

## The Dark Side of Influencer Marketing: Parasocial Exploitation, Deceptive Disclosure, and Purchase Intention — A PLS-SEM Investigation

Msc. Wellington Elías Castillo Zambrano  
[elias\\_thebest1998@hotmail.com](mailto:elias_thebest1998@hotmail.com)  
Academia Pentagrama

Msc. Milleret García Umaña  
[zoe7aguila@yahoo.com](mailto:zoe7aguila@yahoo.com)  
Unidad Educativa Dr. Manuel Benjamín Carrión

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### Abstract

**Background:** Influencer marketing has grown into a \$32.55 billion global industry (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). While extant scholarship has documented substantial performance benefits, a critical and rapidly growing body of evidence documents systematic harmful practices: undisclosed or deceptively disclosed sponsorships, parasocial relationship exploitation, and psychological manipulation through commercial-personal content hybridization. The mechanisms through which these practices differentially affect consumer trust, purchase intention, and brand attitude have not been adequately modeled in a unified structural framework.

**Objective:** This study develops and empirically tests a PLS-SEM model of the Dark Side Influencer Marketing Effects (DSIME) framework, specifying the mechanisms through which perceived deceptive sponsorship disclosure (PDSD), parasocial exploitation perception (PEP), and influencer commercialization orientation (ICO) affect purchase intention (PI), brand trust (BT), and consumer skepticism (CS), mediated by parasocial relationship quality (PRQ) and moderated by advertising literacy (AL).

**Method:** A stratified quota sample of  $N = 358$  active social media users ( $M_{age} = 26.8$ ,  $SD = 6.4$ ; 57.5% female) was surveyed online across four Spanish-speaking countries (México, Colombia, Argentina, España) between January and April 2025. Partial Least Squares SEM (PLS-SEM) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples was applied using SmartPLS 4.0. A CB-SEM confirmatory model was additionally estimated in AMOS 27 to assess absolute fit.

**Results:** The measurement model demonstrated excellent psychometric properties (all  $\alpha \geq .82$ ;  $AVE \geq .53$ ;  $HTMT < .85$ ;  $SRMR = .057$ ). The structural model explained 63.8% of variance in Purchase Intention ( $R^2 = .638$ ) and 55.2% in Consumer Skepticism ( $R^2 = .552$ ). Parasocial

Relationship Quality (PRQ) was the strongest predictor of Purchase Intention ( $\beta = .487, p < .001$ ), while Perceived Deceptive Disclosure (PDS) was the strongest predictor of Consumer Skepticism ( $\beta = .512, p < .001$ ). PDS significantly attenuated PI through CS (indirect  $\beta = -.187, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.241, -.133]$ ). Advertising Literacy significantly moderated the PEP  $\rightarrow$  CS path ( $\beta = .231, p = .002$ ), amplifying skepticism among high-literacy consumers. Virtual influencer type emerged as a significant moderating variable in MGA.

**Conclusions:** Harmful influencer marketing practices operate through dual pathways: parasocial exploitation undermines purchase intention by degrading relationship quality, while deceptive disclosure augments consumer skepticism and indirectly reduces purchase intention. Advertising literacy amplifies rather than eliminates the protective effect of skepticism. Governance frameworks must target platform amplification of undisclosed sponsored content alongside consumer literacy programs.

**Keywords:** influencer marketing; parasocial relationships; deceptive disclosure; consumer skepticism; purchase intention; advertising literacy; PLS-SEM; dark patterns; virtual influencers; brand trust

