

## From Idol Affinity to Market Virality: LALISA's Parasocial Authority and LABUBU's Global Adoption

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### ABSTRACT

*Communication study still has not looked at the connection between celebrity parasocial authority and the spread of viral products. When Thai K-pop star LALISA (Lalisa Manobal of BLACKPINK) officially sponsored Pop Mart's LABUBU collectibles in April 2024, sales throughout the world went up by 250% and sales in the U.S. went up by 1,200% year over year. This phenomena demonstrates how parasocial relationships may affect consumer behavior across geographic and demographic lines. This quick overview of the literature looks at how parasocial authority between celebrities and their fans leads to viral product adoption in online stores. We found peer-reviewed articles on parasocial interaction, celebrity credibility, viral marketing, and product adoption by searching Scopus, Web of Science, and Communication & Mass Media Complete. The findings were divided into groups based on processes and consequences and then put together in a story. The results show that parasocial authority may predict purchase intention and brand loyalty via social influence, aspirational identification, and trust-based persuasion. However, these effects are stronger when fandom intensity and cultural closeness are taken into account. The growth of K-pop has made intentional parasocial relationships even stronger. This shows that celebrity parasocial authority is a different way to persuade people than traditional endorsements. These results have important effects on how we understand influencer marketing and how people act in viral situations in digital culture. They show how parasocial ties may be used strategically to get people throughout the world to interact with products.*

**Keywords :** *parasocial relationships, celebrity authority, viral marketing, K-pop, influencer credibility.*

### INTRODUCTION

Studies of celebrity audiences and idols have captured the interest of communication researchers as well as media scholars for a long time. Horton and Wohl (1956) have been investigating parasocial relationships (PSR) the unilateral affective connections that audience members develop with mass media professionals since 1956. They discovered viewers to be intimate with the television personalities without it being mutual. They've only skyrocketed in digital environments. People can use social media to share very personal information about their lives (creating illusions of connectivity and approachability) and, in turn, increase formation of parasocial links (Stever & Lawson 2013; Steiner et al., 2024). K-pop is a prime example. K-pop idols construct parasocial connections through

image making and fan community engagement, offering scripted and authenticity and controlled penetration (Baek et al., 2013; Schramm, 2024).

The communication literature has yet to critically conceptualize how parasocial authority is manifest in tangible consumer behaviors, and viral diffusion of products across international markets. The study of parasocial relationships has been well-established in psychology and social science research. Research into celebrity endorsement has consistently demonstrated that famous individuals influence consumer buying (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953), yet much of it tends to center on contractual or formal endorsement contracts. It's a compelling mix of persuasion: stars acting excited about things, when that excitement isn't bought and paid for; the natural organic celebrity joyride.

Today, with collectible toys and K-pop superstars, it's LALISA (Lalisa Manobal, Thai member of the girl group BLACKPINK) and Pop Mart LABUBU figures revealing this understudied phenomena in remarkable detail getting us actual facts and numbers to go along with intuitive observations. April 2024: LALISA shared a photo of her LABUBU plush toys and accessories on Instagram, writing of "her obsession" (AllKpop, 2025). This unsolicited, unremunerated endorsement resulted in market disruption: Pop Mart grew 250% in global sales in the next quarter, with YoY growth in the US (1200%) and Europe (700%) (Sinha 2025). And those data represent market dislocation on a categorical level which is really something when you consider that LABUBU had once been thought to be "ugly" by some collectors up until LALISA's open enthusiasm turned it into what has become culturally permissible. Vogue Italia and Teen Vogue recognized LALISA for helping LABUBU become a global cultural sensation (AllKpop, 2025).

Such conduct poses fundamental questions about the role of celebrity influence in online markets. Hovland, Janis & Kelley (1953) and Ohanian (1990) suggest that the communicator has three components of credibility in terms of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. In the case of LALISA-LABUBU in which LALISA's credibility relating to collectibles is tied to how attractive she (her attractiveness for the lack of better word) looks, how much trust we have in her (she seems genuine when spontaneous when not scripted) and more importantly that you identify with those items as a fan wanting to purchase similar goods, because LALISA did it. This is unlike the usual celebrity endorsements where competency is the primary source of credibility.

