

The Impact of Instagram Influencer Marketing on Consumer Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Parasocial Relationships

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between influencer content quality and perceived influencer similarity with consumer purchase intention in Instagram and how the parasocial relationship between followers and influencers can mediate this relationship. The theory of uses and gratifications, social comparison theory and theory of planned behaviour were used to test the model, which was tested with survey data from 214 Pakistani social media users aged 18 and above who follow at least one influencer. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) with 5,000 bootstrap samples was used to test hypotheses. Both influencer content quality and influencer similarity significantly predicted the parasocial relationship, which in turn significantly predicted the purchase intention. The parasocial relationship partially mediated the relationship between content quality and purchase intention, and fully mediated the relationship between influencer similarity and purchase intention, which had no direct effect on purchase intention. The model accounted for 33.9% of the variance in the parasocial relationship and 24.6% of the variance in purchase intention. The results also support the conflicting arguments surrounding the mediating role of parasocial relationships in influencer marketing, and provide brands and content creators with some information on how to persuade in emerging markets: similarity persuades only to the extent that it creates a relational bond, high-quality content persuades both directly and relationally.

Keywords: Influencer marketing; Instagram; influencer content quality; perceived similarity; parasocial relationship; purchase intention; Pakistan.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Traditional outbound marketing is slowly giving way to digital influencer marketing, changing the way consumers make brand choices (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Influencers are ordinary people who have gained a significant social following by creating content around topics, like fashion, fitness, technology, food, and travel, that has led them to be viewed as a more authentic and relatable brand ambassador than regular celebrity advertising (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This authenticity advantage has driven influencer marketing to a paradigm of consumer engagement and brand promotion across visually driven platforms, like Instagram (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

The parasocial relationship (PSR) is the strong, one-sided emotional connection that people experience with the media personae, first postulated by Horton and Wohl (1956) in relation to TV and radio and later adapted to social media (Chung & Cho, 2017). The influencer is usually not aware of any specific follower, and the followers feel emotionally connected to the influencer, as opposed to just following a celebrity, having a sense of familiarity, trust, and attachment. From the perspective of business, PSRs serve as surrogate trust. For instance, followers with high levels of parasocial bonding are more likely to accept a product recommendation and more likely to overlook brand failures (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

There are two main theories about what are the causes of such bonds. The first is influencer content quality (ICQ), which refers to the perception of the informativeness, aesthetics, entertainment and relevance of a creator's content, which signals professionalism and credibility and promotes greater engagement (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The second is perceived influencer similarity (IS), which refers to the extent to which a follower feels attitudinal, lifestyle, or values-based or demographic congruence with the influencer, and which is based on the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and the principle of homophile (McCracken, Richmond, & Daly, 1975), which states that people tend to trust, be persuaded, and form affective bonds with others who are similar to them.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although creator economies have become a rapidly expanding industry, brands are seeing a decline in the effectiveness of traditional advertising due to people using their devices to avoid ads, and in the case of consumers, a lack of trust in polished advertising content and/or an understanding of algorithms that can detect it and block it (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Furthermore, "endorsement overload" which refers to the practice of an influencer's sharing too many brands at a time has been found to ruin followers' trust in the influencer and diminish the relational trust between the creators and their followers (De Veirman et al., 2017; Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Influencer marketing is a

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Review

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popular practice, yet few empirical studies have investigated the exact psychological processes that link perceived characteristics of influencers with purchasing behaviour, and new research has yielded inconsistent results. Several studies have been conducted to support the mediation role of parasocial relationships in the relationship between the attributes of influencers and purchase-related outcomes (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020), but other studies found that parasocial relationships did not mediate the relationship between the intimate self-disclosure attributes of influencers and purchase intentions (Koay et al., 2023), and other studies report a sequential mediation pattern by congruence (Koay et al., 2023). This difference suggests that the parasocial relationship may not be a necessary factor in explaining the relationship between the two variables and requires empirical testing directly.

1.3 Research Gap

This study has been motivated by three gaps in the literature. First, there is a gap in the literature regarding the relationship between the factors of the influencer characteristics, parasocial relationships, and purchase intention, which is based primarily on samples from North America, Europe, East Asia, and Southeast Asia (e.g., Koay et al. 2023; Sokolova & Kefi 2020; Yuan & Lou 2020); only a few direct studies are available involving the Pakistani customer market, which reportedly had more than 71 million users across all social media platforms at the beginning of 2024 (Kemp 2024) and has seen the rise of influencer marketing as a more and more popular brand strategy. Third, an integration gap: while both content quality and perceived similarity have been examined as antecedents of parasocial relationships (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019), few studies tested a single integrated model where both antecedents operate as simultaneously related to the parasocial relationship as the central mediating mechanism. Third, an evidential gap: the mediating role of the parasocial relationship is contested, such that some studies reported significant mediation (Yuan & Lou, 2020), others reported non-significant mediation (Koay et al., 2023) and others reported conditional mediation (Koay, Cheah & Yap, 2023). This path should be reconsidered with validated measures in a new consumer context, all of which are directly helping to address this inconsistency.

