

Influencer Marketing in Pakistan: How Trust and Authenticity Shape Consumer Loyalty

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Abstract

In the fast-growing dominance of social-media interaction in Pakistan, the field of influencer marketing has been transformed radically. The days of isolated celebrity endorsing are relinquishing way to an environment where building trust is the biggest challenge facing modern brands. Since the content of an influencer is everywhere, on Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, and so on, the question that stands out is: what is the criteria of trusting an influencer? Is trust based on veracity and authenticity, perceived expertise, or similarity and reliability congruence?

Based on the assumptions of the Social Exchange Theory, this research attempts to question the origin of trust in social-media influencers and whether the same may be converted into long-lasting consumer loyalty in the Pakistani context. To achieve this goal, this study will focus on a group of people who are the active followers of influencers on popular social-media platforms. In the evaluation of the perceptions and behaviors of the followers, the scholarship seeks to determine whether authenticity and reliability are more valuable to the Pakistani audiences compared to visual appeal. The expected results will be in a position to provide meaningful information to the marketing scholars and practitioners who would like to establish enduring relationships with the consumers, rather than taking short-lived sales achievements.

Introduction

The modern world system is currently experiencing a historic digital revolution that redefines the paradigms of interpersonal interaction, socialization and business. Social media has not only outgrown its crude status as a hobby or a way of maintaining contact with friends, it has become an underpinning of the global economy, fundamental to consumer thinking, communicative behavior as well as spending habits (Kaplan and Heinlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011). In specific cases, Pakistan has been experiencing a sharp digital renaissance, with a new generation of young people moving away from traditional media and moving into the realm of virtuosic online landscapes to an increasing number (Ali and Gazelle, 2020). The mobile phone is the owner of quotidian life in the majority of Pakistani young people, as they watch news, enjoyments, and tendencies on their smartphone and, thus, the smartphone serves as the battleground of brand rivalry (Sharif, 2021).

Traditionally, advertisement in Pakistan was based on broadcast television and billboards, which were two-way communication methods with spatial, financial, and interaction

restrictions (Kotler and Keller, 2016). These modalities, though effective in creating comprehensive brand awareness, lacked close interaction and immediate feedback systems (Belch and Belch, 2018). Marketing has been redefined as a two-way and interactive activity with the introduction of vernacular platforms like Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube (De Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012). The everyday person can now become a celebrity through spreading authentic content on the internet, thus transforming marketing into non-authentic corporate messages to relationship-based recommendations between peers (Abidin, 2016). This transformation brought about the concept of influencer marketing that currently has a massive cultural influence in Pakistani society (Uzair and Bilal, 2022).

The number of followers is not gained by influencers by the virtue of traditional fame, but through unrelenting consistency, creative resourcefulness, and reliability (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey and Freberg, 2011). It could be fashion bloggers who promote local brands, food vloggers who explore local cuisine, or technology reviewers who discuss the consumer goods in Urdu, all these creators appeal to local values and humour (Rashid and Ahmed, 2019).

Their production seems authentic, which is why the persuasiveness of the effect tends to overshadow the traditional advertising (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

But the influencer efforts do not have the same effectiveness. Many brands are spending a lot of money on relationships that do not provoke interest, thus, posing the underlying question: why would a follower leave his money in the hands of an influencer? (Ki & Kim, 2019). The key to this dilemma is Trust, whose cultural production in Pakistan lies in the most prosaic virtue of honesty and moral rectitude (Hassan, 2018). Since buyers cannot physically validate products, the burden of credibility lies in the hands of the influencer; any single failure of trust can turn out to be fatal (Erdogan, 1999).

