

The Mediating Role of Parasocial Relationships in the Influence of Intimate Source Disclosure on Purchase Intention in China's Luxury Cosmetics Market

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of Intimate Source Disclosure (ISD) on purchase intention among Chinese urban women in the luxury cosmetics market, with a specific focus on the mediating role of Parasocial Relationships (PSR). As social media influencers (SMIs) increasingly shape consumer decisions, concerns have emerged regarding the authenticity and transparency of brand-influencer collaborations. To address this, a cross-sectional survey of 385 female consumers in Beijing was conducted, and the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results reveal that ISD significantly enhances PSR, which subsequently exerts a strong positive influence on consumers' purchase intentions. These findings underscore the importance of transparent self-disclosure in fostering consumer trust and relational closeness. The study provides both theoretical implications for understanding mediated communication in influencer marketing and practical guidance for brands seeking to enhance campaign effectiveness in the luxury cosmetics sector.

Keywords: Intimate Source Disclosure (ISD), Parasocial Relationships (PSR), Purchase Intention (PI)

Introduction

The Chinese luxury cosmetics market has experienced remarkable growth, fueled by rising disposable incomes, shifting consumer preferences, and an increased focus on self-care (Zhang et al., 2023). Urban women aged 20-40, who are increasingly active on social media and influenced by influencers, represent a rapidly growing consumer segment in the luxury cosmetics market in China (Li & Su, 2023). Among this demographic, social media influencers (SMIs) have played a pivotal role in shaping purchasing behaviors. SMIs, who are trusted

figures on social media platforms, engage followers and drive consumer decisions through endorsements and collaborations (He et al., 2022).

However, the effectiveness of influencer marketing has come under scrutiny due to concerns about transparency, particularly the disclosure of paid promotions (Lu et al., 2022). As the digital landscape prioritizes authenticity and trust, influencers' transparency regarding commercial relationships has become a critical factor in the success of their campaigns. Intimate Source Disclosure (ISD)—the extent to which influencers disclose commercial partnerships—is now recognized as a key element in determining the success of marketing efforts (Li et al., 2023).

Recent studies highlight the importance of transparency in building trust between influencers and their followers. Clear disclosures about paid partnerships enhance credibility and reinforce the authenticity of influencer content (Huang & Su, 2021). On the other hand, a lack of disclosure can undermine trust, leading to skepticism and reduced effectiveness in marketing campaigns (Ahearne et al., 2021).

ISD also plays a crucial role in the development of parasocial relationships (PSRs), the emotional bonds that followers form with influencers. Research shows that when influencers disclose their commercial relationships, they foster stronger PSRs by increasing perceived authenticity, which enhances follower trust and emotional connection (Djafarova & Bowden, 2021). These relationships significantly impact consumer behavior, particularly in the context of luxury products, where purchasing decisions are often influenced by emotional bonds and social influence (Chekima et al., 2023). In the luxury market, influencers act not just as promoters, but as aspirational figures whose endorsements help followers feel closer to a desired lifestyle (He et al., 2022).

Given the high commercial stakes and emotional engagement involved in the luxury cosmetics industry, understanding how transparency and emotional connection influence consumer decision-making is not only timely but critically important. This topic holds particular significance for marketers, brands, and policy makers seeking to design ethical and effective influencer strategies in China's rapidly evolving digital economy.

Moreover, the insights generated from this study can benefit influencer marketing professionals and consumer behavior researchers by offering a deeper understanding of how psychological mechanisms like PSR mediate marketing effectiveness. For consumers, especially young urban women, this research highlights the dynamics of trust and authenticity that shape their purchasing decisions in digital environments.

The topic is also relevant for regulators and platform designers aiming to balance commercial freedom with ethical transparency in online advertising. By identifying the psychological and behavioral outcomes of ISD, this study helps delineate best practices for influencer disclosure in luxury product markets.

This study aims to investigate two key objectives. First, it will explore the direct effects of Intimate Source Disclosure (ISD) on Parasocial Relationships (PSR). Second, it will examine the mediating role of PSR in translating ISD into purchase intention within China's luxury

cosmetics market. By addressing these objectives, this study offers theoretical contributions to communication and marketing literature while delivering actionable insights for brand communication and influencer campaign design. By examining these dynamics, this research will contribute to understanding how influencer transparency and emotional connections shape purchasing behavior in a highly competitive market.

