



HOW DO SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS DRIVE CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR?

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Abstract:

As organizations recognize the power of influencer marketing, businesses are investing more in working with influencers to promote their products and services. Social media influencers have become increasingly important in shaping consumer behaviour and driving purchasing decisions but it's unclear how or why they have this effect. This lack of understanding makes it difficult for businesses to effectively use influencers as part of overall marketing armoury. This study aims to fill in the knowledge gap by exploring how social media influencers drive consumer behaviour. By applying theory of planned behaviour, the study also focuses on identifying the main drivers of purchase intention through influencer marketing. Findings from semi-structured interviews reveal that follower's attitudes toward influencers and subjective norms have a favourable impact on purchase intentions which influences consumer behaviour. In addition, four additional constructs were identified from the interviews: authenticity, entertaining content, emotional bond, and personal-relevance. Understanding how customers are influenced by social media influencers can help marketers develop more effective marketing strategies. Managers can target influencers that have the most impact on different customer segments, and use them to generate more effective campaigns.



Keywords: *Consumer Behaviour, Influencer Marketing, Social Media Influencers, Theory of Planner Behaviour*

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Introduction

All aspects of our lives have been affected by the digital revolution (Sama 2019). People are increasingly spending more time in the virtual world which has changed their decisions as consumers (Veloutsou, Ruiz & Mafe, 2020). From ordering groceries online to checking-in restaurants on social media to booking rides via mobile apps, the digital influence behaviour is self-evident. With traditional media continuing to lose consumer interest, digital forms of media have completely changed the marketing media landscape (Adeola, Hinson & Evans, 2020). In response to regaining the attention of ever-distracted consumers, marketers have started using a wide mix of digital marketing strategies, incorporating online alternatives with offline sources (Steenkamp, 2020).

Many recent studies have suggested that consumers do not recall the brand messages to which they are exposed through traditional marketing channels, such as TV and print media (Belanche, Flavián, & Pérez-Rueda 2020), (Chan, 2020), (Jin, Kerr & Suh, 2019), (Parengkuan, Tulung & Arie, 2020). Similarly, consumers have been using ad blockers and other such tools to skip the online advertisements that are presented through digital marketing channels (Gordon , Jerath, Katona, Narayanan, Shin & Wilbur, 2021). Therefore, in this present scenario in which the attention span of the consumer is limited, marketers are facing the daunting task to break the clutter and get their brands noticed.

There has been significant growth in social media marketing platforms in the past decade, as brands attempt to engage their customers in a much more individualized and personalized manner (Zahay 2021). While most brands have been using their official social media accounts for promotion and engagement activities, marketers have also now realized that using social media influencers can result in increased brand awareness and connection with the target audiences (Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi & Thrassou 2021). Social media influencers are those individuals that have gained a large follower base on social media platforms (Piehler R, Schade M, Sinnig J, Burmann C. (2022). With the continuous expansion of social media sites, the number and power of social media influencers have been increasing in recent years Enke & Borchers, 2019). These social media influencers have created a strong impression in many different categories, specifically, fashion, travel, food, health, and entertainment (Brooks, Drenten & Piskorski, 2021). Most social media influencers have a presence on multiple social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (Arora, Bansal, Kandpal, Aswani & Dwivedi, 2019).

Many recent studies have suggested that consumers, nowadays, prefer to take opinions from influencers to make informed decisions about their purchases (Agnihotri, & Bhattacharya, 2021),



(Jin , Ryu & Muqaddam , 2021), (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Previous studies also suggest that content posted by social media influencers are perceived as more trustworthy than the brand messages received from official brand account (Breves, Amrehn, Heidenreich, Liebers, Schramm, 2021). In addition, the growing popularity of influencer marketing is a result of better engagement opportunities with the target audiences for the brands (Archer , Wolf , Nalloor, 2021). Thus, social media influencers are now playing a significant role in shaping consumer opinions about products and services.

