

# *Self-Disclosure, Para-Social Relationship, Ambivalent Attitude and Purchase Intention*

Luochu Chen<sup>1, 2</sup>, Hon-Tat Huam<sup>3</sup>, Sai-Keong Chan<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Faculty of Business, Information & Human Sciences, Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur, De Centrum City, Kajang, 43000, Selangor, Malaysia*

<sup>2</sup>*Jingchu University of Technology, Xiangshan Avenue 33, Jingmen 448000, Hubei, China*

<sup>3</sup>*Putra Business School, Serdang 43400, Selangor, Malaysia*

<sup>4</sup>*Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur, De Centrum City, Kajang, 43000, Selangor, Malaysia*

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**Abstract:** Social media has attracted numerous attention in recent years, and consumers' usage frequency and dependence on social media platforms are increasing year by year. However, social media influencers (SMI) are gradually playing an important role in people's daily life and consumption behavior. As such, the information released by SMI is attracted by followers, and their self-disclosure behavior has an impact on consumer behavior, especially consumers' purchasing decisions. The focus of this paper is two-fold: (i) review the existing literature on SMI self-disclosure and consumer purchase intention; (ii) studying the relationship between SMI self-disclosure, para-social relationship, ambivalent attitude and consumer purchase intention, especially in Chinese social media context. Accordingly, such thought depends upon more detailed empirical research by using the structural equation model approaches to test the proposed hypothesis model. The findings of this study will guide the effectiveness of enterprises' social media marketing methods and SMI self-disclosure content, to achieve sustainable marketing effects.

## 1. Introduction

Social media has fundamentally changed the way people interact and communicate, offering a greater capability for marketers to connect with their target customers (Ouvrein et al., 2021). In recent years, influencer marketing (i.e., contents paid for by brands but posted by influencers) has expanded rapidly on social media (Al-Shehri, 2021). The influencer marketing industry is estimated to reach \$2.3 billion in 2020 from \$0.5 million in 2015 (Mediakix, 2018). Influencers tend to post regularly on their preferred social media platforms and generate a large volume of engaged followers who pay

close attention to their opinions. Through influencer advertising, marketers reach their target audience effectively and deliver a message through a trusted source (Brown & Hayes, 2018). Furthermore, influencers are attaining high responsiveness from social media users while typical marketing messages are struggling with consumer avoidance and negligence. Eyal (2018a) conducted a survey and pointed out that 92% of social media users reported they trust influencers over traditional marketing media and 74% of “digital natives” resist being targeted by brand pages on social media. The process of how influencers have impact in social media users successfully has become a research topic in different contexts and markets (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021).

Although the definition of purchase intention has not yet been agreed upon by academics, what is common is that purchase intention reflects both the likelihood of a consumer making a purchase decision and represents the consumer's perception and attitude toward a product or service. According to long-term research on consumer behavior, the process of consumer behaviors and purchase decisions are influenced by a variety of factors, in which consumers will consider a variety of factors and finally make a purchase decision. In the context of gradually popularizing online consumption, the factors affecting consumers' willingness to purchase are more diversified, such as user perception, user trust in brands, consumer psychology and external factors such as products and platforms can all have an impact on consumers' online purchase intention. However, with the rapid development of new media such as social platforms and live streaming platforms, the influence of SMI on consumers cannot be underestimated, and their degree of influence on consumers even surpasses that of traditional celebrities. However, influencer marketing tends to adopt a more covert and subtle approach, which provides an opportunity for this research to select the characteristic factors of SMI native advertising as external stimuli to study its impact on consumer trust, Para-social interactions, and thus on purchase intention.

Ambivalent attitude is mainly related to customers' internal emotions, which can play a large role in information processing and purchase decisions. Especially in today's market environment where new products are emerging, consumers are faced with many choices, and the pre-purchase evaluation of these choices is based on indirect information provided by SMIs or merchants, and it is difficult for consumers to determine whether this information can truly and comprehensively reflect the attributes of the product, thus making ambivalence more prominent. Therefore, research on ambivalent attitude from the consumer perspective needs to be further explored. In addition, by combing the influencing factors of ambivalent attitude, we find that external reference groups can influence consumers' ambivalent attitude, and SMIs can be used as a reference group to influence consumers' ambivalent attitude and thus their willingness to purchase products. However, in the existing research on the mediating mechanism between SMIs native advertising marketing and consumers' purchase intention, the degree of innovation is generally not high, and consumer trust attitude, consumer perceived value, consumer perceived risk level, etc. are often used as explanatory variables. As one of the external reference groups, SMIs' influence on consumers' ambivalent attitude and consumers' purchase intention has rarely been addressed. How SMIs' personal characteristics and behaviors can reduce consumers' ambivalent attitude and thus enhance consumers' purchase intention is the focus of this study.

