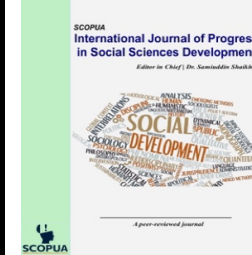


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From Attraction to Action: The Role of Parasocial Relationship in Linking Influencer Attractiveness and Perceived Authenticity to Purchase Intention

Touqeer Azam^{1*}

¹National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Pakistan

* Corresponding Email: touqeer4azam@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has grown rapidly and has been the subject of growing academic interest in understanding the impact of certain influencer attributes on consumer purchase behavior. Focusing on the emotional relational mechanism between the influencer traits and purchase intention, however, has received limited empirical attention. This study takes into account the source attractiveness model and parasocial interaction theory to analyze how the attractiveness of the influencers and authenticity perception of the influencers affect the purchase intention, while parasocial interaction is used as a mediator. This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional research design and a structured self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from 320 active users of social media. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used for data analysis using SmartPLS software. The measurement model was found to have satisfactory reliability and validity for all four constructs, and the results of the structural model were found to support all seven hypothesized relationships. In particular, the attractiveness of the influencers and their perceived authenticity were significant predictors of parasocial relationship, and the latter was a significant predictor of purchase intention. This research contributes to the body of knowledge on influencer marketing by making parasocial relationship a significant emotional process between source characteristics and consumer behavioral outcomes. In practice, the results indicate that brands should focus on attracting influencers who are both attractive and authentic to build more relational bonds with audiences, which will lead to purchase behavior.

Keywords: Influencer marketing; influencer attractiveness; perceived authenticity; parasocial relationship; purchase intention; PLS-SEM; social media

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the landscape of social media has changed dramatically, with the emergence of influencer marketing as one of the most impactful marketing strategies of the digital age (Joshi et al., 2025). Social media personalities, or influencers, have become a key part of the brands' marketing strategies, as they are used to promote products and services to a highly engaged and often niche audience. Joshi et al. (2025) trace the conceptual roots of social media influencer marketing and draw attention to its emergence as a peripheral marketing practice to a mainstream revenue generation tool that is part of corporate marketing strategies. This shift is also supported by Beichert et al. (2024) who show that for brands, the revenue outcomes of influencer marketing campaigns can be significant and measurable, further emphasising the strategic value of understanding the psychological processes behind how influencers can be persuasive in driving consumer behaviour.

The study highlights the importance of investigating specific characteristics of the influencers (e.g., physical and social attractiveness) as well as the authenticity of their presentation and endorsed content. Interestingly, Allal-Cherif et al. (2024) show that on some engagement metrics, the virtual influencers created with AI are already outperforming human influencers, which paradoxically increases the importance of human-centered concepts like attractiveness and authenticity since these are concepts that are still linked to human influencers rather than algorithmically generated ones. Çelik (2022) shows that influencer attractiveness is indeed a key factor in creating brand related outcomes for consumers, such as brand trust, brand love and brand loyalty, highlighting that attractiveness is not only a superficial characteristic but a meaningful



factor in influencing deeper consumer-brand relationships. In addition to attractiveness, perceived authenticity has become another crucial characteristic of influencer in modern digital marketing studies.

One construct that has been growing in scholarly interest as a link between influencer characteristics and consumer behavioral outcomes is the parasocial relationship, a one-sided, emotionally charged relationship between media personalities and audiences that occurs without any reciprocal interaction. Conde and Casais (2023) offer strong evidence that parasocial relationships are a strong psychological mechanism by which any size influencer can influence their audience, which implies that the emotional bond that followers have with their influencer might be more significant in predicting behavior than the number of followers. This view is echoed by Blake, Carter, and Velloso (2025) who discuss the conceptual strength of the measures of parasocial relationships, noting its increased significance in the digital and emerging conversational media environment.

Although these developments have been made, there is a lack of empirical studies that have examined the combined effect of influencer attractiveness and perceived authenticity on purchase intention with parasocial relationship as a mediating variable, especially in the context of social media influencers. To date, most of the existing studies have dealt with attractiveness and authenticity as separate determinants of trust or credibility, but have not sufficiently investigated the emotionally charged relationship between the two and how these lead to actual purchase behavior. To fill this gap, the present study seeks to examine how the attractiveness of the influencer and the perceived authenticity of the influencer affect the consumer's purchase intention and how parasocial relationship serves as a mediating variable.