There is a range of trust-affecting qualities revealed in academic inquiry, including expertise, authenticity, physical attractiveness, and homophily (Ohanian, 1990; Erdogan, Baker and Tagg, 2001). Expertise exhibits perceived competence, e.g. a tech reviewer explaining the features of a device in the native language (Uzair and Bilal, 2022). The concept of transparency and candidness is called authenticity, which includes the readiness to disclose product drawbacks (Audrezet, De Kerveler and Moulard, 2018). Physical attractiveness may attract people to give attention to them at first, but it does not help to maintain trust (Eisend and Langner, 2010).

Homophily or perceived similarity between the influencer and the follower is a phenomenon that arises in Pakistani contexts as the most influential credibility mechanism (McCroskey, 1997). The ability to express a comfortable blend of Urdu and English and respecting the local traditions makes influencers create an esprit of belonging, which makes followers more receptive to endorsements (Rashid and Ahmed, 2019).

This dynamic is elaborated in Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) which is a constant exchange of reciprocal transaction: influencers reward attention, engagement and allegiance with rewards, be it entertainment, informational value, or discounts (Homans, 1958). When the rewards become smaller and the costs become higher, it makes the followers disengage, and perpetual value and honesty on the other hand build long-term loyalty (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

Although the influencer marketing has been spreading, the literature is scanty on non-Western markets, including Pakistan (Nadeem, Kamel & Sharu, 2020). The most common strategies are based on the Western paradigms of consumer behaviours and might not accurately capture Pakistani socio-cultural constants, religious mores and credibility perceptions. This study, therefore, takes an analytical approach that is contextualized to dismantle the role of influencer qualities in eliciting trust and, converting it into brand loyalty, a brand and creator strategy that is based on real, long-lasting connection and not just the number of views.

Literature Review

1. Influencer Marketing: History and Basic Idea.

The influencer marketing has become one of the most outstanding digital marketing strategies, driven by the skyrocketing growth of social-media ecosystems. Influencer marketing is not like traditional advertising, which is more unilateral in nature, but rather interactive, engaging, and relational, which should be cultivated. (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964; O'Donnell, 2018) Influencers are people who build large audiences due to the regular and high-quality content they produce. They are powerful not only because they are visible, but because they are perceived to have credibility and the relationship whose trust has been developed over time with the followers. It is possible to trace the transformation to the word-of-mouth mechanisms; social media has enhanced this fact, making it possible to expose thousands or even millions of people simultaneously. Empirical evidence shows that customers are becoming less and less observers and more peers of the influencers, which makes the statements of influencers more credible. The consequences are particularly topical in Pakistan, where people trust each other and the social recommendation is important in the market.

2. Relationship as the Foundation of Influencer Marketing.

Trust is considered a pillar in the relationship marketing and is essential especially in the influencer situations. Trust is a decisive factor in acceptance of messages in digital venues where there is no physical interaction. Trust is the belief that an influencer is open, dependable and actually cares about the well-being of the audience, but not just to make a profit. Earlier studies show that trust has a direct relationship with consumer attitudes, purchase intentions and long term loyalty. (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Gassenheimer et al., 1998; Molm et al., 2000) On the other hand, lack of trust breeds lack of trust, disengagement and association with a bad brand. The significance of trust in Pakistan is enhanced by the cultural focus on sincerity; the audience is especially suspicious of blatant sponsorship or disjointed message delivery. Therefore, in order to have successful marketing campaigns, it is important to understand antecedents of trust.

3. Authenticity and Its Purpose in the Development of Trust.

One of the main trust drivers is authenticity, which is commonly used in influencer literature. Authenticity refers to perceived sincerity, openness and consistency with self. True influencers speak the truth, present personal stories, and avoid blatant product advertising that will tarnish their reputation. International studies have shown that viewers are very sensitive to authenticity signals and particularly on the Internet. Trust can be undermined via over-scripted content or heavy campaigning. (Hovland et al., 1953; Baker & Martinson, 2002; Vannini & Franzese, 2008) Authenticity is the factor that distinguishes between influencers and celebrities since it makes them appear as real-life people, rather than paid representatives. Pakistan is one of the countries where authenticity is valued the most because there are expectations of honesty and integrity. Those who engage openly and talk in a colloquial language, and offer experiences that are relatable will be perceived more as credible. Trust is also created through transparency such as balanced product reviews.

