The Interpretive Power of Parasocial Relationships: Attribution Processes and Persuasion Knowledge in Influencer Marketing

Abstract

This study examines the cognitive mechanisms explaining why influencer recommendations remain persuasive despite consumers' recognition of commercial intent. Integrating Parasocial Relationship (PSR) theory, Attribution Theory, and the Persuasion Knowledge Model, we propose a process framework in which PSR shapes how consumers interpret influencers' motives. Data from a survey with 251 young social media users in Chile show that perceived homophily is the main driver of PSR intensity. Results indicate that PSR functions as a cognitive shield: it increases attributions of intrinsic, genuine motives while reducing perceptions of extrinsic, commercial motives, indirectly improving brand attitude and purchase intention. In addition, attitudinal persuasion knowledge operates asymmetrically, strengthening negative reactions to extrinsic motives but leaving evaluations based on intrinsic motives largely unaffected when strong parasocial bonds exist. Overall, the findings suggest that informed consumers do not automatically reject commercial influence when relational closeness and perceived authenticity are present.

Keywords: influencer marketing, parasocial relationships, attribution theory, persuasion knowledge, homophily