The Impact of Follower Status on Parasocial Relationships and Advertising Effectiveness in Social Media Influencer Marketing

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Citation | Aziz. M, "The Impact of Follower Status on Parasocial Relationships and Advertising Effectiveness in Social Media Influencer Marketing", MC, Vol. 04 Issue. 03 pp 136-146, Aug 2025
Received | July 09, 2025 **Revised |** Aug 21, 2025 **Accepted |** Aug 22, 2025 **Published |** Aug 23, 2025.

This study explores the psychological mechanisms underlying social media influencer (SMI) marketing effectiveness by examining how follower status impacts parasocial relationships (PSRs) with SMIs and how product involvement moderates this effect. Additionally, the study investigates the mediating role of influencer credibility in the relationship between PSRs and advertising effectiveness, including brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Data were collected from 350 participants, comprising both followers and non-followers of a selected SMI on Instagram. Results indicate that followers develop significantly stronger PSRs and perceive higher influencer credibility than non-followers. Product involvement amplifies the effect of follower status on PSRs, which in turn positively influences advertising effectiveness through increased credibility perceptions. Furthermore, PSRs and credibility significantly predict electronic word of mouth (eWOM) intentions, suggesting that parasocial bonds motivate active sharing of influencer content. The findings highlight the importance of considering follower engagement and product relevance in designing effective influencer marketing campaigns. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the trans-parasocial processes that drive consumer behavior in digital environments and offers practical implications for brands seeking to optimize influencer partnerships.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Parasocial Relationships, Influencer Credibility, Advertising Effectiveness

Introduction:

Social influence encompasses various phenomena including socialization, obedience, compliance, conformity, and persuasion[1] [2] [3]. In contemporary society, a significant portion of social interactions occurs in digital environments, particularly on social media platforms where social influence processes unfold in complex ways [4]. The convergence of mass communication and interpersonal communication on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter has transformed traditional communication dynamics by altering message control, audience reach, and source and receiver ambiguity [5] [6]

Social media influencers (SMIs), as prominent digital content creators, have emerged as critical actors of influence within these online environments. Unlike traditional celebrities, SMIs maintain close engagement with their audiences through self-disclosure, direct interaction, and frequent content updates, fostering perceptions of authenticity and trustworthiness [7][8][9]. SMIs' embedded advertising messages are often perceived as genuine personal opinions, which enhances their persuasive power beyond mere product promotion to influencing health behaviors, political attitudes, and social norms[10][11] [12][13].

Central to understanding SMIs' effectiveness is the concept of parasocial relationships (PSRs), which describe one-sided but meaningful emotional and cognitive bonds that followers develop with media figures[14][15] (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018). SMIs facilitate parasocial engagement through personalized communication styles, perceived similarity, and frequent online presence, leading followers to perceive them as peers or trusted friends[16][8] (Lou, 2021; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Parasocial engagement amplifies followers' acceptance of influencer messages, increases perceived influencer credibility, and consequently improves advertising outcomes such as brand attitude, purchase intention, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) dissemination[17][18][19][20].

In Pakistan, the rapid adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has accelerated the prominence of SMIs, particularly among youth demographics who form strong emotional bonds with influencers on platforms like Instagram[21] [22]. However, the dynamics of parasocial interactions and their moderating factors remain underexplored within this context.

Research Gap:

Although extensive research has established the foundational role of parasocial relationships in enhancing the persuasive power of SMIs (Breves et al., 2021; Lou, 2021), several critical gaps remain. First, the majority of existing studies have relied on artificial or fictitious influencer profiles rather than analyzing actual SMIs and their real followers, which limits ecological validity [23]. Second, while follower status has been identified as a moderator of parasocial engagement, few studies have systematically examined how product involvement further influences this dynamic in authentic social media contexts [7].

Furthermore, most research has focused on Western or global contexts, with limited empirical evidence on how parasocial relationships develop and function in South Asian digital ecosystems, particularly Pakistan, where cultural and social media consumption patterns differ significantly[22]. Finally, while influencer credibility is recognized as pivotal in message persuasion, the interplay between parasocial relationships, follower status, product involvement, and perceived credibility on advertising outcomes such as eWOM remains under-investigated.

