

Trust in AI Influencers and Purchase Intention for Experience Products: The Mediating Role of Parasocial Interaction

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ABSTRACT: This study aimed to examine the relationship between trust in AI influencers and purchase intention for experience products, with parasocial interaction as a mediator, within the cultural context of Lithuania to address the existing research gap. The study adopted a cross-sectional correlational design and a purposive sampling technique to collect data from university students aged 18 to 30 who had been using social media for the past year and had experience purchasing products or services recommended by at least one AI influencer during the past year. Standardized questionnaires were used to measure the study variables. The correlational analysis revealed significant relationships among trust in AI influencers, parasocial interaction, and purchase intention for experience products. The mediation analysis revealed a significant mediating role of parasocial interaction in the relationship between trust in AI influencers and purchase intention for experience products, as the direct effect was not significant, whereas the indirect effect remained significant. These findings highlight the importance of fostering parasocial interaction to enhance the effectiveness of AI influencer marketing. Marketers should focus on developing trustworthy and engaging AI influencers to foster consumers' purchase intentions for experience products.

KEYWORDS: Trust in AI Influencers, Purchase Intention for Experience Products, Parasocial Interaction

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) influencers are virtual personalities generated by computers that have the programming of interacting with people on social media and promote services and products (Chu et al., 2025; Ebrahim & Karim, 2025; Mrad et al., 2022; Rehman et al., 2025). The consistency of communication with the followers online, AI influencers indeed got a competitive edge over human influencers; therefore, many companies have begun to use AI influencers for brand promotion as social media use continues to grow (Audrezet et al., 2025; Gerlich, 2025; Hashem, 2025).

It is an interesting phenomenon to observe how customers respond to AI influencers, particularly while purchasing experience products like restaurants, travel, hotels, beauty services, and entertainment where trust plays an essential part (Feng et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025; Mesquita et al., 2026; Żyminkowska & Zachurzok-Srebrny, 2025). Trust in AI influencers has been found to be associated with influencing consumers' purchase intentions. One of the reasons why consumers' purchase intentions elevate due to the perception of AI influencers as being more

Pages: 31 – 37

Volume: 5

Issue: 2 (February 2026)

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Cite this Article: Mahmood, A. (2026). Trust in AI Influencers and Purchase Intention for Experience Products: The Mediating Role of Parasocial Interaction. *The Regional Tribune*, 5(2), 31-37.

<https://doi.org/10.55737/trt/v-ii.281>

honest, reliable, and knowledgeable (Deepak et al., 2026; Mohamed Izzamudin & Rahman, 2025; Setyanta et al., 2026). However, trust may not adequately demonstrate why consumers decide to buy a product.

Consumers tend to develop emotional bonding with influencers through consistent online interaction. This one-sided psychological relationship is known as parasocial interaction (Ezzat, 2026; Giles & Stever, 2024; Wang et al., 2025). Previous studies have shown that stronger parasocial interaction increases consumers' confidence in recommendations and encourages purchase intentions, particularly for experience products that cannot be evaluated before they are purchased (Ermeç, 2022; Nadroo et al., 2026; Penttinen et al., 2022).

Prior literature has primarily focused on influencers' credibility, consumer attitudes, and attractiveness in relation to physical products. Literature remained limited when it comes to the assessment of how trust in AI influencers affects purchase intention for experience products via parasocial interaction. Particularly, such a relationship among variables is very scarce in Lithuania, creating an important gap that needs to be addressed. Therefore, this study evaluated the association between trust in AI influencers and purchase intention for experience products, with parasocial interaction as a mediating variable.

Objective

1. To examine the mediating role of parasocial interaction between trust in AI influencers and purchase intention for experience products.

Hypothesis

H1: There is a significant mediating role of parasocial interaction between AI Influencers and purchase intention for experience products.

Methodology

Study Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional correlational study design to assess the association between trust in AI influencers and purchase intention of experience products with parasocial interaction as a mediator. The reason for choosing this research design was that it assessed the relationship between variables at a single point in time.

Sample Technique Inclusion Criteria

The study adopted a purposive sampling technique to collect data from undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled at universities in Vilnius, Lithuania. Participants were eligible if they were between 18 and 30 years of age, were currently enrolled as university students, had actively used at least one social media platform (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), or TikTok) during the 12 months preceding participation, had been exposed to or followed at least one AI (virtual) influencer, had purchased or considered purchasing experience products (e.g., hotels, travel services, beauty services, or entertainment services), and were able to read and understand English.