Since influencer marketing has emerged relatively recently, there is no single academic definition for it. Almost a decade back, there were hardly a thousand social media influencers but a recent report by Influencer Marketing Hub Report (2022) suggests that there are more than 50 million people all over the world who are considered social media influencers (Geyser 2022). Most of the academic studies on influencer marketing have been conducted in Western countries; however, the growth of influencer marketing is observed in all parts of the world. With the growing popularity of social media influencers in Pakistan and little research undertaken in the Pakistani context, the authors have studied influencer marketing from a consumer perspective in Pakistan.

Despite a significant rise in academic research in influencer marketing, in recent years, there is still a lack of understanding of how social media influencers drive consumer behaviour. The authors of this study found that there is a paucity of qualitative studies in the field of influencer marketing. Therefore, this study is based on a qualitative research design comprising 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with active followers of social media influencers. The interview guides for the research are developed based on the theory of planned behaviour. The interviews examined the various aspects of how social media influencers drive consumer behaviour. The findings of this study can serve as the foundation for brands and marketers to develop successful influencer marketing strategies. The insights generated from the study will help marketers target consumers by understanding how influencer marketing drives consumer behaviour.

Literature Review

Influencer Marketing

Marketing academic literature has witnessed a sudden rise recently in the term influencers (Vrontis , Makrides, Christofi, & Thrassou, 2021) , (Piehler, Schade, Sinnig & Burmann, 2022), (Enke, & Borchers, 2019), (Brooks, Drenten, & Piskorski, 2021), (Arora Bansal, Kandpal, Aswani & Dwivedi 2019), (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya 2021), (Jin , Ryu & Muqaddam 2021) ,(Kapitan & Silvera, 2016) , (Breves, Amrehn, Heidenreich, Liebers, & Schramm 2021) , (Archer , Wolf , & Nalloor J2021) , Geyser 2022), (Fernández-Prados, Lozano-Díaz, Bernal-Bravo & Muyor-Rodríguez 2021). There have been several attempts to theoretically define influencer marketing. (Brown & Hayes 2008), defined influencer marketing as an act of influencing consumer choices through an external person by someone who has a large following on digital media platforms. WOMMA (Word of Mouth Marketing Association) defines it as the process of identifying opinion



leaders and key communities who have a certain ability to exert an influence on the opinions of others (Morton 2020). Social media influencers are used by the brand to influence online followers by creating two-way communications across social media platforms (Leung, Gu , & Palmatier 2022). The term is still evolving because of the changes that have been occurring in recent years.

The way brands engage with target audiences has changed due to the growth of social media platforms (Constantinescu , Orindaru , Pachitanu, Rosca , Caescu , & Orzan 2019). The marketing scenario has entirely changed in the past two decades as people started to spend more time online, specifically on social media (Li & Larimo , Leonidou 2021). Previous studies have established that consumer place more trust in word-of-mouth in comparison to paid advertisements (Chen & Yuan 2020) ,(Hu & hua, Wang , Jiang , Yang 2019), (Roy & Datta 2019). Influencer marketing uses the word-of-mouth of influencers to endorse brands in ways that can generate engagement with the target audiences (Weiss 2014). Influence marketing leverages the abilities of social media influencers to support and endorse a brand to create awareness and engagement (Campbell & Farrell 2020). Past studies have established that influencer marketing is a highly effective method to build brand awareness and increase engagement with target audiences on social media (Lee & Kim 2020), (Ong , Ito 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The theory of planned behaviour is one of the most widely applied theories in the field of marketing and consumer behaviour (Ferdous 2010). The structure of the theory is as such that it helps in identifying the role of experts, peers, and all others who have an impact on influencing consumer behaviour. The theory has been applied in the field of consumer behaviour to understand the role that opinion leaders and celebrities have in driving consumer behaviour (Knoll & Matthes 2017). This study also makes use of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to understand how social media influencer modifies consumer behaviour. According to TPB, individuals are motivated by three kinds of beliefs: behavioural, normative, and control (Ajzen 1991). To understand how social media influencers drive consumer behaviour, specifically purchase intentions, this study uses TPB by integrating the three constructs: subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and attitude in the interview guide. Therefore, by applying TPB, this study aims to understand the intentions of consumers to purchase services and products endorsed by social media influencers.

