

From Screen Bond to Shopping Cart: An Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective on Para-social Interaction (Bandh), Brand-user Imagery Fit (Ahamkara), Social Comparison (Upamana) and Purchase Intention (Pravritti)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The objective of this paper is to assess the effect of parasocial interaction with internet influencers on purchase intention. It is further hypothesized that mere deep connection (*Bandh*) that a follower has with the influencer is alone not sufficient to create a strong purchase intention (*Pravritti*). Brand-user Imagery Fit (*Ahamkara*) and Social Comparison (*Upamana*) serially mediate this impact. Empirical study is conducted to assess this. Responses are collected by circulating an online form. The secondary objective of this research is to initiate further research in these areas in the Indian context.

Design/methodology/approach – A mix method study is carried out using purposive sampling. Both qualitative interviews and quantitative data collection is done. Purposive sampling is frequently used in this type of researches as characteristics of a particular set of respondents specifically match the study purpose¹.

Findings – The findings suggest that brand-user imagery fit (*Ahamkara Alignment*) is the dominant psychological mechanism that links para-social interactions to purchase intention. Social comparison plays a secondary and supportive role. The results indicate that consumers' perceived alignment with brand imagery is more influential in driving purchase intention than comparison with others.

Research limitations – It is a cross-sectional design, measures are self-reported, focus is only on urban youth in India, the study doesn't take into consideration a specific social media platform or the product.

Practical implications – This study is intended to provide better understanding of influencer marketing. It will contribute to the efforts of digital marketer to create stronger purchase intention in the mind of a consumer. It can also lay foundation for allowing marketers to select the right internet influencer to market the offerings.

Originality/Value – The paper is an original study conducted in India and is based on the collection of primary data from the respondents specifically collected for this study.

Keywords: *Para-social interaction, Bandh, Brand-user imagery fit, Ahamkara Alignment, Social Comparison, Upamana, Purchase intention, Pravritti*

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INTRODUCTION

Digital landscape of the world is changing rapidly. India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world, is no exception. This digital revolution has put smartphones in almost every hand. People are spending more time in connected world in comparison to the real world. People have more virtual connections than real relationships. One such relationship is with internet influencers. These influencers are shaping opinions and directing consumer behaviour. Young adults are highly influenced and affected by internet influencers. Social networks are becoming progressively sophisticated and the relationship between

influencers and their followers is getting stronger². These bonds with various influencers are parasocial interactions. These parasocial interactions is instrumental in shaping preferences, attitudes as well as behavioural intention such as decision of purchase³. These interactions provide opportunities to marketers. Scholars are studying it to dig deeper to understand new-age consumer engagement. Since 1995, India's digital infrastructure has expanded by leaps and bounds. Indian population is one of the largest and youngest populations of the world. India also has largest young population online. As of 2025 India boasts of almost 750 million (75 crores) internet users.

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Substantial proportion of this is youth⁴. This demographic group relies highly on influencers, peer validation and social media consumption⁵. Wide use of smartphones and economic data charges has led to integration of digital media in creating identity and shaping buying behaviour (TRAI, 2025). The existing studies have examined parasocial interaction, social comparison, brand-user imagery fit and intention to purchase in isolation or in limited models, their integrated functioning in the Indian context remains to be explored. This research intends to address this gap by using theoretical backdrop of Indian Knowledge Systems as well as western psychological framework. Indian Knowledge Systems offers a sound foundation for understanding the relationship bonds, how identity is formed and how comparison works in the decision making in the social context⁶.

Indian Knowledge System explains the concept of ‘self’ through the construct of *Ahamkara*. It is a principle responsible for identity formation and self-referential evaluation⁷. In the digital parlance, the parasocial bonds with the internet influencers are analogous to *Bandha* (psychological attachment). On the same lines, brand-user imagery fit can be interpreted as alignment with *Ahamkara*, where consumers incline toward symbolic representation congruent with their perceived self. The construct of social comparison parallels *Upamana*, which involves acquisition of knowledge through analogy and comparison. These Indian constructs provide a cultural lens from which mediated influence and impact on purchase decision can be reinterpreted. On this backdrop, this study investigates the serial mediation of Brand-User Imagery Fit and Social Comparison between Para-social Interaction and Purchase Intention in the Indian context.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in established constructs within consumer behaviour and marketing research in the western as well as Indian Knowledge Systems. The study extends beyond the western paradigms and integrates the perspectives from Indian Knowledge Systems. Specifically, the constructs of Parasocial Interaction, Brand-User Imagery Fit, Social Comparison, and Purchase Intention are interpreted not only through contemporary psychological theory but also through indigenous categories such as *Bandha* (attachment), *Ahamkara* (self-identity), *Upamana* (comparative cognition), and *Pravritti* (action orientation). This integrative positioning enables a sequential interpretation of digital influence processes analogous to the classical Indian psychological progression from perception (*Manas*), to evaluative cognition (*Buddhi*), to action (*Pravritti*). The following sections elaborate the theoretical grounding of each construct and develop the study hypotheses.

