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Dual Credibility Pathways in Cross-Domain Influencer Endorsement

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Abstract. Influencer marketing has a significant influence on consumers' attitudes and willingness to buy. However, when influencers endorse products outside their usual content domain, followers may doubt whether the influencers are credible enough and have the corresponding knowledge. This study examines how parasocial relationship and perceived quality of product-related arguments are related to followers' purchase intention in cross-domain influencer endorsement. Drawing upon source credibility theory, this study presents a dual-pathway model: Perceived trustworthiness plays a mediating role in the relationship between parasocial relationship and purchase intention, while perceived expertise mediates the relationship between argument quality and purchase intention. Through a scenario-based survey of 150 social media users, SPSS was used for analyzing relevant data. The findings showed that parasocial relationship was positively related to perceived trustworthiness, and perceived quality of product-related arguments was positively associated with perceived expertise. In addition, perceived trustworthiness mediated the relationship between parasocial relationship and purchase intention, while perceived expertise mediated the relationship between argument quality and purchase intention. These results suggest that cross-domain influencer endorsement can be explained through two credibility-based pathways. Followers not only rely on the relationship with the influencers, but also on the quality of product arguments to form purchase intentions.

Keywords: cross-domain influencer endorsement, parasocial relationship, argument quality, source credibility

1. Introduction

As social media continues to develop rapidly, influencer marketing has become an increasingly important form of marketing strategy. In influencer marketing, social media influencers recommend products, services, or activities to followers with the intention of influencing the audience's perception and behavior, and eventually converting them into consumers [1, 2]. As followers rely more and more on influencers to obtain product information and advice, it becomes especially important to figure out how relationship clues and information clues shape followers' credibility judgements and willingness to buy.

Studies have shown that followers' reaction to influencer endorsements may be affected by both relationship and information factors. One important relationship factor is the parasocial relationship

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between the influencers and followers. Studies have found that this relationship can enhance the effect of influencer marketing and improve the willingness of followers to buy [3, 4]. In addition, followers may also judge the quality of product-related arguments in the endorsement. When the product arguments provided by influencers are "informative, helpful, valuable, and persuasive", followers are more likely to think that the endorsement is credible and valuable for reference [5].

However, influencer endorsements are not always limited to product fields that the influencers are expert in. In cross-domain endorsement, influencers may recommend products outside their professional field, which will make followers doubt whether the influencers are reliable enough in this product category. In this case, followers may judge the endorsement from different dimensions of source credibility, especially perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertise [6]. These two credibility dimensions are theoretically related, and they represent two different but complementary ways for followers to reduce the uncertainty of cross-domain endorsement. Perceived trustworthiness reflects whether followers think that influencers are credible and trustworthy. And perceived expertise reflects whether followers think that the influencers have enough knowledge and ability about the products they endorse. Therefore, relationship factors and information factors are likely to shape followers' evaluation of influencers and their endorsements together.

Although prior studies have focused on the role of parasocial relationship in influencer marketing, less is known about how relationship factors and information factors are related to purchase intention through different source credibility dimensions in cross-domain endorsement. Specifically, this study examines two connected pathways in cross-domain influencer endorsement: The relationship-based pathway connects parasocial relationship with purchase intention through perceived trustworthiness, and the information-based pathway connects perceived quality of product-related arguments with purchase intention through perceived expertise. Through a scenario-based survey for social media users, this study explores how followers judge the credibility of influencers when the products endorsed by influencers do not match their usual content fields. Therefore, this study focuses on the following research question: In cross-domain influencer endorsement, how are parasocial relationship and perceived quality of product-related arguments associated with followers' purchase intention through perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertise?

2. Literature review

2.1. Influencer marketing and cross-domain endorsement

Influencer marketing refers to working with individuals who have strong influence on the internet to shape the attitude and behavior of the audience [1]. It relies heavily on product recommendations and endorsements on social media platforms [2]. Compared with messages delivered directly by advertisers, influencers' recommendations may be regarded as more genuine and trustworthy because influencers often build more intimate relationships with followers.

