

Trust and Authenticity as Mediating Mechanisms in Social Media Influencer and Audience Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the mediating role of trust and authenticity in influencer–audience relationships within Pakistan's contemporary digital media landscape. The proliferation of social media has positioned influencer marketing as a dominant paradigm in online communication, reshaping brand-to-consumer engagement and how audiences evaluate credibility and persuasion. The research investigated how trust is developed, sustained, and eroded in influencer–audience communication, while examining authenticity as a central determinant of engagement and credibility perception. A mixed-methods design combined quantitative survey data with qualitative insights to achieve both breadth and depth of analysis. Findings reveal a significant positive correlation between perceived authenticity and trust, indicating that audiences favor influencers perceived as genuine, consistent, and relatable. Theoretically, the study extends Two-Step Flow Theory, Relationship Management Theory, and Parasocial Interaction Theory by positioning authenticity as a mediating construct in digital influencer communication, reframing influencer marketing as a relational process grounded in trust-building rather than mere promotion. Practically, findings underscore the necessity of transparency and sustained engagement over superficial self-presentation for commercial gain. The study concludes that trust and authenticity are core mechanisms underpinning influencer–audience relationships, offering contributions to influencer marketing literature and practical guidance for marketers, brands, and content creators seeking credible, engaged digital communities.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, trust, authenticity, audience engagement, digital public relations, social media influencers

INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, it has been a pivotal period in the development of our information and communications technologies, marking a radical shift in the way public, private, and voluntary organizations communicate, develop reputation, and foster relationships with their publics. There has been tremendous growth in digital and social platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook, leading to the creation of a new set of opinion leaders: social media influencers. As a middleman, they play a role by offering recommendations genuinely and engagingly, and creating personal stories. Influencer marketing has transformed from a niche marketing trend to a global industry that is reaching billions of dollars in value.

It is a change that puts influencer marketing firmly in the Public Relations (PR) arena. PR is not just about getting people's attention, it is about building the trust of the audience and establishing credibility. Authenticity is also important, as it is directly linked with audience's attitudes toward brands, this is not a concern of advertising, though. Influencers thus serve as a form of PR, crafting messages and narratives that come deeply to the senses of the general population and are seen as authentic (Gallagher, 2019). consumer behavior, and neglect PR's relational goals (Riaz, Aslam, & Rahil 2025) Furthermore, there are greater ethical issues arising. Following SEO tactics like bot farming and failure to disclose sponsored content compromises the trust in the influencers. Due to commercialization, boundaries between professions are becoming fuzzy, and transparency and accountability remain issues (Owen & Covert, 2020; Davies & Hobbs, 2020).

To fill these gaps, the current research takes on the study of how PR practitioners and influencers build and sustain trust and authenticity in a campaign. It revives influencer marketing as an ongoing PR practice, rooted in cultural, religious, and social values.

By addressing these dimensions, this study contributes to both global PR theory and local practice.

Research Questions

1. In Pakistan's Fashion and Beauty Industry, how are PR Experts utilizing influencers to create trust and build authenticity in the audience?
2. What is the level of credibility and authenticity that audiences see in influencer-led PR market activities in this industry?
3. What are the problems or ethical considerations that can arise in the partnership between PR and influencers in the fashion and beauty industry in Pakistan? What are some of the possible issues or ethical dilemmas that may arise when it comes to working with PR and influencers in Pakistan's fashion and beauty industry

Research Objectives

1. Analyze the way PR practitioners have embraced influencers as part of their campaign strategy to engage and earn trust and authenticity in fashion and beauty brands.
2. To identify the perceptions of the audience regarding the credibility and authenticity of influencers' recommendations and the trust they build for their endorsement.
3. To uncover obstacles and ethical issues of PR – Influencer collaborations in Pakistan's Fashion and Beauty industry.

Hypothesis

H1: The more credible your brand association, the more trust your audience will place in your influencers. Credibility from consistent brand association produces greater audience trust.

H2: If influencers explicitly label their partnerships as paid content, it will appear more likely to be genuine and trustworthy.

Significance of the Study

The theoretical, practical, and cultural values of the present study are significant in the context of public relations and Mass Communication in Pakistan.

Theoretical significance

This study is an addition to the academic knowledge of influencer marketing, when it is presented more as a public relations phenomenon than just a marketing tool. Prior research has focused on the influencer creation campaign from a consumer-behavior point of view, which highlights persuasion and selling.

Practical significance

The study serves as a guide for ethical and culturally relevant relationships with influencers for practitioners. Bridging the gap between client/business goals and the viewer's preferences is a difficult and challenging task in Pakistan's fast-changing media world for PR professionals.