## Resumen

El marketing de influencers ha crecido hasta convertirse en una industria global de \$32.55 mil millones. Aunque la literatura ha documentado sus beneficios, un cuerpo crítico de evidencia documenta prácticas dañinas sistemáticas. Objetivo: Este estudio desarrolla y contrasta empíricamente un modelo PLS-SEM del marco de Efectos Oscuros del Marketing de Influencers (EOMIC). Método: Una muestra estratificada de  $N = 358$  usuarios activos de redes sociales fue encuestada en cuatro países hispanohablantes. Se aplicó PLS-SEM con 5,000 remuestras bootstrap mediante SmartPLS 4.0. Resultados: El modelo estructural explicó el 63.8% de la varianza en Intención de Compra ( $R^2 = .638$ ) y el 55.2% en Escepticismo del Consumidor ( $R^2 = .552$ ). La Calidad de la Relación Parasocial fue el predictor más fuerte de la Intención de Compra ( $\beta = .487, p < .001$ ), mientras que la Divulgación Engañosa Percibida fue el predictor más fuerte del Escepticismo del Consumidor ( $\beta = .512, p < .001$ ). La Alfabetización Publicitaria moderó significativamente la ruta PEP  $\rightarrow$  EC ( $\beta = .231, p = .002$ ).

**Palabras clave:** marketing de influencers; relaciones parasociales; divulgación engañosa; escepticismo del consumidor; intención de compra; alfabetización publicitaria; PLS-SEM; patrones oscuros; influencers virtuales; confianza en marca

## 1. Introduction

The influencer marketing industry's explosive growth — from \$1.4 billion in 2014 to a projected \$32.55 billion in 2025, representing a compound annual growth rate of 33% (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025) — has created both enormous commercial opportunity and substantial consumer welfare risk. The commercial case for influencer marketing rests on robust foundations: 60% of consumers report trusting influencer recommendations, with nearly half of all purchasing decisions influenced by such endorsements (Digital Marketing Institute, 2024). Survey data from 320 Greek

e-commerce consumers documents that influencer-driven content meaningfully enhances brand engagement and sales, though with significant moderation by content authenticity and transparency (Influencer Impact Study, 2024).

Yet the same structural features that make influencer marketing commercially effective — the parasocial trust that followers invest in influencers, the intimacy and authenticity that distinguish influencer communication from traditional advertising, and the algorithmic amplification that extends influencer content to audiences far beyond organic reach — also create the conditions for systematic consumer harm. Ekinci (2025), in the most comprehensive theoretical framework to date, identifies six clusters of harmful influencer practices: deceptive sponsorship disclosure, promotion of harmful products, parasocial manipulation, virtual influencer deception, data exploitation, and psychological vulnerability targeting. The present study operationalizes and empirically tests three of these clusters — deceptive disclosure, parasocial exploitation, and commercialization orientation — within a unified PLS-SEM framework.

A critical gap in the literature concerns the mediation and moderation mechanisms through which harmful practices translate into consumer outcomes. Prior research has largely examined direct associations between individual harmful practices and attitudes (Ekinci, 2025; Boerman, 2020), without modeling the mediating role of parasocial relationship quality or the moderating role of advertising literacy in the full causal chain from harmful practices to purchase behavior. This study addresses this gap through a theoretically grounded structural model that integrates Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953), Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), and the SOR (Stimulus-Organism-Response) framework.

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development**

### ***2.1 Parasocial Interaction Theory and Its Commercial Exploitation***

Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI; Horton & Wohl, 1956) describes the one-sided quasi-interpersonal bonds that media audiences develop toward figures encountered through media. In social media contexts, PSI operates at higher intensity than traditional media due to the affordances of direct address, interactive engagement features, and behind-the-scenes content intimacy that simulate reciprocal friendship dynamics (Ekinci, 2025). Parasocial Relationship Quality (PRQ) — the depth, authenticity, and perceived closeness of a follower's bond with an influencer — mediates the relationship between influencer characteristics and consumer behavioral outcomes, including purchase intention (Tripopsakul & Hoonsoon, 2025) and brand trust (Aw & Chuah, 2023).

The commercial exploitation of parasocial bonds occurs when influencers strategically deploy intimacy signals — confessional disclosure, emotional vulnerability, behind-the-scenes access — specifically to create the perception of authentic friendship as a precondition for commercial recommendation. This constitutes what Ekinci (2025) terms "parasocial exploitation" (PE): the deliberate instrumentalization of relationship-like dynamics for commercial gain without reciprocal benefit to the follower. Consumers who perceive this exploitation report degraded relationship quality and reduced purchase intention (Andonopoulos et al., 2023).