Literature Review

The Effect of ISD on Purchase Intention

Intimate source disclosure (ISD) has become a key component in online marketing, as it significantly impacts consumer trust and purchase intention. Transparency in disclosing commercial relationships fosters a sense of honesty and authenticity, which enhances the credibility of the influencer (Wright & Macrae, 2007). This, in turn, increases the likelihood of followers trusting their product recommendations (Hanzaee & Adibifard, 2012). Research has shown that consumers are more inclined to trust and act on recommendations when the influencer openly reveals any paid partnerships or sponsorships (Jamieson & Bass, 1989). This relationship is particularly vital in an environment where consumers are often skeptical of online promotions (Lu et al., 2022).

Marbach et al. (2021) found that ISD positively influences consumers' perception of an influencer's authenticity, which leads to greater trust and a higher likelihood of acting on the influencer's product recommendations. When followers feel confident in the influencer's honesty, they are more likely to trust the product endorsement and consider making a purchase. The effectiveness of ISD on purchase intention has been widely recognized in the literature, highlighting its role in reducing consumer skepticism and increasing engagement with recommended products.

H1: ISD positively influences purchase intention.

The Effect of ISD on PSR

ISD also plays a crucial role in shaping parasocial relationships (PSR), which refers to the one-sided emotional bonds that consumers develop with media figures like influencers. Transparency in disclosing the nature of the relationship between the influencer and the brand can increase followers' perceived authenticity, thus strengthening the emotional connection. When influencers clearly state their commercial affiliations, followers are more likely to feel that the influencer is trustworthy, leading to a more profound PSR. This heightened emotional connection can significantly influence consumer behavior, as followers tend to emulate the behavior and purchasing decisions of influencers they feel emotionally connected to.

Recent studies underscore the importance of ISD in enhancing PSR. For instance, Pentina et al. (2022) found that the disclosure of influencer marketing practices significantly increases the level of trust followers place in influencers, thereby strengthening the PSR. This emotional attachment fosters stronger bonds, which are crucial in turning followers' loyalty into tangible consumer actions.

H2: ISD positively influences PSR.

Mediating Role of PSR

PSR is increasingly recognized as a mediator in the relationship between ISD and purchase intention. When influencers engage in transparent source disclosure, they foster a deeper connection with their followers, which enhances trust and credibility. This connection then mediates the impact of ISD on purchase intention. Ashraf et al. (2023) highlight the mediating role of PSR, noting that influencers' authenticity, as perceived by their followers, can significantly affect their purchasing decisions. When followers feel a stronger emotional bond with the influencer, they are more likely to trust the influencer's product recommendations, leading to an increased likelihood of making a purchase. This mediating effect emphasizes the importance of maintaining transparency in influencer marketing.

The relationship between ISD, PSR, and purchase intention has been corroborated by several studies, including Chung et al. (2023), which found that PSR acts as a bridge, enhancing the effect of ISD on purchase intention. In this context, ISD not only fosters a deeper connection with followers but also amplifies the influence of influencers' recommendations.

H3: PSR positively influences purchase intention.

H4: PSR positively mediates the relationship between ISD and purchase intention.

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed (see Figure 1).

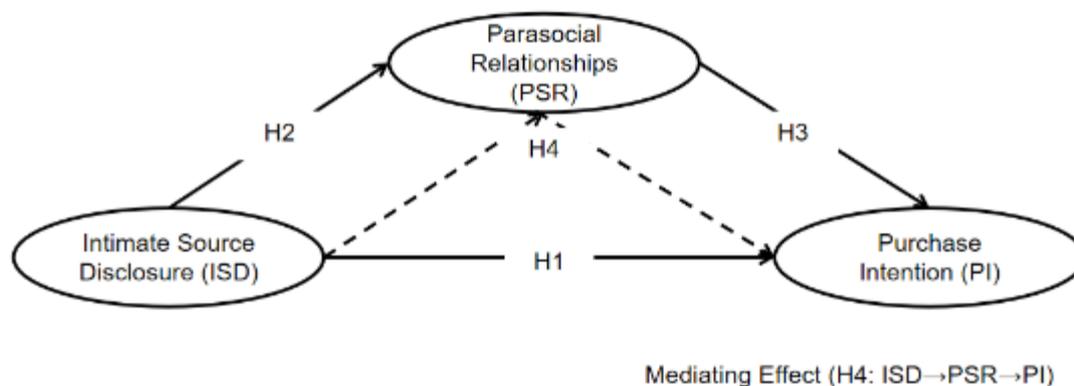


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative survey design to investigate the relationships between Influencer Source Disclosure (ISD), Parasocial Relationships (PSR), and purchase intention among urban women in Beijing, China. The research focused on women aged 20–55 years, a demographic central to China's luxury cosmetics market. Data were collected from 385 participants. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling at high-end shopping malls in Beijing, such as Wangfujing Mall and Sanlitun Taikoo Li. The eligibility criteria included active social media usage (≥5 hours per week on platforms like Weibo) and a recent interest in luxury cosmetics purchases.