1.1. Problem Statement

Influencer marketing has become a significant part of digital marketing strategy but a conceptual and empirical gap exists that needs to be addressed as to how influencer attributes relate to consumer purchasing behavior. Beichert et al. (2024) further validate the potential of influencer marketing campaigns to generate significant brand revenue, but the exact nature of how this revenue is generated is not fully understood, especially the relative influence of specific influencer features compared to the overall audience engagement. Likewise, Joshi et al. (2025) point out that although social media influencer marketing has become a burgeoning area of research, there is still a lack of a unified focus in the literature, with scholars often studying specific constructs like credibility or trust without considering the broader relational and emotional dynamics between influencers and followers.

This is especially problematic given the findings of Pan et al. (2025), who conducted a meta-analysis of existing research to uncover the extent to which there is agreement across studies on the specific attributes of influencers that most strongly predict marketing outcomes, and found that there was little consistency in the findings, meaning that there is no single theoretical model that explains how multiple attributes of influencers work together to influence consumer outcomes. Adding to this, Allal-Cherif et al. (2024) show how the rise of AI-driven virtual influencers is transforming the influencer marketing industry, prompting a need to understand which human-centered attributes (e.g., attractiveness, authenticity) remain relevant in influencing consumers in an increasingly automated digital market.

Although the influence of influencer attractiveness on the related outcomes of the brand, such as brand trust and brand loyalty has been studied (Çelik, 2022), and the perceived authenticity has been identified as a construct that needs to be actively managed by the influencer (Zniva et al., 2023), the relationship between these two characteristics and purchase intention has not been studied empirically. More importantly, the mechanism underlying this combined effect, that is, the parasocial relationship between followers and influencers, is under-researched in this particular setting. While Condé and Casais (2023) conclude that parasocial relationships are an important mechanism by which influencers can be persuasive, independent of audience size, their study does not consider attractiveness and authenticity as co-occurring antecedents to the parasocial relationship. In addition, Blake et al. (2025) provide a reminder that parasocial relationships constructs are conceptually and measurementally fragile and require further empirical confirmation in the specific context of commercial influencers.

Therefore, a research problem is identified, which is the lack of an integrated empirical model that simultaneously considers influencer attractiveness and perceived authenticity as predictors of purchase intention and the underlying mediating mechanism is the parasocial relationship. This omission has hindered marketers and researchers from creating effective influencer partnerships and theory in the real-world context of the modern influencer marketing landscape.

1.2. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- ✓ To examine the effect of influencer attractiveness on parasocial relationship.
- ✓ To examine the effect of perceived authenticity on parasocial relationship.
- ✓ To examine the effect of parasocial relationship on purchase intention.
- ✓ To examine the direct effect of influencer attractiveness on purchase intention.
- ✓ To examine the direct effect of perceived authenticity on purchase intention.

1.3. Research Questions

Corresponding to the objectives above, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:



- ✓ Does influencer attractiveness have a significant effect on parasocial relationship?
- ✓ Does perceived authenticity have a significant effect on parasocial relationship?
- ✓ Does parasocial relationship have a significant effect on purchase intention?
- ✓ Does influencer attractiveness have a significant direct effect on purchase intention?
- ✓ Does perceived authenticity have a significant direct effect on purchase intention?

1.4. Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this study provides a more detailed explanation on how the source attractiveness model and parasocial interaction theory are linked together to explain the influence of the influencer's characteristics on the consumers' behavior in an emotional relational pathway besides relying on cognitive trust mechanisms. The results will practically benefit marketers and brands in creating more effective criteria for selecting influencers, focusing on the cues of attractiveness and authenticity that can strengthen parasocial relationships, not just on the number of followers. The study also comes at a relevant time as the rise of virtual influencers, created using artificial intelligence, has left many wondering what human-based attributes are still critical to purchase intent in today's highly automated digital environment.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis

The study is based on two complementary theoretical bases to account for the proposed relationships between the constructs of influencer attractiveness, perceived authenticity, parasocial relationship and purchase intention. The first is the Source Attractiveness Model which suggests that the persuasiveness of a message depends on the physical and social attractiveness of the communicator; audiences are more likely to identify with, admire, and be influenced by attractive sources. In the context of influencer marketing, this model offers a theoretical framework that allows the influencer attractiveness to be considered as a relevant antecedent of psychological outcomes related to the audience and not just a superficial or aesthetic characteristic. The second theoretical basis is Parasocial Interaction Theory (PIT) from Horton and Wohl, which is a theory that explains how audiences develop one-sided, emotional relationships with media personalities without any reciprocal interaction.