Cultural and social relevance

This study of authenticity from the sociocultural approach acknowledges that authenticity is embedded in culture. In Pakistan, people are interested in those whose moral consistency, modesty and, respect for family and religious values are in turn (Saqib, 2023). In Western societies, authenticity is associated with one's personal expression, whereas, in Pakistan, authenticity is relational, it is earned by being aligned with collective norms

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer marketing studies have grown significantly over the last 20 years, based on theories derived from public relations, communication science, and marketing and consumer psychology. Consumer or audience and influencer relationships have become more complex, and researchers now have a growing realization that models positing a relationship between them must move beyond those of sales and transactions. In keeping with the thematic focus of the chapter, the literature reviewed in this chapter falls under these four overarching themes (1) trust and credibility as core relational constructs; (3) authenticity, ethical transparency and consequences of over-commercialisation; and (4) cultural and contextual dimensions, specifically in Pakistan and collectivist South Asian contexts.

Authenticity, Ethical Transparency, and Over-Commercialization

With audience sensitivity to the trend of 'authentic promotion versus a paid promotion' on one hand and sponsored posts appearing everywhere their influencers participate on social media, audio-visual authenticity has emerged as one of the most studied topics in influencer marketing research. According to Ejaz (2024), follower numbers are not the basis for evaluative judgments of Pakistani audiences of fashion and cosmetics influencers, but rather a sense of parasocial connection (motivation to think of the influencer as credible, trustworthy, and reliable). When inauthenticity is caught by those in the audience, particularly when commercial interests are being promoted that go against an individual's personal beliefs, the audience is less inclined to rate or consider the individual credible. Lakho, K., and Khurram, A. (2025) explore the mediating role of trust between influencer marketing and purchase intention towards Pakistani Gen Z customers. Their research indicates that an influencer who is seen as more authentic, knowledgeable, and approachable establishes more emotional and cognitive attachment with his or her followers, leading to lower perceived risks and higher brand trust.

Content resemblance and influencer-brand fit for increased credibility is supported in comparative international scholarship studies. The studies on the Indian and South Asian context (ResearchGate India, 2024) show that some common authenticity concerns are shared by societies across South Asia, indicating that this is not an exclusive phenomenon of Pakistan. There are further reasons to view influencers as 'digital gatekeepers' in their power to define a specific cultural discourse, as outlined in comparative evidence of Latin America and Europe by Navarro, Moreno, Molleda, Khalil, and Verhoeven (2020), which leads to the argument that authenticity has to be grasped relative to specific situations and contexts.

Ethical transparency, disclosure, and reputational risk

Ethical concerns are closely intertwined with authenticity in the literature. Davies and Hobbs (2020) take an explicitly critical perspective on how senior PR practitioners use influencers, highlighting both the possibilities of reach, relevance, and cultural proximity, and the tensions around ethics, transparency, and control. Their work cautions that without robust professional norms, especially around disclosure and influencer-brand fit, collaborations risk audience skepticism, reputational damage, and regulatory scrutiny. They identify fake followers, hidden sponsorships, and the commercialization of personal lives as the primary mechanisms through which credibility is eroded. Zulfiqar and Ali (2023) corroborate this finding in the Pakistani context, showing that audiences who detect non-disclosure respond with significant credibility penalties. In Pakistan, these risks are amplified: audiences are especially sensitive to religious appropriateness and authenticity, making ethical lapses more reputationally damaging than in many comparable international contexts (Ejaz, 2024; Saqib, 2023). Weber Shandwick MENAT (2024) provides supporting evidence from the broader Middle East and North Africa region, finding that cultural localization such as Ramadan-themed campaigns combined with transparent disclosure, markedly improves trust and engagement.

Cultural and Contextual Dimensions: Pakistan and Collectivist Settings

Collectivism, social validation, and trust formation

One of the major drawbacks is the individualized and Western perspective that is prevalent in the main international literature. The vast majority of research on the "credibility" and "trust" of influencers has been about North American or Western European contexts where the audience's expectations are built on individualism, personal expression, and secular consumerism. The cultural logic of Pakistani and more broadly South Asian settings and/or contexts is significantly different and must be theoretically adjusted.

Ejaz (2024) offers basic evidence which shows that the evaluative frame of the Pakistani audience is collectivist and religious where they value influencers who appear modest, family-centered and are tuned into society values. Afzal et al. (2024) take this one step further and prove that social norm alignment (defined as how much an influencer's behaviors and values are aligned with the community's expectations) is a major factor for trust. It is important to understand that with the collectivist culture, such as that of Pakistan, in which consumers' decision-making is influenced by the validation from the community, this cultural fit can prove far more significant (Lakho & Khurram, 2025).