1.4 Research Questions

In light of the problem outlined above and the gaps identified in the literature, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Do influencer content quality and perceived influencer similarity directly stimulate the formation of parasocial relationships among Instagram users in Pakistan?

RQ2: Do parasocial bonds developed with digital influencers significantly increase followers' purchase intention?

RQ3: Does the parasocial relationship mediate the effects of influencer content quality and perceived similarity on purchase intention?

1.5 Research Objectives

Consistent with these research questions, the study pursues the following objectives:

RO1: To examine the direct effects of influencer content quality and perceived influencer similarity on the formation of parasocial relationships among Instagram users in Pakistan.

RO2: To assess the effect of the parasocial relationship on followers' purchase intention toward influencer-endorsed products.

RO3: To determine whether the parasocial relationship mediates the effects of influencer content quality and perceived influencer similarity on purchase intention.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is relevant both theoretically and practically as well as in context. In theory, it provides additional evidence to the unresolved debate about the role of the parasocial relationship, which had been reported to be significant (Yuan & Lou, 2020), non-significant (Koay et al., 2023), or conditional (Koay, Cheah, & Yap, 2023). The study examines the mechanism by which influencer attributes manifest in purchase-related outcomes, by testing an integrated model in which the quality of the content and similarity of the influencer and the recipient act concurrently as antecedents of the parasocial relationship.

In practice, the results offer valuable feed-forward information to brands when they consider the influencer partnerships they wish to pursue, beyond mere vanity metrics like follower counts: in this study, those metrics are not necessarily correlated with the quality of the relationship established between the creators and their audience (Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017; Masuda, Han, & Lee, 2022). In addition, they can help content creators build and monetize relatable relationships with their audience. In the context of Pakistan, the study aids in mitigating the deficit of empirical consumer-behaviour studies in a society with more than 71 million active social media users (Kemp, 2024) where influencer marketing has started to be a more popular brand strategy.

1.7 Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses on Instagram, a platform that is particularly visual, and on four constructs that are of particular interest for this study: influencer content quality, perceived influencer similarity, the parasocial relationship, and purchase intention. The study uses a cross-sectional survey with 214 social media users aged 18 and above in Pakistan who follow influencers by using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM).

Several delimitations restricted the findings. The study does not cover other platforms like TikTok or YouTube, and does not capture actual purchase behaviour; it also does not capture potential moderators like influencer type, follower count tier or product category. Although the findings are most directly applicable to adult Instagram users in the Pakistani context, the cross-

sectional design only captures associations at a point in time, and not causal dynamics over time.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Influencer Content Quality

The quality of the influencer content is measured by the extent to which the influencer's digital content, such as videos, photos, captions, stories, and live streams, fulfils or exceeds follower's expectations in terms of informative, aesthetic, accurate, entertaining and relevant content (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Advertising quality, which is usually measured by objective production criteria, differs from influencer content quality, which is inherently relational and audience subjective, depending on the perception of authenticity, creativity and usefulness the audience has of the content. The challenge that still hangs over them is the same, however: audiences are increasingly "algorithm-aware" and sensitive to cues indicating sponsored content, which can diminish the perceived authenticity of even the best-produced content, and ultimately its ability to create authentic relational ties with followers.

2.2 Influencer Similarity

Influencer similarity is the degree of attitudinal, demographic, lifestyles or values-based congruence that a follower of a social media influencer feels with that influencer. This construct is based on the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), the attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), and tenets of the homophily principle (McCroskey et al., 1975) which suggest that individuals will be more likely to trust, persuade, and form affective bonds with persons similar to themselves. Recent scholarship has clearly differentiated between actual similarity, that is, shared characteristics that can be objectively verified and perceived similarity, that is, a sense of likeness that is psychologically constructed and may not reflect reality, suggesting that persuading effectiveness is more dependent on symbolic and narrative cues than on some sort of demographic overlap. In addition, research on self-discrepancy has indicated that followers are attracted to influencers who not only embody their actual self, but also those embodying an idealized self (Aw & Chuah, 2021).

2.3 Parasocial Relationship

Media audiences develop parasocial relationships with media personalities that share an emotion-based quality with interpersonal relationships, but lack the reciprocity, vulnerability, and social history that define social relationships between individuals (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In this digital influencer setting, PSRs have proven to be commercially important as it is believed that having high PSRs makes people more inclined to accept product recommendations, forgive brand missteps and maintain their engagement with the brand over a long period of time (Chung & Cho, 2017; Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Recent theorization goes beyond the framework of Horton and Wohl to conceptualize the bonds in a more multidimensional way that includes affective bonds

(emotional warmth), and cognitive bonds (believing in the persona's reliability and competence), as well as behavioural bonds (liking, commenting, purchasing, etc.) (Chung & Cho, 2017).