Participants

A total of 300 undergraduate and postgraduate students from universities in Vilnius, Lithuania, were approached for participation. Of these, 220 students completed the questionnaire, resulting in a 73.3% response rate. The participants had a mean age of 24.27 years ($SD = 3.70$). Among them, 119 (54.1%) were male and 101 (45.9%) were female. Regarding educational level, 128 (58.2%) were undergraduate students and 92 (41.8%) were postgraduate students. In terms of university type, 130 (59.1%) attended public universities, whereas 90 (40.9%)

were enrolled in private universities. The most frequently used social media platforms were Instagram (67, 30.5%), TikTok (41, 18.6%), Facebook (54, 24.5%), and X (formerly Twitter) (58, 26.4%).

Questionnaire/Instruments

Trust in AI influencers was measured using the Trustworthiness subscale of the Source Credibility Scale developed by Ohanian (1990). The subscale comprises five semantic differential items (7-point Likert) measuring the perceived trustworthiness of an information source. Higher scores indicate greater trust in AI influencers. The original study reported excellent internal consistency for the Trustworthiness subscale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$) (Ohanian, 1990). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.84, indicating good internal consistency.

Parasocial interaction was assessed using the 8-item adapted Parasocial Interaction Scale, originally derived from the Parasocial Interaction Scale developed by Rubin et al. (1985) and subsequently adapted for social media influencers by Lee and Watkins (2016) and Sokolova and Kefi (2020). Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating stronger parasocial interaction. The scale's original Cronbach's α ranged from .89 to .94. In the current study, Cronbach's α was .78, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Purchase intention was assessed using the Willingness to Buy measure developed by Dodds et al. (1991). The original item wording was slightly modified to reflect experience products recommended by AI influencers while retaining its original meaning. For example, the original statement, *"The probability that I would consider buying the SEARS TELEVISION is very high,"* was changed to *"The probability that I would consider purchasing the experience product recommended by the AI influencer is very high."* Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating stronger purchase intention (Dodds et al., 1991). In the current study, Cronbach's α was .72, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the Helsinki ethical principles and the APA 7th edition code of conduct. First, the authors of the instruments were contacted via email to obtain permission to use the questionnaires. Subsequently, the students were approached at both private and public universities in Vilnius, Lithuania, and were provided with the consent form, demographic questionnaire, and study instruments. The consent form clearly stated that participation was voluntary, that participants' information would remain confidential, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. Upon providing written consent, the participants were given the data sheet and study instruments. Once the data were collected, they were entered into IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 for analysis.

Results

Table 1

Correlational Analysis (220)

Variables	1	2	3
1. Trust in AI Influencers	-	.68***	.86***
2. Parasocial Interaction		-	.78***
3. Purchase Intention for Experience Products			-

Note: *** $p < .001$

Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation analysis among the study variables. Trust in AI influencers showed a significant positive correlation with parasocial interaction ($r = .68, p < .001$) and purchase intention for experience products ($r = .86, p < .001$). Parasocial interaction was also positively correlated with purchase intention ($r = .78, p < .001$).

Table 2

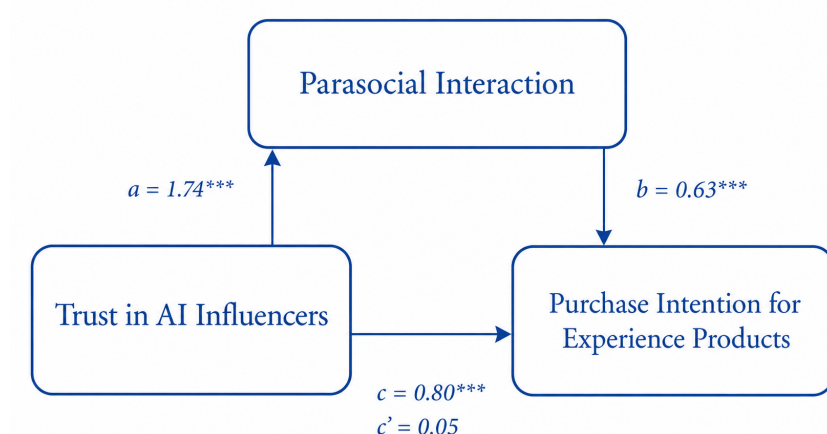
Mediation Analysis (N=220)

Variable / Effect	B	SE	t	P	95% Confidence Interval	
$TiAI \rightarrow PSI$	1.74	0.04	25.09	<.001	1.08	1.26
$PSI \rightarrow PI_{fEP}$	0.06	0.07	8.91	<.001	0.49	0.77
$AT \rightarrow PI_{fEP}$ (Direct Effect)	0.05	0.07	0.61	0.54	-0.13	0.25
Indirect Effect	0.74	0.07			0.59	0.88
Total Effect	0.80	0.05	14.02	<.001	0.69	0.92

Note: B = Unstandardized coefficient; SE = Standard Error; TiAI = Trust in AI Influencers; PSI = Parasocial Interaction; PI_{fEP} = Purchase Intention for Experience Products.