The impact of influencer endorsements may rely on the fit between the influencer and the endorsed product. The effectiveness of influencer endorsements may depend strongly on the match between endorsed products and influencers. The match of influencers and brands can enhance perceived trustworthiness, perceived expertise, and advertising effect [7]. Therefore, cross-domain endorsement is a situation that needs to be examined in depth, because the evaluation of such endorsements by followers is likely to be different from those endorsements that match the usual fields of influencers.

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2.2. Parasocial relationship and perceived trustworthiness

A parasocial relationship describes the sense of closeness and intimacy between followers and influencers through repeated exposure and interaction with influencer content [3, 4]. The interactive characteristics of social media may enhance followers' sense of intimacy, because followers can repeatedly watch, comment, and respond to the content of influencers. Over time, these interactions may make followers feel more familiar with influencers and more willing to believe their recommendations.

Previous studies have shown that parasocial relationships with the influencers can not only improve the willingness to purchase, but also reduce persuasion knowledge's negative impacts [3]. More recent evidence points out that parasocial relationships can build consumer trust, which in turn promotes the willingness to buy [8]. In cross-domain endorsement, followers may not be sure whether the influencer is qualified to recommend the product. In such situations, trustworthiness may become particularly important. Based on this, this study proposes the following hypothesis: H1: Parasocial relationship with the influencer is positively related to perceived trustworthiness of the influencer.

2.3. Argument quality and perceived expertise

In addition to relationship-based factor, followers may also evaluate influencer endorsements based on the perceived quality of product-related arguments. Argument quality represents an important informational cue in persuasion [5]. In endorsement contexts, highly persuasive arguments and product fit can contribute to perceptions of expertise and trustworthiness [9].

Perceived expertise describes how followers evaluate influencers' knowledge, experience, skills, and qualifications within a specific product domain [10]. Since influencers often build their reputation around specific niche domains, they may only be seen as credible mainly when the endorsed product fits their usual area of content. In cross-domain endorsement, followers may be more likely to question whether the influencer has sufficient expertise to recommend the product. Therefore, when an influencer provides "informative, helpful, valuable, and persuasive" product-related arguments, followers may perceive the influencer as more knowledgeable in the endorsed product category [5]. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis: H2: Perceived quality of product-related arguments is positively related to perceived expertise of the influencer.

2.4. Source credibility and dual-pathway model

Source credibility framework identifies trustworthiness and expertise as two key dimensions of endorser credibility [6]. Recent research also indicates that influencers' perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertise are positively associated with followers' purchase intentions [11]. Influencers may function not only as creators of trends but also as reliable information sources whose trustworthiness can shape followers' purchase intentions [12]. Similarly, previous study has also shown that trustworthiness can influence perceived argument quality and purchase intention [13]. Therefore, this study proposes two mediation hypotheses: H3: Perceived trustworthiness mediates the relationship between PSR with the influencer and followers' purchase intention. H4: Perceived expertise mediates the relationship between perceived quality of product-related arguments and followers' purchase intention.

Scholars have done a lot of research to prove that parasocial relationship, source credibility, and argument quality all play vital roles in influencer marketing, but several gaps still remain. First,

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many studies treat the credibility of influencers as a whole concept, while less attention has been paid to different dimensions of credibility. Second, the relationship between parasocial relationships and different dimensions of credibility needs to be further cleared. Although existing research shows that parasocial relationships can enhance trust and purchase intention, there is not much discussion about whether it is more related to credibility than to expertise. Third, the role of expertise may vary depending on the endorsement situation. In cross-domain endorsement, expertise may become more prominent because followers will doubt whether influencers are qualified to recommend products outside their usual domain. Finally, followers who have a strong parasocial relationship with influencers may rely less on the match between influencers and brands when evaluating credibility, which implies that relationship clues and information clues may operate differently through different mechanisms [7].

In cross-domain influencer endorsement, followers may feel uncertain because the endorsed product does not fully match the usual content field of influencers. In order to judge whether the endorsement is credible, followers may rely on both relationship clues and information clues. The relationship clues come from the long-term parasocial relationship between followers and influencers, which helps them judge whether influencers are trustworthy. The information clues come from the quality of product-related arguments given in the endorsement. High-quality arguments may help followers judge whether the influencers have sufficient professional knowledge in the endorsed product categories.