Therefore authenticity defines emotional connection between the influencers and the followers, which ends up increasing trust and loyalty.

4. Experience and Apparent Authority.

Expertise refers to perceived knowledge, competence and skill of the influencer in a given field. Credibility is shown when an influencer exhibits a high level of domain knowledge, e.g. a tech reviewer explaining product specifications. (Giffin, 1967; McGuire, 1968; Maddux & Rogers, 1980) The conceptual frameworks assume that the high involvement products in which

consumers need to know much before buying the product need expertise. The followers act as knowledge seekers and reward experience. Expertise does not only build the trust, but also strengthens the authority of the influencer. In the long term, expertise would be especially relevant to Pakistan: the first one can be based on authenticity, and the second one will require the values and reliability of the content.

5. Physical Beauty and Its Weak Effect.

Although in the past physical attractiveness was an influential factor, the evidence in the present times is that it is not enough to create trust or influence in the long run. (Dion et al., 1972; Dipboye et al., 1977; Chaiken, 1979) The good-looking people might attract followers at first, but without credibility and authenticity, people will not trust them. Pakistan Modesty and substance usually overshadow the appearance in Pakistan making physical attractiveness less useful in building long-term trust.

6. Homophily and Relatability

Homophily, which is perceived similarity between influencer and follower in terms of values, lifestyle or background, increases trust and relationship proximity. (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Gilly et al., 1998; Simons et al., 1970) research that shows that people tend to trust the recommendation of similar influencers confirms this idea. Homophily is highly influential in Pakistani situations, as a result of similar cultural and social identities. The sense of belonging and availability is developed by the presence of influencers who model local practices, language, and social realities. Therefore, homophily plays a significant role in brand loyalty and trust.

7. Influencer-Follower Relationships and Social Exchange Theory.

The Social Exchange Theory offers a solid framework of influencer marketing relations. It revolves around reciprocity: influencers provide value in the form of content and information; followers provide it in the form of trust, engagement, and loyalty. (Homans, 1961; Gouldner, 1960; Molm et al., 2007) The important result of a successful social exchange is trust. Consistency in value is greatly appreciated when followers do not feel deceived and the relationship will grow slowly creating brand loyalty.

8. Gap in Research and Relevance to Pakistan.

A large part of the available literature focuses on the Western markets, and there is a gap in the literature about Pakistani contexts. (Gatignon & Robertson, 1986; McGuire, 1968; Granovetter, 1973) Perceptions of trust and credibility are moderated by cultural diversities, social norms as well as consumer expectations. Thus, it is necessary to conduct localized studies that would trigger the traits of influencers in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. The current research will shed some light on the formation of trust and consumer loyalty in the Pakistani influencer marketing by exploring the concept of authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, and homophily.

Conceptual Framework: Influencer Marketing in Pakistan

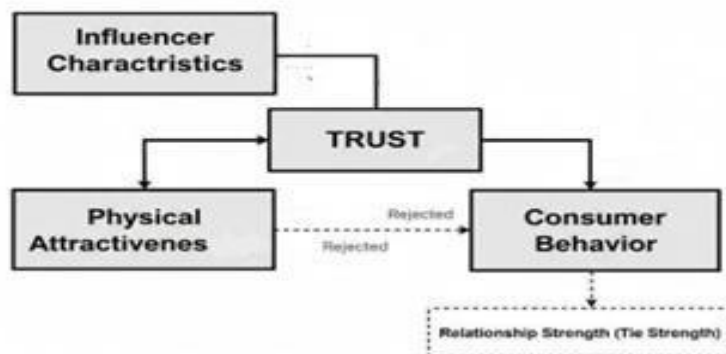


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Influencer Marketing in Pakistan.