Parasocial Interaction (Bandha)

Parasocial interaction (PSI) refers to the illusory experience of a face-to-face relationship with a media personality⁸. In digital environments, PSI emerges as a one-sided yet emotional bond that followers develop with

the internet influencers³. As the social media is becoming more and more interactive, these bonds exhibit intimacy and reciprocity. This is blurring the boundaries between an actual and a virtual relationship⁹. In the context of Indian Knowledge Systems, this attachment can be paralleled with *Bandha*, a psychological bond or attachment that an individual feels towards an object or a person. It isn't just taking cognisance of the existence of that object or a person but it is an emotional attachment. The emotional attachment to such an extent that it can affect behaviour. Existing studies establish that the PSI positively impacts consumer attitudes and intentions¹⁰. When the followers feel emotional closeness with an internet influencer, the communication of that influencer is internalized readily by the followers. It is likely to lead to favourable purchase intention.

H1. Para-Social Interaction positively relates to Purchase Intention.

Brand-User Imagery Fit (Ahamkara Alignment)

Brand-user imagery fit refers to the congruence of a consumer's interpretation of a typical brand user and their self-image¹¹. In internet influencer marketing, internet personalities are perceived as symbolic representatives of the brand that they endorse and it shapes consumers' perception of "typical user of the brand"¹².

From the perspective of Indian Knowledge System, this process is similar to *Ahamkara*, the principle responsible for creating self-identity in a person and the evaluation of self. *Ahamkara* drives the perception of "I" and "mine". It influences preferences toward products congruent with one's identity. When the followers feel there is an alignment between their self-image and the brand image of a brand endorsed by the influencer, psychological congruence emerges.

Brand-user imagery fit has been widely studied in many researches but its role as a mediator, in influencer marketing in the Indian context remains to be explored. Here, parasocial interaction (*Bandha*) may improve alignment with the identity (*Ahamkara congruence*), which subsequently impacts the purchase intention.

H2. Brand-User Imagery Fit mediates the positive effect of Para-Social Interaction on Purchase Intention.

Social Comparison (Upamana)

Social comparison theory explains that individuals do compare their opinions and status with others for evaluation purpose by comparing them with others¹². On social media, influencers represent themselves as ideal and it strengthens such comparison in the mind of the followers¹³. These comparisons positively influence self-image and purchase intention. In Indian Knowledge System, *Upamana* is acquiring knowledge through comparison and analogy. In the digital context, the influencers become the context with whom followers compare. It shapes followers' lifestyle, perception about status and consumption intention. Social comparison has been studied in the context of social media and well-

being¹⁴. But its mediating role between parasocial interaction and purchase intention in Indian context has not been sufficiently examined. Parasocial interaction may intensify this comparison and finally the follower is motivated to purchase to reduce the discrepancy emerging out of such comparison. This hypothesis proposes that comparative understanding (*Upamana*) acts as a psychological bridge between parasocial bond (*Bandha*) and action of purchase inclination.

H3. Social Comparison mediates the positive effect of Para-Social Interaction on Purchase Intention.

Purchase Intention (Pravriddhi toward Action)

Purchase intention is a core predictor of actual buying behavior of the consumer¹⁵. In the context of influencer marketing, understanding the background that leads to purchase intention is necessary for evaluation of effectiveness of a campaign².

In Indian Knowledge System, behavioural intention can be termed as *Pravriddhi*. It is an outward inclination of action which emerges from internal cognition and affective processes. It usually follows the sequence of *Manas* (perception), *Buddhi* (evaluation), and *Ahamkara* (self-image identification) followed by *Pravriddhi* (action). Thus, purchase intention may be viewed as the behavioural result of parasocial bonding, brand-user imagery fit and social comparison. Purchase intention has been widely studied but has hardly been studied as a systematic outcome of brand-user imagery fit and social comparison extensively studied across marketing domains, examining it as the outcome of sequential identity and comparison mechanisms within the Indian digital ecosystem provides new theoretical depth.