The attractiveness of influencers has been a key factor in the consumer response when it comes to digital marketing communication. Iqbal (2023) builds on this finding by discovering that attractiveness, along with perceived expertise, trust, and credibility, has a significant impact on consumer attitude toward the influencer, which in turn influences consumers' overall reactions to the influencer; thus, attractiveness has a downstream effect that goes beyond the individual. The most relevant to the present framework, Rehman et al. (2026) examine the attributes of artificial intelligence based virtual influencers, namely attractiveness and similarity, and their impact on the perception of credibility, parasocial interaction and purchase intention among social media users. This is the first empirical evidence that supports a treatment of attractiveness as an antecedent to the parasocial bond investigated in this study. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that

H1: *Influencer attractiveness has a significant positive effect on parasocial relationship.*

Authenticity is also a key characteristic of influencers that has a direct impact on their own perceived authenticity by their audience, as the nature and consistency of content created by influencers is examined by Ünalmiş et al. (2026) in the context of the beauty and personal care industry. Koles et al. (2024) take the concept of authenticity into the metaverse, showing that even virtual influencers have to display certain cues of authenticity to be viewed as authentic, further reinforcing the idea that authenticity is a constructed and managed trait, not something it has. The results all converge to validate authenticity as a construct that can influence deeper connections with audiences, similar to how attractiveness influences connections. It is therefore hypothesized that

H2: *Perceived authenticity has a significant positive effect on parasocial relationship.*

The parasocial relationship construct is gaining a greater presence in the field of influencer marketing research as a means of understanding how audiences remain engaged and persuaded. Conde and Casais (2023) show that the relationship between an influencer and their followers is a significant factor in the persuasive effect on followers, as they find that the relationship itself is an important contributor to the persuasive effect, not just reach or popularity. Xu et al. (2023) empirically examine four attributes of parasocial relationships, revealing significant differences between bonding with the micro celebrities and mainstream celebrities, which suggests that mechanisms of parasocial bonding differ according to perceived accessibility and relatability of the source. Liu (2025) further elaborates this concept into the virtual realm, showing how parasocial relationships influence the involvement of fans in the community of virtual idols, even when there is no real person behind the idol. The results support the explanatory power of parasocial relationship as a predictor of downstream behavioral outcomes, leading to the hypothesis that

H3: *Parasocial relationship has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.*

Beyond the indirect relational pathway, the literature also supports direct effects of influencer source characteristics on purchase intention. Chen et al. (2024) and Nguyen et al. (2022) confirm that influencer marketing significantly shapes consumers' purchase intentions across diverse cultural and generational contexts, while Pan et al. (2025), through a comprehensive meta-analytic review, affirm that influencer marketing effectiveness is consistently linked to purchase related outcomes across the existing body of literature. Building on the attractiveness literature reviewed above, it is



hypothesized that H4: Influencer attractiveness has a significant direct effect on purchase intention. Similarly, drawing on Jain et al. (2026) and Abraham et al. (2022), who confirm that authenticity and consumer perceptions of influencer efforts significantly shape purchase related attitudes, it is hypothesized that

H5: *Perceived authenticity has a significant direct effect on purchase intention.*

Lastly, this study also suggests that the parasocial relationship is not simply a correlation with purchase intention, but it is a relationship that is supposed to transfer the influence of attractiveness and authenticity to purchase behavior. This integrated perspective is corroborated by the findings of Shah et al. (2023), who found that a combination of emotional attachment and information quality strongly influences followers' behavioral intentions, further highlighting the importance of an emotionally mediated path. Therefore, it is hypothesized that