2.4 Purchase Intention

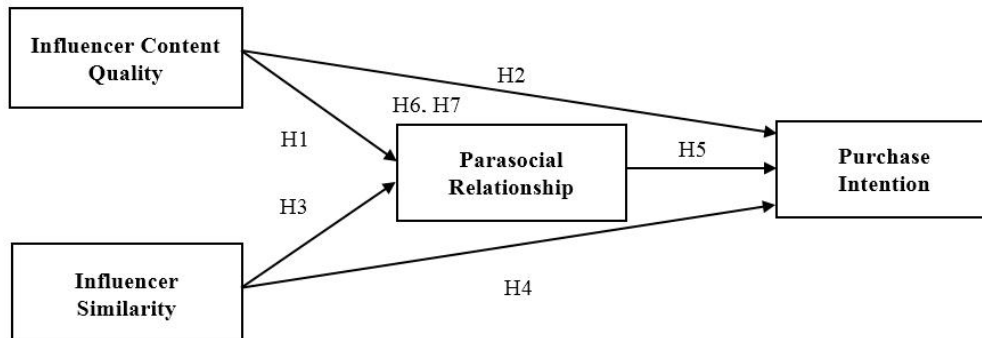
Purchase intention is defined as what the individual says he/she perceives as the probability that he/she will engage in the purchasing behaviour toward an actual product, service or brand within an established time frame, and is supported by the theory of planned behaviour which suggests that purchase intentions are a function of attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). However, in the influencer-marketing world, purchase intent reflects the follower's intent to purchase or seriously consider purchasing the product the influencer purchases (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

2.5 Hypothesis Development

This theoretical relationship between the quality of influencer content and the formation of a parasocial relationship is based on uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), which suggests that audiences seek media content that fulfills cognitive, affective, social-integrative, or escapist needs. If the content of an influencer satisfies multiple gratification needs at the same time, it fosters the familiarity and false intimacy required to cultivate parasocial bonds with an influencer over time. Moreover, high-quality content has been found to convey credibility, which not only facilitates parasocial bond but also contributes to consumer trust in the branded content and their openness to endorsement (Lou & Yuan, 2019), indicating that content quality can have an impact on purchase intention, beyond the parasocial bond.

This connection between perceived similarity and parasocial relationship development is grounded in social identification theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and interpersonal attraction research (Byrne 1971), which both suggest that perceived similarity leads to increased liking, trust, and relational closeness. Yuan and Lou (2020) empirically support this route, showing that when followers feel similar with an influencer, it positively influences the intensity of parasocial relationship, which, in turn, positively influences followers' interest in influencer-promoted products. Alongside this, Koay et al. (2023) and Koay, Cheah, and Yap (2023) demonstrate congruence between follower and influencer, and influencer and the endorsed product influences parasocial bond strength and downstream effects on purchase-related outcomes, but with mixed findings on whether the parasocial relationship serves as a consistent or a conditional mediator. Overall, the association between parasocial relationship and purchase intention is the one that has been investigated the most, and the findings suggest a positive relationship between the two variables, although with boundary conditions like endorsement overload that can create a weaker pathway (De Veirman et al., 2017; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Yuan & Lou, 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). on this basis, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Figure 1: Proposed model of study



H1. Influencer content quality has a significant positive effect on the parasocial relationship.

H2. Influencer content quality has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

H3. Influencer similarity has a significant positive effect on the parasocial relationship.

H4. Influencer similarity has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

H5. The parasocial relationship has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

H6. The parasocial relationship mediates the relationship between influencer content quality and purchase intention.

H7. The parasocial relationship mediates the relationship between influencer similarity and purchase intention.

The hypotheses together constitute a mediation model with exogenous antecedents (influencer content quality and similarity of the influencer) and the parasocial relationship acting as the central mediator and the purchase intention as the focal outcome.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The positivist epistemological approach was used in this study, which assumes that social reality is objective, measurable, and can be systematically studied empirically (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). In line with this, the quantitative, cross sectional survey design was used (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The cross-sectional design was suitable because it enables measuring all constructs at the same time, as well as enabling the statistical assessment of the hypothesized direct and mediating paths, but it is recognized that the cross sectional design only provides association and does not provide causal precedence, as is most common in research in the field of influencer marketing. The structured questionnaire allowed for the standardization of measurement and for conducting multivariate analyses

Journal of Management Science Research

Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

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which were needed to test mediation and structural relationships (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019).

3.2 Population, sampling, and participants

The target population was active social media users in Pakistan who follow at least one Influencer on any major social media platform with the main platform being Instagram. Content quality, similarity and the parasocial relationship were only relevant to those who actually interacted with the influencer's content, which is why (a) an active social media profile and (b) one 18 years old or older were required, as well as (c) followers of at least one of the influencers with 10,000 followers or more. The study looked at the 18-40 age demographic as this is the most engaged consumer audience for categories that are typically influenced by influencers like fashion, beauty, electronics, and lifestyle products, while a minority of respondents over 40 who met all the eligibility requirements were kept. Descriptive data were captured with regards to the respondents' purchase behaviour influenced by the use of influencers and not used as a screening criterion.

No sampling frame of followers of the influencers was found, so a non-probability sampling approach was used, which involved purposive and snowball sampling (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Patton, 2015). The initial respondents were recruited via university student networks, as well as social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp groups), and were asked to invite others who were interested in and fulfilled the inclusion criteria (Bryman, 2016). Of the 214 responses, five were incomplete and these cases were submitted with the mean-replacement procedure of the SmartPLS model estimation procedure; the five incomplete cases are not reported in the respondent's demographics. This is a sample of 170 cases, which is more than the minimum of 10 per indicator that is suggested for PLS-SEM, as recommended by Hair et al. (2019); at the same time, it is less than the 200 cases minimum suggested for general structural equation modeling (SEMs), which is revisited in a following section of the limitations.