Serial Mediation: From Para-social interaction (Bandha) to Purchase Intention (Pravriddhi) through Brand-User imagery Fit (Ahamkara) and Social Comparison (Upamana)

Based on all of the above arguments, this study is proposing a 'serial mediation model' using SEM-PLS. Parasocial interaction (*Bandha*) influences Brand-User Imagery Fit (*Ahamkara congruence*), which strengthens the Social Comparative cognition (*Upamana*), ultimately strengthening the Purchase Intention (*Pravriddhi*).

This serial mediation suggests that intention of purchase is not solely driven by emotional attachment with the influencer but by a multi-layered psychological process which integrates user identity alignment and also social evaluation of the choices. Investigating this serial path intends to contribute a novel insight into effectiveness of influencer marketing, particularly in India. The following hypothesis intends to examine, for the first time, whether congruence of user identity and social comparison cognition operate sequentially as bridge between parasocial interaction and purchase intention. The model suggests that multiple interrelated psychological processes strengthen the consumer decision-making even when favourable brand inclination already exists.

H4. Brand-User Imagery Fit and Social Comparison serially mediate the positive effect of Para-Social Interaction on Purchase Intention.

Significance

- **Comprehensive Framework:** While previous studies have examined some of these constructs in isolation or in limited combinations. This research presents a comprehensive framework that integrates these four constructs to provide a holistic understanding of internet personality influence on purchase intention.
- **Context-Specific Analysis:** The majority of existing research on internet personality influence has been conducted in western or far eastern contexts. This study is carried out to address the gap for context-specific analysis of Indian urban youth.
- **Novel Hypotheses:** This study proposes two novel hypotheses. These hypotheses are intended to examine the previously unexamined relationships between the constructs.
- **Cultural Nuances:** The Indian market has its own unique cultural nuances. They may affect the effectiveness of the influence of the internet personalities.

Construct Selection Rationale

The four constructs used in this study are based on several significant factors:

- **Theoretical Relevance:** Each of the constructs used in this research are studied in depth in isolation or in limited relationships. Each of these constructs has a strong theoretical background^{3, 11, 12, 16}.
- **Contextual Applicability:** All these constructs have been relevant in studying the consumer behavior in the context of social media and influencer marketing^{2, 9}. This study is unique in terms of the double mediation effect it intends to examine.
- **Practical Significance:** Examining these constructs can provide important insights for digital marketers and brands intending to optimize their influencer marketing strategies in the Indian market.
- **Methodological Considerations:** These constructs have defined measures and have been proved to be highly useful in empirical testing of similar hypotheses^{10, 17}.

The primary objective of this research is to understand the influence of internet personalities on buying behavior of urban youth of India and is it affected by some other factors. This study examines the interplay between parasocial interaction, brand-user imagery fit, social comparison and purchase intention. This research intends to contribute to advancement of theory of digital marketing. Further this study also intends to provide practical insights to the marketers. The new hypotheses

being tested in this study address some important gaps in the Indian context and also paves the way for further studies in this field.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Mixed methods approach is employed to test the proposed hypotheses. It employs both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. The relationships between the constructs are complex in nature and hence this approach is employed to get deeper insights into them.