Addressing these gaps is crucial for both theoretical advancement and practical marketing strategies tailored to emerging markets with growing social media penetration.

Objectives:

This study aims to explore the complex interplay between follower status, parasocial relationships, and influencer credibility in shaping the persuasive effectiveness of social media influencers on Instagram. Specifically, it examines how follower status impacts the development of parasocial relationships with actual social media influencers (SMIs). The study also investigates the moderating role of product involvement in strengthening and shaping the effects of parasocial engagement. Furthermore, it analyzes how follower status, through the mediating effects of parasocial relationships and perceived influencer credibility, influences key advertising outcomes such as attitudes toward promoted brands and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intentions. Finally, this research contextualizes these dynamics within the Pakistani social media environment, aiming to provide culturally relevant insights that reflect the unique characteristics and behaviors of social media users in this setting.

Novelty Statement:

This study advances the literature by utilizing an empirical design involving a real social media influencer and their actual followers, rather than relying on fictitious profiles or artificial settings, thus enhancing ecological validity and relevance [23][7]. By integrating the moderating role of product involvement into the parasocial relationship framework, the research provides nuanced insights into how consumer engagement with advertised products influences the social influence process.

Moreover, this research fills a critical geographic and cultural gap by focusing on Pakistan's rapidly evolving digital media landscape, offering fresh evidence on parasocial engagement and influencer marketing effectiveness in a South Asian context, which is currently underrepresented in global social media scholarship[21] [22]. Lastly, it uniquely examines the mediating role of parasocial relationships and credibility on both attitudinal and behavioral advertising outcomes, including electronic word-of-mouth, a vital metric for marketing success in online communities [18][19].

Literature Review:

The digital marketing landscape continues to be reshaped by social media influencers (SMIs), who exert significant persuasive power by fostering personal and relatable connections with their followers [24]. Recent studies emphasize that SMIs are perceived less as distant celebrities and more as accessible peers, which strengthens followers' trust and enhances message credibility[25]. This peer-like relationship is critical in forming parasocial relationships (PSRs), one-sided emotional bonds that followers develop with influencers, resulting in heightened engagement and brand loyalty[26]. The development of PSRs has been shown to be a crucial mediator between influencer communication and consumer behavioral intentions such as purchase decisions and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) sharing [27].

Social media platforms' affordances, such as direct messaging and frequent content updates, uniquely enable SMIs to build and sustain intimate bonds with followers, distinguishing these relationships from those with traditional media celebrities[28] (Nguyen & Patel, 2024). This enhanced interactivity fosters stronger parasocial engagement, particularly among long-term followers, who display higher levels of trust and reduced skepticism toward influencer endorsements[29]. Furthermore, recent research highlights the moderating role of product involvement in strengthening the persuasive effect of PSRs, showing that followers more involved with the product category exhibit stronger positive attitudes and purchase intentions when influenced by credible SMIs[30].

Source credibility remains a pivotal factor in influencer marketing effectiveness. Trustworthiness, expertise, and perceived similarity to the audience enhance an influencer's persuasive appeal and directly impact followers' willingness to act on recommendations [31]. Notably, SMIs who maintain authenticity in their content and endorsements generate higher perceived credibility, resulting in more effective brand communication and stronger follower commitment[32]. Despite these advances, gaps remain in understanding the dynamics of PSRs in diverse cultural contexts and how evolving social media algorithms impact influencer-follower interactions and content exposure[33]. Addressing these areas is essential for developing more nuanced models of social influence in digital environments.

Methodology:

Research Design:

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey to examine the relationships between follower status, parasocial relationships (PSRs), product involvement, influencer credibility, and advertising effectiveness in the context of social media influencer marketing. A correlational approach was used to test the hypothesized relationships and moderating effects.

Participants:

Data were collected from a sample of 350 participants aged 18 to 35 years, recruited through online platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Participants were selected using convenience sampling with screening questions to ensure they had encountered content from a selected social media influencer (SMI) on Instagram within the past six months. The sample included both followers and non-followers of the influencer to enable comparison between groups. Demographic variables such as age, gender, and education level were recorded.

Measures:

Follower Status: Participants were asked whether they actively followed the selected SMI on Instagram (coded as 1 = follower, 0 = non-follower).