3.3 Data collection and measures:

A cost-effective, quick, geographically widespread and digitally literate target population made it convenient to use a digitally literate instrument, a self-administered, structured online questionnaire developed and sent using Google Forms (Couper, 2017). The informed consent of all participants was obtained at the beginning of the survey and participants were assured that they were participating voluntarily and anonymously in standard research ethical protocols. The instrument was pre-tested with 30 respondents from the target population to see the clarity of the items and internal consistency of the instrument using the traditional alpha level 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

There were two sections of the questionnaire. The first collected sociodemographic data, such as age, gender, education level, preferred social media platform, daily social media use and following behaviour of influencers.

Journal of Management Science Research

Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

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The second item included the four constructs measured by validated Likert scale items, with the anchors ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) aligned with previous studies on influencer marketing (Koay et al., 2023; Yuan & Lou, 2020). The quality of the influencer content was measured using five items adapted from Lou and Yuan (2019) and Ohanian (1990) that included informativeness, entertainment and credibility. The four items used to measure the similarity of influencers were adapted from the homophily scale of McCroskey et al. (1975). To measure the parasocial relationship, the current study used three items that were adapted from Yuan and Lou (2020) in line with the cognitive and behavioural aspects that were posited by Chung and Cho (2017). Five items were used to assess purchase intention, which were based on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and used in previous studies on influencer marketing (Koay et al., 2023). Table 1 is a summary of the measurement sources; complete instruments are included in the Appendix.

Table 1. Measurement sources and item allocation.

Construct	Source	Items	Item nos.
Influencer content quality (ICQ)	Lou & Yuan (2019); Ohanian (1990)	5	1–5
Influencer similarity (IS)	McCroskey et al. (1975)	4	6–9
Parasocial relationship (PSR)	Yuan & Lou (2020)	3	10–12
Purchase intention (PI)	Ajzen (1991)	5	13–17
Total		17	1–17

3.4 Data analysis strategy

The data were analyzed in two steps following methodological best practice for testing structural models with mediation (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Hair et al., 2019). The measurement model was tested in SmartPLS, including indicator reliability, internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability) and convergent validity ($AVE \geq 0.50$), and discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015) tests. The second stage involved estimating the structural model using PLS-SEM with the path weighting scheme and evaluating the significance of the direct and indirect effects with a bootstrapping procedure of 5,000 subsamples and bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) confidence intervals in accordance with the recommendation by Preacher & Hayes (2008) for mediation analysis. Common method bias was addressed both procedurally through the use of validated scales (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) and respondent anonymity and assurance that there were no right or wrong answers, as all data was collected from the same source at the same time; and statistically, via the full collinearity assessment reported in Section 4.3.

Journal of Management Science Research

Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

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Print ISSN: 3006-2039

4. Results

4.1 Respondent profile

The profile of the 214 respondents who gave full data is summarized in Table 2. The sample was somewhat biased in favor of younger, more highly educated people: 70.6% were aged 18–22, and 58.9% had or were working toward a bachelor's degree. The sample consisted of 56.5% female. 65.9% of respondents used Instagram as their main social media platform, while half (50.5%) followed between 1 and 5 influencers on the platform. The top two categories of content consumption were food and lifestyle (29.0%) and fashion and beauty (21.0%). An interesting finding is that 35.5% of the respondents indicated making an influencer purchase in the past six months, with an additional 11.7% seriously considering that purchase, suggesting that purchase intention is not a given in this market but something still to be explained.

Table 2. Respondent profile (n = 214).

Characteristic	Frequency	%
Age		
18–22	151	70.6
23–27	38	17.8
28–32	12	5.6
33–40	9	4.2
Above 40	4	1.9
Gender		
Male	92	43.0
Female	121	56.5
Prefer not to say	1	0.5
Education level		
Intermediate / A-Levels	67	31.3
Bachelor's degree	126	58.9
Master's degree	7	3.3
M.Phil / PhD	14	6.5
Primary social media platform		
Instagram	141	65.9
TikTok	46	21.5
YouTube	24	11.2
Facebook	2	0.9
WhatsApp	1	0.5
Number of influencers followed		
1–5	108	50.5
6–10	47	22.0
11–20	9	4.2
More than 20	50	23.4
Type of influencer content followed		
Fashion & beauty	45	21.0

Journal of Management Science Research

Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

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Print ISSN: 3006-2039

Fitness & health	41	19.2
Technology	35	16.4
Food & lifestyle	62	29.0
Travel	26	12.1
Other	5	2.3
Influencer-driven purchase (last 6 months)		
Yes, made a purchase	76	35.5
Seriously considered it	25	11.7
No purchase or consideration	113	52.8

4.2 Measurement model

The reliability of the indicators was assessed based on the criterion of outer loadings greater than 0.708 (Hair, Howard, & Nitzl, 2020). The loadings were between 0.698 and 0.859, and were all significant at $p < .001$, based on 5,000 two-tailed bootstrap samples (Table 3). One item (ICQ3, $\lambda = 0.698$) was marginally under the critical threshold of 0.708, and the case-by-case retention advice from Hair et al. (2022) was followed, thus the item was retained as no item was below the threshold for item removal (AVE = 0.40). Construct reliability was satisfactory: Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.730 to 0.844, ρ_A from 0.731 to 0.855, and ρ_C from 0.847 to 0.889, all within the recommended 0.70–0.95 band (Hair et al., 2020). AVE values were in the range of 0.554 to 0.649, which indicated that the items had convergent validity.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics, reliability, and convergent validity.