Research Methodology

The primary objective of the study was to understand how social media influencers drive consumer behaviour. Since the research is exploratory in nature, a qualitative research design is adopted. The study is focused on expanding the body of knowledge related to influencer marketing as it is designed to identify and understand important dimensions that drive consumer behaviour. The study also aims to identify and elaborate on the characteristics of social media influencers that can drive consumer behaviour.



The target group of the study was the consumers who were actively following social media influencers; therefore, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted in three urban cities of Pakistan (Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad). Each of the respondents was an active follower of more than five social media influencers and had a habit of browsing social media accounts at least twice a day. To ensure that there is a representation of different product categories, the respondents were selected from different age groups and a healthy gender ratio was ensured (8 females, 7 males).

The researchers had studied the literature on influencer marketing extensively, which had given a thorough understanding and helped in designing the interview guides. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the respondents. The interviews with respondents (6) from Karachi were conducted in person while the interviews with respondents from Lahore (4) and Islamabad (5) were conducted online. All interviews were conducted in the Urdu language since respondents can express themselves freely in their mother tongue.

The semi-structured interviews were based on the following format:

1. Asking respondents about the social media platforms they use, which type of social media influencers they follow, and product categories in which the social media influencers are perceived to be relevant.
2. Elaborating on the factors that drive consumer behaviour. Expanding on the constructs from the Theory of Planned Behaviour (attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control)
3. Probing the new constructs in an attempt to identify the factors that are driving consumer behaviour.

Data Analysis and Findings

All the semi-structured interviews were recorded and as the interviews were conducted in the Urdu language they were then translated into English. After translation, the transcripts from the interviews were examined and analysed for patterns. The data was arranged into concepts and sub-concepts and then related themes and subthemes emerged as the responses started to come in. The main ideas and concepts that were generated from the interviews are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Key Findings

Construct	Findings	Keywords
Attitude	Respondents had a favourable attitude toward social media influencers because they found their content valuable, informative, and entertaining.	Like, up-to-date, creative, entertainment, valuable content, and quick access to information.



Perceived Control	Behavioural	No clear pattern emerged from the interviews.	Domain knowledge and expertise.
Subjective Norm		Respondents indicated that they were somewhat influenced by peer group.	Don't care, recommendation, and follow.
Authenticity		It emerged as the main driver of consumer behaviour as respondents perceived social media influencers to be more trustworthy than any other endorsers.	Real, credible, trust, care
Entertaining		Social media influencers provided its followers entertaining content which allowed the relationship to form and flourish.	Fun, time-pass, easy, enjoyable.
Emotional Bond		Respondents shared that they have developed a deeper relationship with the social media influencers.	Emotions, friend, likeability, connection.
Personal Relevance		Life experiences, personal interests and ambitions led to the development of a relationship between followers and social media influencers.	Match, shares, common, fit, relevant

The findings from the in-depth interviews were classified into two broad categories: specific and other findings. The constructs that were used from the theory of planned behaviour made up the specific findings of the study while new constructs were classified under other findings. The researchers identified the themes that emerged from the interviews for each of the constructs and defined them in Table 1.

Specific Constructs

1. Attitude:



The respondents had a positive attitude toward social media influencers. The favourable attitude towards them was indicated in the interviews as many of the respondents thought and believed that social media influencers were providing meaningful and entertaining content to them. Most respondents reported that they admired the influencers' ability to remain consistent in their messaging, build meaningful connections and engage with their audiences.

"Some of the influencers are able to provide creative and meaningful content" – P2

"I like them because of their content" – P11

Some of the responses also suggested that the favourable attitude towards social media influencers was because of the knowledge that they possess.