Religious and moral dimensions of authenticity

The role of religion in an audience's assessment of influencers is unique from a structural point of view. Content should not be religious in nature as audiences are particularly sensitive to this. Modesty, humility and respect for religious values are applied carefully amongst the influencers and influencers who exhibit these settings are systematically assessed as more trustworthy (Ejaz, 2024). The concept of authenticity is

not limited to personal identity and content in the Pakistani context but extends to contribution to community moral structures, a factor that isn't much discussed in Western studies on the theme.

Relevant comparative evidence is provided by Navarro et al. (2020), who explore the gatekeeping dynamics in non-Western and regional markets in comparison with northern hemisphere markets, and show significant differences between their gatekeeping models. They conclude that what is urgently needed is for cultural specificity to be embedded within all influencer PR models and processes rather than as an afterthought or contextualization of universal findings. This finding is reinforced by the adjacent Middle East and North Africa context, in which all the campaigns scored higher by being culturally localized on trust and engagement metrics, compared to culturally generic ones (Weber Shandwick MENAT 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Two-Step Flow Theory and the Role of Influencers as Digital Opinion Leaders

Two-Step Flow Theory was originally formulated in 1944 by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet when they studied the Presidential election in the U.S., in the book, *The People's Choice*, and then further developed and theorized in 1955, in the book, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. This theory is a criticism of the prevailing communication theory of that time, the hypodermic needle (magic bullet) model of communication which originally posited that mass media messages are received and internalized in a uniform passive way by audiences who are essentially unable to resist or reinterpret the messages

Relationship Management Theory and Long-Term Relational Logic of Influencer PR

Relationships in their framework are not just a pattern of exchanges of communication, but an ongoing, or lasting, state of interconnectedness in which an organization and its publics are interdependent by virtue of awareness, influence and benefit to each other, in one or both directions when well managed. Ledingham and Bruning discussed relationship quality in terms of five important dimensions that PR practitioners should aim to develop: First, trust is the confidence that the relational partner is honest, dependable and indeed cares about the other party's welfare; second, satisfaction is the extent of satisfaction felt by a public in the site of the organization's ability to fulfil its obligations in the relationship; third, control mutuality is the perception of meaningful influence the parties have on each other in terms of the relationship; and fourth, communal orientation is the level of genuine concern that the organization has for the other party beyond merely calculating costs and benefits.

Parasocial Interaction Theory and the Emotional Architecture of Influencer Trust

Parasocial Interaction Theory is a phenomenon that is so common to anyone who regularly consumes the media, but so under-explored in much communication scholarship that cozy and even intense, life-altering connections can be formed by an audience toward a media persona they will never meet.

METHODOLOGY

The chapter aims to detail the methodological exercise taken to study the impact of social media influencers on creating trust and authenticity in the fashion and beauty industry in Pakistan. The aim of this research is to examine the relationship between an influencer and the audience with a focus on Public Relations (PR) approaches, rather than a transactional approach to marketing by taking into account the relational and ethical aspects of the digital communication. This methodology combines both qualitative approaches (interviews with PR practitioners and influencers) and quantitative approaches (census and surveys of

audiences). This not only allows for a holistic understanding of the audience perception but also allows for capturing the cultural and contextual nuances that are inherent in the mind of the audience for Pakistan, a society that can be considered as more collectivistic in nature.

Research Design

Convergent Parallel Mixed methods design was chosen to investigate the present study..

Rationale for mixed-methods

The integrated theoretical framework highlights the multi-layered dynamics of influencer marketing:

Two-Step Flow Theory and **Digital Gatekeeping Theory** emphasize the structural mediation of messages.

Source Credibility Theory and **Parasocial Interaction Theory** focus on cognitive and emotional evaluation of influencers.

Relationship Management Theory situates the process within long-term PR practices.

Population and Sampling

Target population

The study focuses on Pakistan's fashion and beauty sector, including three categories of participants:

1. **PR Professionals:** Working in agencies or corporate communication departments involved in influencer campaigns.
2. **Fashion and Beauty Influencers:** Across nano, micro, and macro tiers with active presence on Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube.
3. **Social Media Users:** Followers of these influencers aged 18–35, representing Pakistan's digitally engaged population.