Construct/item	Mean	SD	Kurt.	Skew.	Loading	α	ρ_A	ρ_C	AVE
Influencer content quality						0.799	0.800	0.861	0.554
ICQ1	3.205	1.040	0.085	-0.915	0.765				
ICQ2	3.516	0.978	0.927	-1.009	0.753				
ICQ3	3.699	0.953	1.810	-1.287	0.698				
ICQ4	3.329	0.978	0.302	-0.819	0.728				
ICQ5	3.356	0.991	0.337	-0.736	0.775				
Influencer similarity						0.764	0.770	0.849	0.585
IS1	2.551	0.891	-0.553	0.079	0.800				
IS2	3.248	0.938	-0.279	-0.319	0.749				
IS3	3.196	0.999	-0.457	-0.352	0.781				
IS4	2.757	1.017	-0.437	0.059	0.728				
Parasocial relationship						0.730	0.731	0.847	0.649
PSR1	3.150	1.016	-0.353	-0.360	0.804				
PSR2	3.238	0.926	-0.007	-0.674	0.833				
PSR3	3.121	1.098	-0.749	0.027	0.779				

Journal of Management Science Research

Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

Online ISSN: 3006-2047

Print ISSN: 3006-2039

Purchase intention						0.844	0.855	0.889	0.616
PI1	2.995	1.029	-0.308	-0.016	0.859				
PI2	3.107	0.930	-0.218	-0.081	0.775				
PI3	3.136	0.946	-0.485	-0.048	0.768				
PI4	3.047	1.048	-0.463	-0.071	0.784				
PI5	3.014	1.064	-0.320	-0.144	0.732***				

Note. *** $p < .001$, based on a 5,000-sample two-tailed bootstrapping test. α = Cronbach's alpha; ρ_A and ρ_C = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

For discriminant validity, the heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) was used (Henseler et al., 2015). All the HTMT exceeded the conservative threshold of 0.85 were within the limit, with the highest being 0.720 between influencer similarity and the parasocial relationship (Table 4), thereby demonstrating discriminant validity. Given that fit indices were used mainly for confirmatory, and not predictive, PLS applications (Hair et al., 2019), and the measurement model was found to be reliable and valid, it was considered acceptable for the study's predictive purposes, as the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) values were 0.086 for the saturated model and 0.080 for the estimated model.

Table 4. Discriminant validity: heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) criterion.

Construct	1	2	3	4
(1) Influencer content quality	–			
(2) Influencer similarity	0.314	–		
(3) Parasocial relationship	0.453	0.720	–	
(4) Purchase intention	0.497	0.286	0.498	–

Notes: HTMT = Heterotrait-monotrait ratio based on PLS algorithm and path weighting scheme

4.3 Structural model

The values of inner variance inflation factor (VIF) ranged from 1.068 to 1.513, which are far below the limit of 3.0, as proposed by Hair et al., (2020) suggesting that inner multicollinearity was not likely to cause the structural estimates to be contaminated. The path coefficient was estimated with 5,000 bootstrap subsamples and BCa confidence intervals with f^2 benchmarks according to Cohen (1988). These results are presented in Table 5 and Figure 2.

Figure 2: Bootstrap diagram

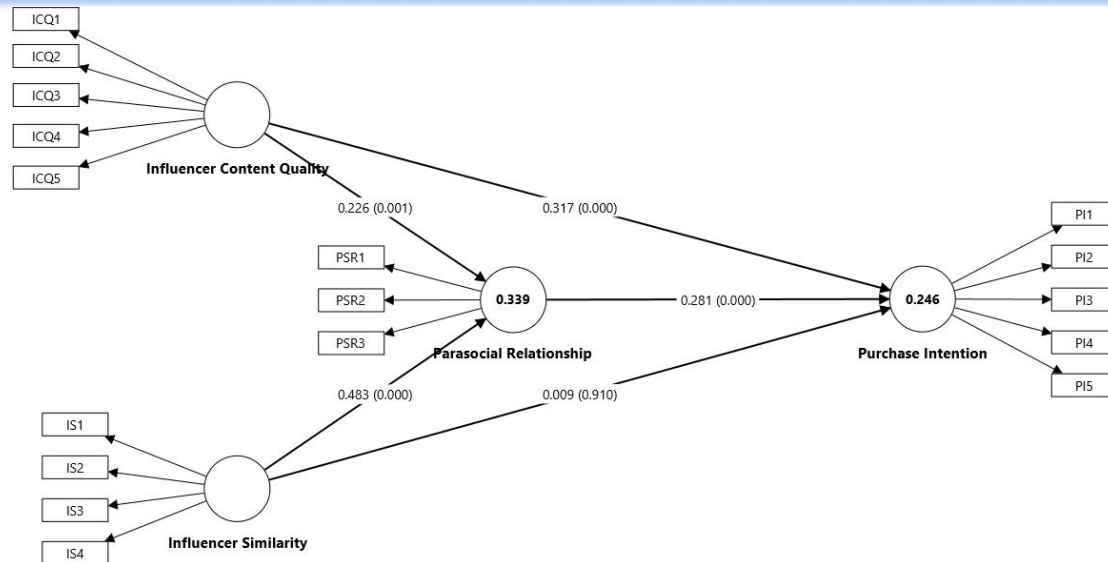
Journal of Management Science Research Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

