

Hasan, Shermeen; Zahid, Hasan; Qayyum, Abdul

Article

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Influencer authenticity and intention to co-create brand value: an investigation of central and peripheral pathways

Shermeen Hasan^a , Hasan Zahid^a and Abdul Qayyum^b

^aFaculty of Management Sciences, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan; ^bNUST Business School, National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

Given the popularity of influencer marketing, this study aimed to determine the effectiveness of influencer authenticity in achieving intention to co-create brand value and purchase intention in Pakistan. Grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the study explored the central and peripheral routes to achieving desired behavioral intentions. Using a self-administered questionnaire, data were collected from 421 fashion and lifestyle social media influencers followers in Pakistan by the time-lagged approach, over a period of four months, and partial least squares structural equation modeling was performed for data analysis. The results showed a significant impact of influencer authenticity on behavioral intentions. Serial mediation indicated that consumers followed the central route of persuasion. The study aimed to fill gaps in the influencer marketing research literature by conceptualizing influencer authenticity as a composite higher-order construct and examining its impact on the intention to co-create brand value. Second, it elaborated on the cognitive and affective components of attitude formation using central and peripheral routes, respectively. Third, it highlighted relational attitude (the customer-brand relationship) as a bridge to achieving targeted behavioral intentions. The outcomes of this study may assist managers in designing effective influencer marketing campaigns by emphasizing brand attributes rather than relying on social media influencer followership.

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1. Introduction

Influencer marketing's success is evident from its global value reaching \$35.1 billion by the end of 2024, expected to hit \$52 billion by 2028 (Statista, 2024). It harnesses the power of social media influencers (SMIs), members of the consumer community, who leverage the ability of social media to build well-engaged communities through their knowledge and expertise, particularly in the fields of fashion, lifestyle, health, and fitness (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Moreover, SMIs are pivotal in spreading awareness about new products, sparking interest in emerging trends, and ultimately driving sales (Jin et al., 2019). Consumers' desire to mimic these SMIs lays the foundation of influencer marketing (Ki & Kim, 2019). However, influencer marketing has some downsides, concerning the credibility and authenticity of SMIs. Consumers become skeptical of influencers collaborating with many brands, raising doubts about their authenticity (Zniva et al., 2023). In this connection, influencer authenticity has emerged as an essential construct in the domain of influencer marketing.

Various attributes of perceived authenticity of social media influencer (PASMI) have been explored, e.g., expertise (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Aw & Chuah, 2021; Chekima et al., 2020; Faisal et al., 2022; Ki et al., 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019; Lee & Eastin, 2021), uniqueness (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Casalo et al., 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2021; Zniva et al., 2023), trustworthiness (Chekima et al., 2020; Faisal et al., 2022; Jin et al., 2019), communication skills (Faisal et al., 2022), visibility, sincerity, and truthful endorsement (Agnihotri et al.,

CONTACT Shermeen Hasan  amirshermeen@gmail.com  Faculty of Management Sciences, Riphah International University Islamabad, Pakistan.

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2023; Lee & Eastin, 2021). Moreover, the impact of these authenticity attributes on numerous outcome variables, such as, brand loyalty (Çelik, 2022; Jun & Yi, 2020), purchase intention (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Kim & Song, 2020; Pick, 2021; Pöyry et al., 2019; Trivedi & Sama, 2020; Weismueller et al., 2020; Zniva et al., 2023), intention to interact and recommend (Casaló et al., 2020), and e-WOM (Dhun & Dangji, 2022), have also been studied. Bu et al. (2022) recently highlighted that intention to co-create brand value (ICC) may be an important outcome of influencer marketing, however, to date this relationship has not been studied. ICC has emerged as an essential concept in branding, emphasizing different stakeholders' roles in achieving brand success (France et al., 2018). Brand value co-creation engages consumers with the brand on social media platforms, where they share their opinions and suggestions, thus co-creating value for the brand (Nadeem et al., 2021). Therefore, based on the significance of ICC as a plausible outcome of influencer marketing, the first objective of this study is to fill this gap by determining the impact of PASMI on ICC.

