

Impact of Social Media Influencer Traits on Brand Equity in Pakistani Context: The Role of Gender as Moderator

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Abstract

The purpose of this research article is to explore the influence of social media influencer characteristics on brand value in Pakistan, with a particular focus on the moderating role of gender. This study focuses on how influencer characteristics such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, and likability influence consumer perceptions and attitudes toward brands. In this study, cross-sectional research was used, and data was gathered via questionnaires distributed to university students in Multan, Pakistan, using convenience and stratified sample techniques. Furthermore, analyzing the data collected, the SPSS and Process Macro by Hayes showed that influencer traits do have an impact on brand equity and the role of gender as a moderator. These traits were seen to have a more substantial effect on females compared to males. The study discusses the implications of these findings for marketing strategies and acknowledges limitations, such as the sample's demographic concentration and the reliance on self-reported data. This study is significant as it provides insights into tailoring marketing strategies to effectively reach and engage different demographic segments, increasing brand equity in the digital age.

Keywords: Brand Equity, Credibility, Likeability, Social Media Influencer, Attractiveness

Introduction

Over the last few years, marketing has undergone a significant shift due to the incorporation of influencer marketing as a potent strategy for attracting consumers' attention. Influencer marketing also involves the use of aspiring opinions of those considered influencers who possess groups of fans on several social networks, including Instagram, YouTube, and Tok-tok. These influencers or opinion leaders can be in a position to alter the current and potential purchasing behaviors of consumers with the help of content sharing and recommendations done via the Online platform (Brown & Hayes, 2008; De Veirman et al., 2017).

Therefore, in the present world, where globalization has impacted almost all life elements, influencer marketing is a vital component in branding strategies of the world because it avails the honest and trustworthy consumer approach (Hajli, 2014; Khamis et al., 2017). The respective brand can build on this social capital within the advertisement process and choose influencers that

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result in higher engagement among the audiences and, consequently, the specific target groups to boost sales among the respective audiences (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Pérez-López et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the effectiveness of influencer marketing depends not only on the reach and popularity of the influencer but also on the perceived traits of the influencer by their followers. Attributes such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, and likability play a vital role in shaping how audiences perceive and respond to influencer content and recommendations (Freberg et al., 2011; Kim & Johnson, 2016).

Influencer Marketing in Pakistan

The current study investigates influencer marketing in Pakistan, which has been proliferating over the last few years, especially with the growth in the adoption of social media platforms and the emergence of social media influencers (Ahmed & Ahmad, 2020; Khokhar & Raza, 2019). Indeed, the evidenced information suggests that social media users in Pakistan, especially the youth audience, tend to trust their peers, purchase products and watch movies motivated by recommendations and role models whom they saw on social media platforms (Ali et al., 2018; Iqbal et al., 2021).

By integrating IM into branding techniques in Pakistan, there is the need to set the characteristics of influencers that affect the consumer perception and attitude towards their favourite brands in this cultural environment. Thus, to fill this gap, this research aims to explore the effect of selected influencer attributes, attractiveness, trust, and likability, on brand equity in Pakistan, with the gender of the audience as the moderator.

Research Objectives

This research objective is to investigate the impact of influencer characteristics, such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, and likability, on Pakistani consumer's perceptions and attitudes toward brands and how the identified influencer characteristics interact with gender differences in consumer behavior. It suggests that the influence of these traits on brand perceptions and attitudes may vary depending on the consumer's gender. By involving gender as a moderator, the research aims to give a better understanding of how influencer marketing strategies can be modified to effectively target different demographic segments within the Pakistani market and give a deeper understanding of consumer-brand interactions in the digital era.

Research Gap and Significance

Influencer marketing is quite common in Pakistan. However, there still needs to be a notable gap in understanding how influencer characteristics impact brand equity in the Pakistan market. Past studies mainly looked at single influencer traits like attractiveness (Freberg et al., 2011), trustworthiness (De Veirman et al., 2017), and likability (Kim & Johnson, 2016) or studied these traits in isolation. There needs to be more research when it comes to understanding how all these influencer qualities combinedly impact how people see brands in Pakistan. Plus, not much attention has been paid to how gender might change the link between influencer traits and brand equity in Pakistan.

