

Leveraging Parasocial Capital: A Qualitative Study on Influencer Partnerships as Drivers of Consumer Habit Disruption in the FMCG Sector

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ABSTRACT

In markets of Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG), routine consumer purchase behavior is largely characterized by automation. Traditionally, it was considered very difficult for new brands in these markets to disrupt the existing automated behaviors of the consumers. In this qualitative research, we try to explore the ways through which strategically planned influencer collaborations serve as catalysts for such disruption of consumer habits in the FMCG markets. Using an exploratory research design in which data is collected via 25 semi-structured interviews conducted among social media users, we explore the ways through which parasocial capital, which comprises relational value, trust and intimacy that develop in one-sided media relationship, can help in disrupting the automated processes of consumer behavior in the FMCG markets. The thematic analysis shows that the use of parasocial capital helps in overcoming cognitive barriers and lowering down the switching costs while introducing alternatives and rewarding individuals with different identities.

Keywords: FMCG, Leveraging, Consumer Habit, Qualitative Research, Cognitive Barriers.

Introduction

The Imperative of Habit Disruption in FMCG Markets

The FMCG industry stands out due to low consumer involvement, frequent buying patterns, and lack of brand differentiation (Hoying & Steenkamp, 2021). Cleaning products, personal care, packaged foodstuffs, and beverages are not bought through the process of conscious decision-making; they are subject to automatization, cognitive scripts that are triggered by the environment and known as habits (Wood & Neal, 2009).

In terms of established brands, consumer habits create a powerful barrier against competition. For new entrants and innovative brands, the same habits create a huge barrier of entry to the market. The outbound marketing communication strategies such as linear TV commercials, print, or banner ads on the internet cannot disrupt the psychological automatism anymore. Consumers have evolved a number of cognitive filters that protect them from overtly commercial communications (Wedel & Pieters, 2020). These filters include selective attention and banner blindness. Therefore, traditional advertising often fails to elicit the cognitive interruption necessary for re-evaluation of habitual purchases.

The Evolution of Influencer Marketing and Parasocial Capital

In order to penetrate consumers' defenses, modern marketing techniques employ social media influencers. Influencers on such platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube function not only as public mediums for advertisements but also as relational anchors for their audiences (Lou & Yuan, 2019). After engaging with the content of their influencers over a considerable period of time, the audience builds unique psychological bonds with them. These kinds of bonds are referred to as Parasocial Interactions (PSIs) in media studies (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Although initially PSIs were considered purely media phenomena, the modern marketing context necessitates a more active approach to it. The prolonged exposure to PSIs eventually results in parasocial capital (Chae, 2018). The concept of parasocial capital in this paper is defined as relational resources built by the influencer that include interpersonal trust, authenticity, social identity, and persuasive power of the influencer in his or her audience.

Research Objective and Questions

While it is known that influencer marketing is effective in generating brand awareness, there is still little information regarding its ability to serve as a behavioral disrupter. At present, most studies on the subject analyze situations in which the customer makes decisions in high-involvement marketplaces like fashion, luxury, and technology, in which consumers are already investing their mental effort into decision making (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016).

The current study tries to fill in this gap by analyzing the connection between media psychology and behavioral economics in low involvement marketplaces. The primary goal of this study is to answer the following research question: How do influencer collaborations use parasocial capital to disrupt consumer behavior in the FMCG marketplace?

Theoretical Framework

• **The Habit Loop Mechanics**

To know how habits can be broken, one should understand how these habits form. Behavioral psychology basics suggest that the formation of habits takes place in a tripartite cognitive structure called the Habit Loop (Duhigg, 2012):

Cue – An external, emotional, or situational trigger that tells the brain to switch into the automatic mode.

Routine – The action itself that is carried out automatically after being triggered by the cue (such as taking a particular brand of toothpaste from a supermarket shelf).

Reward – A physical or emotional reward that reinforces the loop by informing the brain that the routine is worth remembering when the same cue arises next time.

In the FMCG industry, the reward is mostly cognitive convenience as the brain uses less energy when no decision is made consciously (Kahneman, 2011). Habit Disruption Theory holds that if one wants to disrupt the automatic routine, there needs to be either an interference with the environment trigger or a high cognitive friction that forces the consumer to rethink his/her routine (Verplanken & Wood, 2006).