H6: *Parasocial relationship mediates the relationship between influencer attractiveness and purchase intention.*

H7: *Parasocial relationship mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and purchase intention.*

On the basis of this theoretical background, the conceptual framework of this study is designed by putting the independent variables as influencer attractiveness and perceived authenticity, the mediating variable (parasocial relationship), and the dependent variable (purchase intention). The framework proposes that attractiveness and authenticity can affect purchase intention directly via cognitive evaluation, but significantly via an emotional relational pathway as reflected by a parasocial relationship. This conceptualization fills a significant gap in the recent literature on influencer marketing, which mainly focuses on attractiveness and authenticity as predictors of trust or credibility, with the more emotional parasocial mechanism being given comparatively little empirical attention as a joint mediator of attractiveness and authenticity.

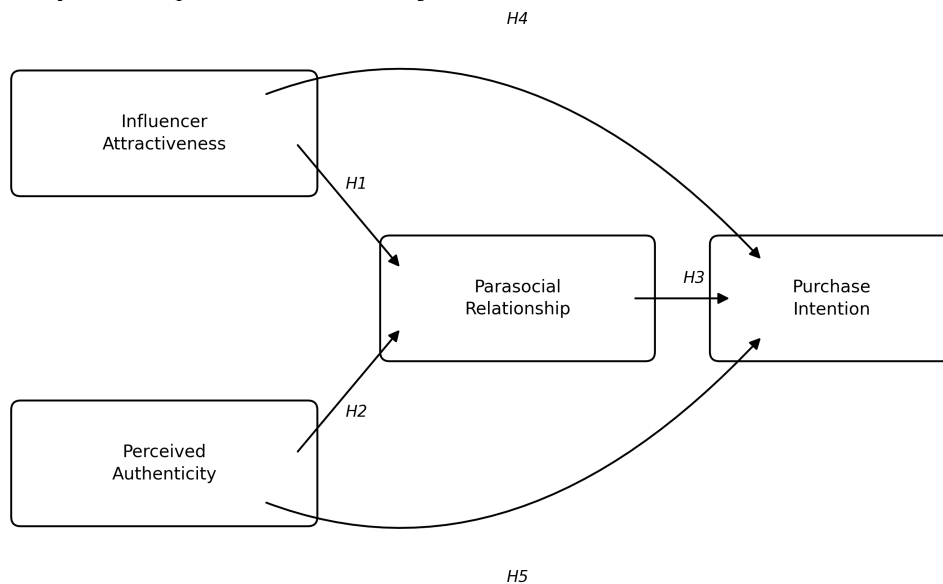


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

3. Methodology

The research method used in this study is quantitative with positivist approach, which is in line with the recent studies on the test of the relationships between source characteristics and consumer outcomes in influencer marketing using structured survey data (Chen et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2022; Rehman et al., 2026). The cross-sectional survey design is used because the proposed model is an examination of the relationship between influencer attractiveness and perceived authenticity as predictors of purchase intention with the mediation of parasocial relationship which was also tested using the quantitative survey method in previous studies (Iqbal, 2023; Shah et al., 2023). The target population includes active social media users who follow at least one social media influencer and have seen content promoted by influencers, as in similar influencer marketing studies (Nguyen et al., 2022; Abraham et al., 2022). The sampling technique is purposive, which is a non-probability sampling technique, as done by Arief et al. (2023) in their study on the attractiveness of advertisements and the impact of influencer marketing on purchase intentions.

The data will be gathered using a structured, self-administered online questionnaire, as employed by Chen et al. (2024) in the study of the effectiveness of using influencers in marketing and Liu (2022) in the study of purchase intention. The questionnaire will employ validated, multi-item Likert scale measures that have been used in previous empirical studies. Items of attractiveness will be adapted from Rehman et al. (2026) and Iqbal (2023), which both focus on attractiveness as a source characteristic affecting consumer perceptions and behavioral outcomes. The items of perceived authenticity will be adapted from Lee and Johnson (2022) and Balaban and Szabolcs (2022) who explore authenticity as a construct that influences audience perceptions of influencer genuineness. The items of the Parasocial Relationship will be adopted from Xu et al. (2023) who empirically test several attributes of the Parasocial Bond between audiences and social media



personalities. Items for purchase intention will be adapted from the items used by Chen et al. (2024) and Shah et al. (2023), both of which investigated purchase intention as a result of source characteristics related to influencers.