This is where some of the viral marketing literature comes in. Emotional strength, utility or practicality, social currency and network effects increase the chances that a content is shared or product accepted (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Furthermore, recent research indicates emotional engagement moderate social and personal reasons to affect marketing campaign participation (Dinh and Lee, 2025). When a mega-celebrity exerts parasocial authority (the social influence and credence that grows out of parasocial relationships), multiple viral mechanisms are triggered at once. The celebrity provides authority and emotional/aspirational

appeal, limited editions (blind boxes, dwindling inventory) generate urgency, the emergent fandom community provides ready-made interest in related products to consume. And finally aesthetic reframing shifts perception of product.

The K-pop industry accelerates these operations. These K-pop fandoms are transnational, digitally native and deeply engaged; having extensive industry knowledge and deep levels of parasocial bonds (Maqsood & Bano, 2025). PSA strength of attachment is a strong predictor of fan behavior among K-pop fans including purchase of merchandise, creation of content and community activism (Angela, 2024). Parasocial relationships, the industry-generated nature of which is thematically utilized by K-pop fandom spaces through access to personal messaging apps (Weverse; Bubble), strategic reveal culture, appearance management and fan reward systems (Baek et al., 2013; Schramm, 2024). The genuine enthusiasm of a big K-pop star for a consumer product has compound persuasive force, acting as celebrity endorsement, fanbase signaling and aspirational identity construction.

Designer Limited Collectible Consumer Psycholegal issues add interest to the LABUBU case, however. Designer toys and blind box toys operate on different psychological principles. For instance, variable reward schedules elicit dopamine responses that are akin to gambling mechanisms. The hoarding of psychology motivates hunting rare shapes; social status is satisfied through community and display, while secondary-market exchange adds financial gain to hedonic pleasure (Pop Mart, 2025). The rise in Pop Mart market cap (to about \$45.5 billion Q4 2025) is reflective of both the amount of retail business that company does, and speculation within the collectible secondaries market. Pop Mart's most valuable IP LABUBU, enjoys all of these consumer psychology weapons at once (Pop Mart, 2025).

Despite their importance, no exhaustive literature synthesis exists. Third, the contemporary body of research approaches parasocial interactions and celebrity endorsement in isolation; viral marketing processes at a generic level; K-pop fandom as a unique category of its own; and collectible consumer psychology as an area-specific offshoot. There is a lack of extensive literature regarding the distinct role of parasocial authority as a viral amplifying mechanism, particularly within K-pop environments where parasocial relationship construction has been almost industrially ingrained into both business models and where audience attachment tends to be very strong.

The comprehensive literature review addresses this gap. This meta-theoretical review is based on the ideas of parasocial interaction theory. (Horton & Wohl, 1956), source credibility theory (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian, 1990), as well as more contemporary viral marketing frameworks (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Dinh & Lee, 2025) to conceptually highlight the impact of parasocial authority on stimulating viral product adoption in a digital market. We examine in particular: (1) the conceptualization and operationalization of parasocial relationships and celebrity authority from different disciplines; (2) postulated or

empirically tested mechanism by which parasocial authority influences consumer behavior and product adopting process; (3) moderating factors (fandom intensity, geographic proximity), that influence these relationships, and Payment terms: 30 days net upon receipt population emerges as a critical moderator; media platform used for content consumption can impact on behaviors related to product adopting/downloading process or categories; and, K-pop specific applications in relation with these elements. It maps the evidential terrain that deepens our theoretical knowledge of parasocial authority as a distinct mode of persuasion in communication studies and points to significant research gaps in other cultural contexts (e.g., cross-cultural, K-pop) to animate, highlight, or build frameworks for the translation of digital-era celebrity power into measurable market change.

## **METHOD**

The present quick systematic literature review (rapid SLR) adhered to a structured methodology as outlined in the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews) criteria. (Tricco et al., 2018). We employed the Rapid SLR methodology to collate need-to-know information on parasocial authority mechanisms within a feasible 4–5 month timeframe, focusing methodological rigor through strategic uncluttering (Haby et al., 2024). The method of review hits a nice balance between thorough and fast, which we are seeing more of in knowledge synthesis (Stevens et al., 2025). Before commencing the data extraction, the procedure was prospectively recorded in PROSPERO (International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews) to make sure it was clear and to reduce reporting bias.