Sampling Strategy

Quantitative phase (Audience survey)

A **non-probability purposive sampling** approach was adopted for audience respondents, targeting individuals actively following fashion and beauty influencers. Inclusion criteria included: Age 18–35 years Regular engagement with influencer content (at least once per week) Familiarity with at least one fashion or beauty brand via influencer campaigns And for the interviews:

PR Professionals: 3 participants from agencies and corporate communication teams.

Influencers: 3 participants representing nano (1k–10k followers), micro (10k–100k), and macro (>100k) tiers. Stratified purposive sampling was employed for adequate representation of the entire sample in the urban, semi-urban and rural areas and the sample was taken from the cities of Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad and lesser cities of Punjab and Sindh. Based on the population of active social media users in the targeted age group, and the 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, the targeted sample size for quantitative survey was 500.

Qualitative phase (Interviews)

Purposive and snowball sampling methods had been used to recruit a total of 6 semi- structured interviews, with half PR professionals, and half influencers to gain a range of different perspectives on influencer campaigns for the qualitative part of the study.

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative data: audience survey

The quantitative survey aimed to measure **perceived credibility, trust, and authenticity** of influencer-driven campaigns.

Instrument design The survey instrument was developed based on constructs derived from the theoretical framework:

- ▮ **Source Credibility Dimensions**
- ▮ **Parasocial Interaction**
- ▮ **Trust and Authenticity**

The instrument included **5-point Likert scale items** ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (5).

Data collection procedure

The survey was administered online using Google Forms, circulated through:

- ▮ Social media groups (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook)
 - ▮ PR networks and student organizations
 - ▮ Snowball sharing by initial respondents
- Data collection spanned **four weeks**, with reminders issued twice to improve response rates.

Interview protocol

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with PR professionals and influencers to capture nuanced insights into **campaign strategy, ethical decision-making, and cultural adaptation**.

Interview guides were pretested with **two PR professionals and two influencers** to refine questions for clarity, relevance, and cultural sensitivity.

Interview procedure

- ▮ Interviews were conducted **face-to-face or via Zoom/Google Meet**, depending on participant location and preference.
- ▮ Each interview lasted **45–60 minutes**, was audio-recorded with consent, and supplemented with field notes.
- ▮ Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded for thematic analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using **SPSS v28**. Analytical steps included:

1. Demographic variables and constructs: Descriptive statistics: frequencies and percentages and mean scores.
2. Internal consistency was checked using the Cronbach's alpha reliability measure.

Analysis of Relationships: Pearson correlation analysis to assess relationships among credibility, parasocial interaction, trust and authenticity.

3. Analysis of the data: Regression analysis: Hierarchical regression to find out the predictive power of the credibility and parasocial interaction on trust and perceived authenticity.
4. Interpret comparisons from t-tests or ANOVA to determine if there are differences in opinion among the various sub-groups within the sample

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from **6 semi-structured interviews** were analyzed using **thematic analysis**

RESULTS

The analysis of quantitative data obtained and carried out using SPSS v28 and the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) are presented in this chapter. The analysis consisted of four sequential steps, reliability analysis, than descriptive and correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation analysis was carried out on the sample of 498 respondents (N = 498).

Reliability Analysis

To determine the internal consistency of each measurement scale Cronbach's alpha (α) was used in reliability analysis. According to Nunnally (1978), alpha values at .70 or higher are acceptable. High internal consistency was achieved for all the constructs exceeding .943 to .957 in alpha value, as indicated in Table 1, this is considered excellent reliability

Reliability Statistics for All Constructs (N = 498)

Construct	Variables	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Influencer Credibility	IC1–IC5	5	.957
Trust	Trust1–Trust5	5	.949
Parasocial Interaction	PI1–PI5	5	.956
Authenticity	ACA1–ACA5	5	.943
Ethical Perceptions	EP1–EP5	5	.950

The results showed that measurement scales in this study were reliable and internally consistent.

Descriptive Statistics

Demographic data was descriptively analysed which showed that the sample was largely included of youth (75.3% age 18-24) with slightly more males than females (48.0% male) and high concentration in Lahore (80.7%). The majority of respondents (64.9%) consumed fashion and beauty influencer content daily, mostly on Instagram (46.4%). The study aims to target digitally engaged young urban gen z from Lahore, which is consistent with these demographic attributes.