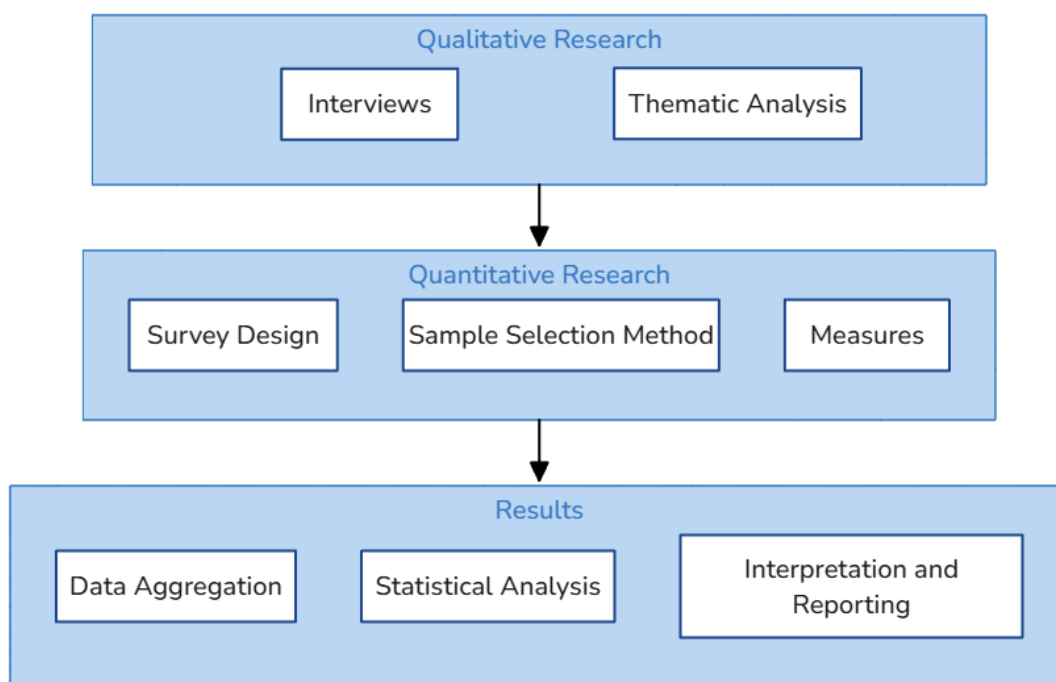


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of Research Methodology

Qualitative Research

In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with about 23 participants from the target demographic to gain deeper insights into their perceptions of internet personalities, brand interactions, and purchase decision-making processes. Various themes emerged from this qualitative research and these semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis helped to provide the necessary context to the quantitative findings.

Quantitative Research

Survey Design: A structured questionnaire has been developed and circulated online to measure these four key constructs: parasocial interaction, brand-user imagery fit, social comparison and purchase intention. Established scales from earlier studies have been adapted and modified to fit the Indian context^{18, 19}. The questionnaire also includes demographic questions and items related to social media usage patterns.

Sample Selection Method: This study has employed purposive sampling. Sample size was determined following established guidelines^{20, 21} and recent related studies were also critically examined. Comparable Indian studies used the following respondent age ranges: 18–34 years^{22, 23} and 18–29 years²⁴. Studies that were conducted outside India used 20–35 years²⁵ and 18–40 years²⁶ as age

ranges of the respondents. Because the commercial broadband and social media usage in India expanded substantially after 2010, this study required a similar age band; consequently, an age range of 18–30 years is selected. The target population for this study is Indian urban youth aged 18-30. A stratified random sample of over 385 responses was planned. This sample size is sufficient for 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error for infinite population²⁰. The questionnaire was distributed in the form of an online form and over 400 responses were collected. 393 responses qualified for the analysis.

Measures:

- **Parasocial Interaction:** Adopted from Liu et al, 2018²⁷
- **Brand-User Imagery Fit:** Adopted from Lee & Watkins, 2016¹⁸
- **Social Comparison:** Adapted from Gibbons & Buunk, 2007¹⁹
- **Purchase Intention:** Adopted from Lee & Watkins, 2016¹⁸

A 6-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" is used to measure all items.

Conceptual Model:

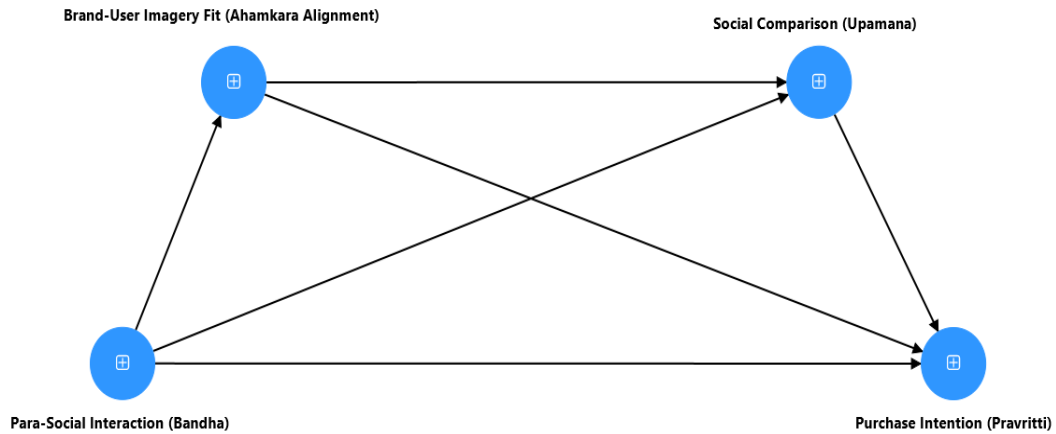


Figure 2: Image of a Conceptual Model for this Research

The relationship between the constructs in this research are defined by the conceptual model stated above. Figure 2 describes the relationships hypothesized among these constructs, which are selected for the purpose of this research. The arrows show the direction of the relationship. In this model Purchase Intention is a dependent variable. Para-Social Interaction is an independent variable, which positively influences the Purchase Intention. The uniqueness of this conceptual model lies in the hypothesis 4 above, which intends to examine the ‘serial mediation’ of Brand-User Imagery Fit and Social Comparison.

RESULTS

Data analysis is conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with partial least squares approach (PLS-SEM). Research software SmartPLS 4²⁸ is used to do the data analysis. PLS-SEM is appropriate for data analysis in this study as the relationships between the selected constructs is complex. Also, PLS-SEM is further suitable due to its predictive modelling and ability to simultaneously estimate multiple relationships.

The analysis is done with the SEM-PLS using SmartPLS 4.1 software. Evaluation of the structural model is done. Under the assessment of measurement model, reliability, i.e., internal consistency, is examined using Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (CR). The convergent validity is assessed through average variance extracted (AVE) and indicator loadings. Heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio is used to evaluate discriminant validity.

Next, path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R²), effect sizes (f²) and predictive relevance (Q²) will be examined to evaluate the structural model. Blindfolding procedures have been used for such evaluation. Significances of direct, indirect, and serial mediation effects are tested using Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. Mediating roles of Brand–User Imagery Fit and Social Comparison are carefully tested, both independently and sequentially, in the relationship between Parasocial Interaction and Purchase Intention.

This two-step data analysis ensured robust validation of both the measurement properties and the hypothesized structural relationships.

Table: Respondent Characteristics (Demographic Profile)

Sample Profile	Sample %
Gender (N = 393)	
Male	45.0
Female	55.0
Age	
18-24	86.5
25-30	11.7
30+	1.8
Education Level	
Pursuing bachelor’s degree	27.7
Bachelor’s degree or equivalent	71.7
Post-graduate or above	0.6
Number of Social Media Accounts	
One	14.5

Sample Profile	Sample %
Two to five	73.0
More than five	12.5

Table 1: Respondent Characteristics

Respondent Characteristics

The table 1 above clearly indicates that the sample selected is appropriate for this study. An attempt was made to distribute the questionnaire equally to male and female respondents. From the received responses it is evident that female respondents were more enthusiastic in responding. The entire respondent lot is from various urban parts of

India. 85.5% of the respondents have robust social media presence with more than two social media accounts. The minimum qualification of an average respondent is ‘pursuing bachelor’s degree’. This substantiates the grasp of the questionnaire distributed. Respondents have sufficient social media presence to understand the questions and answer them. An appeal was made to the respondents to be honest and truthful in their responses to arrive at as accurate findings as possible.

Mean and Standard Deviation

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	P values
Brand-User Imagery Fit -> Purchase Intention	0.440	0.436	0.052	0.000
Brand-User Imagery Fit -> Social Comparison	0.265	0.267	0.058	0.000
Para-Social Interaction -> Brand-User Imagery Fit	0.551	0.554	0.048	0.000
Para-Social Interaction -> Purchase Intention	0.212	0.213	0.055	0.000
Para-Social Interaction -> Social Comparison	0.223	0.226	0.071	0.002
Social Comparison -> Purchase Intention	0.239	0.242	0.049	0.000

The mean and standard deviation statistics in the Table 2, provide an overview of the central tendency and dispersion of the constructs in the study. The mean values indicate that respondents generally reported moderate to high levels of para-social interaction, brand-user imagery fit, social comparison, and purchase intention, suggesting favorable perceptions across key variables. The relatively moderate standard deviations imply acceptable variability within the sample, indicating that responses were not overly concentrated around a single value. This spread enhances the robustness of the structural analysis by confirming sufficient heterogeneity in perceptions, which

supports meaningful estimation of relationships among constructs in the model.