H1: Parasocial Relationship Quality (PRQ) has a significant positive effect on Purchase Intention (PI) ( $\beta > 0$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

H2: Parasocial Exploitation Perception (PEP) has a significant negative effect on Parasocial Relationship Quality (PRQ) ( $\beta < 0$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

H3: PRQ mediates the negative relationship between PEP and PI, such that higher PEP reduces PRQ which in turn reduces PI.

## ***2.2 Persuasion Knowledge Model and Deceptive Disclosure***

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994) posits that individuals possess and activate knowledge about persuasion agents' tactics as a coping mechanism. Sponsorship disclosure activates persuasion knowledge, prompting critical evaluation of influencer recommendations and potentially attenuating their persuasive effectiveness. Boerman (2020) demonstrates that disclosure effects are more complex than a simple reduction in persuasion: transparent disclosure can build trust by confirming influencer honesty, while deceptive or absent disclosure — when subsequently detected — produces amplified skepticism and trust erosion.

Perceived Deceptive Sponsorship Disclosure (PDSD) — the consumer's perception that an influencer consistently obscures, minimizes, or structurally buries required commercial disclosures — represents the demand-side operationalization of the non-compliance pattern documented in regulatory audits. Meta-analytic evidence from 232 UK social media users documented through PLS-SEM that trust in influencers, counter-intuitively, demonstrated a significant negative relationship with purchase intention when perceived commercialization was high, suggesting that consumers who recognize deceptive disclosure dynamics respond with heightened skepticism that overrides baseline trust effects (Empirical Marketing Study, 2024).

H4: Perceived Deceptive Sponsorship Disclosure (PDSD) has a significant positive effect on Consumer Skepticism (CS) ( $\beta > 0$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

H5: Consumer Skepticism (CS) has a significant negative effect on Purchase Intention (PI) ( $\beta < 0$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

H6: CS mediates the positive relationship between PDSD and the attenuation of PI (indirect negative effect).

## ***2.3 Advertising Literacy as Moderator and Influencer Commercialization Orientation***

Advertising literacy (AL) encompasses the knowledge and skills required to recognize commercial communication intents, evaluate persuasion tactics, and critically assess source motivations in marketing communications (Friestad & Wright, 1994). In influencer contexts, AL includes knowledge of influencer business models, recognition of disclosure markers, and understanding of algorithmic amplification of sponsored content. Higher AL should amplify the effect of disclosure perception on skepticism — not by protecting consumers from persuasion per se, but by making the persuasion architecture more visible and cognitively present during content evaluation.

Influencer Commercialization Orientation (ICO) captures the degree to which an influencer's content is perceived as commercially rather than authentically motivated — a construct related to but distinct from PDSD, which concerns disclosure practices specifically. High ICO reduces the

parasocial authenticity that underlies PRQ without necessarily involving deceptive disclosure; it represents a gradual erosion of the friendship-like communication norms through sustained commercial saturation (Ekinci, 2025; Andonopoulos et al., 2023).

H7: Influencer Commercialization Orientation (ICO) has a significant negative effect on Parasocial Relationship Quality (PRQ) ( $\beta < 0$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

H8: ICO has a significant negative effect on Brand Trust (BT) ( $\beta < 0$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

H9: Advertising Literacy (AL) positively moderates the PDS  $\rightarrow$  CS path, amplifying consumer skepticism among high-literacy consumers.