"She (referring to an influencer) is an expert in her field and she shares such valuable content" - P10

"Many influencers, such as Anushae, help me keep up-to-date with the fashion trends" – P15

"I feel like social media influencers can be a source of inspiration for many people." – P5

"Social media influencers have so much reach and influence that they can really help in creating positive change in the world." – P13

"Many times, I go to the influencers to find out about the latest trends and products." – P9

"I appreciate how open, honest and transparent some of the influencers are about their lives. They don't pretend to be something they are not." – P7

They also appreciated the way these influencers used their platforms to promote charitable causes or important societal issues without expecting anything in return.

"It's not just dancing and fun activities with them. They speak about social issues and help in creating awareness." – P10

"There are many influencers who have been doing good for society. Asad and Nimra collected funds for the flood victims." – P2

There was only one participant who explicitly shared that she had an unfavourable attitude toward social media influencers; however, her responses were contradicting her statements.

"I might check out the product if the influencer is promoting a product, but I'm aware that they are getting paid for it." - P1

The main keywords that emerged from the discussion related to attitude towards social media influencers included like, up-to-date, creative, entertainment, valuable content, and quick access to information.

2. Perceived Behavioural Control



For this construct, respondents were asked about their belief about social media influencers' capabilities and knowledge to influence their consumption patterns. There were mixed responses to this specific construct. There was no clear pattern that emerged from asking questions related to this construct.

"I follow Hira (popular social media influencer) on Instagram who claims to be an expert on cosmetics but I don't think she knows much about it herself" – P15

"I regularly watch food vlogs by Ramish, you don't need much knowledge about eating, do you?" – P3

"Many influencers know a lot about their fields, that's why I do consider their recommendations" – P7

"The demos given by Glossips show that the team knows a lot about the work (styling)" – P13

"You don't need any capabilities or knowledge to become an influencer" – P9

"Influencers know as much as their followers do (not much)" – P2

The main keywords that emerged from the discussion related to perceived behavioural control included: domain knowledge and expertise.

3. Subjective Norms:

The questions related to assessing the subjective norms included how much the respondents believed that there was a role of others in approving or disapproving of their behaviour of following social media influencers. In most of the cases, the peers and family members of the participants disapproved of their decision to follow social media influencers.

"My sister makes fun of me all the time that I have so much spare time to follow Asad and Nimra" – P9

"I know my friends will not approve of my influencer choices, so I don't discuss with them" – P1

Despite the disapproval from their friends and family, the respondents did not care much about what they thought of their behaviour; hence, subjective norms had very little influence on the respondents.

"I don't care what my friends think about influencers, I like their content" – P12

"Who cares what everyone thinks?!" – P14

Most of the respondents did mention that they do take suggestions from others related to social media influencers.

"If my friend recommends me a channel (YouTube), I don't mind giving it a look." – P1

"My brother knows my interests and he spends more time on Instagram so he often recommends to me who to follow" – P15



The keywords that emerged from this construct included: don't care, recommendation, and follow.

New Constructs:

1. Authenticity (Trust):

The most prominent factor that emerged from the interviews was that social media influencers are perceived to be authentic and credible. The responses showed that followers generally believed that the influencers they followed were authentic, especially if they had been following them for a long time.

"In the long run, if they are not being true to us, there would be no connection between the two." – P11

"I trust that whatever they are saying is true because if they don't they'll start losing followers" – P9

"The main reason why so many people follow Junejo is that he is himself, he does not pretend to be someone that he is not" – P2

"I like the way how Hania shared her struggles with her followers because this is what makes her look real" – P10

"Unlike the TV stars, these social media celebrities are real" – P1

"They cannot fake their online presence because they are on social media all the time" – P12

However, there was one respondent who disagreed with this notion and argued that many social media influencers are not true to themselves at times.

"They show a lifestyle that is aspirational. They only show the side that they want the followers to see." – P3

Keywords: Real, credible, trust, care

2. Entertaining Content

Many respondents mentioned that a key reason that they follow social media influencers is that they find their content to be entertaining. They believe that their favourite influencers can provide entertainment through humorous videos, thoughtful vlogs, and creative pictures. It is clear that followers highly value the entertainment offered by social media influencers.