Mean values on the 5-point Likert scale ranged from 'Generally positive' on average across the constructs, thus providing generally positive impressions of the credibility, trust, parasocial connection, authenticity, and ethical transparency of influencers.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was used to explore the relationships between the 5 variables in the study. The correlations were all statistically significant, at the $p < .001$ (2 tailed) level, as shown in Table

Pearson Correlation Matrix (N = 498)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Influencer	—				
Credibility					
2. Trust					

Detailed description of the Pearson Correlation Matrix: The matrix shows correlations between five variables: 1. Influencer, Credibility, 2. Trust, 3. Parasocial Interaction, 4. Authenticity, and 5. Ethical Perceptions. The diagonal is 1.00. Correlations are: 1. Influencer-Credibility: .771*, 1. Influencer-Trust: .771, 1. Influencer-Parasocial Interaction: .759*, 1. Influencer-Authenticity: .744*, 1. Influencer-Ethical Perceptions: .717*, Credibility-Trust: .752*, Credibility-Parasocial Interaction: .738*, Credibility-Authenticity: .710*, Trust-Parasocial Interaction: .738*, Trust-Authenticity: .710*, Trust-Ethical Perceptions: .710*, Parasocial Interaction-Authenticity: .710*, Parasocial Interaction-Ethical Perceptions: .710*, Authenticity-Ethical Perceptions: .710*.

	**			*		*		*	
3.Parasocial		.759		.752*	—		.704*		.702*
Interaction	**		*			*		*	

Variable	1		2		3		4		5	
4.Authenticity		.744		.738*		.704*	—			.733*
	**		*		*				*	
5.Ethical		.717		.710*		.702*		.733*	—	
Perceptions	**		*		*		*			

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation matrix shows high positive correlation of all the variables. The strongest correlation was between Influencer Credibility and Trust ($r = .771$) showing that the most direct predictor of trust is Influencer Credibility. Parasocial Interaction also showed a significant correlation to Trust ($r = .752$), thus highlighting the emotional ties to relational trust. Both Authenticity ($r = .738$) and Ethical Perceptions ($r = .710$) were strongly correlated with Trust, which is a theoretical prediction of the degree to which audiences receive and perceive communication as being authentic and ethical.

Regression Analysis

Simple linear regression models were used to investigate the effects of each independent variable on the dependent variable, namely, Trust, and the effects of Trust on the dependent variable, taking in turn the variables Authenticity

Regression Analysis Results

Model	Predictor	Dependent	Beta		Standar		R ²		F		p	
			(B)		dised							
					Beta							
1	Influencer	Trust		.		.7		.		7		<
	Credibility		727		71		594		25.807		.001	
2	Parasocial	Trust		.		.7		.		6		<
	Interaction		721		52		565		44.227		.001	
3	Ethical	Trust		.		.7		.		5		<
	Perceptions		705		10		505		05.515		.001	
4	Trust	Authenticity		.		.7		.		5		<
			738		38		544		92.286		.001	

Model 1 showed that Influencer Credibility was a significant predictor of Trust ($B = .727$, $\beta = .771$, $p < .001$) and explained 59.4% of the variance in Trust scores ($R^2 = .594$). The

results from Model 2 revealed that Parasocial Interaction also significantly predicted Trust ($B =$

$.721$, $\beta = .752$, $p < .001$) accounting for the variance of 56.5% ($R^2 = .565$). The result showed that the coefficient (B) of Ethical Perceptions ($.705$) is significant at $p < .001$ ($\beta = .710$) and account for 50.5% variance ($R^2 = .505$) for Trust. Finally, Authenticity was explained by Trust ($B = .738$, $\beta = .738$, $p < .001$) accounting for 54.4% of the variance in Authenticity scores (R^2

$= .544$). The overall results suggest that all three trust predictors (credibility, parasocial interaction, and ethical perceptions) are statistically significant one and that trust itself is a powerful predictor of perceived authenticity.

Mediation Analysis

The PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2022), Model 4, was used to conduct mediation analysis, using 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals. Two mediation models were tested – the first one Parasocial Interaction (X) mediated Trust (M) which then mediated Authenticity (Y) and the second one Ethical Perceptions (X) mediated Trust (M) which in turn mediated Authenticity (Y). The results are reported in Table 4

Table 4

Mediation Analysis Results

Model	X -> M		X -> Y	Indirect		Boot SE		95% Boot CI		Conclusion
	(Trust)		Direct	Effect						
PI -> Trust		B= .	B=.3		.34		.0		[.282,	Partial
->	721,		29, p<.001	6		34		.414]		mediation
Authenticity	p<.001									
EP ->		B= .	B=.4		.30		.0		[.255,	Partial
Trust ->	705,		19, p<.001	9		28		.368]		mediation
Authenticity	p<.001									