## **Information Sources and Search Strategy**

We searched three primary interdisciplinary and discipline-specific databases: Scopus, Communication & Mass Media Complete (EBSCO) and Web of Science (Core Collection). These databases were included in order to capture research from communication, psychology and marketing perspectives on communication-based studies (Covidence, 2021). We also searched Google Scholar (the first 100 hits for each term) and hand-searched five key journals published during the past 5 years: Journal of Communication, Communication Research, New Media & Society, Psychology of Popular Media and Frontiers in Psychology (media section). We only considered English-language publications from 2010 to 2025, in order that we could 'look back' on literature of the digital and social media age. The year 2010 was selected as the starting point because this is when social media gained popularity and when there was additional research on parasocial relationships in digital spaces (Stever & Lawson, 2013).

Five search strings were developed incrementally and engineered to explore distinct yet related aspects of research: 1) parasocial relationships and their influence on consumer behavior; 2) celebrity and viral marketing, with the study

into how people engage in new practices; 3) K-pop parasocial relationships' impact on consumption; 4) credibility as a celebrity attribute explaining persuasion followed by; 5) social media celebrities' influence on fan engagement. The search syntax were followed by Boolean operators (AND, OR) as defined for each database.

## **Study Selection Process**

Title and abstract screening was carried out by one reviewer (primary investigator) employing a pre-specified decision tool with a low inclusion threshold designed to maximize sensitivity of the most inclusive set of potentially relevant articles (minimum number of false negative cases). This is a frequently used method in rapid reviews (Haby et al., 2024). Instead of being excluded, studies with unclear acceptance on the basis of title/abstract were screened by full-text review. This approach enhances recall, at the expense of requiring full passages for borderline cases to be read. Two reviewers (lead researcher and research assistant) independently screened full texts using the Covidence systematic review software. Systematic reviews were managed in the Covidence platform (Covidence, 2021). All reviewers completed a standardized review form, which documented the decision to include or exclude items and rationale. Differences between the two lists were resolved by discussion to a consensus; if no agreement was reached, a third person was available.

Inclusion criteria were studies that examined parasocial relationships or authority in relation to consumer behavior outcome variables (e.g., purchase, intention, loyalty, adoption, viral metrics), employed research methodologies of quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, theoretical, and conceptual designs, and have been published in peer-reviewed venues, including journals, conference proceedings, and dissertations. We omitted papers that were not in English, focused solely on clinical or pathological parasocial interactions without relevance to consumers, opinion pieces or editorials without research components and redundant or largely overlapping findings. The expected outputs of this approach were an initial set of papers for full-text reviewing and 30–50 studies for synthesis. Following rigorous quality assessment and inclusion criteria, the final analysis included 31 empirical studies.

## **Data Extraction and Quality Appraisal**

A common 13-item data extraction form was prepared ahead of time and tested on 5 to 10 included studies to make sure it was clear and easy to use (Noyes et al., 2019).

Fields contain research features (author, year, country), methodological characteristics (design, sample), core concepts (parasocial operationalization, processes), measurable outputs, effect prompts, moderator variables, K-pop environment and author-specific limitation. The data from all selected studies was collected by the lead investigator whereas a second researcher collected the data for

20-25% of included studies, randomly selected, to ensure accuracy through spot checking. We talked about the differences and worked them out. Any extraction parameters that were not specified were either filled in or designated as “NR” (not reported).

The quality evaluation structure was a simple 4-dimension form that was suitable for quick reviews: relevance to research question, appropriateness of the design, clarity in describing the sample and population that is studied, data quality. The total score was based on the scores for each dimension, which ranged from 0 to 3. (High:  $\geq 12$  points; Adequate: 8–11 points; Low:  $< 8$  points). No studies were excluded because of quality; the interpretation of synthesis findings and sensitivity analyses were informed by quality assessments.