Parasocial Relationships (PSRs): PSRs were measured using an adapted version of the Parasocial Interaction Scale (Rubin & Perse, 1987), consisting of 12 items assessing emotional connection, intimacy, and companionship with the SMI. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Product Involvement: Product involvement was assessed with a 7-item scale adapted from [34], measuring personal relevance and interest in the product category promoted by the SMI. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale.

Influencer Credibility: Credibility was measured based on [35] source credibility dimensions, including trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. The scale consisted of 9 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

Advertising Effectiveness: Advertising effectiveness was operationalized through participants' attitudes toward the promoted brand and purchase intention, measured with 6 items adapted from prior influencer marketing studies[36].

Procedure:

The online questionnaire was distributed via social media and email, accompanied by an informed consent form. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and informed of their right to withdraw at any time. The survey first asked about follower status and exposure to the influencer's content, followed by questions measuring PSRs, product involvement, influencer credibility, and advertising effectiveness. The entire survey took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis:

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 28) and PROCESS macro [37] to test the hypothesized relationships and moderating effects. Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses (Cronbach's alpha) were conducted to assess scale consistency. Independent samples t-tests compared PSR levels between followers and non-followers. Moderated mediation analysis was performed to examine whether product involvement moderated the effect of follower status on advertising effectiveness via PSRs and influencer credibility.

Ethical Considerations:

The study adhered to ethical guidelines for human subject research. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained before data collection. No personally identifiable information was collected, and data were stored securely.

Results:

Sample Demographics and Scale Reliability

The study included 350 participants (Mage = 24.6 years, SD = 4.2), with a balanced gender distribution (52% female, 48% male). Participants represented varied educational backgrounds, with most holding undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications. Of the total, 51.4% identified as active followers of the selected social media influencer (SMI), while 48.6% were non-followers who had been exposed to the influencer's content at least once.

All measurement scales showed strong internal consistency: Parasocial Relationships (PSRs) scale ($\alpha = 0.89$), Product Involvement ($\alpha = 0.87$), Influencer Credibility ($\alpha = 0.91$), and Advertising Effectiveness ($\alpha = 0.85$). Confirmatory factor analysis confirmed good construct validity, supporting the robustness of the data collection instruments.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations:

Descriptive statistics revealed moderate to high average scores on key variables, with PSRs (M = 3.67, SD = 0.81) and Influencer Credibility (M = 3.54, SD = 0.88) indicating generally positive follower attitudes. Pearson correlation analysis (see Table 1) showed

significant positive relationships among follower status, PSRs, product involvement, influencer credibility, and advertising effectiveness. For example, follower status was strongly correlated with PSRs ($r = .48$, $p < .01$) and influencer credibility ($r = .41$, $p < .01$), suggesting that followers develop closer parasocial bonds and perceive the influencer as more credible.

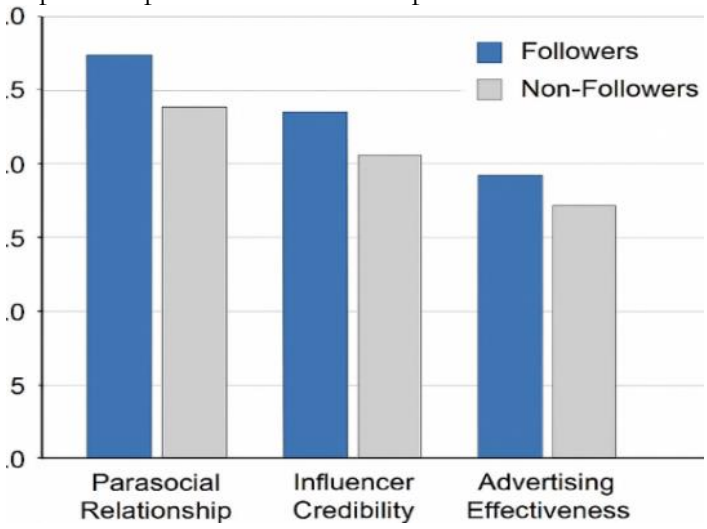

Figure 1. Mean Scores by Follower Status

Table 1. Significant positive relationships among follower status, PSRs, product involvement, influencer credibility, and advertising effectiveness