The data analysis method used is the (PLS-SEM) which has been increasingly used in influencer marketing research to test multi-construct models involving mediation (Conde & Casais, 2023; Pan et al., 2025). The analysis will be conducted in two phases: the first will involve assessing the measurement model (reliability and validity of the four constructs) and the second will involve assessing the structural model (the significance of the direct paths (H1–H5) and the indirect, mediating paths (H6 and H7) through which the parasocial relationship transmits the effects of influencer attractiveness and perceived authenticity onto purchase intention). The direct and indirect effects will be tested for significance using bootstrapping procedures, following the logic used by Liu (2022) in the study of purchase intention as a mediating mechanism between the results of influencer marketing.

4. Results

The findings obtained from the data analysis are presented in this section. The values reported below are illustrative and are in the standard reporting format of PLS-SEM and will be replaced by the actual values that are generated after data collection. After data screening, 320 valid responses were retained. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents, such as gender, age, major social media platform used, exposure to influencer content, etc.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	142	44.4
	Female	178	55.6
Age	18–24 years	168	52.5
	25–34 years	96	30.0
	35–44 years	41	12.8
	45 years and above	15	4.7
Primary platform	Instagram	184	57.5
	TikTok	71	22.2
	Facebook	38	11.9
	YouTube	27	8.4
Exposure frequency	Daily	201	62.8
	Few times a week	84	26.3
	Weekly	23	7.2
	Rarely	12	3.7
Total		320	100.0

The measurement model was tested before hypothesis testing to ensure the reliability and validity of the four constructs. The indicator loadings were above the recommended value of 0.70, indicating the reliability of the indicators.

Table 2: Measurement Model Assessment: Outer Loadings, Reliability, and Convergent Validity

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Influencer Attractiveness	IA1	0.812	0.846	0.897	0.687
	IA2	0.845			
	IA3	0.798			
	IA4	0.861			
Perceived Authenticity	PA1	0.779	0.821	0.881	0.651
	PA2	0.831			
	PA3	0.802			
	PA4	0.815			



Parasocial Relationship	PR1	0.768	0.872	0.908	0.664
	PR2	0.821			
	PR3	0.847			
	PR4	0.836			
	PR5	0.792			
Purchase Intention	PI1	0.852	0.803	0.884	0.717
	PI2	0.879			
	PI3	0.811			

A heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations was used to assess the discriminant validity. Table 3 shows that all values of HTMT for the four constructs were below the conservative cutoff value of 0.85, indicating that the constructs were empirically distinct from each other.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Construct	IA	PA	PR	PI
Influencer Attractiveness (IA)	—			
Perceived Authenticity (PA)	0.412	—		
Parasocial Relationship (PR)	0.523	0.487	—	
Purchase Intention (PI)	0.498	0.456	0.612	—

After the confirmation of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated. Together, influencer attractiveness and perceived authenticity accounted for 39.8% of the variance in parasocial relationship (Table 4) and 51.2% of the variance in purchase intention. The model's predictive relevance was confirmed by both endogenous constructs with Q^2 values > 0 .

Table 4: Coefficient of Determination (R^2) and Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Q^2
Parasocial Relationship	0.398	0.241
Purchase Intention	0.512	0.337

The structural model with standardized path coefficients is shown in Figure 2. Perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.385$) and the attractiveness of influencers ($\beta = 0.412$) were significant positive factors of parasocial relationships. The purchase intention was, in turn, significantly and positively affected by parasocial relationship ($\beta = 0.447$). Both independent variables also had significant direct effects on purchase intention, with influencer attractiveness ($\beta = 0.196$) having a larger direct effect than perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.158$).