Therefore, the two pathways proposed in this study are connected through source credibility, and they are complementary rather than independent. As for the relationship pathway, parasocial relationship is expected to be positively related to perceived trustworthiness, and perceived trustworthiness is expected to mediate the correlation between parasocial relationship and consumers' willingness to purchase. As for the information pathway, perceived quality of product-related arguments is expected to be positively related to perceived expertise, and perceived expertise is expected to mediate the relationship between perceived quality of product-related arguments and consumers' willingness to purchase. By analyzing these two pathways, this study aims to clarify how different credibility dimensions play a role in cross-domain influencer endorsements.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and participants

This study applied a scenario-based survey design. This design allowed participants to evaluate a standardized cross-domain endorsement situation based on the influencers they actually followed. Participants were required be social media users, followed at least one influencer, and had the experience of watching influencer content or product recommendations. Through convenient sampling of online questionnaires, a total of 150 valid responses were collected.

3.2. Scenario procedure

Participants were first asked to recall an influencer they regularly followed and filled in the influencer's account name. After that, they selected the main content domain of the influencer from a list of common social media content categories. Then, the questionnaire system randomly assigned a product category that was not in the selected field to construct a cross-domain endorsement scenario. This procedure not only ensured that the scenario was based on the real social media experience of the participants, but also systematically created a mismatch between the usual field of influencers

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and the category of endorsement. They then completed the parasocial relationship items based on this influencer. After that, participants read a cross-domain endorsement scenario in which the recalled influencer recommended a product outside his or her usual content domain. Following the scenario, participants answered questions measuring perceived quality of product-related arguments, perceived trustworthiness, perceived expertise, and purchase intention. Participants' demographic information was gathered at the end of the questionnaire.

Two scenario check items were used to evaluate whether participants regarded the scenario as a cross-domain endorsement. A scenario engagement item was also included to assess whether participants carefully imagined the cross-domain endorsement scenario when answering the questionnaire.

3.3. Measures

All constructs were measured using items adapted from established scales in previous studies and slightly modified to fit cross-domain influencer endorsement. Five-point Likert scales were used to measure all items (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Parasocial relationship was measured before the scenario, using five items adapted from previous study [14]. The items assessed participants' sense of closeness, familiarity, and identification with the influencer.

Perceived quality of product-related arguments was measured after the scenario using four items adapted from previous study [5]. The items assessed the extent to which participants regarded the product arguments of influencers as informative, helpful, valuable, and persuasive.

Perceived trustworthiness was measured after the scenario using five items adapted from source credibility scale [6]. The items assessed whether the influencer was regarded as dependable, truthful, dependable, sincere, and trustworthy.

Perceived expertise was measured after the scenario using five items adapted from source credibility scale [6]. The items assessed whether the influencer was regarded as knowledgeable, experienced, qualified, and skilled in the product category endorsed.

Purchase intention was measured after the scenario using four items adapted from previous study [15]. The items assessed the willingness of participants to try, buy, and search for the recommended product.

3.4. Data analysis

SPSS was used to analyze the data. The reliability of each scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to evaluate the internal consistency. Composite scores were then created by averaging the items for each construct. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the basic associations among parasocial relationship, perceived argument quality, perceived trustworthiness, perceived expertise, and purchase intention.

To test the proposed hypotheses, the PROCESS macro for SPSS was used to conduct mediation analysis. The first model examined whether perceived trustworthiness mediated the relationship between parasocial relationship and the willingness to purchase. The second model examined whether perceived expertise mediated the relationship between perceived quality of product-related arguments and purchase intention. Indirect effects were tested using 5000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals.

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4. Results

4.1. Scenario checks and reliability

The results of scenario check showed that participants generally perceived the scenario as a cross-domain endorsement. As shown in Table 1, the mean score for the item "The product did not match the influencer's usual content domain" was higher than the midpoint of the scale, M = 4.23, SD = 0.64. Similarly, the mean score for the item "The recommendation represented a cross-domain endorsement" was also higher than the scale midpoint, M = 4.15, SD = 0.67. These results indicated that participants generally understood the scenario as a cross-domain influencer endorsement.