Methodology

1. Research Design

The research design of the investigation is quantitative research which uses online survey as the main data collection tool. The most suitable approach to assess the nexus between influencer characteristics, trust, and consumer loyalty is a quantitative one. The survey approach provides objective analysis and statistical rigour, which allows making generalisable conclusions about the digital media users in Pakistan. The information was gathered in cross-sectional mode covering the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of the participants on the dynamics of influence at one time. The methodological decision made is similar to the common practice in social-media and consumer behaviour studies, which provide a complete picture of current trends and views.

The survey was distributed through the most popular platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp, which guaranteed access to active participants of the social-media that could be regularly exposed to the content of influencers. This selection is appropriate as it meets the digital overture of influencer marketing and provides maximum sample diversity between different cities and regions.

2. Participants and Sampling

The target population was Pakistani citizens aged 18 y and older and are active followers of at least one local influencer. This group was chosen due to the fact that the population older than 18 years is more likely able to make independent buying decisions and is the most likely to use the social-media platforms. In this regard, purposive sampling method was used in order to recruit individuals who are interested in influencer marketing at the moment. Those participants who were unable to name an influencer were filtered out to ensure the relevance of the data. Such an approach will guarantee that the sample is highly relevant and has quality information, reflecting the target population.

3. Measurement Instruments

The survey instrument combined the proven academic scales, carefully translated into readability and the cultural contextualisation. Various sections contained the constructs of

influencer characteristics, trust, loyalty, and tie-strength. The traits of influencers (expertise, authenticity, and physical attractiveness) were measured through a 7-point Likert scale. The issue of trust was measured by the dependence of the participants on the recommendations of the influencers and their trust in their advice. Measures of loyalty represented intentions to make repeat purchases, brand promotion, and long-term preference. Tie-strength measured intensity of engagement, which determined the depth of interaction moderated the results of trust and loyalty.

Data Analysis

The surveys were carefully coded and analyzed with the Statistical Package of the social Sciences (SPSS) after the data collection stage was completed. To ensure accuracy as well as strength, the analytical protocol has been outlined into a number of consecutive steps.

To begin with, a reliability test was conducted using Cronbachs Alpha to evaluate the internal consistency of every scale of measurement. Any coefficient of 0.70 and above was considered to be indicative of sufficient reliability thus confirming that the constituent items in each construct were viable to measure the intended latent variable.

After the reliability test, the descriptive statistical methods were used to bring together information about the respondent demographics and the general trends in social media use. This step provided a descriptive portrait of the sample, which provided the required scaffolding of contexts on the subsequent analyses.

Lastly, there was the implementation of multiple regression analyses to explore the relationship between influencer qualities, such as authenticity, expertise, physical attractiveness, and homophily, and consumer trust and to determine the resultant effect of trust on consumer loyalty. The regression model helped to identify salient predictors and also measure the extent of their contribution in the Pakistani context.

In combination, this methodological approach has allowed a comprehensive investigation of the aims of the study and produced empirical support that can support or disprove the formulated hypotheses.

Results

The last dataset consisted of the responses of 384 Pakistani respondents, which are gender balanced, meaning that they use social-media channels on a high daily basis. The most popular platform was YouTube (82 per cent), then Facebook (78 per cent), and Instagram (71.6 per cent). Most of the followings were created by the fashion, beauty, and travel influencers.

Expertise and authenticity were ensured as important antecedents of trust through regression analyses (H1, H2). Trust was positively predicted by homophily (H4), but was non-significant with physical attractiveness (H3). Trust was an intermediary between influencer features and consumer behaviors-loyalty, product attitudes and purchase intentions (H5-H7). These dynamics were moderated by strength of relationships: authenticity primarily affected new followers, expertise maintained trust in followers with experience.