Table 2 presents the mediation analysis of parasocial interaction in the relationship between trust in AI influencers and purchase intention for experience products. Trust in AI influencers significantly predicted parasocial interaction ($B = 1.1741, SE = 0.0468, t = 25.0962, p < .001, 95\% CI [1.0819, 1.2663]$), which in turn significantly predicted purchase intention ($B = 0.6374, SE = 0.0715, t = 8.9112, p < .001, 95\% CI [0.4964, 0.7783]$). The direct effect was non-significant ($B = 0.0596, SE = 0.0974, t = 0.6118, p = .5413, 95\% CI [-0.1324, 0.2516]$), whereas the indirect effect was significant ($B = 0.7483, BootSE = 0.0735, 95\% Bootstrap CI [0.5957, 0.8878]$). The total effect was also significant ($B = 0.8079, SE = 0.0576, t = 14.0244, p < .001, 95\% CI [0.6944, 0.9215]$), supporting the mediating role of parasocial interaction.

Statistical Model



Note: N = 220, *** $p < .001$

The above statistical model presents that Trust in AI influencers significantly predicted parasocial interaction ($a = 1.17, p < .001$), and parasocial interaction significantly predicted purchase intention for experience products ($b = 0.63, p < .001$). The total effect of trust in AI influencers on purchase intention for experience products was significant ($c = 0.80, p < .001$), whereas the direct effect was not significant after including the mediator ($c' = 0.05, p = .541$), indicating full mediation.

Discussion

The correlational results demonstrated that trust in AI influencers was positively and significantly associated with parasocial interaction and purchase intention for experience products, while parasocial interaction was also significantly and positively related to purchase intention. These findings indicate that consumers who perceive AI influencers as trustworthy are more likely to develop one-sided emotional relationships with them, which subsequently elevates their willingness to purchase experience products. The results are supported by previous studies revealing that source trustworthiness facilitates consumers' inclination towards influencer recommendations and positively affects purchase decisions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Penttinen et al., 2022). Similarly, Nadroo et al. (2026) reported that higher parasocial relationships enhance consumers' purchase intentions by promoting emotional attachment as well as perceived credibility. Because experience products cannot be fully assessed before consumption, consumers may highly rely on trusted AI influencers and the psychological associations they develop with them.

The hypothesis of the study was supported through mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4), which revealed that parasocial interaction fully mediated the relationship between trust in AI influencers and purchase intention for experience products. Trust in AI influencers significantly predicted parasocial interaction, which subsequently increased consumers' purchase intentions, whereas the direct effect of trust became non-significant after including the mediator. These findings indicate that trust alone is not enough to directly influence purchasing decisions unless it fosters an emotional bond with AI influencers. The results are supported by previous studies revealing that parasocial interaction acts as a key psychological mechanism through which influencer credibility influences consumer behavioral intentions (Lou & Kim, 2019; Ki et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The present study assessed the relationship between trust in AI influencers and purchase intention for experience products with parasocial interaction as a mediator in the cultural context of Lithuania. The study adapted a cross-sectional correlation design and a purposive sampling technique for data collection from university students aged 18 to 30 who had been using social media for at least 1 year prior to participating in the study. The correlational analysis of the study revealed a significant relationship among variables, whereas the mediation analysis revealed a significant mediating role of parasocial interaction between trust in AI influencers and purchase intention for experience products. The findings emphasized the importance of fostering parasocial interaction to enhance the effectiveness of AI influencer marketing. Marketers should focus on building trustworthy and engaging AI influencers to foster consumers' purchase intentions for experience products.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study utilized a cross-sectional correlational study design and a purposive sampling technique, along with very limited demographic variables, and that too from only the city of Vilnius. Future studies are suggested to utilize a longitudinal study design and a stratified sampling technique, as a longitudinal study design measures variables in the same participants over a longer period, and stratified sampling from different cities of Lithuania would provide better representation of university students. Some demographics, such as socioeconomic status and daily social media usage, are also suggested for future studies.

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