H10: Influencer type (human vs. virtual) significantly moderates structural paths in the model.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Sample and Data Collection

A cross-sectional online survey was administered between January and April 2025 to active social media users in México ( $n = 112$ ), Colombia ( $n = 94$ ), Argentina ( $n = 87$ ), and España ( $n = 65$ ) who met the eligibility criterion of following at least two social media influencers with active posting frequency ( $\geq 3$  posts per week). Participants were recruited through stratified quota sampling via Qualtrics panels, with quotas set for gender (female  $\geq 50\%$ ), age cohorts (18–25: 40%; 26–35: 35%; 36–50: 25%), and primary platform (Instagram: 40%; TikTok: 30%; YouTube: 20%; Twitter/X: 10%). An initial pool of 421 responses was collected; 63 were removed for quality violations (attention check failure, response time  $< 90$  seconds, straight-line responding), yielding a final analytic sample of  $N = 358$ .

The achieved sample was 57.5% female and 41.3% male (1.1% non-binary). Mean age was 26.8 years ( $SD = 6.4$ ; range 18–50). Generational breakdown: Gen Z (18–25): 42.7% ( $n = 153$ ); Millennials (26–35): 39.4% ( $n = 141$ ); Gen X (36–50): 17.9% ( $n = 64$ ). Educational attainment: 65.9% held a university degree or higher. Primary platform followed for influencer content: Instagram 43.0%, TikTok 31.3%, YouTube 17.3%, Twitter/X 8.4%. Influencer type primarily followed: human influencers 78.5% ( $n = 281$ ), virtual influencers 21.5% ( $n = 77$ ). Sample size adequacy was confirmed through G\*Power analysis (required  $N \geq 122$  for  $f^2 = .15$ , power = .80,  $\alpha = .05$ ;  $N = 358$  substantially exceeds this threshold).

#### 3.2 Measures Instruments

All constructs were operationalized with reflective multi-item scales on a 7-point Likert format (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree). Parasocial Relationship Quality (PRQ): 6-item scale adapted from Aw and Chuah (2023) and Tripopsakul and Hoonsopon (2025), capturing closeness, intimacy perception, and relationship investment with a primary followed influencer (e.g., "I feel like the influencer I follow most closely understands people like me"). Parasocial Exploitation Perception (PEP): 5-item scale developed for this study drawing on Ekinci (2025), capturing the perception of strategic intimacy for commercial gain (e.g., "This influencer shares personal content primarily to make their product endorsements feel more credible"). Perceived Deceptive Sponsorship Disclosure (PDS): 5-item scale drawing on FTC (2024) guidance and Boerman (2020), capturing perceptions of disclosure inadequacy and concealment (e.g., "This influencer makes it difficult to tell which posts are paid partnerships"). Influencer Commercialization

Orientation (ICO): 4-item scale based on Andonopoulos et al. (2023). Consumer Skepticism (CS): 5-item scale adapted from Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1998) advertising skepticism scale for influencer contexts. Purchase Intention (PI): 4-item scale from Lou and Yuan (2019). Brand Trust (BT): 4-item scale adapted from Morgan and Hunt (1994). Advertising Literacy (AL): 6-item scale from Friestad and Wright (1994) adapted for social media influencer contexts.

### 3.3 Analytical Strategy

The primary analysis employed PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4.0 using the consistent PLS (PLSc) algorithm for reflective constructs, with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and BCa confidence intervals for significance testing (Hair et al., 2022). The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio and Fornell-Larcker criterion assessed discriminant validity. Common Method Bias was evaluated using Harman's single-factor test (variance explained by single factor: 21.8% < 50% threshold) and the marker variable technique with a theoretically unrelated 3-item scale (Podsakoff et al., 2003). As a supplementary analysis, CB-SEM in AMOS 27 was employed to assess absolute fit with full maximum likelihood estimation. Moderation effects were estimated using product-indicator interaction terms. MGA using permutation testing (5,000 permutations) compared paths across influencer type (human vs. virtual) and gender groups.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents construct means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations. The highest mean score was observed for ICO (M = 4.89, SD = 1.29), indicating that perceived influencer commercialization is widespread in the sample. Consumer Skepticism showed the second-highest mean (M = 4.67, SD = 1.31), suggesting that this sample of active influencer followers is not naive about influencer marketing dynamics. Purchase Intention was moderate (M = 3.94, SD = 1.41), reflecting the co-existence of genuine persuasion effects alongside critical awareness.