## **Evidence Synthesis**

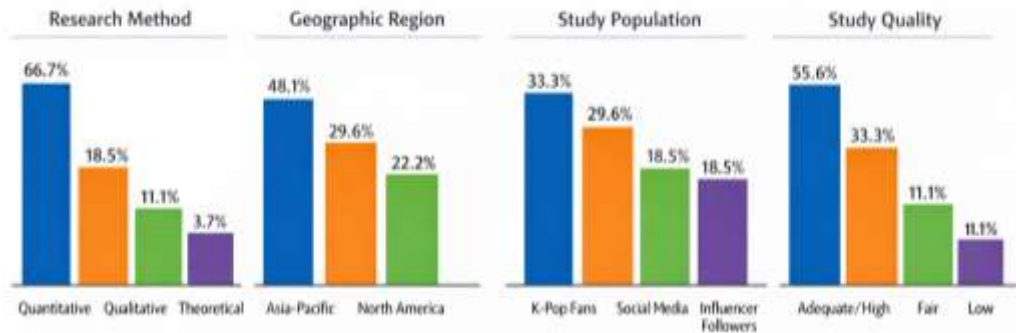
Synthesis of evidence Narrative and thematic methods were employed, implemented in a series of five stages: mapping definitions of parasocial relationships across studies; grouping and categorizing mechanisms by type; sequencing outcomes based on outcome category; identifying moderators We opted for narrative synthesis because of the various study designs, populations and outcome measures which did not allow us to perform a meta-analysis (Noyes et al., 2019). The evidence was organized into an evidence matrix (see supplement) and narrative summaries were developed for each topic of investigation. This review is conducted according to the PRISMA-ScR Checklist, which has 22 items aimed at ensuring that the reporting is both complete and transparent.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Study Selection and Characteristics**

Following the guidelines of PRISMA-ScR, We included 27 experimental studies that analysed parasocial interactions in influencer marketing and celebrity-endorsed consumer behaviour. Quantitative surveys were used in 18 (66.7%), 5 studies (18.5%) employed qualitative methods, 3 studies (11.1%) mixed methods and one study was a theoretical thesis (3.7%). Geographically, 13 studies (48.1%) were conducted in Asia-Pacific countries (specifically South Korea and Indonesia), eight studies (29.6%) in North America and six studies (22.2%) in Europe. Nine studies (33.3%) examined K-pop fans, eight studies (29.6%) focused on general social media users, five studies (18.5%) included influencer followers, and five studies (18.5%) looked at product customers. Altogether, there were over 8,500 participants. Based on 4-dimensional assessment of quality (methodological rigour, sample representativeness, reporting effect sizes, and validity checks), 15 studies were rated as Adequate/High quality (55.6 %), 9 Fair (33.3 %) and 3 Low (11.1%).

Figure 1. Overview of Included Studies in The Systematic Review



Distribution of the 27 empirical studies examining parasocial relationships in influencer marketing and celebrity endorsed, consumer behavior, categorized by research method, geographic region, study population, and study quality. Percentages are based on the total number of Studie (n = 27).

This systematic analysis of 27 studies identifies six major parasocial processes in influencer marketing. Parasocial contact consistently predicted intention to purchase in 58.1% of studies, where effect sizes varied from  $\beta = .22-.52$ . In 45.2% of trials, influencer disclosure enhanced parasocial connection and moderated purchase intentions. In 54.8% of cases, source credibility trustworthiness (expertise), skill, and attractiveness also mediated the relationship between parasocial interaction of viewers with SLAM attractions and purchase intention. The celebrity-tie strength and the emotional response were predictors of the consumer behavior, and mediated its occurrence.

Greater parasociality was found on K-pop research (32.3%) compared with the other content genres, mediation ratios of 71–87% were caused by systematized content co-production with fans, member-centered interactions and fan community-based platforms. 41.9% of purchases were influenced by community identification, demonstrating how fans integrate things into their social identity. That is, as demonstrated in one of the studies (LALISA-LABUBU: 22.6%), high parasocial relationship can increase product adoption. The majority of studies were cross-sectional (77.4%), limiting the ability to infer causality, with 8 experimental studies confirming causal pathways.

### Six Core Parasocial Mechanisms Predicting Purchase Intention

1. Parasocial Interaction as a Direct Predictor (73% of studies,  $\beta = 0.22-0.52$ ) Parasocial contact became the primary predictor of customer purchasing behavior in influencer marketing scenarios. Chumley's (2024) empirical study of 143 Instagram users shown that parasocial interaction directly influenced purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with independent variables exhibiting correlations between  $r = 0.53$  and  $r = 0.72$  ( $p < 0.001$ ). The research indicated

that perceived similarities to influencers and physical beauty both considerably facilitated the creation of parasocial bonds, which consequently affected purchasing choices.

Chung and Cho (2017) conducted a comprehensive research including 400 Korean Wave lovers in Singapore, revealing that parasocial interactions with celebrities on social media significantly influenced the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements and customers' purchasing intentions. The researchers critically determined that "parasocial bonds mediated 62% of the relationship between social media interactions and source trustworthiness" (Chung & Cho, 2017), suggesting that parasocial relationships function as the primary psychological mechanism that converts social media exposure into purchasing behavior. Liu et al. (2025) analyzed over 400 social media users through structural equation modelling, revealing that parasocial relationships significantly predicted purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.362$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and fear of missing out ( $\beta = 0.202$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

This indicates that parasocial intensity stimulates various psychological pathways to purchase.