Online ISSN: 3006-2047

Print ISSN: 3006-2039



For parasocial relationship, the result showed that the quality of the content produced by the influencers was positively and significantly influenced ($\beta = 0.226$, $p = .001$, $f^2 = 0.072$), so that H1 was accepted, while for the intention to buy, the quality of the content produced by the influencers was also positively and significantly influencing ($\beta = 0.317$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = 0.117$), so that H2 was accepted. H3 was supported by the strongest effect for influencer similarity ($\beta = 0.483$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = 0.331$) in the model on parasocial relationship. The direct effect of influencer similarity on purchase intention was not significant ($\beta = 0.009$, $p = .908$, $f^2 = 0.000$), its CI was overlapping with zero and H4 is not supported. This pattern does not mean that similarity does not have an effect, it simply means that having the parasocial relationship as a mediator cause similarity's effect on purchase intention (0.145) to be transmitted almost entirely through the parasocial relationship, leaving little space for the direct path once the mediator is included in the model. Analysis result showed that parasocial relationship had a positive effect on H5: purchase intention ($\beta = 0.281$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = 0.069$).

The parasocial relationship significantly mediated the relationship of influencer content quality with purchase intention ($\beta = 0.063$, $p = .015$, 95% BCa CI [0.021, 0.125]), which supported H6, and the relationship between influencer similarity with purchase intention ($\beta = 0.136$, $p = .002$, 95% BCa CI [0.062, 0.230]), which supported H7. The direct similarity–purchase-intention path was non-significant but its indirect path was significant, so the direct path between similarity and purchase-intention was fully mediated by the parasocial relationship. The direct path between content-quality and purchase-intention remained significant, so the indirect path between content-quality and purchase-intention was partially mediated by the parasocial relationship. The model accounted for 33.9% of the variance in parasocial relationship, and 24.6% of the variance in purchase intention.

Journal of Management Science Research

Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

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Table 5. Structural model results.

Path	VIF	β (p-value)	t	95% CI	BCa	Decision
Direct effects						
H1: ICQ $\rightarrow$ PSR	1.068	0.226 (.001)	3.357	[0.089, 0.349]		Supported
H2: ICQ $\rightarrow$ PI	1.145	0.317 ($< .001$)	4.549	[0.171, 0.446]		Supported
H3: IS $\rightarrow$ PSR	1.068	0.483 ($< .001$)	7.960	[0.361, 0.597]		Supported
H4: IS $\rightarrow$ PI	1.420	0.009 (.908)	0.115	[-0.148, 0.157]		Not supported
H5: PSR $\rightarrow$ PI	1.513	0.281 ($< .001$)	3.493	[0.127, 0.435]		Supported
Indirect (mediating) effects						
H6: ICQ $\rightarrow$ PSR $\rightarrow$ PI		0.063 (.015)	2.440	[0.021, 0.125]		Supported
H7: IS $\rightarrow$ PSR $\rightarrow$ PI		0.136 (.002)	3.145	[0.062, 0.230]		Supported
Total effects						
ICQ $\rightarrow$ PI		0.381 ($< .001$)	5.333	[0.230, 0.510]		
IS $\rightarrow$ PI		0.145 (.050)	1.958	[-0.001, 0.292]		
Explained variance						
PSR		0.339		Adjusted R ² 0.333		
PI		0.246		0.235		

Note. ICQ = influencer content quality; IS = influencer similarity; PSR = parasocial relationship; PI = purchase intention. Confidence intervals are bias-corrected and accelerated, based on 5,000 two-tailed bootstrap samples.

4.4 Robustness checks

To test for possible nonlinear relationships a recommended robustness checks (Hair et al., 2019) a quadratic effect (QE) term was added to each structural path following Hair, Sharma, Sarstedt, Ringle, and Liengaard (2024). None of the quadratic terms were significant in the two-tailed bootstrap test, making the linear specification strong as reported in Table 6. Interestingly, the effect of influencer similarity on purchase intention (H4) was non-significant, as was the quadratic term, suggesting that there is no curvilinear effect on purchase intention, but rather a fully mediated parasocial effect.

Journal of Management Science Research

Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

Online ISSN: 3006-2047

Print ISSN: 3006-2039

Table 6. Testing for possible nonlinear effects.