The survey utilized a self-administered questionnaire in Mandarin and English to ensure accessibility. The questionnaire incorporated validated scales from previous studies, including

Labrecque's (2014) PSR scale and Hanzae and Adibifard's (2012) purchase intention scale. For measuring Influencer Source Disclosure (ISD), we adapted existing scales from previous studies on transparency in influencer marketing. SMI credibility was also validated by referencing Weibo's Top List and performing additional checks on social media platforms to ensure the influencers' authenticity and relevance. Participants were screened to ensure that they met specific criteria, including strong engagement with social media, particularly Weibo, and a preference for luxury cosmetics.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method, targeting individuals with a clear inclination toward social media and cosmetic consumption (Ashraf et al., 2023). The screening process involved identifying women who regularly engaged with social media platforms and had an expressed interest in luxury cosmetics. Upon arriving at the mall, potential respondents were approached and invited to participate. They were asked to complete the questionnaire on-site, and their responses were collected after completion.

To analyze the data, descriptive statistics were computed using SPSS 28.0 to summarize the demographic information and distribution of responses. The relationships between variables were examined using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4.0 with 5,000 bootstrap iterations to assess path coefficients and their statistical significance. The measurement model was assessed for convergent validity ($AVE > 0.5$) and discriminant validity ($HTMT < 0.85$), and mediation analysis was conducted to evaluate the indirect effects of PSR, supported by bias-corrected confidence intervals.

Results

The demographic profile of the 385 respondents reveals that most were between 30-39 years (40.0%) and 20-29 years (29.9%), with fewer in the 40-49 years (20.0%) and 50-55 years (10.1%) age groups. The majority held a Bachelor's Degree (67.8%), followed by Master's Degree holders (22.1%), indicating a highly educated sample. Most respondents were Married (62.3%), while a smaller portion were Single (23.9%), Widowed (6.2%), or Divorced (7.5%). In terms of occupation, a significant portion were Professionals (42.1%) and Executive/Managers (29.1%), with Self-employed individuals making up 25.7%. The majority earned between ¥8,001 - ¥15,000 (40.3%) or ¥15,001 - ¥25,000 (37.2%), while a smaller group earned Above ¥25,000 (13.5%) or Below ¥8,000 (9.1%). Overall, the sample consists primarily of young, educated, and economically active women, fitting the profile of consumers in the luxury cosmetics market. Table 1 shows the demographic information of this study.

Table 1
Demographic Information (N=385)

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Age	20-29 years	115	29.9%
	30-39 years	154	40.0%
	40-49 years	77	20.0%
	50-55 years	39	10.1%
Education	Diploma	38	9.9%
	Bachelor's Degree	261	67.8%
	Master's Degree	85	22.1%
	Doctorate Degree	1	0.3%
Marital Status	Single	92	23.9%
	Married	240	62.3%
	Widowed	24	6.2%
	Divorced	29	7.5%
Occupation	Unemployed	12	3.1%
	Professionals	162	42.1%
	Executive/Managers	112	29.1%
	Self-employment	99	25.7%
Income Level (RMB)	Below ¥8,000	35	9.1%
	¥8,001 - ¥15,000	155	40.3%
	¥15,001 - ¥25,000	143	37.2%
	More than ¥25,000	52	13.5%

The results of the hypothesis testing show that all the proposed hypotheses were supported.

H1 was supported with a strong positive correlation ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of Influencer Source Disclosure (ISD) lead to a significant increase in purchase intention among the participants. H2 was also supported ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that transparency in influencer marketing strengthens the parasocial relationships (PSR) between influencers and their followers, which enhances emotional connection and trust. H3 was confirmed ($\beta = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$). The analysis showed that a stronger PSR with influencers leads to a greater likelihood of purchase intention, emphasizing the importance of emotional bonds in influencing consumer behavior.

The results of H4 show that Parasocial Relationships (PSR) significantly mediate the relationship between Influencer Source Disclosure (ISD) and purchase intention. The direct effect of ISD on purchase intention is strong ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), meaning that transparency in influencer marketing directly increases purchase intention. However, the indirect effect through PSR ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$) reveals that when influencers disclose their commercial partnerships, it strengthens the emotional bond with followers, which in turn increases the likelihood of purchase (see Table 2). This confirms that PSR not only enhances the direct impact of ISD on purchase intention but also plays a crucial role in driving consumer behavior.