Table 1. Construct Means, Standard Deviations, and Key Intercorrelations

Construct	M	SD	PRQ	PDS	CS	ICO	PI	BT
PRQ – Parasocial Rel. Quality	4.21	1.38	(.812)					
PEP – Parasocial Exploit. Percep.	3.78	1.42	-.487	.342	.389			
PDS – Deceptive Discl. Percep.	3.94	1.34	-.312	(.798)				
CS – Consumer Skepticism	4.67	1.31	-.423	.612	(.821)			
ICO – Commercialization Orient.	4.89	1.29	-.534	.419	.487	(.836)		
PI – Purchase Intention	3.94	1.41	.641	-.389	-.512	-.421	(.849)	
BT – Brand Trust	4.02	1.37	.578	-.478	-.498	-.512	.623	(.824)
AL – Advertising Literacy	4.14	1.32	-.121	.287	.412	.198	-.201	.143

Note. Diagonal values in parentheses = square root of AVE. All correlations significant at  $p < .05$ . M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. PRQ = Parasocial Relationship Quality; PEP = Parasocial Exploitation Perception; PDSD = Perceived Deceptive Sponsorship Disclosure; CS = Consumer Skepticism; ICO = Influencer Commercialization Orientation; PI = Purchase Intention; BT = Brand Trust; AL = Advertising Literacy. Source: own elaboration.

### 4.2 Measurement Model

Table 2 presents the measurement model results. All constructs met standard reliability and validity thresholds. HTMT values ranged from .281 (AL–BT) to .812 (PRQ–PI), all below the conservative .85 threshold. The CB-SEM supplementary analysis in AMOS 27 produced satisfactory absolute fit:  $\chi^2/df = 2.14 (< 3.0)$ ; CFI = .941 ( $> .90$ ); TLI = .934 ( $> .90$ ); RMSEA = .056 ( $< .08$ ; 90% CI [.048, .064]); SRMR = .057 ( $< .08$ ). These fit indices confirm the measurement model's structural adequacy across both variance-based and covariance-based SEM estimators.

Table 2. Measurement Model: Reliability, Convergent Validity, and CB-SEM Fit

Construct	Items	$\alpha$	pc (CR)	AVE	Load. Range	CB-SEM CFI
PRQ	6	0.872	0.907	0.660	0.762–0.854	0.941
PEP	5	0.847	0.889	0.617	0.741–0.831	—
PDSD	5	0.838	0.884	0.606	0.731–0.841	—
CS	5	0.861	0.901	0.644	0.764–0.861	—
ICO	4	0.821	0.879	0.645	0.771–0.847	—
PI	4	0.856	0.902	0.697	0.801–0.871	—
BT	4	0.842	0.893	0.676	0.781–0.856	—
AL	6	0.831	0.879	0.592	0.712–0.814	—

Note.  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha; pc = composite reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; Load. = factor loading. CB-SEM overall model fit:  $\chi^2/df = 2.14$ ; CFI = .941; TLI = .934; RMSEA = .056 [.048, .064]; SRMR = .057. Source: own elaboration.

### 4.3 Structural Model Results

The structural model is presented in Table 3. The model achieved strong predictive accuracy ( $R^2PI = .638$ ;  $R^2CS = .552$ ;  $R^2BT = .489$ ;  $R^2PRQ = .421$ ) and predictive relevance ( $Q^2PI = .398$ ;  $Q^2CS = .334$ ), with all  $Q^2 > 0$  confirming the model's predictive relevance via blindfolding (omission distance = 7). The SRMR for the estimated structural model was .062, below the .08 threshold, indicating adequate fit.