The identified research gap emphasizes the need for an in-depth examination of the combined impact of attractiveness, trustworthiness, and likability of social media influencers on brand equity in Pakistan while considering gender as a moderator. By addressing this gap, this research aims to give valuable awareness of the delicate dynamics of influencer-consumer interactions and their implications for brand equity in the Pakistani market.

Literature Review

Social media influencers (SMIs) are a broad term that refers to those persons who are followed by a vast population, and these persons have the capabilities to modify the moves, beliefs and buying behaviors of the total population through Social media platforms (Freberg et al., 2011). They also command a considerable level of following from social media platforms. They are seen as critical supporters for organizations in the area of brand advertising to distinguish themselves within the marketplace while participating in internet-based consumer engagement (Ahmed & Ahmad, 2020; Khokhar & Raza, 2019). Some may want to segment specific markets, and by working with other influencers who hold the same ideologies, the company can brand itself well to gain supporters for its brand awareness (Ali et al., 2018; Iqbal et al., 2021).

Brand equity refers to the additional value that a brand delivers to a good or service based on the consumers' perceptions, favorable/unfavorable brand image and overall brand strength. It consists of perceived quality, consumer brand identifications, brand familiarity and brand image, which constitute significant aspects (Aaker, 1991). It means consumers trust the brand more, are loyal to it, and thereby have the potential to pay more for services or products that are branded. Mezirow and Beck (2004) have pointed out that by providing these customer's dependable and relevant endorsements, influencer marketing may be an effective tool for building brand equity (Keller, 2009).

Characteristics of Social Media Influencers

Influencer marketing works better in case if influencers possess certain qualities. The level of engagement of influencer marketing can be influenced by a number of factors that concern the influencer himself. This is because many qualities characterize influencers, such as their attractiveness, trustworthiness, and likability. These characteristics that are put together complement the general factors that make an influencer appropriate for persuading their followers to make confident buying decisions.

Attractiveness is an element that captures the attention of many individuals towards social media influencers. Another factor that ends up dominating is the facial features of models signed on social media platforms. The products being marketed by attractive influencers appear more valuable, improving their public reception due to a presumed higher fan turnout and interaction (Baker & Churchill, 1977). The study further revealed that attraction is likely to increase customer traffic while creating a positive attitude towards the endorsed brand, which is the aspect of brand equity (Freberg et al., 2011). For instance, physical attractiveness has a positive impact on creating brand appeal and customers' confidence in purchasing certain products, particularly those generated from the fashion business (Rehman, 2016).

H1: There is a significant relationship between attractiveness and brand equity.

Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which an influencer is deemed to be genuine, ethical, and reliable. Building on a large array of 'weak' ties is not sufficient for developing an even stronger brand bond; such bonds require contextual consumer trust and such value-focused influencers are more likely to gain this trust from the target audience they work with (De Veirman et al., 2017). Thus, for the purpose of making a decision, an influential message will be seen as credible because of the reliability of the source, increasing the chance of consumers following the advice of the influencers (Hovland et al., 1953). Authenticity is thus a significant customer concern in communication marketing, making trustworthiness a crucial aspect when analyzing the situation in Pakistan (Ahmed & Ahmad, 2020).

H2: There is a significant relationship between trustworthiness and brand equity.

Likability is one of the essential influencer traits that have a significant impact on audience engagement and brand impression. Positive relationships are established between likeable influencers and their audience because they are viewed as approachable, accessible, and entertaining to follow (Freberg et al., 2011). Empirical evidence indicates that consumers' views and actions toward influencer content and recommended companies are significantly influenced by likeability (Kim & Johnson, 2016). Likeability may improve brand equity in the Pakistani market by forging an appealing and uplifting brand identity that appeals to customers (Khokhar & Raza, 2019).

H3: There is a significant relationship between likability and brand equity.

Gender as a Moderator

Marketing with consideration of gender works as an essential aspect to many marketing aspects due to the differences in consumer behavior that is observed in many products and services marketing. Gender is a moderator that can impact the ways that individuals perceive and act towards influencer content and also their general attitude and purchase behavior with regard to brands endorsed by influencers (Chu et al., 2020). Research shows that gender differences regarding how people perceive and engage with influencer content. For example, the buying motives of female consumers may differ from those of male consumers, and such differences may play out in attributes such as skepticism, ability and expertise, respectively. Such crude gender differences are vital in identifying when it comes to targeting and encasing influencer marketing approaches that would best fit to reach out and communicate with the various consumer segments in Pakistan (Khokhar & Raza, 2019).