Table 1: Summary of Research Hypotheses and Results

Hypothesis	Path / Relationship	Result	Findings from Research
H1	Expertise →Trust	Supported	Expertise significantly boosts trust.
H2	Authenticity →Trust	Supported	Sincerity is a major driver of follower trust.
H3	Physical Attractiveness →Trust	Rejected	Looking good does not build long-term trust.
H4	Homophily →Trust	Supported	Relatability leads to higher trust levels.
H5	Trust →Loyalty	Supported	Trust is the main bridge to brand loyalty.
H6	Trust →Product Attitude	Supported	Trust improves the attitude toward products.
H7	Trust →Purchase Intention	Supported	Trusting followers are more likely to buy.

Discussion

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Theoretical Implications

The current research paper can be of significant value to the current body of knowledge on influencer marketing because it challenges how trust is formed in the unique socio-cultural context of Pakistan. Using the long-established theoretical models, namely the Social Exchange Theory, the Source Credibility Model, and homophily, the study surpasses the traditional Western-centered discourse and expands our understanding of the digital impact within the non-Western setting. The empirical results indicate that influencer-follower dyads in Pakistan are much more than transactional; they are characterized by exchanges that are

reciprocal in nature where influencers provide value in the form of information, advice, entertainment, and personal insight, and followers provide trust, engagement, and loyalty as reciprocations. This two-way traffic highlights that trust is the key outcome of effective transactions and the key catalyst of a long-term brand attachment, hence, confirming that influencer marketing is a social process, as well as a marketing strategy. The paper also dispels current beliefs endorsed by the Source Attractiveness Model as it shows that physical attractiveness is not a significant addition to credibility or trust among Pakistani audiences. Although this visuality of the influencers might be appealing to the eye, the permanency of the influence will depend on deeper qualities such as sincerity, reliability, and authenticity towards the followers, and therefore, to avoid the long-term influence, the emphasis on the superficial qualities should be avoided.

In addition, the study provides a subtle extension of the Source Credibility Model which sheds light on the differentiated functions of authenticity and expertise in different phases of the influencer-follower relationship. Authenticity is conclusive in the initial stage as it allows influencers to build initial trust based on openness, reliability, and honesty: a platform on which credibility can be stacked. With the development of relationships, professionalism takes a leading position, which enhances credibility and maintains attention. Homophily also has a key role in the formation of trust given that Pakistani followers are more disposed to value and take the advice of influencers who reflect their values, lifestyles, language, and cultural perspectives. This visual resemblance leads to emotional intimacy, which allows influencer manipulation to appear more like a counseling effort by an influential friend than an advertisement. Overall, the results shed light on an evolving, culturally-based transformation of trust in Pakistani influencer marketing - between initial affective ties and competence-grounded credence as time passes. In the case of brands, this revelation highlights the need to choose influencers who can help establish meaningful lasting relationships and not superficial measures like the number of followers or transient reach.

Table 2: Comparison of Trust Drivers based on Relationship Strength

Follower Type	Relationship Strength	Key Driver of Trust	Why it Matters?
New Followers	Weak Tie	Authenticity	It helps build initial trust.
Long-term Followers	Strong Tie	Expertise	It strengthens long-term trust and credibility

Practical Implications

Applied-wise, the research suggests that Pakistani companies must focus on truthfulness and connection instead of shallow measures. The genuineness is critical to the initiation of engagement, and expertise is the key to long-term loyalty. The brands should give the influencers the freedom to be creative, thus preserving credibility and establishing long-term relationship.

Conclusion

The provided evidence shows beyond a reasonable doubt that the effectiveness of influencer marketing in a Pakistani context is determined by the relational authenticity and cultural resonance as opposed to the polished production values or visual appeal. The only currency that creates a bridge between the attributes of influencers and consumer loyalty is trust. This highlights why brands and creators need to develop authentic, trust-based relationships instead of seeking temporary promotion spurts. The results support the idea that the trust and its meticulous development can turn a fledging digital follower into a brand loyalty.

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