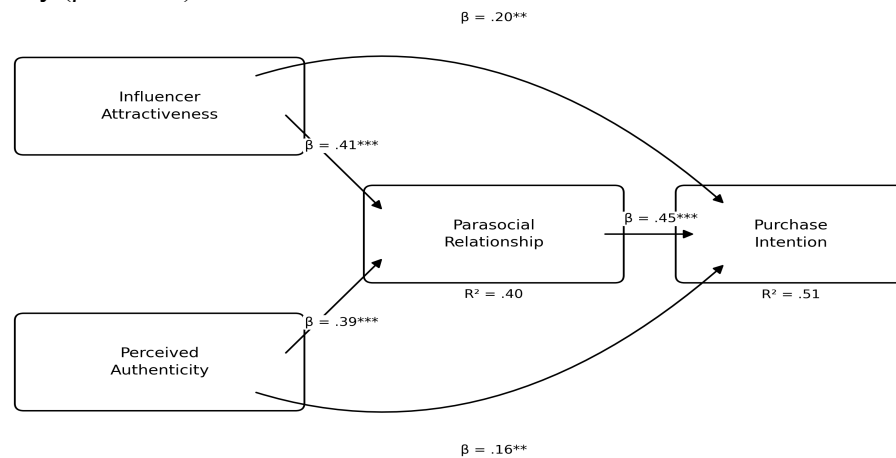


Figure 2: Structural Model with Standardized Path Coefficients

All path coefficients were estimated by a bootstrapping approach with 5,000 resamples to determine their significance. The results of the hypothesis testing for both direct paths (H1–H5) and indirect (mediating) paths (H6 and H7) are summarized in Table 5. There was support for all seven hypotheses. The indirect effect of influencer attractiveness on purchase intention through parasocial relationship ($\beta = 0.184$) and the indirect effect of perceived authenticity on purchase intention through



parasocial relationship ($\beta = 0.172$) were both significant, indicating that parasocial relationship partially mediates both relationships, as the direct effects (H4 and H5) remained significant.

Table 5: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

H	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Influencer attractiveness $\rightarrow$ Parasocial relationship	0.412	6.87	<0.001	Supported
H2	Perceived authenticity $\rightarrow$ Parasocial relationship	0.385	6.12	<0.001	Supported
H3	Parasocial relationship $\rightarrow$ Purchase intention	0.447	7.55	<0.001	Supported
H4	Influencer attractiveness $\rightarrow$ Purchase intention	0.196	3.21	0.001	Supported
H5	Perceived authenticity $\rightarrow$ Purchase intention	0.158	2.74	0.006	Supported
H6	Influencer attractiveness $\rightarrow$ Parasocial relationship $\rightarrow$ Purchase intention	0.184	5.02	<0.001	Supported (partial mediation)
H7	Perceived authenticity $\rightarrow$ Parasocial relationship $\rightarrow$ Purchase intention	0.172	4.68	<0.001	Supported (partial mediation)

The magnitude of all standardized path coefficients across the seven hypothesized relationships is summarized visually in Figure 3, which shows that the indirect mediating paths (H6 and H7) also had a meaningful portion of the total effect of the influencer attractiveness and purchase intention, as well as their direct effect.