H4: Gender moderates the relationship between trustworthiness and brand equity.

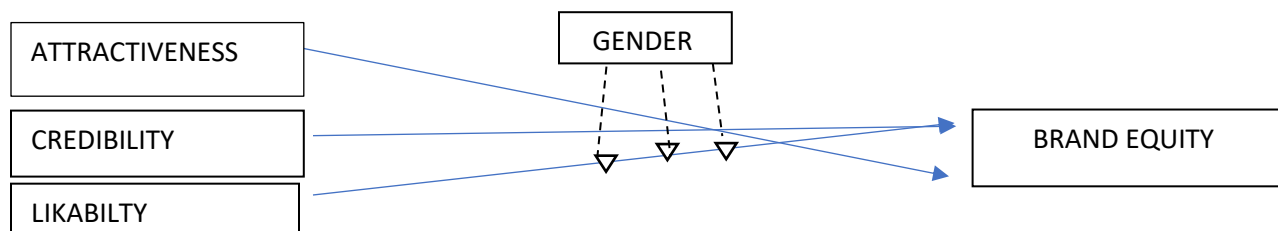
H5: Gender moderates the relationship between attractiveness and brand equity.

H6: Gender moderates the relationship between likability and brand equity.

Theoretical Framework - Source Credibility Theory

According to this view, the Source Credibility Theory is helpful for understanding how different features of influencers affect consumer attitudes and responses in influencer marketing. As per this theory, the source of a message plays a significant role in the persuasiveness of that message and the changes that it brings to the behaviors and attitudes of the customers (Hovland et al., 1953). Source credibility within influencer marketing, the attractiveness, trustworthiness, and likability of an influencer determine the perceived credibility of the source in how they are able to influence the consumer's perception and acceptance of content and endorsement. Notably, by using the principles of Source Credibility Theory, brand managers can establish much more effective and efficient ways of working with the influencers that will be effective in reaching the critical audience and generating meaningful engagement and brand associations (Brown & Hayes, 2008; De Veirman et al., 2017).

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



Research Methodology

Instrument Development

The instrument for this research developed was constructed by adopting 5-point Likert scales from earlier research surveys. The attractiveness scales were adopted from Freberg et al. (2011), trustworthiness adapted from De Veirman et al. (2017), likability from Kim and Johnson (2016) and brand equity was adapted from Aaker (1991). This approach facilitates in the measurement of the correct constructs that should be derived from the validated and reliable scales found in the literature.

Sampling and Data Collection

The target population of the study was university students in Multan, Pakistan who engage in social media frequently and possibly the followers of social media influencers. This population was deemed suitable for the study because university students constantly interact with social media; they are an adequate population for investigating the effects of social media influencers on brand equity. There are taught programs including 92 bachelors at 8 universities, 68 masters at 4 universities, and 1 doctorate at 1 university in Multan.

Thus, the social research tool to be used in the present study was developed in the form of an online questionnaire in Google Forms. These questions touched on the general use of social media spanning through YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and TikTok. To prevent attention fatigue, the filter question was asked to select only participants who use the given social networks and follow these influencers.

Both convenience type and stratified sampling procedure were used for collecting data. The employed sampling techniques were convenience sampling to gain easy access to participants, through stratified sampling to broaden the possibility of sampling across different education levels and genders. It also aids in minimizing bias and provides a better estimation of the target population by not confining it to a single sampling unit.

The study received responses from 201 people; from which 104 were considered valuable as per the guidelines to follow one or more social media influencers. This number of samples is adequate for statistical analysis, and to make a general conclusion on the outcome.

Respondents' Demographic Profile

There were 63.46% females and 36.53% males. 59.61% of respondents were 19 to 24 years old, 26.92% were 25 to 30 years, above 30 years were 5.76% and 7.69% were below 18 years of age. In respect of their educational qualifications, 43.26% were undergraduates, 47.11% were postgraduates, 6.73% had a doctorate degree, and 2.88% had completed a professional diploma or degree course. 98.02% of the respondents were use social media daily and 1.92% were weekly users of social media.