Table 1. Scenario check results

Item	M	SD
The product did not match the influencer's usual content domain	4.23	0.64
The recommendation represented a cross-domain endorsement	4.15	0.67

Cronbach's alpha was used to conduct reliability analysis. Table 2 presents the reliability and descriptive statics for the main variables. The internal consistency values were acceptable for parasocial relationship, perceived trustworthiness, and perceived expertise. The reliability value for perceived quality of product-related arguments was slightly below the conventional 0.70 threshold but was close to acceptable levels. The mean score for perceived trustworthiness was the highest among the main variables, M = 4.01, while perceived expertise had the relatively lowest mean score, M = 3.74. However, all mean scores were above the scale midpoint of 3, suggesting that participants' overall evaluations were generally positive.

Table 2. Reliability and descriptive statistics

Variable	Cronbach's α	M	SD
Parasocial relationship	0.735	3.90	0.61
Perceived quality of product-related arguments	0.682	3.87	0.62
Perceived trustworthiness	0.787	4.01	0.59
Perceived expertise	0.821	3.74	0.75
Purchase intention	0.712	3.89	0.62

4.2. Correlation analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the correlations among parasocial relationship, perceived quality of product-related arguments, perceived trustworthiness, perceived expertise, and purchase intention. As shown in Table 3, parasocial relationship was positively correlated with perceived trustworthiness, $r = 0.595$, $p<.001$, supporting H1. Perceived quality of product-related arguments was positively correlated with perceived expertise, $r = 0.755$, $p<.001$, supporting H2. Purchase intention was also positively correlated with perceived trustworthiness, $r = 0.703$, $p<.001$, and perceived expertise, $r = 0.709$, $p<.001$.

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Table 3. Pearson correlations among main variables

Variable	Parasocial relationship	Perceived quality of product-related arguments	Perceived trustworthiness	Perceived expertise	Purchase intention
Parasocial relationship	—				
Perceived quality of product-related arguments	.696*	—			
Perceived trustworthiness	.595*	.652*	—		
Perceived expertise	.567*	.755*	.655*	—	
Purchase intention	.602*	.765*	.703*	.709*	—

Note. N=150, *p < .001

4.3. Mediation analysis

The PROCESS macro for SPSS with 5000 bootstrap samples was used to conduct mediation analysis. The results are shown in Table 4. The first mediation model tested whether perceived trustworthiness mediated the relationship between parasocial relationship and purchase intention. The indirect effect was significant, effect = 0.352, 95% bootstrap CI [0.207, 0.534]. Since the confidence interval did not include zero, perceived trustworthiness statistically mediated the relationship between parasocial relationship and the willingness to purchase. Hence, H3 was supported.

The second mediation model tested whether perceived expertise mediated the relationship between perceived quality of product-related arguments and purchase intention. The indirect effect was significant, effect = 0.709, 95% bootstrap CI [0.564, 0.867]. Since the confidence interval did not include zero, perceived expertise statistically mediated the relationship between perceived quality of product-related arguments and purchase intention. Hence, H4 was supported.

Table 4. Mediation analysis results

Model	Path	Effect	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Result
1	Parasocial relationship-Perceived trustworthiness-Purchase intention	0.352	0.207	0.534	Supported
2	Perceived quality of product-related arguments-Perceived expertise- Purchase intention	0.709	0.564	0.867	Supported

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5. Discussion

5.1. Overall interpretation of the results

This study examined how relationship clues and information clues are related to followers' purchase intention in cross-domain influencer endorsements. Overall, the findings supported all four hypotheses. Parasocial relationship was positively associated with perceived trustworthiness, while perceived quality of product-related arguments was positively related to perceived expertise. Both perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertise mediated the corresponding pathways.

The results also show that followers do not rely only on a certain type of clue when evaluating cross-domain recommendations. Instead, they seem to use the existing relationship with influencers to judge their trustworthiness, and use the quality of product-related arguments to evaluate their expertise. Therefore, parasocial relationship and argument quality play a role through different dimensions of credibility respectively, but both are connected to followers' purchase intention. This provides a clearer understanding of how followers react when influencers recommend products outside their usual domain.