Model Analysis

Analysis of the data collected has been completed in SmartPLS 4.1 research software. Bootstrapping has been used to estimate confidence intervals and standard errors. SEM-PLS method is useful in this type of researches as it estimates multiple and interrelated dependence of constructs in one single analysis. This technique has been employed by various earlier researches^{29, 17, 30}. This study shall establish the reliability and validity of the survey instrument using the structural model.

Reliability and Validity of the Instrument

Table 3: Construct Reliability and Validity (bias corrected)

	Cronbach’s alpha	Composite Reliability (rho a)	Composite Reliability (rho c)	Average Variance extracted
Brand-User Imagery Fit	0.829	0.829	0.880	0.593
Para-Social Interaction	0.813	0.813	0.862	0.471
Purchase Intention	0.868	0.871	0.898	0.558
Social Comparison	0.806	0.803	0.858	0.462

Reliability and validity of the instrument is checked by carrying statistical analyses out in SmartPLS 4.1. As can be observed from the table 3 above, Cronbach’s alpha values for all the constructs are greater than 0.7. Composite reliabilities (rho_a and rho_c) also have values above 0.7. The reliability of the constructs is evident from these values. Average variance extracted is a very conservative measure of construct reliability.

Measurement Model

The measurement model is evaluated to ensure that the constructs are assessed with adequate reliability and validity. The results indicate satisfactory internal consistency across all latent variables included in the study. Overall, the measurement properties provide confidence in the robustness of the instrument used for empirical testing.

Convergent Validity

Table 4: Convergent Validity (bias corrected)

	Average Variance extracted
Brand-User Imagery Fit	0.593
Para-Social Interaction	0.471
Purchase Intention	0.558
Social Comparison	0.462

Convergent validity was assessed using factor loadings, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All constructs demonstrated Composite Reliability (ρ_c) values above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency. The AVE values for Brand-User Imagery Fit (0.593) and Purchase Intention (0.558) exceeded the 0.50 benchmark,

confirming adequate convergent validity for these constructs. Although Para-Social Interaction (0.471) and Social Comparison (0.462) reported AVE values slightly below 0.50 but their satisfactory reliability coefficients suggest acceptable convergent validity in line with established SEM guidelines.

Discriminant Validity

Table 5: Discriminant Validity (Heterotrait-monotrait ratio)

Path	Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)
Para-Social Interaction <-> Brand-User Imagery Fit	0.788
Purchase Intention <-> Brand-User Imagery Fit	0.855
Purchase Intention <-> Para-Social Interaction	0.774
Social Comparison <-> Brand-User Imagery Fit	0.612
Social Comparison <-> Para-Social Interaction	0.619
Social Comparison <-> Purchase Intention	0.725

Discriminant validity as per Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) substantiates sufficient divergence in the constructs. Meaning the two constructs are sufficiently different from each other and hence are worth studying.

After running these tests, it can be safely stated that the instrument used for this study is sufficiently reliable and valid.