Table 1: Demographics characteristics of respondents

Variables	Groups	Frequency	%age
GENDER	MALE	38	63.46
	FEMALE	66	36.53
AGE	19 - 24 years old	62	59.61
	25 - 30 years old	28	26.92
	Above 30 years old	6	5.76
	Below 18 years old	8	7.69
EDUCATION	Undergraduate	45	43.26
	Postgraduate	49	47.11
	Doctoral	7	6.73
	Diploma	3	2.88

Data Analysis

The statistical analysis was done using the SPSS software and the method employed in the analysis was called the Process Macro developed by Hayes in 2022. This will facilitate a direct assessment of the impact of social media influencer traits on brand equity and the moderating influence of gender. Among the different analytical techniques available for this re-architecting of this study, the Process Macro is particularly well designed for mediation, moderation, and conducting a conditional process analysis.

Table 2: The process procedure output

IV (Independent Variable)	DV (Dependent Variable)	Coeff (Coefficient)	SE (Standard Error)	t (t-value)	p (p-value)	LLCI (Lower Level Confidence Interval)	ULCI (Upper Level Confidence Interval)
ATT	BE	.22	.11	1.99	.04	.00	.44
ATT*GED		.28	.08	3.24	.00	.11	.46
TRT	BE	.30	.14	2.01	.04	.00	.59
TRT*GED		.24	.11	2.26	.02	.03	.46
LIK	BE	.30	.14	2.01	.04	.00	.59
LIK*GED		.24	.11	2.26	.02	.03	.46

Findings

Consequently, the research examines the influence of social media influencer traits in the context of Pakistan: Brand equity perspective by investigating gender as a moderator. As pointed out in the analysis done by Hayes (2022) using the Process Macro method, the following conclusions were made. The analysis of the traits of attractiveness, trustworthiness, and likability shows the positive impact on brand equity, attractiveness, Coeff = .22, p = .04, trustworthiness, Coeff = .30, p = .04, likability, Coeff = .30, p = .04. These findings echo similar prior studies, including Freberg et al. (2011), where physical attractiveness positively affects user trust, leading to more favorable brand experiences.

Gender exerts a significant effect in these studies where female consumers are significantly more influenced by these traits as noted by gender and attractiveness (Coeff = .28, $p = .00$), gender and trustworthiness (Coeff = .24, $p = .02$) gender and likability (Coeff = .24, $p = .02$). These findings align with the work by Chu et al. (2020) who indicate that gender disparity is instrumental in the consumers' perception and interaction with the influencers. Concerning the hypothesis, this research proves that attractiveness, trustworthiness, and likability improve the brand equity of social media influencers, with a higher impact on female consumers of Pakistan.

It is because of these findings, that the relationship to these psycho-graphic traits recommends the characteristics in Pakistan that should be considered and used by marketers to adjust in influencing marketing strategies, especially for targeting female audiences. As it pertains to the analysis of consumer behavior, it is significant to consider the various ways in which gender may play a role in consumer decision-making processes to improve branding and marketing campaigns and thereby improve overall brand equity.

Conclusion

This research aims to establish an understanding of the behavior of social media influencers and their relation to brand equity within Pakistan. In the framework of the Source Credibility Theory, this paper points up that the qualities of an influencer are critical when it comes to influencer marketing. It also notes attractiveness, trustworthiness, and likability as essential factors closely related to social media influencers impacting brand equity. Such traits improve the evaluative perceptions of consumers; thus, awareness, loyalty, and perceived quality of brands are improved. Also, the study examines gender as a moderator and confirms that it has an essential impact on the relationships under investigation. Overall, male and female consumers in Pakistan are not much different in terms of their decision-making, but the importance of these traits is more dominant in female customers. This proves that there is a need to develop strategies that consider demographic factors in order to capture specific individuals of a particular gender effectively.

Thus, understanding the value of influencer characteristics and the impact that gender has on the outcomes allows for generating more effective and proper influencer approaches. If properly implemented, it can thus lead to an even better consumer-brand connection and, hence, more excellent brand value in the aggressive digital platform.

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