The Parasocial Interaction significant predicted Trust ($B = .721, p < .001$), and when holding Parasocial Interaction constant, Authenticity significant predicted Trust ($B = .480, p < .001$). Authenticity was a second indicator and revealed an indirect effect of Parasocial Interaction on Authenticity (.346, Boot SE = .034, 95% CI [.282, .414]). Due to the confidence interval not containing Zero, this is statistically significant for the indirect effect at the .05 level. Partial mediation was demonstrated as the direct effect of Parasocial Interaction on Authenticity was still present ($B = .329, p < .001$). Parasocial emotional engagement has a mediational role in between perceived authenticity and trust. Ethical Perceptions had a significant effect on Trust ($B = .705, p < .001$) and Authenticity was significantly predicted by Trust ($B = .438, p < .001$) as well. The indirect effect of Ethical Perceptions on Authenticity through the chain of Trust was .309 (Boot SE = .028, 95% CI [.255,.368]). The 99 % CI does not contain the value of 0, indicating a significant

indirect effect. This direct effect of Ethical Perceptions on Authenticity remained in this analysis ($B = .419$, $p < .001$), consistent with partial mediation. Trust partially mediates the relationship between ethical perceptions and perceived authenticity.

Hypothesis Testing

The results from the hypothesis testing examined in this section would give answers to the three modified hypotheses presented in Chapter 1. The results are summarised in Table 5.5.

H1: Influencer credibility is positively associated with audience trust

Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive relationship between influencer credibility and audience trust, such that the more credible the influencers are, and the more they are associated with the brand, the higher the amount of trust. The regression analysis (Model 1, Table 5.3) provides direct statistical support: Influencer Credibility significantly predicted Trust ($B = .727$, $\beta = .771$, $R^2 = .594$, $F(1, 496) = 725.807$, $p < .001$). This is the best predictor of Trust alone, explaining almost 60% of the variance in trust scores. This is confirmed by the Pearson's correlation that was found between the Credibility and the Trust ($r = .771$, $p < .001$). H1 is supported. The qualitative data further supports this finding, with Theme 3 Long-Term Collaborations Build Credibility illustrating that repeated brand collaborations foster familiarity and consistency among audiences, which leads to greater credibility with time. This quantitative and qualitative proof follows as evidence:

H2: Transparency in paid partnership disclosure increases perceived trust

Hypothesis 2 claimed that if the influencers make it obvious that the partnership is a paid arrangement, then the audience will have a more positive perception of this partnership as being honest and trustworthy. This is supported directly by the regression which shows that Ethical Perceptions ($B = .705$, $\beta = .710$, $R^2 = .505$, $F(1, 496) = 505.515$, $p < .001$) significantly predicted in the positive direction Trust. This pairwise Pearson correlation between Ethical Perceptions and the subscale "Trust" ($r = .710$; $p < .001$) offers good consistency.

This is confirmed by the mediation analysis (Model 2, Table 5.4): the indirect effect value of the pathway between Ethics Perceptions and perceived Authenticity through Trust was .309 (Boot 95% CI [.255, .368]). The qualitative themes (Transparency and Disclosure as an Ethical Necessity) confirmed the findings of the three quantitative themes in the previous themes, and evidence was found in abundance that could back up survey responses. The qualitative themes supported the findings of the three quantitative themes in the past years evidence has been found rich enough to support all of the survey responses on the qualitative theme "Transparency and Disclosure as an Ethical Necessity". H2 is supported.

H3: Negative ethical perceptions reduce trust, which in turn diminishes perceived authenticity

Hypothesis 3 stated that a drop in perceived authenticity due to negative ethical perceptions motivated by perceived over-commercialization and inauthenticity, would decrease trust of the audience. The two-stage pathway was directly tested using mediation analysis. The regression results (Table 5.4, Model 2) showed that Ethical Perceptions was significant at predicting Trust ($B = .705$, $p < .001$); and the regression result of Trust could be explained by ethical perception such that, the ethical perception coefficient was significant at predicting Authenticity after controlling the direct effect of ethical perception ($B = .438$, $p < .001$). The indirect (Boot 95% CI [.255, .368]) was statistically significant, and supported the partial mediation model of the EP $\rightarrow$ Authenticity relationship. The direct effect of Ethical Perceptions on Authenticity was also strong ($B = .419$, $p < .001$), meaning that there were two paths: the first related to how ethical perceptions

influence authenticity directly, and the second concerned how they influence authenticity indirectly through the influence on trust. In close connection with the findings of qualitative Theme 4 (Over Commercialization diminishes influence), it was found that audiences are drawn to what feels like they are seeing commercials that are actually not about a product, but when they do, they perceive less relational closeness and credibility. H3 is supported.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Statistical Test	Key Statistic	Result
H1: Credibility	Simple	beta=.771,	Supported
positively predicts Trust	linear regression	R ² =.594, p<.001	
H2: Ethical	Simple	beta=.710,	Supported
transparency positively	linear regression	R ² =.505, p<.001	
predicts Trust	+ mediation		
H3: Negative EP	PROCESS	Indirect	Supported
reduces Trust, which	mediation (Model	effect=.309, 95% CI	
reduces Authenticity	4)	[.255,.368]	