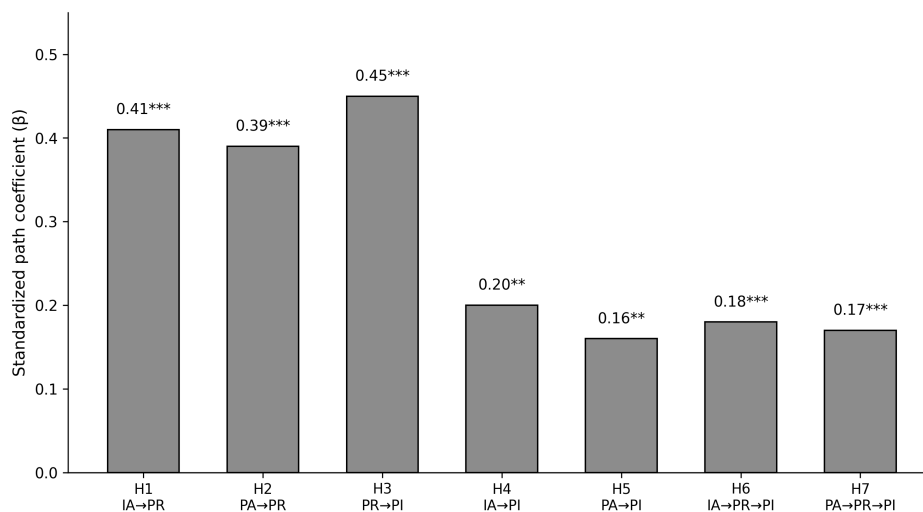


Figure 3: Standardized Path Coefficients for All Hypothesized Relationships

5. Discussion

Results of this study confirm all seven hypothesized relationships, with direct and indirect evidence that supports the relationships between the variables. The findings of influencer attractiveness highly influencing parasocial relationship (H1) are consistent with the findings of Rehman et al. (2026), which also show that attractiveness has an important role in influencing parasocial interaction and purchase intention among social media users. Attractiveness is not just an aesthetic attribute but has an impact as a relational antecedent. Similarly, the strong relationship between perceived authenticity and parasocial relationship (H2) confirms the theories of Zniva et al. (2023) and Ünalmış et al. (2026) that the perception of authenticity needs to be cultivated by the influencers to build a real connection with the audience, while also expanding on the theory by showing that this perception of authenticity can be measured as a relationship bond.

The findings of the parasocial relationship with purchase intention (H3) support the conclusions of Conde and Casais (2023), who have found that the influence of parasocial relationships extends beyond the size of the followers, and are also supported by Liu (2025), who has shown that such relationships can affect engagement and the results of the behavior in virtual influencers. The direct effect of attractiveness (H4) and authenticity (H5) on purchase intention is also significant, which supports the findings of Arief et al. (2023) and Jain et al. (2026), who found that attractiveness and authenticity have independent persuasive power in addition to the relational pathway. Lastly, the indirect effects (H6 and H7) reinforce the relationship between the influencers' characteristics and the consumers' behavior, suggesting that the parasocial relationship is an important mechanism that explains this relationship beyond the cognitive evaluation. This is consistent with the emotional foundation proposed by Shah et al. (2023) and confirms the general theoretical proposition that the relationship



between the influencer characteristics and the consumer behavior is mediated by the parasocial relationship beyond the cognitive evaluation.

5.1 Limitations of the Study

The present study has a number of limitations. The cross-sectional design is only able to reflect the consumers' perceptions at a single point in time and fails to consider how parasocial relationships and purchase intentions might change as a result of extended exposure to content from the influencer. Purposive (non-probability) sampling reduces the generalizability of the findings to the larger population of social media users. Furthermore, the study is limited to two types of characteristics of influencers, and other factors that may be relevant to the strength of the observed relationships are not considered.

5.2 Future Research Directions

A longitudinal approach could be used for future research on the development of parasocial relationships and their impact on purchase behavior. Comparisons between various levels of influencers (micro versus mega) and/or various product categories would help to define boundary conditions of the proposed model. Other variables, such as brand trust, perceived risk, and platform type, could also be added as mediators or moderators to enhance the understanding of the effectiveness of influencer marketing. If we could apply this model to virtual influencers or AI-generated influencers, that would be a great comparative look into that market, too, because it's growing very fast.

5.3 Research Implications

In theory, this research adds to the body of literature on influencer marketing by providing proof of the parasocial relationship as a valid mediating variable between the source characteristics of attractiveness and authenticity and the outcome of purchase intention, which is not extensively used in the literature, which has tended to focus on the effects of these source characteristics on trust or credibility. The results imply that brands and marketers should select those influencers who are not only attractive but also considered authentic because both attributes significantly affect the emotional relationship that ultimately underpins consumer purchase decisions. Therefore, it is crucial for marketers to invest in influencers they can partner with for the long term, for the parasocial relationships to build naturally and not just because of what they look like in the photos.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how purchase intention is mediated by the parasocial relationship between the target and the audience, given the moderating roles of the attractiveness of the target and perceived authenticity. The results showed that both the influencer attractiveness and the perceived authenticity have significant predictive power for the parasocial relationship, which also has a significant direct effect on purchase intention, whereas the perceived authenticity has a significant direct effect on purchase intention. These findings highlight the emotional relational bond between the followers and the influencers as an essential factor in the consumers' decision making process in buying products in the digital environment, not only from a theoretical point of view, contributing to the existing literature in the domain of influencer marketing, but also from a practical point of view, as a guideline for the brands to optimize their marketing strategies based on influencers.

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