Quadratic term	β (p-value)	t	95% CI	f ²	Result
QE (ICQ) → PSR	-0.055 (.471)	0.721	[-0.185, 0.119]	0.003	n.s.
QE (IS) → PSR	-0.119 (.080)	1.750	[-0.245, 0.021]	0.021	n.s.
QE (ICQ) → PI	-0.080 (.345)	0.943	[-0.253, 0.082]	0.005	n.s.
QE (IS) → PI	-0.011 (.874)	0.158	[-0.149, 0.110]	0.000	n.s.
QE (PSR) → PI	-0.026 (.699)	0.386	[-0.174, 0.094]	0.001	n.s.

Note. n.s. = not significant.

5. Discussion

5.1 Discussion of findings

The aim of this study was to investigate if the quality of influencer content and perceived similarity of the influencer influences the purchase intention among the Instagram users of Pakistan and whether this parasocial relationship acts as a mediator. Six of the seven hypotheses were confirmed and the overall pattern of results is consistent and tells a very clear story about the influence occurring on the platform.

First, both antecedents were significant in the prediction of the parasocial relationship (H1 and H3), but they differed in weight, with perceived similarity being a by far stronger predictor of the parasocial bond ($\beta = 0.483$, $f^2 = 0.331$) than its content quality ($\beta = 0.226$). This asymmetry jibes with the theory of homophily and social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; McCroskey et al., 1975): polished and informative content supports rather than leads in relation building, with followers generally forming pseudo-friendships with influencers they see as reflecting themselves.

Secondly, the two antecedents lead to purchase intention in different ways. Content quality had a direct effect on the purchase tendency (H2; $\beta = 0.317$) and an indirect effect via the parasocial relationship (H6 with the largest total effect in the model: 0.381) in the shopping process. In contrast, purchase intention was not significantly affected by perceived similarity (H4: $\beta = 0.009$) but was significantly affected by a full mediation pattern, namely through the parasocial relationship (H7; $\beta = 0.136$). Substantively, there is no similarity as such that is selling: it is only when the sense of similarity has developed into a “felt” connection that a willingness to purchase arises. In contrast, high-quality content has a direct persuasive power of providing informational and credibility value to influence purchases, which also feeds into the relational bond with higher persuasive power (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

The non-significant direct similarity–purchase-intention path (H4) deserves special attention, as this is an expected but not anomalous path.

Journal of Management Science Research

Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

Online ISSN: 3006-2047

Print ISSN: 3006-2039

There are three reasons why this is a likely reading. First, the large indirect path (H7) and near zero direct residual ($\beta = 0.009$) suggests that, as predicted by full mediation models, the persuasive force of similarity was virtually completely mediated by the parasocial relationship. First, the size of the indirect path (H7) was quite large, and the direct path residual ($\beta = 0.009$) was very small, suggesting that as predicted by full mediation models, the persuasive force of similarity was essentially completely mediated by the parasocial relationship. Secondly, it is theoretically sound. The homophily principle and interpersonal attraction theory suggest that similarity leads to liking, trust, and relational closeness (Byrne, 1971; McCroskey et al., 1975) which is a distal cue of identity rather than purchase-relevant. Similarity has commercial consequence only when it becomes a parasocial bond, a bond that is fuelled in turn by the trust judgments that underpin commercial recommendations. Just looking like a follower is not enough to make the follower want to purchase, but when they feel connected to the person who looks like them, then it is. Third, the finding is consistent with previous findings: Yuan and Lou (2020) also reported that perceived similarity was not a direct cause of product interest instead, it was on the indirect path through the parasocial relationship. The congruence-dependent patterns reported by Koay, Cheah, and Yap (2023) also place the role of relational and congruence mechanisms not on the effect of raw similarity, but on the effect of the parasocial relationship. The finding that H4 was not supported does not weaken the model, but instead further solidifies the central findings: that the parasocial relationship is not one of the ways similarity impacts purchase intention, but it is the only one observed in these data.

Third, the parasocial relationship significantly predicted purchase intention (H5; $\beta = 0.281$), and the model explained a meaningful amount of variance in the parasocial relationship ($R^2 = 0.339$) and in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.246$). These findings, coupled with the mediation findings, highlight the parasocial relationship as the main psychological channel through which influencer attributes are transformed into business results in this market.

5.2 Theoretical implications

The study will make three contributions to theory. First, a topic is controversial in the literature of influencer marketing parasocial mediation. The findings support Yuan and Lou (2020) and Sokolova and Kefi (2020) both of which found support for the mediation of the relationship between the attributes of the influencer and the purchase-related outcomes and are contrary to the results of Koay et al. (2023) which did not find any mediation for the intimate self-disclosure. A first account of this divergence is that, as Koay et al. (2023) found, the mediating effect of the parasocial bond seems to be contingent on the relationship between the attribute and the bond; attributes of identity congruence (similarity) are perceived as mediated solely by the bond, while attributes that carry independent informational value

Journal of Management Science Research

Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

Online ISSN: 3006-2047

Print ISSN: 3006-2039

(content quality) have a direct persuasive pathway. Second, it takes classic theories of parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973) and theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) to an algorithmically mediated emerging-market context. Third, it provides rare evidence from Pakistan, which could help to balance the geographic representation in the literature, which is largely from the West and East Asia.