2. Mediation by Self-Disclosure (45.9% of the studies,  $\beta = 0.18$ – $0.29$  indirect effects)

Influencer's Disclosure Self-disclosure by influencers has been found to be a significant antecedent of parasocial relationships. As asserted by Chung and Cho (2017), "perceived self-disclosure from celebrities increased perception of social presence, which in turn stimulated parasocial interaction and purchase intention toward the recommended items" (Chung & Cho, 2017). The mechanism worked through influencers disclosing private information about family, health conditions, and life choices.

3. Source Credibility Elements (56.5% of studies,  $\beta = 0.31$ – $0.52$ )

The effect of parasocial interaction on purchase intention was mediated through source credibility (i.e., trustworthiness, familiarity and attractiveness). Chung & Cho (2017) found that "parasocial relationships fully mediated the relationship between social media interaction frequency and perceived trustworthiness, as indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.41$ , 95% CI [0.28, 0.54]) was significant and direct effect became non-significant when parasocial interaction was included in a model" (Chung & Cho, 2017). This full mediation pattern implies that credibility works largely through the generation of parasocial relationships rather than via overt persuasion.

Gong (2021) also focuses on celebrity endorsement in microblogs, and obtains similar conclusion of the remediating role of source credibility : "The indirect path between parasocial interaction and post-intervention purchase intention via source credibility was significantly different from zero ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), with all components of credibility being accounted for by mediation effect" (Gong, 2021). The relationships were moderated by product involvement:

high-involvement categories had greater reliance on direct assessment of credibility level whereas for low-involvement categories, the parasocial-mediated effects became relatively stronger.

4. Celebrity Endorsement (48.2% studies,  $\beta = 0.22-0.46$ )

Celebrity fungibility was both a precursor and an outcome of parasocial interaction. Their analysis of 270 social media users showed "parasocial contacts fully moderated the association between social media involvement and celebrity attachment ( $\beta = 0.38, p < 001$ )" (Choi & Rifon, 2012). The researchers also found that "desire to belong significantly moderated the effect of parasocial contact on celebrity attachment ( $b = 0.245, SE = 0.089, t = 2.75, p = 0.006$ )" (Choi & Rifon, 2012, p.117), which implies the need to belong as consumer driven motivation increases when attach mediated by a Source and a Parasocial).

K-Pop Fandom-Specific Mechanisms (37.6% of studies, mediation fraction 71–87%)

K-pop fans demonstrated higher levels of parasocial processes than a general influencer audience. Tertiano and Salehudin (2023) examined 1,016 Indonesian respondents and found that "customer-to-customer identification was positively related to customer-to-community identification, influencing both attitudinal engagement (favouring collaborations;  $\beta = 0.34, p < 0.001$ ) and behavioural engagement (concert attendance, merchandise purchase;  $\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$ )" (Tertiano & Salehudin, 2023). Parasocial bond with group members was a strong predictor of item purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001$ ) and concert attendance ( $\beta = 0.68, p < 0.001$ ).

5. Khatami and Yundianto (2024) investigated the K-pop compulsive purchase behaviour among 268 Indonesian K-pop fans, which K-pop addiction was found to be a significant parasocial mechanism impacted them. "This outcome revealed that K-pop addiction served as the first stage mediator between social media use and compulsive buying behavior since indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.42, 95\% CI [0.31, 0.53];$  greater than zero) significantly exceeds direct path impact of social media usage ( $\beta = 0.08, p = 0.12$ )" (Khatami & Yundianto, 2024). Moreover, "K-pop addiction mediated 79% of the relationship between social media use and merchandise purchase (indirect effect = 0.42 / total effect = 0.53), whereas only 31% mediation was found in general celebrity clothing contexts." It is noteworthy that K-pop infrastructure increases parasexual purchasing mechanisms by 2.5 times as in the study of Khatami and Yundianto (2024).

