



Influencer marketing, parasociality, and consumer behavior based on secondary data

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Abstract

In the era of social media, influencer marketing has become a central tactic for brands seeking authentic engagement. Followers often form parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional bonds—with influencers, and these relationships are an important mechanism through which influencer attributes (credibility, authenticity, attractiveness) affect consumer attitudes and behavior. This paper synthesizes secondary data from academic studies, industry reports, and platform analytics to (a) map how influencer attributes drive parasociality, (b) examine how parasocial bonds mediate effects on awareness, attitude, purchase intention and loyalty, and (c) identify moderating conditions and ethical concerns. The study finds consistent evidence that authenticity and trustworthiness are the strongest drivers of parasocial connection, and that parasociality reliably predicts higher engagement and purchase intention. Gaps remain in longitudinal evidence, cross-cultural comparisons, and platform-specific dynamics.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, parasocial relationships, consumer behavior, authenticity, secondary data, social media

Introduction

Social media transformed who can influence consumers. Influencers—ranging from micro-influencers to celebrities—mediate brand messages and shape consumer perceptions. Unlike conventional advertising, influencer communication often appears personal, conversational, and authentic; these qualities foster parasocial relationships (PSRs) in followers. PSRs create perceived intimacy and trust which can translate into favorable brand attitudes and purchase behaviors. Given the rapid commercial uptake of influencer marketing, a synthesis of existing secondary evidence is valuable for researchers and practitioners.

Purpose of paper. This paper uses secondary data (peer-reviewed articles, literature reviews, industry reports, and platform analyses) to synthesize evidence on (1) the antecedents of parasociality in influencer contexts, (2) the pathways through which parasociality affects consumer behavior, and (3) moderators, boundary conditions, and ethical implications.

Methodology (Secondary Data Synthesis)

Data sources and selection

This research is a secondary-data synthesis that relied on:

- Peer-reviewed empirical studies and systematic reviews on influencer marketing, source credibility, authenticity, and parasocial relationships (journals in marketing, media studies, and psychology).
- Industry reports and platform whitepapers (e.g., marketing/insights reports by social platforms and market research firms).
- Meta-analytic and review studies summarizing effects of influencer characteristics on engagement and purchase intent.
- Policy, ethics, and advertising disclosure guidelines published by regulators and trade bodies.

Search & Inclusion Criteria

- **Time window:** principal evidence concentrated from 2010–2024 (to capture the social-media era).

- **Inclusion:** empirical studies that measured influencer attributes (e.g., expertise, trustworthiness, authenticity), parasocial constructs, and consumer outcomes (attitude, purchase intention, loyalty); literature reviews and industry trend reports; platform analytics where available.
- **Exclusion:** non-evidenced blog posts; non-relevant marketing tactics.

Approach. The synthesis combined narrative review with thematic aggregation—identifying consistent findings across secondary sources rather than combining raw numerical data (no primary data meta-analysis performed).

Theoretical Background

Parasocial relationship theory (PSR): Originating with Horton and Wohl (1956) [4], PSR theory explains how media users develop one-sided “friend-like” relationships with media figures. In social media contexts, the interactivity cues (comments, replies, stories) intensify perceptions of intimacy and reciprocity, although the relationship remains one-sided.

Source credibility and ETA model: Ohanian's (1990) [6] ETA framework (Expertise, Trustworthiness, Attractiveness) is regularly used to assess influencer credibility. Research finds ETA dimensions predict influence on attitudes and purchase intention, often mediated via PSR.

Authenticity and human-branding lens: Authenticity (perceived genuineness, consistency, sincerity) emerged as a core construct that distinguishes effective influencer marketing from overt endorsements. Authenticity can be conceptualized as both a property of influencer content and a perceived persona attribute.

Literature Synthesis (Key Themes From Secondary Data)

1. Influencer attributes → Parasociality

- **Credibility (Expertise & Trustworthiness):** Multiple studies show that perceived expertise and trustworthiness are strong antecedents of PSR. Followers are more likely to form attachments if the influencer is perceived as knowledgeable and honest. (See Ohanian-style measures and numerous empirical replications.)
- **Authenticity:** Secondary sources consistently highlight authenticity as the single most robust predictor of follower engagement and parasocial closeness. Authentic posts (personal narratives, behind-the-scenes) foster intimacy. Industry reports (platform insights) corroborate that authentic storytelling yields higher engagement than polished ads.
- **Relatability/Similarity:** Perceived similarity (shared interests, values, lifestyle) boosts PSR formation. Micro-influencers often score higher on relatability in secondary comparisons.
- **Attractiveness and production quality:** These affect initial attention and perceived professionalism but less often predict long-term parasocial closeness when compared to authenticity/trustworthiness.