## 2. Proposed Conceptual Model

The hypothesized model linking the relationship between self-disclosure, para-social relationship, ambivalent attitude and purchase intention is depicted in Figure 1. Based on the S-O-R framework and other relevant theories, the conceptual framework has been developed. The self-disclosure is divided into two parts referring to the existing researches, which are personal self-disclosure and

product review disclosure. This section establishes the theoretical foundation and research model for the entire study.

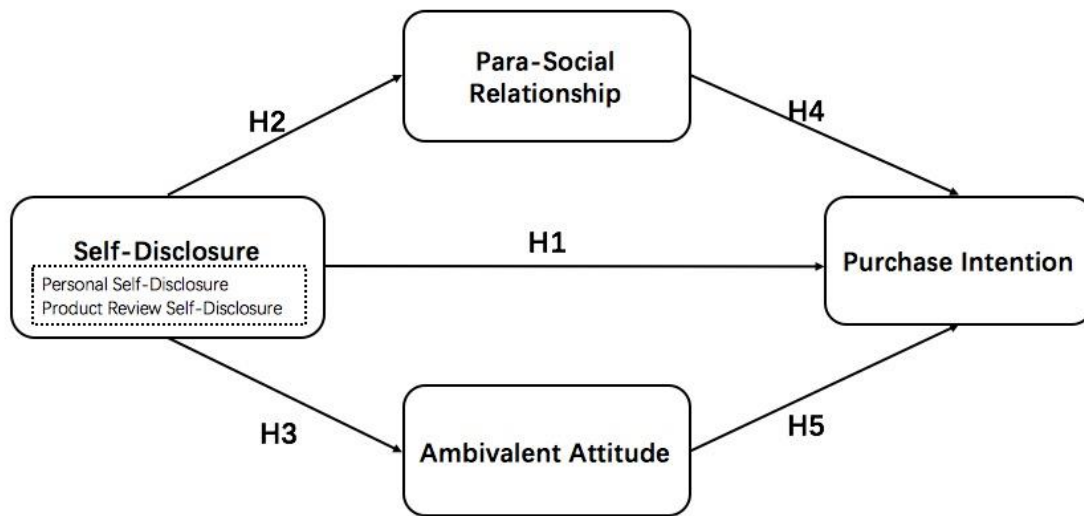


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual model

### 3. Hypotheses Development

Personal self-disclosure is defined as an individual's willingness and intention to disclose information about themselves to others (Shih, Lai, & Cheng, 2018), including their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. SMIs are arguably somewhere between friends and salespeople (McCorquodale & Nolan, 2021), making it difficult to predict the impact of social self-disclosure. Followers can develop friendships or para-Social relationship by following their content, especially content that involves personal self-disclosure (De Jans et al., 2018; Taillon et al., 2020). When SMIs disclose more information related to product review, their posts become more detailed and useful, satisfying consumers' information motivation and enhancing their trust (Huang & Chou, 2008). When users' information needs are satisfied, they perceive the post as valuable, and Hamby (2015) found that containing users' reviews in the form of narratives based on the aftermath of product use increases consumers' perceived value, which in turn increases positive attitudes toward the review information and product purchase intention. Subsequently, Shin et al (2017) also argued that when the disclosure contains more information about the product review based on the user's experience posted, the more truthful and insightful the reviews, the lower the risk perceived by the consumer, and the greater the attitude towards the products. Zhang et al. (2018) also found that consumers feel that the product reviews and recommendations provided by key opinion leaders (KOLs) who disclose more product experiences are professionally backed thereby reducing their shopping risk perception. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**H1:** There is a significant positive relationship between self-disclosure and consumer's purchase intention.

Social media, as the primary platform for communication between consumers and SMIs, transcends temporal and spatial constraints, enhancing the frequency of interaction between them (Huaman et al., 2022; Chung et al., 2023). This increased interaction lays the groundwork for cultivating para-social relationships between them. The relationship between consumers and SMIs subsequently influences the consumers' willingness to accept advertisements published by SMIs and

their attitudes and behaviors towards products endorsed by SMIs (Wang et al.,2023; Bae & Kim,2023). Gnambs & Kaspar (2015) posited that the quantity and positivity of individual self-disclosure foster a deeper relationship intimacy with the audience. A successful and expansive social network aims to establish beneficial social relations for its users (Sohn et al.,2021). Thus, users' disclosure of personal information facilitates a more profound understanding from their friends and other users, promoting the development of new relationships built on existing ones. This dynamic, in turn, advances the growth of the social network (Maier, Zhang, & Clark, 2013; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Karina & Hajer (2019) highlighted that the more frequent and extensive a celebrity's disclosure of personal information, the more likely users are to develop an emotional attachment to the media personality. Thus, the following hypothesis is distributed:

**H2:** Self-disclosures is positively related to para-social relationship.

Individuals are prone to ambivalent attitude if their behaviors or attitudes differ significantly from those of the reference group. If SMIs are used as a reference group, the more product review information they disclose and the more professional they are, consumers will think that their reviews about products' sense-of-use have credibility and can help them get more accurate, complete and important information and suggestions. This information reduces the expected risk of consumers before purchasing, and consumers are willing to try the product review self-disclosure based on SMIs with a positive attitude and reduced ambivalent attitude (Turel & Qahri-Saremi, 2023). On the other hand, SMIs' product review self-disclosure is one of the important factors in the source of consumer trustworthiness. Consumers' cognitive evaluations, attitudes, and affective biases toward SMIs' recommended products are largely influenced by credibility. If the more comprehensive the information disclosed by SMIs', the more detailed the description of the sense-of-use experience, and the advantages and defects of the products disclosed at the same time, consumers are more inclined to believe that SMIs are oriented to the interests of consumers, and that their disclosure of the product review information has more credibility. And thus the positive attitudes towards the target products are dominant, the negative emotions are reduced, and the ambivalent attitude in the purchase decision are fewer.

**H3:** Self-disclosures is positively related to ambivalent attitude.

Although para-social relationship (PSR) is a unilateral emotional attachment to SMIs as perceived by consumers, it is possible that influencers in the virtual community may influence consumers' attitudes and behaviors due to the presence of the prosocial relationship (PSR) (Rasmussen & Ewoldsen, 2016). Therefore, para-social relationship (PSR) is crucial for fostering consumer-brand relationship and loyalty as well as consumer purchase intention (Labercque & Lauren, 2014). For example, Tran et al. (2019) found that para-social relationship (PSR) is positively related to consumers' reviews of celebrity-recognized brands and purchase intention. The study by Reinikainen et al. (2020) found that a para-social relationship with the influencer builds the perceived credibility of the influencer, while comments by other audience members moderate the effect. Influencer credibility positively affects brand trust and purchase intention. A recent study conducted in China by Hwang & zhang (2018) also pointed out that the para-social relationship (PSR) can be used to articulate a one-way relationship between online digital celebrities and their followers and found that the para-social relationship (PSR) positively influences the followers' purchase intention. Based on this, the research proposes hypothesis as follows:

**H4:** Para-social relationship is positively related to consumers' purchase intention.

While according to the research of Lee (2019), the more comprehensive the product review self-disclosure is, consumers will not spend too much time and effort to collect product review information, and they believe that SMIs' introduction of the product is comprehensive and accurate enough. When consumers' information search costs are reduced, the level of consumers' ambivalent

attitude decreases, which in turn is conducive to enhancing consumers' purchase intention (Rothman, N.B. et al., 2017). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H5:** Ambivalent attitude is positively related to consumer purchase intention.

#### 4. Sample, Data Collection and Measurements

The chapter explains the research design adopted for this study, the population, sample size, and the sampling techniques. It discusses operationalization of the variables examined in this study, describes the questionnaire designed for data collection, methods of data collection, and the procedures followed in collecting data for this study. The techniques employed in the data analyses procedure has been discussed.

In this study, the population under consideration comprises individuals who engage with social media influencers' (SMIs) native advertising content. The broader population encompasses social media users across various platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin, reflecting the diverse demographic and psychographic profiles inherent to this context (Jin and Ryu, 2020). Due to the development of gender as a moderating variable in this study, it is necessary to further select a relatively balanced number of male and female respondents among participants. On the consideration of the problems of incomplete responses and outliers, the researcher decided to distribute 500 sets of questionnaire for the formal research. The development and formulation of the questionnaire in this research are executed utilizing the online platform. The data will be collected through above online platform. The initial questionnaire and related data will be in Chinese, and it will be translated in English version after collection. SEM is used to test the developed hypothesizes in a systematic, and comprehensive analysis by exploring the relationships among multiple independent and dependent constructs simultaneously.

#### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the existing literature review, self-disclosure is closely related to para-social relationship and ambivalent attitude, which both have influence on consumer purchase intention. The para-social relationship and ambivalent attitude mediating the effect between self-disclosure and purchase intention.

The proposed conceptual model is mainly grounded within the SOR theory which was articulated by Belk (1975). Specifically, this theory provides insight into how firms can develop value-creating linkages with others in order to achieve their desired outcomes. In conclusion, the proposed model, though helpful to some extent, still needs to be researched and fine-tuned before it can be usefully applied to the context of Chinese social media contexts.

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