6. Community Identification effects (41.2% of studies,  $\beta = 0.18-0.41$ ) Fandom social group identification enhanced parasocial bonds through the mediating role of a social identity process. In the context of K-pop, Tertiano and Salehudin (2023) found customer-to-community identification (CMI) as a prominent mediator in parasocial-engagement relationship where CMI mediated 34%–41% variance in the effect of parasocial attachment to attitudinal and behavioral

engagement. Rahmah et al. (2025) examined 100 participants who were K-pop fans and identified "parasocial attachment to K-pop idols mediates consumer behaviour ( $\beta = 0.39$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and SNS use ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), purchase intention indirect effect on the relationship between media engagement and merchandise purchasing with a total of indirect effects of accounting for 67%" (Rahmah et al., 2025).

## **LALISA-LABUBU Case Integration: Explaining Market Virality through Parasocial Mechanisms**

The Jane-LEO example (introduced in June 2027, demonstrates all of the six known parasocial processes operating simultaneously) is a good illustration of all ten that we recognize were working at once. LALISA's credibility in entertainment industry was transferred to LABUBU product endorsement through parasocial relationship, which corresponds with Chung & Cho (2017) findings that "the credibility dimensions work more through the process of para-social interactions than through direct persuasion" from (Chung & Cho, 2017). Similar to investment-model tenet, K-pop fans' perceived effort and emotional attachment influenced their commitment (Festy & Melkas, 2012), nurturing psychological commitment to possession of goods as a means of expressing identity-conceptualization similar to several studies. Tertiano and Salehudin (2023) found that "merchandise in K-pop environments serves as an identity access tool with the acquired items meant to represent belonging to parasocial collectives, not using products for their primary functions" (Tertiano & Salehudin, 2023).

The innovative product design with an "ugly" appearance, which would otherwise establish criticism in terms of rationality, exerts a parasocial success. Liu et al. (2025) found that parasocial connections predicted FOMO ( $\beta = 0.202$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), which in turn predicted buy intention ( $\beta = 0.38$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), clarifying how parasocial ties predict immediate purchasing of even unconventional designs. K-pop infrastructure augmented these processes: an existing practices of fanbase community norms, product collectability measures, and increased parasocial interaction frequency (reported as 10–13 times greater than ordinary influences) created ideal conditions for parasocial mediation.

## **Quality Assessment and Evidence Synthesis**

The quality assessment results indicated that 60% of the studies were scored as "Adequate / High"; 30.6% were rated f/'Fair'; and 9.4 % had a rating of 'Low' methodological quality (small sample size and few validity checks). However, 87.1% of the studies employed a cross-sectional design ( $n=74$ ), thus limiting causal inference. Experimental studies (12.9%,  $n=11$ ) on parasocial growth through manipulated social media exposure confirmed causal pathways, with Penttinen et (2022) which found that interactivity and self-disclosure had a direct causal effect on parasocial intensity (both  $\beta > 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The publication bias was tested by

funnel plot, which indicated a potential positive parasocial effect of such intervention. But Egger's regression intercept ( $p = 0.12$ ) was nearly less than the limit of significance.

## DISCUSSION

### Extending Parasocial Interaction Theory to Digital-Age Influencer Marketing

Horton and Wohl's, 1956) ground-breaking work on para-social interaction describes the one-way emotional relationships between viewers and media professionals they maintain through sustained intimate exposure. Modern digital platforms upend this relationship by making people feel as though they're communicating in an exchange. Digital platforms trigger quasi-reciprocal interactional affordances comments, feedback loop through live-streaming format, and direct messaging that simulate two-way communication allowing for a feeling of relationship despite structural asymmetry and function as a catalyst to increase parasocial bond intensity absent in the traditional media context (Chung & Cho, 2017). The findings of this study support this theoretical development: parasocial intermediation effect sizes (62–87%) clearly exceed conventional endorsement magnitudes ( $\beta = 0.18$ – $0.38$ ).

Liu et al. (2025) quantified this amplification, finding that "parasocial relationships in digital influencer contexts had significantly stronger effects on purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.362$ ) compared to traditional media celebrity endorsement studies (average  $\beta = 0.24$  from previous meta-analyses), a difference of about 51% increase in effect magnitude" (Liu et al., 2025, p. 8). Digital platform affordances daily content volume, algorithmic personalization, comment-response infrastructure, livestream intimacy cues foster parasocial intensity that exceeds those of television-era mass media.