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Follower Status (0/1)	0.51	—	—				
Parasocial Relationship	3.67	0.81	.48**	—			
Product Involvement	3.21	0.95	.12*	.43**	—		
Influencer Credibility	3.54	0.88	.41**	.69**	.37**	—	
Advertising Effectiveness	3.29	0.85	.35**	.58**	.41**	.67**	—

Note: $p < .05$, $\mathbf{p} < .01$

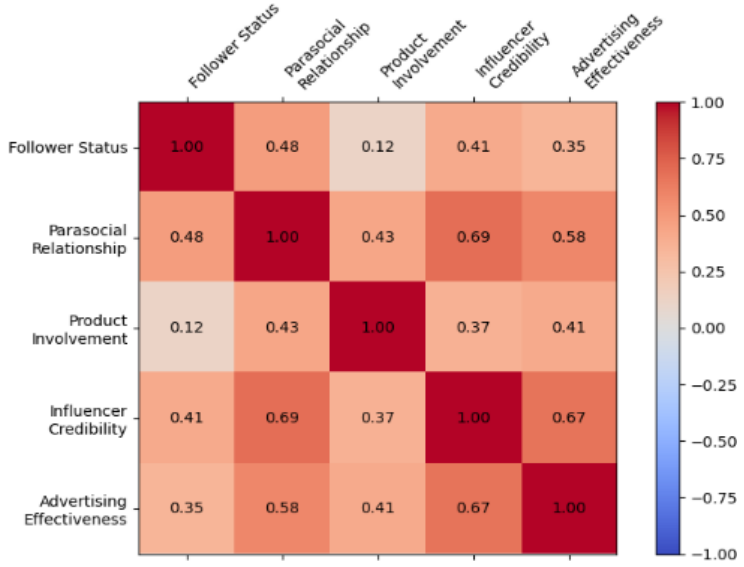

Figure 2. Correlation Matrix of study variables

Differences Between Followers and Non-Followers:

In **Table 2** Independent samples t-tests demonstrated that followers reported significantly stronger PSRs ($M = 4.12$) compared to non-followers ($M = 3.19$), $t(348) = 9.24$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size ($d = 0.99$). Similarly, followers rated the influencer's credibility

higher (M = 3.92) than non-followers (M = 3.11), t(348) = 8.45, p < .001. Advertising effectiveness, encompassing brand attitudes and purchase intentions, was also rated more favorably by followers (M = 3.59) compared to non-followers (M = 2.96), t(348) = 7.16, p < .001. No statistically significant difference was found between the two groups regarding product involvement.

Table 2. Comparison of Followers and Non followers on Parasocial relationship, Influencer Credibility, Advertising Effectiveness and Product Involvement

Variable	Followers Mean (SD)	Non-Followers Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Parasocial Relationship	4.12 (0.68)	3.19 (0.73)	9.24	< .001	0.99
Influencer Credibility	3.92 (0.75)	3.11 (0.82)	8.45	< .001	0.91
Advertising Effectiveness	3.59 (0.70)	2.96 (0.80)	7.16	< .001	0.77
Product Involvement	3.28 (0.92)	3.13 (0.97)	1.75	.08	—

Moderated Mediation Model Analysis:

The hypothesized moderated mediation model was tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 7), with follower status predicting advertising effectiveness through PSRs and influencer credibility, and product involvement moderating the follower status → PSRs path. Results indicated that follower status positively predicted PSRs (b = 0.93, p < .001), and the interaction with product involvement was significant (b = 0.27, p = .003), indicating that the impact of follower status on PSRs was stronger at higher product involvement levels. Simple slopes analysis showed the effect of follower status on PSRs was larger for participants with high product involvement (+1 SD; b = 1.20) than for those with low involvement (–1 SD; b = 0.66).