"Whenever I'm bored, I start watching Irfan's vlogs" – P1

"For me, entertainment is the main factor." – P9

"I like to have fun and enjoy the content." – P3

"It's a good time-pass because the videos posted are easy and fun to watch." – P2

Keywords: Fun, time-pass, easy, enjoyable.

3. Emotional Bond

The respondents of the study repeatedly mentioned that they tend to develop an emotional connection with social media influencers. They can create a sense of belonging for those who



follow them, which encourages their followers to remain engaged over long periods. This connection helps foster an emotional attachment between an influencer and their followers that can be incredibly powerful.

"I started watching Junaid Akram (a popular social media influencer) because I liked the videos but after a while, I started liking Junaid as a person." – P1

"They know how to develop connections with the followers at a personal level, so everyone is connected to them." – P14

A strong emotional bond with social media influencers is often formed due to the personal connection people feel with them. Followers tend to think of these influencers as friends, or even family members, and are drawn in by their authenticity and positive messages.

"I follow them and they show their daily life activities, even their family members are shown in their videos, so I think I'm a part of their family too" – P11

"Ramish (a popular social media influencer) posts stuff that we share with our friends, so it's like he is part of the group." – P2

Keywords: Emotions, friend, likeability, connection.

4. Personal Relevance

Most of the participants mentioned that they like to follow social media influencers in categories that are of their interest. The respondents tend to follow those social media influencers to who they could relate because of common interests and aspirations.

"I started following Waliya Najib because she shares information related to beauty, fashion, cosmetics, and all the things that I am fascinated with." – P2

"I love photography and Junejo is a master at it, so I follow him on all platforms." – P13

"Being a foodie, there are many influencers I follow just to know which are the best places to go" – P14

"I'm just like Meerub, so when I see her I feel like she shares my liking for clothes and cosmetics" – P7

The sense of connection was often due to shared values, hobbies, interests, political views, or even just because of an admiration for their success story. Many people found comfort in knowing that someone else was going through similar struggles and believed that it was easier to trust what their influencer said about products and services because of this bond.

"I started following Anushae when I became pregnant. I could completely relate to what she was experiencing and that is when I developed a liking for her." – P3

Keywords: Match, shares, common, fit, relevant



Other Findings

1. Understanding of social media influencers

When respondents were asked about whom they considered social media influencers to be, they had quite a clear and similar understanding of it. For many, the idea of an influencer conjures images of individuals with a large social media following who also promote products and services.

“People who have a large following on social media” – P15

“The celebrities of social media” – P2

“Individuals who have the power to influence others on social media” – P9

Only two respondents knew about the presence of micro-influencers as well; however, they did not know the exact term for it.

“Anyone on social media who have some followers and are active in posting can be a social media influencer.” – P1

“You don’t need to have millions of followers to exert influence on social media. Do you?” – P11

2. Platform Preferences

The findings from interviews indicate that when it comes to following social media influencers, people prefer platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Surprisingly, despite TikTok being the fastest-growing social media platform in Pakistan, none of the respondents mentioned TikTok in the interviews.

YouTube offers a platform for video content which is easier to consume than text-based content on other platforms.

“I think YouTube is the best because by watching daily vlogs you get connected more.” – P10

Some respondents suggested that they prefer to follow social media influencers on Instagram. Instagram provides an engaging visual element with aesthetically pleasing photos and videos.

“Instagram allows everything, images, videos, DMs, stories” – P10

Facebook remains popular due to its ease of use and broad reach.

“There are more people on Facebook than anywhere else so all social media influencers are also there.” – P2

“I only use Facebook so I follow the ones that are on Facebook.” – P15

A few respondents also followed social media influencers on Twitter because allows quick conversations between influencers and their followers.

“Influencers are more responsive on Twitter as it is less crowded” – P9



3. Impact on Consumer Behaviour

The findings from the interviews suggested that social media influencers have a significant impact on purchase decisions. Most respondents said that when they come across an influencer's recommendation or endorsement online, it carries more weight than any other form of marketing. Additionally, there seemed to be some level of comfort that the influencer was an expert in the product they were recommending, compared to a generic advertisement.