Structural Model

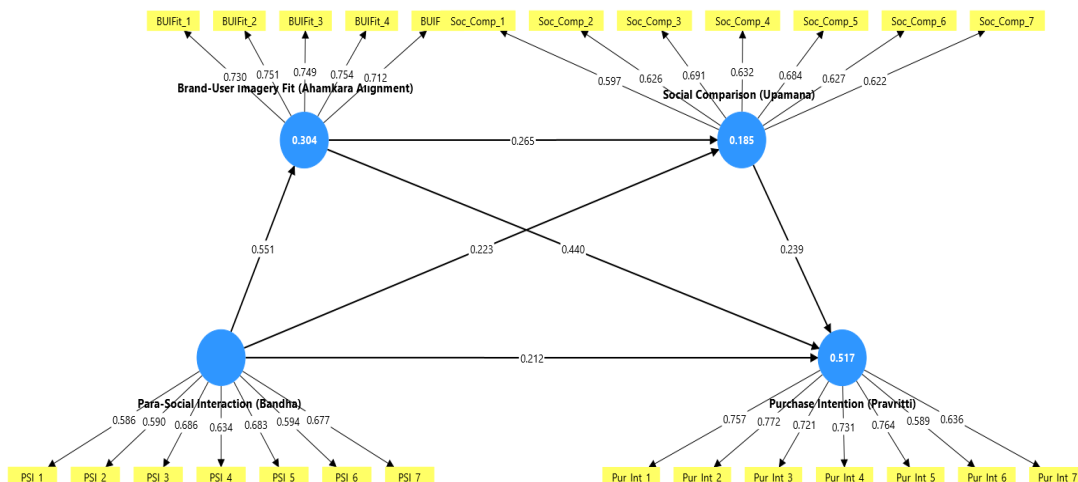


Figure 2: Structural Model with Statistics

The results of the analysis of the structural model indicate significant and some strong relationships among the studied constructs. Para-Social Interaction (PSI) (*Bandha*) significantly predicted Brand-User Imagery Fit (Ahamkara Alignment) ($\beta = 0.551$, $t = 11.478$, $p < .001$). PSI further predicted Social Comparison (*Upamana*) ($\beta = 0.223$, $t = 3.145$, $p = .002$) and Purchase Intention (*Pravritti*) ($\beta =$

0.212 , $t = 3.880$, $p < .001$). Brand-User Imagery Fit has significant positive effects on Social Comparison ($\beta = 0.265$, $t = 4.571$, $p < .001$) and Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.440$, $t = 8.465$, $p < .001$). Further, Social Comparison significantly predicted Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.239$, $t = 4.878$, $p < .001$).

The mediation and the serial mediation analysis revealed significant indirect effects. Brand-User Imagery Fit exerted a significant indirect effect on Purchase Intention through Social Comparison ($\beta = 0.063$, $t = 3.178$, $p = .001$). Para-Social Interaction showed a substantial total indirect effect on Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.330$, $t = 8.889$, $p < .001$), as well as on Social Comparison ($\beta = 0.146$, $t = 4.145$, $p < .001$). The specific indirect paths, including the serial mediation from Para-Social Interaction \rightarrow Brand-User Imagery Fit \rightarrow Social Comparison \rightarrow Purchase

Intention ($\beta = 0.035$, $t = 3.007$, $p = .003$), were also significant.

Overall, the total effects further confirmed that Para-Social Interaction ($\beta = 0.543$, $t = 10.344$, $p < .001$) and Brand-User Imagery Fit ($\beta = 0.503$, $t = 10.632$, $p < .001$) has strong positive impacts on Purchase Intention, demonstrating both direct and indirect pathways within the model. These findings provide robust support for the proposed structural relationships.

Specific Indirect Effects Coefficients

Tabel 6: Specific Indirect Effects

Path	Specific indirect effects coefficients
Para-Social Interaction (<i>Bandha</i>) \rightarrow Brand-User Imagery Fit (<i>Ahamkara Alignment</i>) \rightarrow Social Comparison (<i>Upamana</i>) \rightarrow Purchase Intention (<i>Pravrutti</i>)	0.035
Para-Social Interaction (<i>Bandha</i>) \rightarrow Brand-User Imagery Fit (<i>Ahamkara Alignment</i>) \rightarrow Purchase Intention (<i>Pravrutti</i>)	0.242
Para-Social Interaction (<i>Bandha</i>) \rightarrow Brand-User Imagery Fit (<i>Ahamkara Alignment</i>) \rightarrow Social Comparison (<i>Upamana</i>)	0.146
Brand-User Imagery Fit (<i>Ahamkara Alignment</i>) \rightarrow Social Comparison (<i>Upamana</i>) \rightarrow Purchase Intention (<i>Pravrutti</i>)	0.063
Para-Social Interaction (<i>Bandha</i>) \rightarrow Social Comparison (<i>Upamana</i>) \rightarrow Purchase Intention (<i>Pravrutti</i>)	0.053

Specific Indirect Effects

The specific indirect effects are examined to assess the serial mediation of Brand-User Imagery Fit (*Ahamkara Alignment*) and Social Comparison (*Upamana*) in the relationship between Para-Social Interaction (*Bandha*) and Purchase Intention (*Pravrutti*).

Results show that Brand-User Imagery Fit serves as the primary mediating construct. The specific indirect effect of Para-Social Interaction on Purchase Intention via Brand-User Imagery Fit is positive and has a substantial effect ($\beta = 0.242$). It is the strongest effect in the entire model. It suggests that strong para-social interaction enhances perceived brand-user imagery fit with the brand. This further significantly increases consumers' purchase intention.