Overview of Qualitative Findings

The quantitative hypotheses and the statistics findings are confirmed directly from the themes 1-4. In Theme 1, the authors set the principles on authenticity as the precursor to trust because without it, the act of commerce communication is nothing. Theme 2 supports and confirms with parties talking about the concept of 'relational transparency,' rather than simply 'compliance to transparency. Theme 3 adds a qualitative depth to H1 that goes beyond increased exposure to familiarity, achieved through repeated collaborations. For H3, participants document specific mechanisms by which parasocial bonds get disrupted by over-commercialisation; Theme 4 assists with this.

The mathematical models in Themes 5-7 provide explanatory detail to quantitative patterns. Tension created between creative freedom and brand control (Theme 5) helps to understand why credibility has at times suffered over the years as a result of the brand's creative freedom being hampered by time. All relationships involved in the quantitative analysis are heightened in any number of ways by Theme 6: the

sophistication of audiences in detecting inauthenticity. Theme 7 provides a context for all the findings, showing that rather than being an individual thing, the concept of authenticity is narrated through cultural and communal lenses in context of Pakistan which is a collectivist and religiously sensitized society.

Qualitative Analysis (Thematic Analysis)

Introduction to qualitative findings

In the qualitative aspect of this study, the researcher aimed to add depth and nuances to the findings of the quantitative analysis by focusing on how trust and authenticity are applied in the relationship between influencers and receivers. The survey data provided a quantifiable set of trends and statistically defined relationships but left out a significant element of subjectivity and emotion surrounding influencer marketing the way people feel and their individual professional evaluations. Hence, semi-structured interviews were held with PR professionals and influencers in the fashion and beauty industry in Pakistan to further delve into these elements. The use of the mixed method approach was especially appropriate for this study because of the complexity of trust and authenticity as a phenomenon that is socially

DISCUSSION

This chapter offers a detailed elaboration of the study based on the quantitative and qualitative results and their connection to its means, aims, hypotheses, theory and literature.

The mixed methods approach used in this study is key to its strength; it provides the researcher with a breadth and depth of analysis. In addition to providing qualitative data that explores the lived experience and work-based insight of influencers and PR practitioners, the quantitative data offers measurable evidence of relationships between variables. These findings collectively provide a more comprehensive perspective that neither could offer on its own of the influencers' relationship with their audience.

Linking Hypotheses with Themes

The quantitative findings we have extracted from the H1 is the credible brand collaborations significantly increase audience trust. This finding was also backed up by the qualitative theme 1: Authenticity is important to build trust, where the participants said that audiences trust those influencers more often whose brand collaborations align more with their image and values. Theme 3: Long-term brand collaborations build credibility among influencers. If the Influencers are working with the same brands over a long period of time, their credibility is increased, and lastly, Theme 7: Local Sensitivities and Cultural Context confirmed that the credibility of the influencers is mostly evaluated through their cultural and religious expectations. All together these findings confirm and extends the relationship between audience trust and brand credibility, supporting the Hypothesis 1

The quantitative findings we have extracted from H2 indicate that disclosure of paid collaborations positively influencer's audience trust. This hypothesis was supported by Theme 2: Transparency is ethically necessary for the influencers. Participants mentioned that the more transparently the influencers acknowledge their paid collaborations, the more their authenticity and credibility are strengthened. Theme 6: Nowadays, the audiences are more digitally literate, supporting the stance that the audience is now more aware about the paid collaborations and expect the influencers to be transparent about their paid partnerships. Theme 7: Local sensitivities and context of Pakistan show that being honest and ethical are highly appreciated in the local context.