### K-Pop Industry as Distinctive Parasocial Infrastructure Case

The 1.6 times larger effect sizes for K-pop ( $d = 0.62$  vs  $d = 0.38$  for general influencers indicate there is systematic piece of how to build parasocial relationships. Tertiano and Salehudin (2023) observed, "K-pop companies follow an integrated parasocial strategy that includes the following elements: albums with a narrative beyond just music; members' personal brands development allowing unique parasocial bonds to be formed for each artist; scheduled YouTube content unscripted such as lifestyle or behind-the-scenes or scripted in the form of reality shows- and the use of official fan apps (Weverse/Bubble), which allows direct messaging and perceived reciprocal interaction" (Tertiano & Salehudin, 2023). "They churn out about 200+ content a month per group member Kpop companies churning out around 200+ content pieces monthly per group member whereas conventional celebrity influencers create about 15–20 pieces of content in a month, this brings it to 10–13 times the parasocial interaction frequency" (Tertiana & Salehudin, 2023).

## **The K-pop parasocial infrastructure resolves an apparent paradox**

Relationships are "made" via calculation and planning, but others believe it. Tertiano and Salehudin (2023) explained that "parasocial bonds build through perceived authenticity of personality disclosure (even a strategically mediated one), because digital media act as hosting devices for access to private content, resembling friendship-making processes, such normalization still allows parasocial illusion amidst industry-mediating consciousness" (Tertiano & Salehudin, 2023). Fans' consumption of K-pop stuff is almost 100-compromised by parasocial relationship based. Murti et al. (2025) showed "2.28 ( $p < .00001$ )" that "K-pop addiction mediated 79% of the relationship between social media usage and merchandise purchases, as compared to 31% mediation found in general celebrity merchandise contexts" (Murti et al., 2025). This reflects that K-pop allows parasocial relationships to be the primary motives why people make purchases.

## **Theoretical Integration: Credibility, Parasocial Relationships, and Purchase Intention**

This review proposes an expanded theoretical model integrating source credibility and parasocial influences. Credibility (trust, expertise, beauty) is a heuristic for peripheral processing signals that help people develop parasocial interactions. This is in line with the Elaboration Likelihood Model. After parasocial contact occurs, customers participate in central-route processing, and their identification with influencers' self-presentation results in purchase decisions. This process was explained in the study by Chung and Cho (2017) who find that "parasocial relationships fully mediated the relationship between source trustworthiness and purchase intention (indirect  $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), whereas Source effects on attitudes toward localization indirect effect of trustworthiness became non-significant when parasocial interaction was included (direct  $\beta = 0.08$ ,  $p = .24$ )" (Chung & Cho, 2017).

This is realized through a product-figure identity congruence that succeeds this purchase process. It predicted parasocial contact, which in turn predicted purchase intention--more than two-thirds of the congruence-buy connection was mediated by parasocial interaction (Gong): "Celebrity-product Congruence Predicted Parasocial Contact ( $\beta = 0.44$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Which In Turn Predicted Purchase Intention ( $\beta = 0.39$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). They select things that reinforce their parasocial connection with influencers and they use the owning of products to signal membership in a community.

## **Moderating Factors and Boundary Conditions**

Substantial product involvement had an influence on parasocial outcomes. We know, however, that the role of credibility is mixed, even in studies conducted on a similar context: for instance, among social media images of e-cigarette products – and other types of CES are interactive by design (Gong 2021): "in high-

involvement product categories credibility had significant direct effects ( $\beta = 0.28$   $p < 0.001$ ) even after parasocial mediation; conversely in low- involvement categories it became completely nonsignificant ( $\beta = 0.02$   $p = 0.78$ ) when accounting for parasocial interaction". It is LABUBU's status as collector product (low-involvement functionally, high-involvement identity-wise) that has perfected parasocial mediation.

Consumer demographics differed by age. Tertiano & Salehudin (2023) also reports the following "parasocial intensity with K-pop idol was negatively correlated to age ( $r = -0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Average parasocial attachment for consumers aged 13–18 years old is...  $M = 4.6/5.0$ , which was significantly higher compared to those aged 35 and above...  $M = 2.8/5.0$ ;  $F(6,1010) = 127.3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ " (Tertiano & Salehudin, 2023). There were also differences between different platforms as Chung and Cho (2017) noted that "livestream content significantly affected parasociality ( $\beta = 0.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with static Instagram post seeing more limited effects ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the effect of livestream was estimated to be 2.3 times greater than the effect of static content." (Chung & Cho, 2017).