Para-Social Interaction also exerts a small but meaningful indirect effect on Social Comparison through Brand-User Imagery Fit ($\beta = 0.146$). This indicates that brand-user imagery fit enhances consumers' tendency to socially compare his brand choices. The serial mediation path from Para-Social Interaction to Purchase Intention via Brand-User Imagery Fit and Social Comparison shows weaker effect ($\beta = 0.035$). This suggests that social comparison contributes to the serial mediation but does not substantially magnify the brand-user imagery fit mechanism.

Brand-User Imagery Fit indirectly influencing Purchase Intention via Social Comparison ($\beta = 0.063$) and Para-Social Interaction indirectly influencing Purchase Intention via Social Comparison alone ($\beta = 0.053$) are

positive but weak effects. Even though these effects are positive, they are weaker than the direct mediation through Brand-User Imagery Fit.

Overall, the findings suggest that brand-user imagery fit (*Ahamkara Alignment*) is the dominant psychological mechanism that links para-social interactions to purchase intention. Social comparison plays a secondary and supportive role. The results indicate that consumers' perceived alignment with brand imagery is more influential in driving purchase intention than comparison with others.

Limitations

While this study aims to provide a comprehensive examination of internet personality influence (Para-Social Interaction) on consumer behavior (Purchase intention) among Indian urban youth, the limitations of this study are acknowledged below:

- Cross-Sectional Design:** The study is conducted only on the cross-section and thus limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Future research may use longitudinal study to understand influencer and follower relationships over a period in time and their long-term impact on consumer behavior.
- Self-Reported Measures:** The measurement is based on self-filled questionnaire. Future studies may incorporate actual behavioral data or may use an experimental design to complement self-reported information.

3. **Urban Focus:** This study focuses on affluent urban youth in India. Subsequent studies may be conducted in semi-urban or rural areas to assess if the relationships behave in a similar way or different way.
4. **Product Category Specificity:** Product may prove to be a moderating factor and the relationships may be product specific. Future studies may consider this as a factor.
5. **Platform Specificity:** This study is not taking into consideration the different social media platforms. Future studies may consider if the relationships behave differently based on the platform. (e.g., Instagram vs. YouTube vs. TikTok) in the Indian context.

Expected Contributions

This study is expected to make significant contributions to both theory and practice:

Theoretical Contributions:

1. Provide an Indian context to existing theories of parasocial interaction, social comparison, brand-user imagery fit and purchase intention.
2. Developing a model that integrates these different theoretical perspectives to better explain the effectiveness of influencer marketing.
3. Identifying and testing novel mediating factors that influence the relationships between Para-social Interaction and Purchase Intention.

Practical Contributions:

1. This study will provide better insights into influencer marketing. This study can lay foundation for deciding effective strategies for leveraging internet personalities to influence consumer behavior among Indian urban youth.
2. It will contribute to the efforts of digital marketer to create stronger purchase intention in the mind of a consumer.
3. It can also lay foundation for allowing marketers to select the right internet influencer to market the offerings.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the structural relationships among para-social interaction, brand-user imagery fit, social comparison, and purchase intention within a serially mediated framework. The findings provide robust empirical support for the proposed model and offer meaningful theoretical as well as practical implications. Para-social interaction emerged as a driver within the model, exerting strong direct effects on brand-user imagery fit, social comparison, and purchase intention. This confirms that audience's perceived closeness with internet influencers plays a significant role in shaping both cognitive and behavioural outcomes.

Brand-user imagery fit significantly enhanced both social comparison and purchase intention. It underlined the

significance of alignment between consumers' self-image and brand image. Social comparison significantly predicted purchase intention. This suggests that consumers' comparing with others significantly affects their buying intentions. The mediation and serial mediation analyses further revealed that both brand-user imagery fit and social comparison act as significant mediators through which para-social interaction translates into stronger purchase intentions. Serial mediation pathway (para-social interaction → brand-user imagery fit → social comparison → purchase intention) was statistically significant, highlighting the layered and interdependent nature of these psychological processes.

Collectively, the total effects demonstrate that para-social interaction and brand-user imagery fit exert substantial overall influence on purchase intention, reflecting both direct and indirect pathways. These results advance the literature by integrating relational, identity-based, and comparative mechanisms into a single explanatory framework.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that brands should strategically cultivate authentic para-social connections and ensure alignment between influencer personas and target consumers' self-image. By fostering imagery congruence and activating constructive social comparison processes, marketers can effectively strengthen consumers' purchase intentions. Future research may extend this model across different cultural contexts, product categories, or digital platforms to enhance generalizability and theoretical refinement.

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