• **Reconceptualizing Parasocial Capital**

In this research, parasocial capital is considered to be a very specific type of resource that can produce necessary cognitive friction. In the case of introduction of a product by the influencer, the recommendation does not get to the consumer's mind via any of the conventional ways of advertising.

Parasocial capital serves as a psychological cushion, which reduces resistance that consumers have to advertisements (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and allows the advertising message to be treated in the same way as the advice of a good friend or relative.

Methodology

• **Research Design**

As both habituation and parasocial relations are strongly associated with an individual's psychology, this research employed an explorative qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using qualitative methods gives researchers access to certain aspects of consumer behavior that are difficult to reveal through traditional quantitative metrics like clicks and impressions.

• **Sampling and Participants' Characteristics**

The purposive and snowball approaches were applied to obtain the sample of research participants. In order to guarantee that the data collected by the researcher would be relevant, the subjects had to pass three criteria:

Be active users of at least two visual social media sites (Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube);

Follow digital influencers, whose posts include some recommendations on how to live your life and/or which products you should buy;

Have consciously changed their choice from a traditional FMCG brand (with at least 6 months of usage) to another brand because of the recommendation from an influencer.

The obtained sample included 25 participants aged 18 to 35, which is the target audience in terms of modern digital content consumption (Smith, 2023). The ratio between females, males, and non-binary persons was equal (13, 11, and 1 respectively).

- **Data Collection Procedures**

Data was collected through semi-structured and in-depth interviews. Owing to geographical differences, interviews were all done remotely using online video conferencing technology. A set of standardized interviews was prepared concentrating on three main themes: the quality and strength of the psychological relationship of the participant with his/her favorite influencer; the actual history of his/her past FMCG buying behavior; and the process of cognition he/she went through as a result of the disruption caused by the influencer.

The average duration of each interview was 52 minutes. All interviews were fully transcribed with permission from the participants, leading to more than 400 pages of transcripts.

- **Data Analysis**

Data from the transcripts was subjected to thematic analysis through six phases as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Coding of the data was facilitated using data analysis software. In the initial phase, open line-by-line coding was done on the first five transcripts to create a codebook. Later, axial coding was done as more transcripts were coded to organize the codes into concepts. Finally, the concepts were organized into three major thematic structures that specifically relate to the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

Qualitative analysis showed that the use of influencers does not interfere with habits through sheer exposure and sales promotion. On the contrary, the interference process is due to the psychological intervention facilitated by parasocial capital. The dynamics of the process have been explained using three themes and illustrated in the behavioral transition matrix below.

- **Behavioral Transition Matrix**

Phase in Behavioral Cycle	Historical Baseline Status	The Influencer Intervention Mechanism	Resulting Post-Disruption State
Cognitive Processing Mode	System 1 (Automatic): Fast, effortless, and driven by habit loops (Kahneman, 2011).	Parasocial Interruption: The creator introduces a narrative that breaks the automated loop.	System 2 (Deliberate): Slow, analytical, and open to brand trial.
Perceived Risk of Brand Switching	High Friction: Anxiety over losing money or getting a poor-quality product.	Risk Transference: The influencer guarantees quality, absorbing the consumer's anxiety.	Low Friction: The consumer feels safe testing an unproven brand.
Primary Value Reward	Functional/Convenience: Saving time and mental energy at checkout.	Identity/Relational Alignment: The consumer feels closer to the creator's lifestyle.	Social/Psychological Gratification: Value is derived from self-expression and belonging.

- **Detailed Thematic Analysis**

Theme 1: The 'Trusted Peer' Interruption and Bypassing Commercial Defense Mechanisms

The unique position that influencers have in the consumer's perception was one of the prominent topics discussed by all 25 participants during the interviews (Schouten et al., 2020).

Defeating the Commercial Filter: Traditional advertisements elicit an automatic response when consumers block the message as an attempt to protect themselves from advertising messages. This mechanism coincides with the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994). However, if an influencer has enough parasocial capital, their followers perceive them as an actual peer. One participant (P07, Female, 24) explained:

"When I see a commercial for laundry detergent on television, I am not paying any attention to the advertisement. It is just another corporation trying to promote something. But when Sarah [influencer] talks about her laundry routine in her story, it is like a roommate telling me about something. I do not see it as a sell, but as someone who is trying to help me."

The Illusion of Reciprocity: Since creators share personal stories, weaknesses, and daily activities with their followers, it creates an illusion of reciprocal friendship (Giles, 2002). It leads to a different interpretation of a recommendation. The promotion turns into advice from a friend and makes the consumer open up.