"I won't say I entirely believe in what the influencer promotes but his/her recommendation is more credible for me than any other marketing promotion" – P11

"It's certainly better than a cricketer promoting brands on TV." – P2

Influencers not only provide product details and reviews but also can create a feeling of trust between the customer and the brand. The responses indicated that many customers found it easier to trust an influencer's advice because they had seen the person first-hand using the product in their everyday life. They felt like these were people who could relate to them, which made it easier for them to believe what was being said about a particular item.

"When Sara recommends any brand then I do believe she is also using it so her reviews are important for me." – P13

"Juenjo's review on Canon's DSLR was really helpful because he mentioned both the strengths and weaknesses of the product." – P13

From the interviews, it was evident that social media influencers are becoming increasingly influential in influencing purchase decisions. People are turning to them for advice and have begun to trust their opinions, thus making influencer marketing a powerful tool for businesses looking to reach potential customers.

"I'm always looking out for recommendations from Ramish for new places to hang out in Karachi." – P4

4. Product Categories

Findings from the interviews show that followers are most likely to follow social media influencers' recommendations for product categories such as fashion, beauty, and travel. For instance, when it comes to buying clothes or makeup, they look to influencers for advice on what looks best or which brands are worth investing in.

"I often purchase brands (clothes) that are recommended by Fatima as I like her fashion sense." – P12

"Mooro showed the hotels in which he was staying so I got a fair idea of what to expect, so I booked it for my trip." – P15



“Anushae shares makeup tips with products do not pay her to do the endorsement so I know for a fact whether those products are of good quality or not.”

Additionally, people often trust influencers’ suggestions regarding lifestyle items such as home decor and tech gadgets. Followers appreciate being able to get unbiased opinions on the latest trends and products from someone knowledgeable about these topics.

“I got my home renovated recently, and I took a lot of advice from influencers.” – P1
“I don’t know much about phones but I know that Athar Mahmood is an expert so I asked for his recommendation online and purchased it afterward.” – P9

Therefore, it is clear that social media influencers have an impact when it comes to followers’ decisions in various product categories. Based on the findings of the study, Figure 1 represents the theoretical framework.