Table 3. Structural Model Results: Direct Effects, Mediation, and Moderation

Hyp.	Structural Path	$\beta$	SE	t-stat	p	95% BCa CI	F <sup>2</sup>	Decision
H1	PRQ → PI	0.487	0.039	12.49	< .001	[0.411, 0.563]	0.312	Supported
H2	PEP → PRQ	-0.423	0.041	10.32	< .001	[-0.503, -0.343]	0.219	Supported
H3 (med)	PEP→PRQ→PI (indirect)	-0.206	0.028	7.36	< .001	[-0.261, -0.151]	—	Supported
H4	PDSD → CS	0.512	0.037	13.84	< .001	[0.440, 0.584]	0.341	Supported
H5	CS → PI	-0.318	0.042	7.57	< .001	[-0.400, -0.236]	0.142	Supported
H6 (med)	PDSD→CS→PI (indirect)	-0.187	0.027	6.93	< .001	[-0.241, -0.133]	—	Supported
H7	ICO → PRQ	-0.389	0.040	9.73	< .001	[-0.467, -0.311]	0.192	Supported
H8	ICO → BT	-0.421	0.038	11.08	< .001	[-0.496, -0.346]	0.231	Supported
H9 (mod)	AL × PDSD → CS	0.231	0.044	5.25	= .002	[0.145, 0.317]	0.071	Supported

H10 (MGA)	Human vs. Virtual	—	—	—	—	—	—	Supported
Direct	BT → PI	0.261	0.038	6.87	< .001	[0.187, 0.335]	0.094	—

Note.  $\beta$  = standardized path coefficient; SE = bootstrap standard error; BCa = bias-corrected and accelerated confidence interval;  $f^2$  = Cohen's effect size (.02 = small; .15 = medium; .35 = large).  $R^2(PI)$  = .638;  $R^2(CS)$  = .552;  $R^2(BT)$  = .489;  $R^2(PRQ)$  = .421.  $Q^2(PI)$  = .398;  $Q^2(CS)$  = .334. SRMR = .062. Source: own elaboration.

The mediation analysis confirmed two parallel mediation pathways. For H3, the indirect effect of PEP on PI through PRQ was  $\beta = -.206$  (95% BCa CI [-.261, -.151]), with the direct effect of PEP on PI being non-significant ( $\beta = -.089$ ,  $p = .113$ ), indicating full mediation. The indirect-to-total ratio of  $.206/.295 = .699$  indicates that PRQ accounts for 69.9% of the total effect of parasocial exploitation on purchase intention. For H6, the indirect effect of PDS D on PI through CS was  $\beta = -.187$  (95% BCa CI [-.241, -.133]), with the direct effect of PDS D on PI also significant ( $\beta = -.142$ ,  $p = .032$ ), indicating partial mediation: CS accounts for 56.8% of the total PDS D → PI relationship ( $.187/.329 = .568$ ).

The moderation analysis for H9 revealed that Advertising Literacy amplifies rather than attenuates the PDS D → CS relationship. The interaction term AL × PDS D yielded  $\beta = .231$  ( $p = .002$ ), indicating that high-AL consumers exhibit stronger skepticism responses to perceived deceptive disclosure. Simple slope analysis showed that the PDS D → CS path was  $\beta = .418$  for low-AL consumers ( $M - 1$  SD) and  $\beta = .612$  for high-AL consumers ( $M + 1$  SD), confirming that more advertising-literate consumers are not merely aware of deceptive practices but exhibit more pronounced skeptical reactions when such practices are perceived.

Table 4. Multigroup Analysis: Human vs. Virtual Influencer Path Comparison ( $N = 358$ )

Path	Human (n=281) $\beta$	Virtual (n=77) $\beta$	$\Delta\beta$	p-value (permutation)
PRQ → PI	0.512	0.387	0.125	0.038*
PEP → PRQ	-0.441	-0.289	0.152	0.021*
PDS D → CS	0.498	0.567	0.069	0.241 (ns)
ICO → PRQ	-0.401	-0.312	0.089	0.087 (marginal)
ICO → BT	-0.438	-0.341	0.097	0.064 (marginal)
CS → PI	-0.331	-0.271	0.060	0.312 (ns)

Note. \*  $p < .05$ . ns = non-significant. Permutation test with 5,000 resamples. H10 supported for PRQ → PI and PEP → PRQ paths, indicating that parasocial mechanisms are stronger for human influencers. Source: own elaboration.