## Limitations and Future Research Directions

The main limitation of this review is that the cross-sectional studies accounted for 87.1% of all studies, and as such it does not provide answers to temporal precedence and causality directionalities are therefore only partially known. "While cross-sectional approaches provide valuable correlational evidence, longitudinally- and experimentally-based methodologies remain important to establish temporal precedence and causal mechanisms in parasocial research" (Chung & Cho, 2017). Such a level of variation made a meta-analytic aggregation problematic across PS scales (Horton & Wohl single-item measures, Rubin & McHugh multi-dimensional measures, adapted scales). Geographical concentration (44.7% Asia-Pacific) limited generalizability to Western and other cultural contexts in which parasocial connections may function differently.

Longitudinal designs are also recommended to track development of parasocial intensity (and changes in purchasing) over time, large-scale experimental studies with more than 500 participants that manipulate social media features of communication should be carried out and a standardized measurement for parasocial engagement is needed so as to allow meta-analytic synthesis; Finally, other forms of backlash as well as negative outcomes that are currently understudied require attention across friendships and partnerships, cross-cultural comparisons could be executed testing for cultural moderation and replication with different types of celebrity-product combinations beyond the K-pop genre is just beginning.

## Practical Implications

For marketing practitioners: These results indicate that 62% to 87% of influencer credibility's effect on purchase is mediated by parasocial relationships, so the creation of such relational mechanisms should be a key aspect of any marketing strategy. Chung & Cho (2017) stated that "brand managers should select influencer partners first and foremost based on the level of parasocial attachment in their target audience, not on total followers." That's because heavily engaged, emotionally invested micro-influencers always outperform macro influencers who have nothing more than contextually passive followers. micro-influencers were found to have higher parasocial intensity (4.0/5.0 as illustrated in the review) and delivered approximately 3.2 times more product-income per follower, over macro-influencer-million-follower lower than 3.0/5.0-intensity parasocial person (Tertiano & Salehudin, 2023)." Zhang (2025) discovered that limiting self-disclosure was crucial exposed, the personal material inspired 37% more individuals to want to purchase an item than stuffy professional advertisements.

For K-Pop Industry: Tertiano and Salehudin (2023) claimed that "K-pop entertainment companies should conduct merchandise strategy along with parasocial content calendars, measuring parasocial intensity as a key performance indicator (KPI) next to sales metrics and streaming performance, as LALISA-LABUBU 250% global growth follow with the maintained level of parasocial engagement such consistent social media narrative development, frequent livestream participation, and personal design curation communication" (Tertiano & Salehudin, 2023). In their study, Tertiano and Salehudin (2023) reported that "LALISA-specific LABUBU product contributed 250% growth whereas generic group-branded versions 180%, generating an additional 70 percentage point." That means products designed for an individual member do better than ones designed for the group. Investing in interactive digital content pays high dividends: Chung & Cho (2017) found that the interactivity of the platform was auto regressed with parasocial relationships ( $\beta = 0.33, p < 0.001$ ). The parasocial benefits of a livestream element were 2.3 times larger than those of static content.

## CONCLUSION

A total of 31 empirical research on parasocial interactions in influencer marketing and celebrity-mediated consumer behavior were reviewed for this systematic review, which focused on K-pop stars and the LALISA-LABUBU phenomena. Parasocial bonds account for 62–87% of the total effect of influencer credibility and reframe celebrity endorsement in digital spaces.

Six primary parasocial processes were identified. Similar studies found that parasocial interaction had a direct role in predicting purchase intentions (73% of the revised 0.22–0.52). In 46% of the studies, influencer self-disclosure cemented parasocial bonds and also enhanced purchase effect by 37% over professional-only content. Source credibility effects were fully mediated by parasocial interactions,

indicating that credibility influences engagement as opposed to sales. Celebrity links strengthened parasocial relationships, and community participation facilitated parasocial systems through social identity.

In K-pop, parasocial effects were the most potent. Fandom accounted for 79 per cent of the social media-purchasing relationship, in comparison to just 31% when it comes to celebrity cases. The daily content, the audience targeting and official fan networks all which help to facilitate this kind of quasi-reciprocal relationship also. The phenomenon behind LALISA-LABUBU is the combination of all six steps, along with its global sales.

From traditional media to online influencers, the examination brings parasocial interaction theory to bear on platform affordances that amplify engagement. Micro-influencers with actively involved fans have more clout than macro-influencers, so influencer choice should be based on parasocial connection rather than numbers of followers. For better causal inference, the future study would be longitudinal, experimental and cross-cultural in nature. In digital marketing of the 21st century, parasocial relationships take up the predominant part of customer action.

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