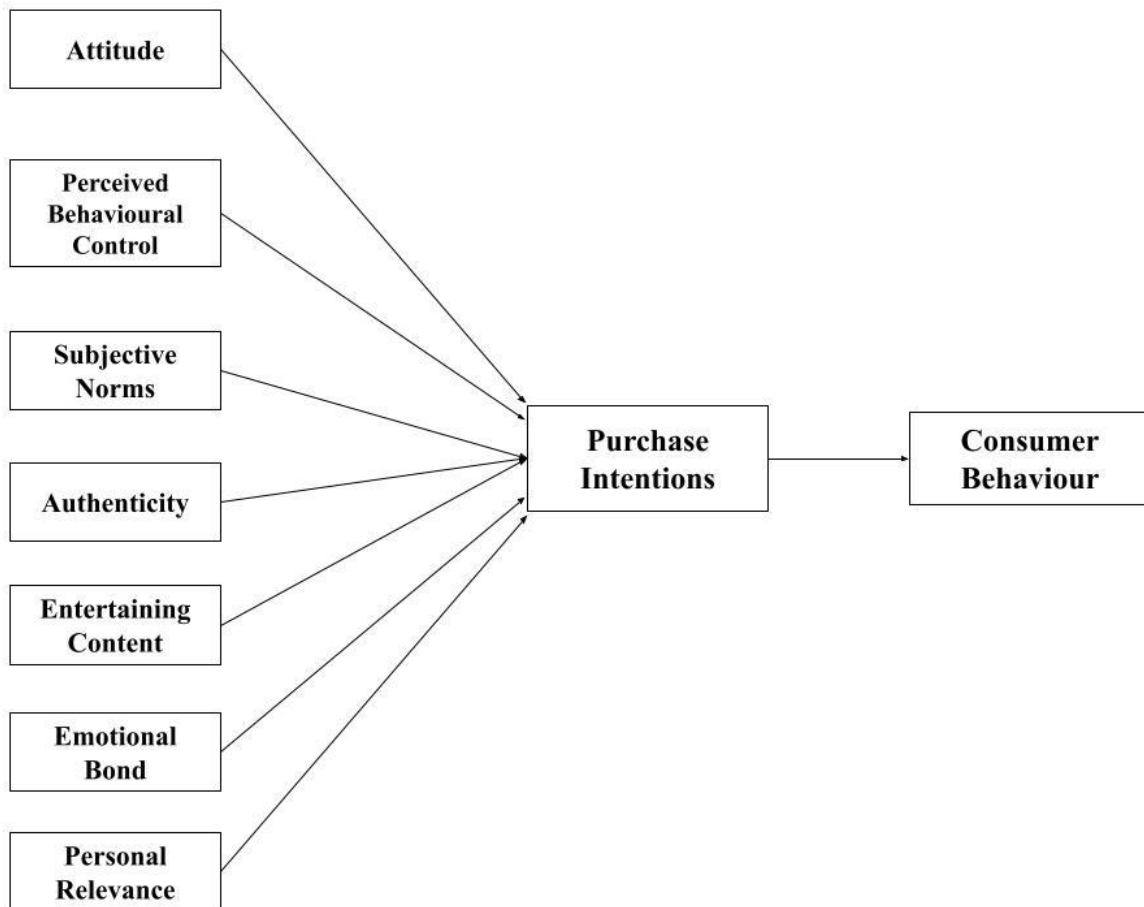


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework



Conclusion

This study presents many strategic insights for practitioners which can help them reach their target audiences by identifying the types of influencers that match their marketing and content strategies. Consumers, in this digital era, have become more informed and aware which is why they can easily tell the difference between a genuine recommendation and an endorsement. Therefore, if the brands expect to hire any social media influencer to deliver the message to the target audiences, it might not work as well. A sustainable influencer marketing strategy requires marketers to understand what kind of social media influencer can drive more engagement and will be perceived as authentic by their target audiences.

Since social media influencers have formed a deeper connection with their followers, people look at them as a trusted source of information. Many individuals, see social media influencers as their friends or someone they know which is why influencer marketing can be viewed as an extension of word of mouth from friends and family. The findings from the interviews suggest that marketers can use social media influencers as facilitators to connect with target audiences by building relationships with them.

Analysis of the interviews with active followers of social media influencers has shown that these influencers play a key role in driving consumer behaviour. Through their carefully crafted content, these influencers are able to draw attention to particular products and services in a way that resonates with their target audience. The respondents stated that they often purchase items recommended by the influencer they follow due to the trust built between them and the influencer. This type of relationship is formed through continuous engagement between the two parties: The follower's continued involvement allows them to build up a level of trust which leads them to believe in and take action on recommendations made by the influencer.

Social media influencers help their followers to make better purchasing decisions. Through the influencer's content, followers are able to learn more about a product or service before making a purchase decision. This can reduce buyer's remorse and help them find what they actually need instead of buying something just because it was popular on social media at that time. By leveraging these aspects, they have become increasingly influential in helping people decide what to buy and when to buy it.

Limitations and Future Research

Given the qualitative nature of the research, the derived findings from the interviews cannot be generalized. The study is restricted to the three main urban cities of Pakistan (Karachi, Islamabad, and Lahore). However, there is a difference in the popularity and viewing trends of social media influencers in rural parts of Pakistan. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted with 15 respondents which is a relatively small sample size.



Considering these limitations, future researchers can conduct a quantitative study to assess and validate the constructs identified from this study. It would also be interesting to compare how social media influencers drive consumer behaviour in other countries. Similarly, a comparative study can also be conducted while assessing the similarities and differences between social media influencers and TV celebrities. In addition, this study had a broad perspective and did not look at any one particular category, specifically. Therefore, future studies can test the constructs identified from this study in specific categories, such as fashion, travel, food, or lifestyle.

List of Abbreviations:

None

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