## 5. Discussion

This study contributes the first PLS-SEM test of a unified dark-side influencer marketing framework, revealing that harmful influencer practices operate through two theoretically distinct but empirically co-present mechanisms. The parasocial exploitation pathway (H2–H3) demonstrates that perceived strategic use of intimacy for commercial gain erodes the relational quality that is the primary driver of purchase intention — accounting for 69.9% of the PEP → PI total effect through PRQ degradation. The deceptive disclosure pathway (H4–H6) demonstrates that perceived disclosure inadequacy amplifies consumer skepticism, which in turn attenuates purchase intention — accounting for 56.8% of the PDS D → PI total effect through CS augmentation.

These findings systematically extend and quantify Ekinci's (2025) theoretical framework, providing the first effect size estimates for the parasocial exploitation pathway. The finding that PRQ accounts for 69.9% of the PEP → PI effect is particularly striking: it empirically demonstrates that the consumer harm from parasocial exploitation operates not through a simple negative

attitude toward the influencer, but through the degradation of the relational mechanism that constitutes the unique commercial value of influencer marketing. In other words, the practices most harmful to consumers are precisely those that undermine the psychological mechanism that makes influencer marketing commercially valuable — a structural contradiction with significant implications for long-run industry sustainability.

The moderation result for Advertising Literacy (H9) challenges the intuitive prediction that literacy protects consumers by reducing persuasion. Instead, AL amplifies skeptical responses: high-AL consumers who perceive deceptive disclosure react with disproportionately stronger skepticism ( $\beta = .612$  vs.  $.418$  for low-AL consumers). This finding is consistent with the Persuasion Knowledge Model's prediction that knowledge activation does not reduce persuasion per se, but changes its quality and direction. For regulatory design, this implies that literacy programs should not be assessed solely by their ability to reduce brand attitudes or purchase intention, but by their capacity to generate proportionate skepticism responses to objectively deceptive content — a more demanding and more appropriate outcome metric.

The MGA results for influencer type are theoretically consequential. The parasocial exploitation and relationship quality mechanisms are significantly stronger for human influencers than virtual influencers ( $\Delta\beta = .125$  for PRQ  $\rightarrow$  PI;  $\Delta\beta = .152$  for PEP  $\rightarrow$  PRQ), suggesting that the architecture of parasocial exploitation is more elaborate — and the resulting harm potentially more consequential — in human influencer contexts. Virtual influencers, by contrast, show comparable deceptive disclosure skepticism effects ( $\Delta\beta = .069$ , ns), suggesting that regulatory disclosure requirements should apply equivalently across influencer types.

## 6. Conclusions

This study has empirically validated a dual-pathway model of dark-side influencer marketing effects in a multinational Spanish-speaking sample of  $N = 358$  active influencer followers. The findings demonstrate that parasocial exploitation (operating through PRQ degradation) and deceptive sponsorship disclosure (operating through CS augmentation) independently and cumulatively attenuate purchase intention, with the former pathway accounting for larger proportional variance (63.8% of PI variance explained by the full model). Digital advertising literacy amplifies rather than eliminates consumer skepticism, reinforcing the value of transparency-promoting regulation. Platform-differentiated governance and mandatory disclosure enforcement emerge as the most evidence-grounded policy priorities.

## 7. Limitations and Future Research

Limitations include: the cross-sectional design precluding causal temporal inference; the focus on purchase intention as a proximal outcome rather than actual purchase behavior (a gap highlighted by Tripopsakul & Hoonsopon, 2025); the potential for social desirability bias in skepticism self-reports; and the sampling restriction to Spanish-speaking markets that limits generalizability to other linguistic and regulatory contexts. Future research should employ longitudinal designs tracking follower-influencer relationship dynamics over time, incorporate behavioral outcome measures validated against actual purchase records, and test platform-level governance interventions as field experiments.

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