5.2. Relationship-based pathway: parasocial relationship and trustworthiness

Regarding H1 and H3, the results suggested that the parasocial relationship between influencers and followers is closely related to followers' perceived trustworthiness in cross-domain endorsement. The positive correlation between parasocial relationship and perceived trustworthiness indicates that followers who sense closer to influencers are more possible to think that the influencers are credible. Moreover, the mediating role of perceived trustworthiness shows that parasocial relationship is indirectly associated with purchase intention by improving credibility.

The finding is particularly relevant in cross-domain endorsement. When influencers recommend products outside their usual domain, followers may not be sure whether they know enough about the product. In such situations, followers may rely more on the previously established relationship and the judgement of the trustworthiness of influencers. If followers feel that influencers are reliable, they may show greater willingness to accept this recommendation. Therefore, perceived trustworthiness may have an important influence in shaping the willingness to buy in cross-domain endorsement.

5.3. Information-based pathway: argument quality and expertise

Regarding H2 and H4, the findings suggest that cross-domain endorsement depends not only on the relationship, but also on the quality of product-related arguments. There is a positive relationship between the perceived quality of product-related arguments and perceived expertise, which shows that when the recommendation arguments are rich in information, useful, valuable, and persuasive, followers are more possible to think that influencers are knowledgeable about the endorsed products.

The mediating role of perceived expertise further shows that high-quality product-related arguments may enhance the willingness to buy by improving followers' perception of the expertise of influencers. This finding is also meaningful in cross-domain endorsement. Since influencers may not be naturally regarded as experts when recommending products outside their usual domain, high-quality product arguments may help to make up for the lack of expertise. A clear and convincing explanation may reduce the uncertainty of followers and make the endorsement more credible.

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5.4. Practical implications and limitations

The findings provide some practical insights for both influencers and brands. For influencers, it is very important to maintain a relationship of trust with followers, especially when endorsing products outside their usual fields. However, a strong parasocial relationship alone may not be enough. When promoting cross-domain products, influencers also need to provide clear, informative, and convincing product-related arguments to strengthen their perceived expertise. For brands, choosing an influencer should not only look at the popularity or the number of fans, but also consider whether the influencer has established trust with followers and whether the influencer can give high-quality product-related arguments.

There are also several limitations in this study. First, a scenario-based imagined survey design was used. Although this made the endorsement situation relevant to the individual, the imagined scenarios cannot completely reflect the real social media environment. Second, the dependent variable was the purchase intention rather than the actual purchase behavior, so these findings should only be regarded as evidence of relevance. Third, the small sample size and the use of convenience sample limited the generalization of the findings.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how parasocial relationship and perceived quality of product-related arguments are associated with followers' purchase intention in cross-domain influencer endorsement. The results showed that parasocial relationship was positively related to perceived trustworthiness, while perceived quality of product-related arguments was positively related to perceived expertise. Moreover, perceived trustworthiness mediated the relationship between parasocial relationship and purchase intention, while perceived expertise mediated the relationship between perceived quality of product-related arguments and purchase intention. Overall, the results suggest that followers evaluate cross-domain influencer endorsements through two connected pathways: a relationship-based pathway and an information-based pathway.

This study explains how followers react when influencers recommend products outside their usual content domain. The findings suggest that the effect of cross-domain endorsement depends both on the emotional connection between followers and influencers, and on the quality of the product information in the recommendation. For influencers, the results highlight the importance of providing high-quality product arguments while maintaining the trust of followers. For brands, when choosing influencers for cross-domain endorsements, they should not only focus on the number of fans, but also look at whether the influencers are trusted by followers and whether influencers can convey product information in a credible and convincing way.

Future research could use experimental design to present real or simulated influencer posts to further explore cross-domain influencer endorsements. In order to improve the generalizability of the conclusion, larger and more diverse samples can be selected for future studies. In addition, researchers could examine actual behavioral results, which will help to better understand how cross-domain influencer endorsements affect the actual reaction of consumers.

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