The quantitative findings we have extracted from H3 indicate that over- commercialization negatively impacts the authenticity of the influencers. This was supported by Theme 4: Too much paid content weakens influencers’ influence, participants said that if the influencer is constantly posting paid content, they’re not considered genuine. Theme 5: Creative freedom vs Brand demands adds to this, commercialized content limits the content’s originality and the self-expression of the influencers. And lastly, Theme 6: Audiences are more digitally literate nowadays identifies that audiences are more likely to identify highly promotional content, this factor portrays them as someone who’s inauthentic

Hypothesis	Primary Themes	Secondary Themes
H1 Credible Brand Collaborations → Trust	Theme 1, Theme 3	Theme 7
Transparency → Trustworthiness	Theme 2	Theme 6, Theme 7
Over-Commercialization → Lower Authenticity	Theme 4, Theme 5	Theme 6

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study offers empirical as well as conceptual evidence that shows that the role of trust and authenticity as a mediator component between the influencer and his/her audience has a significant impact on perception, credibility, and behavioral intention.

One key outcome of the study is the strong, statistically and thematically significant positive connection between authenticity and trust. The findings suggest that viewers of influencer-generated content are not passive agents, but rather make their own judgment on how authentic they believe the influencers are, considering their consistency, relatability, style of communication, and perceived congruence of the personal and advertised content. But predictably, authenticity exists not in any single moment of being, but more as a perceptual construct. People feeling that influencers are genuine are the ones who truly feel authentic; this is not just about their word, it's also about their actions.

The study also supports hypothesis 1 which suggested a direct relationship between long- term brand partnerships and higher influencer credibility and trust of audiences. The findings highlight that repeated collaboration impacts in a sense of continuity and familiarity, which consequently leads to perceived credibility. Their collective exposure to influencers' brand story starts cognitive association, and diminishes skepticism. Even in the positive context of long-term partnerships, however, there is a critical element missing from the qualitative results: impacts on trust may have more to do with the fact that messages are repeated or there is not enough content variety or freshness than with sheer frequency.

Hypothesis 2, related to the impact of transparency of sponsored content disclosure, was also well supported. The results suggest that transparency and honesty regarding disclosure activity are well-received by their audience. Trust and perceived integrity were always linked to transparency, and so was ethical credibility. In other words, in the digital context of Lahore, audiences are becoming more and more mindful of commercial motives and demand ethical transparency from influencers. Importantly, transparency won't sully persuasive power; it will strengthen it by reinforcing credibility.

Hypothesis 3 was also confirmed, and found that the excess commercialism decreases the level of trust among viewers, which consequently diminishes the authenticity of the audience towards the influencers. The audience is not receptive when the content is too promotional or mostly profit-oriented; they feel suspicious and start to feel distant from the brand. Audience is not receptive when content is too promotional or for a greater profit; they become suspicious and feel distant from the brand. This discovery highlights a pivotal turning point when it comes to influencer marketing: once the level of commercial overuse exceeds a certain threshold, the levels of authenticity perceived and trust and engagement also begin to drop.

Together, these findings argue that relationships between influencers and followers do not exist in a state of permanency, but are ongoing processes negotiated through the communicative interaction between them, their cultural interpretation of the events, and the evaluation of their ethical responses to them.

Overall Conclusion of the Study

Based on this research, the overarching finding is that authentic trust is integral to the structural and relational elements of influencer-audience ecosystems. They do not necessarily serve as secondary or tertiary performance indicators, but as primary indicators of the effectiveness of communication, emotional connection with the target group, and building sustainable relations in digital influencer marketing.

A major theoretical insight from this research is the re-conceptualization of authenticity as a socially-constructed and performative process. Authenticity does not just "happen" for influencers; it's created when influencers and followers engage with each other in an ongoing fashion. The authorial choices of these influencers/narrators are inherently about constructing authenticity through the production of a consistent story, the manner of its visual presentation, its language, and its self-disclosure, which, in turn, are interpreted (and validated, in part) by the receivers (the audience persona) as per their own cultural frameworks, expectations, and media literacy levels. As such, it generates a co-constructed authenticity dynamic and not a unilaterally producer-defined identity. The study also calls for a fundamental re-thinking of the concept of influencer marketing. This study differs in that it does not attempt to restrict the research and its findings to a persuasive and reach-oriented point of view of marketing, but focuses on the challenge and question of public relations as a whole and relationship management. Influencers serve as an intermediary link between brands and audiences and are seen as cultural intermediaries, whose role is to transcribe the commercial message to the social message.

Finally, the study concludes that audience agency has significantly increased in the digital age. Audiences are no longer passive recipients of persuasive messages but active evaluators who critically assess influencer credibility, commercial intent, and ethical behavior. This shift has fundamentally altered the power dynamics of digital communication, making transparency and authenticity not just desirable but essential for sustained influence.

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