Theme 2: Lifestyle Anchoring and the Transference of Shared Social Identity

However, FMCG behavior can be subtly connected to one's identity and surroundings. The study found out that the influencers challenge these behaviors through introducing a desirable but relatable lifestyle into which the product is integrated.

Visualization of the Product in the Context: Contrary to staged advertising, the influencers present the product in their natural setting, such as their apartments, kitchen, and bathroom. In this way, the consumers get a clear visualization of where the product would fit in their everyday life (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Identity Reorientation: Individuals tend to purchase certain FMCG products based on their self-concept (Sirgy, 1982). Influencers' modeling of particular lifestyle (for example, minimalist, very organized, or environmentally friendly) makes the consumers want to follow the same. The simplest way to do it would be to purchase the same dish soap or snack as the influencer. Thus, the brand habit is replaced with another more relevant to the consumer's self-image one.

Theme 3: Risk Mitigation via Relational Collateral and Reward Re-Engineering

Theme three addresses how parasocial capital alleviates the concerns of brand switching including money loss and inferiority of the alternative product.

The Influencer as Relational Collateral: Switching from the trusted and loyal brand to the competing brand creates cognitive dissonance (Campbell & Goodstein, 2001). It was established that high parasocial capital resolves this problem. As participants trust the judgment of the influencer, they assume that the influencer has verified the quality of the product. Influence of the reputation of the influencer acts as relational collateral, eliminating concerns of the consumers.

Replacing the Reward Loop: According to Wood and Neal (2009), the reward is usually connected to the comfort of purchasing familiar product in the classic habit loop. Influencer collaboration modifies the loop by adding new psychological reward. Purchasing the product suggested by the creator gives consumers a feeling of connection to the creator and his/her social circle. Psychological satisfaction replaces old comfort, which used to be the part of the habit loop.

Theoretical Implications and Strategic Applications

• Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes uniquely to the marketing literature by bridging the gap between media psychology and behavioral economics. Traditionally, parasocial capital has been regarded solely as an instrument to generate top-of-the funnel brand awareness or sentiment (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The present paper extends this understanding by demonstrating that parasocial capital is a strong behavioral mechanism that is capable of disrupting consumers' automatic habits.

In addition, this study contributes to Habit Disruption Theory (Verplanken & Wood, 2006). It reveals that disruption of habit loops does not only necessitate physical or environmental alterations. They can also be disrupted through digital, relationship-based interventions that reshape cognitive reward structures.

• Practical Implications for FMCG Brand Managers

For brand managers working in highly competitive FMCG environments, the results above imply some important directions to follow:

Pare Engagement to Reach: While choosing influencer partners, companies are recommended not to pay attention to trivial vanity metrics such as number of followers. Instead, brands can assess parasocial capital of the creator via analyzing comment depth, sentiment and trust of the community (De Veirman et al., 2017). A micro-influencer trusted by audience is much more likely to change consumer behavior compared to a mega-celebrity with wide but shallow reach.

Co-Create Native Unscripted Content: Companies have to avoid forcing corporate scripts on influencers. Excessive production and over-scripting ruin authentic peer-to-peer interaction between an influencer and audience (Audrezet et al., 2020). It is important for creators to be able to freely incorporate products into their regular routines.

Concentrate on Relational Reward: Promotional campaigns should not concentrate on mere features of the product but stress the way the product improves consumers' lifestyles and identities. The key message should promote social and emotional benefits of becoming a member of the influencer's community thanks to using the product.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

• **Final Summary**

The breaking of established consumer behaviors presents the greatest challenge in FMCG marketing strategies. This study proves that partnership with influencers provides an excellent approach to overcoming this challenge through parasocial capital.

Through acting as a trusted friend, integrating brands within the aspirational lifestyle of the consumer, and eliminating psychological barriers involved in switching brands, the influence of influencers breaks consumer automatic behavior, compelling them to switch to different brands.

• **Limitations and Future Research**

Even though this study provided rich qualitative insights, there were some limitations in the research. One limitation is that the sample of the study comprised only people between the ages of 18 and 35 years, and this limits its applicability to older populations who use social media in a different way.

Further research can be done using mixed research methods and even quantitative methods. Longitudinal consumer behavior research could be carried out to understand for how long these habits persist and the effect of parasocial capital could be determined using structural equation modeling.

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