Table 2

Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path Relationship	β (Beta)	SE	t-value	p-value	f ² Effect Size	Decision
H1	ISD → Purchase Intention	0.68	0.05	13.60	0.00**	0.46	Supported
H2	ISD → Parasocial Relationship (PSR)	0.65	0.06	10.83	0.00**	0.41	Supported
H3	PSR → Purchase Intention	0.72	0.04	18.00	0.00***	0.52	Supported
H4	ISD → PSR → Purchase Intention (Indirect)	0.31	0.03	10.33	0.00**	–	Supported

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Finding and Discussion

This study highlights the significant role of Influencer Source Disclosure (ISD) in shaping purchase intention in the context of China's luxury cosmetics market. The results suggest that when influencers disclose their commercial relationships clearly and transparently, they foster trust with their followers, which in turn increases the likelihood of followers making a purchase. Transparency in marketing is essential in an environment where consumers are increasingly sensitive to authenticity and credibility. In particular, in the luxury sector, where brand reputation is crucial, consumers are more likely to trust influencers who are transparent about their paid partnerships, making ISD a key factor in driving consumer behavior (Leite & Baptista, 2021).

Moreover, the study revealed that ISD not only affects purchase intention directly but also strengthens the parasocial relationship (PSR) between influencers and their followers. By being transparent, influencers create a sense of closeness and authenticity, which enhances the emotional bond that followers feel toward them. These parasocial relationships are vital in influencing purchase decisions, as consumers are more likely to act on the recommendations of influencers they feel emotionally connected to. In the luxury cosmetics market, where status and self-expression are often tied to purchasing decisions, the emotional connection with an influencer can significantly influence consumers' willingness to purchase (Breves et al., 2021).

The mediating role of parasocial relationships in this context is also noteworthy. While ISD directly boosts purchase intention, the emotional bonds established through parasocial relationships further amplify this effect. Followers who feel emotionally connected to an influencer are more likely to trust their endorsements and make purchases. This suggests that parasocial relationships do not merely act as a byproduct of influencer marketing but as a crucial mechanism that translates transparency into tangible consumer behavior. This finding aligns with the idea that in influencer marketing, especially in the luxury cosmetics industry,

emotional connection and trust are more important than the sheer number of followers or promotional content (Jansom & Pongsakornrungsilp, 2021).

The study demonstrates that transparency in influencer marketing, particularly through Intimate Source Disclosure (ISD), is key to building trust with followers. This transparency not only directly enhances purchase intention but also strengthens parasocial relationships, which in turn amplifies the purchasing behavior (Koay et al., 2023). These findings suggest that brands should prioritize partnerships with influencers who maintain transparent commercial relationships to foster deeper emotional connections with their audiences. Emotional bonds, not just promotional content, are central to successful influencer marketing in the luxury cosmetics market.

Limitations and Conclusion

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations must be considered. First, the sample used in this research consisted predominantly of young, educated, and economically active women, which is characteristic of the primary consumer base for luxury cosmetics. However, this sample may not fully represent the broader demographic, such as men or older consumers, who may also influence or engage with luxury cosmetics brands (Leite & Baptista, 2021). Future research could benefit from a more diverse sample to ensure the findings are generalizable to a wider consumer population .

Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which introduces the possibility of social desirability bias. Respondents may have overstated their trust in influencers or purchase intentions, which could affect the accuracy of the findings. Incorporating objective measures of consumer behavior (Gopakumar & Dananjayan, 2024), such as actual purchase data, would provide more robust insights into the impact of ISD and parasocial relationships on purchase intentions.

Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to draw definitive conclusions about causal relationships. The data collected reflects a snapshot in time, and while the study identifies associations between ISD, parasocial relationships, and purchase intentions, it does not establish a cause-and-effect link (Koay et al., 2023). Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of transparency and emotional bonds on consumer behavior.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of Influencer Source Disclosure in shaping purchase intentions within the Chinese luxury cosmetics market. By increasing transparency, influencers can foster parasocial relationships, which enhance trust and emotional connection, thereby driving consumer purchases. These findings have significant implications for both brands and influencers, suggesting that cultivating authentic and transparent relationships with followers is key to achieving successful influencer marketing campaigns (Taher et al., 2022). Brands should consider not only the influencer's reach but also their ability to engage followers on an emotional level and maintain transparency in their marketing practices. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the long-term impact of parasocial relationships and the role of transparency in different consumer segments.

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