Scale (Su et al.,2021).
- Content of social media influencer posts scale (Ki& Kim,2019).
- Taste and Opinion Leadership Scale (Ki& Kim, 2019).
- Fredickson's Objectification Scale (Prichard et al.,2023).
- State Appearance Comparison Scale (Tiggemann& McGill,2004).

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