5.3 Managerial implications

As a result, brands should look for other metrics when choosing influencers, beyond vanity metrics like followers (De Veirman et al., 2017; Masuda et al., 2022). However, similarity effects on purchase intentions occur only due to the parasocial bond, thus the practically relevant question in the selection of influencers is not only if the influencer is similar to the target audience, but whether this similarity has developed into a real following in a relationship that can be observed, for example, in the depth and reciprocity of comments in the target audience. Investing in the informational and entertainment value of sponsored content is likely to benefit both by influencing the decision and by enhancing the bond. For content creators, the results highlight that the parasocial bond is their commercial asset, and practices that are argued to reduce the PSR, such as endorsement overload (De Veirman et al., 2017; Hwang & Zhang, 2018), threaten to lose it. The opportunity to adopt relationally-based influencer strategies in markets like Pakistan, where more than half of the sampled followers reported having not purchased nor considered purchasing something influenced by an influencer in the last six months, looks promising.

5.4 Limitations and future research

There are several caveats to these conclusions. The cross-sectional design does not allow one to make causal inferences regarding the ways in which parasocial bonds form or change over time; longitudinal or experimental designs would allow for this. Although the non-probability purposive and snowball sampling methods were suitable for the lack of a sampling frame, the sample was heavily skewed towards younger (70.6% aged 18-22) and university-educated respondents, reducing the generalizability for respondents outside these categories; the sample size (214 responses) was adequate for PLS-SEM but was modest and larger probability-based samples would strengthen future estimates. Although a number of procedural precautions were taken, including respondent anonymity (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), and purchase intention was assessed instead of actual purchasing behaviour, common method variance cannot be ruled out because all constructs were self-reported. The parasocial relationship was assessed using three items with a cognitive and behavioural orientation, and the model SRMR (0.086) slightly surpassed the stringent threshold of 0.080. Future studies could use the entire tripartite parasocial

Journal of Management Science Research Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

Online ISSN: 3006-2047

Print ISSN: 3006-2039

construct, analyze comparisons between platforms (Instagram vs. TikTok and YouTube), test other moderators (endorsement overload and congruence between influencers and content, as explored by Breves et al., 2019; Koay, Cheah, & Yap, 2023), and replicate the model in other markets in South Asia.

5.5 Conclusion

In this study, an integrated mediation model of Instagram influencer marketing was tested using survey data of 214 Pakistani social media users. Influencer similarity was the most salient attribute to initiate parasocial relationships, while doing so increased purchase intention only indirectly, through the parasocial bond, and influencer content quality influenced purchase intention both directly and indirectly. The results validate the parasocial relationship as the key link between influencer attributes and purchase intention in an under-researched emerging market, and attribute-specificity of the parasocial relationship helps to explain why purchase intention has been found to be mixed in the recent literature.

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Journal of Management Science Research Review

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Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

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Print ISSN: 3006-2039

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Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

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Journal of Management Science Research

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<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

Online ISSN: 3006-2047

Print ISSN: 3006-2039

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Journal of Management Science Research

Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

Online ISSN: 3006-2047

Print ISSN: 3006-2039

Appendix: Survey Instrument

The respondents answered the questions by marking the most suitable answer for each item—age group (18-22, 23-27, 28-32, 33-40, above 40), gender, education level, monthly income/allowance (in PKR), primary social media platform, average use of social media per day, number of influencers followed, type of influencer content followed and influencer-driven purchase in the past 6 months. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Table A1. Measurement items.

Item	Wording
ICQ	Influencer content quality
ICQ1	The influencer I follow shares content that gives me useful, practical information about products or services.
ICQ2	The information the influencer I follow shares helps me make better decisions about products or services.
ICQ3	The content shared by the influencer I follow is entertaining and enjoyable to watch.
ICQ4	I find the influencer's content fun and engaging, not just promotional.
ICQ5	I consider the influencer I follow to be a credible and trustworthy source of information.
IS	Influencer similarity
IS1	The influencer I follow thinks in ways that are similar to how I think.
IS2	The values and beliefs of the influencer I follow are consistent with my own.
IS3	The influencer I follow behaves in ways that are similar to me.
IS4	Overall, I see myself as similar to the influencer I follow.
PSR	Parasocial relationship
PSR1	I trust the influencer I follow to give me reliable recommendations.
PSR2	I consider the influencer I follow to be a competent and knowledgeable source.
PSR3	I actively engage with the influencer's content by liking, commenting, or sharing it.
PI	Purchase intention
PI1	I intend to purchase a product or service recommended by the influencer I follow.
PI2	I am likely to buy a product after seeing the influencer use or endorse it.
PI3	I would consider making a purchase specifically because the influencer I follow recommends it.
PI4	The influencer I follow motivates me to look up and consider the products they promote.

Journal of Management Science Research Review

<https://jmsrr.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume. 5 Issue No. 1 (2026)

Online ISSN: 3006-2047

Print ISSN: 3006-2039

PI5	I plan to purchase a product recommended by the influencer I follow within the coming months.
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