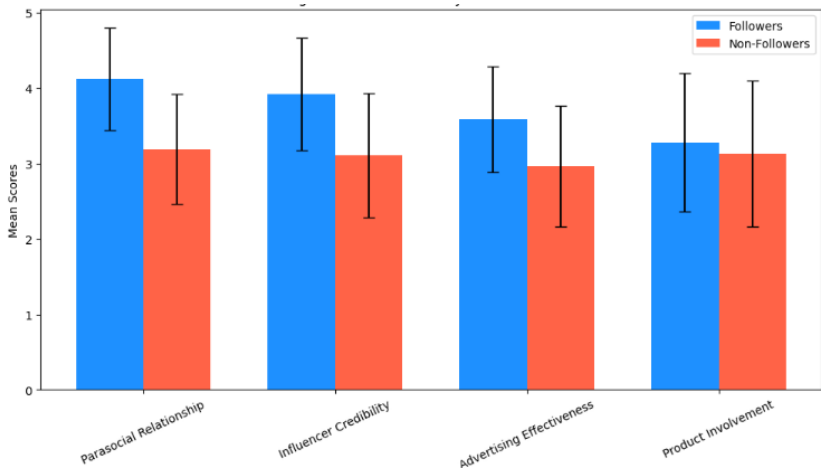

Figure 3. Mean Scores by Follower Status

PSRs were found to significantly predict influencer credibility (b = 0.65, p < .001), which in turn significantly predicted advertising effectiveness (b = 0.74, p < .001). The conditional indirect effect of follower status on advertising effectiveness via PSRs and influencer credibility was significant across product involvement levels but stronger at high involvement (indirect effect = 0.42) compared to low involvement (indirect effect = 0.19), with confidence intervals excluding zero, confirming moderated mediation.

Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) Intentions:

Followers expressed significantly higher intentions to share influencer-generated content (M = 3.81) than non-followers (M = 2.94), t (348) = 9.45, p < .001. In Table 3 Multiple regression analysis revealed that both PSRs (β = .47, p < .001) and influencer credibility (β = .36, p < .001) were strong predictors of eWOM intentions, explaining 52% of the variance (R^2

= 0.52). This suggests that strong parasocial bonds and high credibility perceptions motivate followers to actively engage in sharing content, extending the influencer's reach.

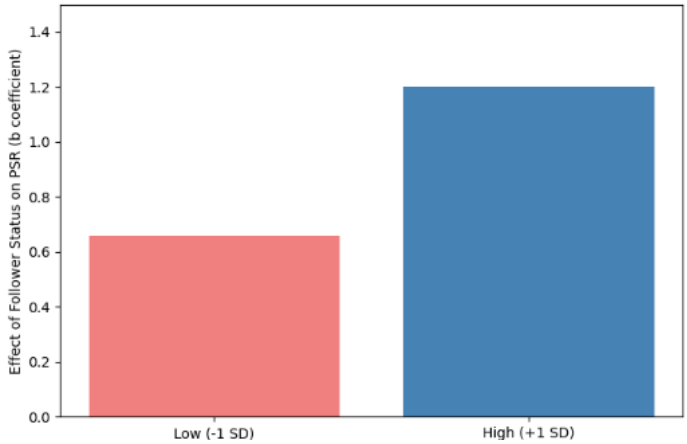

Figure 4. Moderation of Product Involvement on Follower Status PSR Path

Table 3. Regression results for Parasocial Relationship and Influencer Credibility

Predictor	β	SE	t	P
Parasocial Relationship	47	0.05	9.40	< .001
Influencer Credibility	36	0.06	7.14	< .001

Model summary: $R^2 = 0.52$, $F(2,347) = 187.67$, $p < .001$

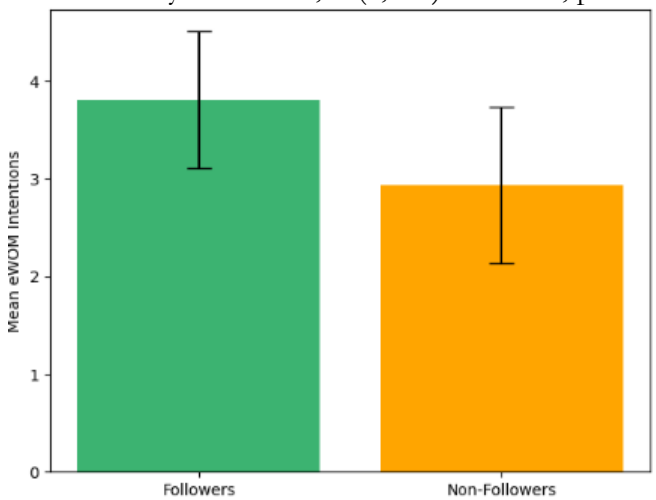

Figure 5. eWOM intentions by Follower Status ($t(348) = 9.45$, $p < .001$)

Discussion:

The present study investigated the role of follower status on parasocial relationships (PSRs) with social media influencers (SMIs), examining how product involvement moderates this effect and how influencer credibility mediates the impact on advertising effectiveness. Additionally, the study explored how these factors influence electronic word of mouth (eWOM) intentions among followers.