2. Parasociality → Consumer outcomes

Secondary evidence converges on PSR as a mediator between influencer attributes and consumer outcomes:

- **Awareness & Attention:** Influencer posts amplify reach and awareness through follower networks; PSR strengthens attention to recommendations.
- **Attitude toward brand:** Strong PSRs correlate with more favorable brand attitudes when influencers endorse products consistent with their persona.
- **Purchase intention & behaviour:** Multiple survey and experimental studies show PSR predicts higher stated purchase intention; some archival platform reports show increased traffic/conversion from influencer referrals (context-dependent).
- **Brand loyalty and advocacy:** Long-term parasocial engagement supports loyalty to both influencer and brand, particularly when influencer-brand fit is high.

3. Moderators and boundary conditions (secondary findings)

- **Influencer category:** Micro-influencers often generate stronger parasociality per follower owing to higher perceived authenticity; macro/celebrity influencers yield larger reach but weaker PSR intensity.
- **Platform differences:** Longer-form platforms (YouTube) allow deeper narrative and stronger PSR development versus short-form platforms (TikTok) where rapid trends and ephemeral content dominate. Platform affordances (stories, live Q&A) moderate PSR strength.

- **Disclosure & commercialization:** Sponsorship disclosure can reduce immediate persuasion but tends to preserve trust when disclosures are transparent and when influencers retain authenticity.

- **Cultural/contextual variations:** Secondary cross-cultural analyses indicate that collectivist vs individualist cultures shape how PSR translates to behavior (differences in the weight given to social endorsement vs personal evaluation).

4. Ethical and wellbeing concerns (from secondary literature)

- **Over-reliance and emotional dependency:** Some secondary studies and commentaries warn that intense PSRs may create unrealistic expectations and emotional dependency among vulnerable followers.
- **Transparency & deception:** Ethical lapses (hidden sponsorships, fake reviews) damage PSRs and have reputational/legal consequences.
- **Regulatory environment:** Advertising standards require disclosure; industry reports emphasize the need for clear labeling for trust preservation.

Secondary Data Insights: Illustrative Examples

(Using aggregated secondary reports and peer-reviewed studies; numbers below are illustrative trends reported across multiple secondary sources—not new primary data.)

- **Engagement vs. follower size:** Across industry reports, micro-influencers (<100K followers) often report higher engagement rates per follower vs. mega-influencers.
- **Effect of authenticity on purchase intent:** Multiple studies show authenticity perceptions increase purchase intention more than mere attractiveness or production polish.
- **Conversion and ROI:** Platform case studies suggest variable ROI—strong conversion in categories with experiential products (beauty, fashion) when influencer-brand fit is high.

Note: For specific numeric estimates (engagement rates, conversion lifts), one should extract precise figures from platform analytics reports (e.g., Instagram/Facebook/YouTube case studies, Statista, Nielsen) and cite them individually. This paper intentionally synthesizes generalized trends.

Discussion

Integrated model: Secondary evidence supports a mediated model:

Influencer Attributes (Expertise, Trustworthiness, Authenticity, Relatability) → Parasocial Relationships (Perceived intimacy, emotional attachment) → Consumer Outcomes (Awareness, Attitude, Purchase Intention, Loyalty)

Moderators: Influencer type, platform, disclosure, culture. Ethical considerations (transparency, negative PSR outcomes) overlay the model.

Managerial implications

- Select influencers for fit & authenticity, prioritizing those whose content aligns with brand values rather than only reach metrics.
- Use platform affordances (long-form content, live sessions) to build PSR where long-term relationships are desired.
- Be transparent with sponsorships; short-term persuasion loss is likely offset by long-term trust gains.
- Measure outcomes beyond likes track changes in brand attitude, referral traffic, and conversion attributable to influencer campaigns.

Research Implications / Gaps Identified From Secondary Data

- Longitudinal studies needed to chart PSR formation, decay, and long-term effects on loyalty.
- Cross-platform comparative studies to parse how format/affordances impact PSR dynamics.
- Cross-cultural research to validate models in diverse markets.
- Ethical impact studies examining mental health consequences of intense PSRs.

Conclusion

This secondary-data-based paper synthesizes evidence showing that influencer marketing works largely because of parasocial processes: authenticity and trust drive perceived intimacy, which in turn drives engagement, attitudes, and purchase intentions. While secondary sources converge on these mechanisms, future empirical work should address longitudinal, cross-platform, and cultural gaps, and must remain mindful of ethical implications.

References

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