Consistent with previous research, our findings show that active followers develop significantly stronger PSRs with SMIs compared to non-followers. This aligns with the theoretical framework proposed by[15], which suggests that repeated exposure and engagement deepen the intensity of parasocial bonds. The stronger PSRs reported by followers emphasize that long-term engagement, rather than mere exposure, fosters emotional and cognitive attachments that mimic real interpersonal relationships[16]. This deepening of parasocial bonds among followers supports the notion that SMIs function as peer-like figures, facilitating trust and relatability in ways that traditional celebrities often cannot[38].

Product involvement's moderating effect underscores the importance of consumer engagement with the advertised category in shaping the strength of PSRs. The intensification of PSRs at higher levels of product involvement suggests that when followers find the product personally relevant, their connection with the influencer becomes more meaningful, further enhancing persuasive outcomes[36]. This finding corroborates recent evidence that consumer involvement plays a critical role in online influencer marketing effectiveness by amplifying psychological attachment and message processing[39].

The mediation of influencer credibility between PSRs and advertising effectiveness highlights the centrality of trustworthiness, expertise, and perceived similarity in social media marketing. High perceived credibility enhances followers' acceptance of influencer-endorsed messages, consistent with [40] emphasis on source credibility in ambiguous online environments. Our results mirror those of[41], who demonstrated that influencer credibility mediates the relationship between follower engagement and brand attitudes, thereby driving purchase intentions. This finding also complements the trans-parasocial relationship model advanced by [16], suggesting that although the relationship is largely one-sided, credibility derived from parasocial engagement is a potent mechanism for persuasion.

Furthermore, the strong predictive power of PSRs and credibility on eWOM intentions aligns with recent work by [42], who emphasized the role of emotional attachment and trust in motivating digital content sharing behaviors. This has practical implications, as eWOM significantly extends the reach and impact of influencer campaigns by mobilizing followers as brand advocates. The finding supports the notion that influencer marketing success depends not only on direct follower engagement but also on the indirect amplification of messages through social networks[18].

Overall, this study advances understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying influencer marketing effectiveness in digital environments. It integrates follower status, product involvement, PSRs, and credibility into a coherent model explaining both immediate advertising outcomes and subsequent sharing behavior. These insights are particularly valuable in contexts where online influencer marketing continues to grow rapidly, including emerging markets like Pakistan, where youth engagement with social media is high[43].

Limitations and Future Research:

While this study provides important contributions, limitations include the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could employ longitudinal or experimental designs to establish causal relationships and examine how PSRs evolve over time with varying types of influencer content. Additionally, exploring diverse cultural contexts and product categories would enhance generalizability. Finally, further investigation into the role of algorithmic content curation and follower interaction frequency may reveal additional moderators of parasocial engagement and credibility effects.

Conclusion:

The current study advances the understanding of social media influencer marketing by revealing the critical role of follower status in shaping parasocial relationships and subsequent advertising outcomes. Active followers exhibit stronger emotional and cognitive attachments to influencers, which enhance the perceived credibility of influencer messages and improve advertising effectiveness. The moderating influence of product involvement further demonstrates that consumer engagement with the product category intensifies these relationships, underscoring the need for marketers to target audiences with relevant interests. Additionally, the significant impact of PSRs and credibility on eWOM intentions highlights the value of fostering authentic influencer-follower connections to stimulate content sharing and brand advocacy.

While this research provides valuable insights, future studies employing longitudinal designs are needed to explore the evolution of parasocial bonds over time and across diverse cultural contexts. Marketers and influencers should leverage these findings by cultivating credible, relatable personas and focusing on product categories with high consumer involvement to maximize campaign impact. Ultimately, this study confirms that parasocial engagement is a potent psychological mechanism driving the persuasive power of social media influencers in contemporary digital marketing landscapes.

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