According to Napoli et al. (2014), entities are either authentic or inauthentic, which means that attitude formation and consequent behaviors are a result of this overall authenticity evaluation. However, the available studies have mostly focused on the outcomes of PASMI dimensions (Farivar et al., 2023; Lee & Eastin, 2021). Therefore, there is a lack of knowledge on how consumers perceive the overall authenticity of SMI, form attitudes toward influencer and brand, build relationships and achieve desired behavioral intentions. Hence, the second objective of the study is to operationalize PASMI as a composite construct and explore its brand-related outcomes (ICC and PI), grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

SMIs aim to expand their network size by entertaining consumers, and providing relevant information, hence shaping consumer attitude (Farivar et al., 2023). Numerous theories have provided a theoretical basis to explain attitude formation and the consequent behavioral outcomes. For example, the Meaning Transfer Model (McCracken, 1989), Social Identity Theory (Agnihotri et al., 2023), and Stimulus-Organism-Response framework (Belanche et al., 2021a) all aim to explain the attitude and consequent behavior formation through influencer marketing. In a recent study Farivar et al. (2023) highlighted the impact of SMI authenticity on purchase intention using the ELM. Although the study adequately explained the impact of cognitive and affective dimension on purchase intention but ELM being a model of attitude formation and subsequent behavior, the study does not shed light on the underlying process of attitude component. Utilizing the power of ELM, this study intends to expand the conceptualization of Farivar et al. (2023), by elaborating the attitude component and thus outlining the underlying mechanism. Consumers may form a positive attitude toward an influencer (ATI) when SMIs impact the affective route to attitude formation (Lee & Eastin, 2021), leading to PI (Chetioui et al., 2020; Pick, 2021). On the other hand, attitude toward brand (ATB) depends on the cognitive content evaluation, generating purchase intention (PI) (Chekima et al., 2020; Chetioui et al., 2020; Pick, 2021). According to ELM behavioral intentions may be achieved through the central route and peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Therefore, the third objective of this study is to outline the role of the attitude component as the underlying mechanism of achieving desired behavioral outcomes by creating the aura of SMI authenticity.

Attitude encompasses consumers' evaluations of various environmental cues, fostering better brand-relationships (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Brand-relationships depend upon trust, satisfaction, and commitment, leading to future behavioral intentions (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). The extant literature has also shown that customer-brand relationships (CBR) impact consumers' intention to co-create by enhancing trust in the marketing message (Tajvidi et al., 2021). However, the research literature lacks in-depth knowledge of CBR as a relational attitude (Ahn & Back, 2020), bridging between attitudes and behavioral intentions (i.e., ICC and PI). Therefore, the fourth objective of this study is to find out how CBR bridges attitudes with behavioral intentions.

Finally, while social networking has garnered global exposure, there is little research accessible to offer insights into trends in emerging economies such as Pakistan (Abbas Naqvi et al., 2020). 71.7 million people in the country use social media, accounting for 30% of the entire population (Kemp, 2023). Previous research has mostly concentrated on the frequency and popularity of social networking sites in western economies, where IT literacy is higher than in Pakistan and other South Asian nations, with little insight into South Asian and other emerging markets (Shamim et al., 2024; Sheldon et al., 2017). In a nutshell, the aim of the study is to give a comprehensive overview of attitude and the consequent

behavior formation through serial mediation, understand the bridging role of CBR between attitude component and intentions, and contribute to the ELM by vividly categorizing ATI as a result of peripheral cues and ATB as a result of cognitive cues. Therefore, the findings of this study provide insights into influencer marketing dynamics of emerging economies, including the psychological perspectives on consumers decision-making.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Elaboration likelihood model

The ELM is a dual-process model that explains two routes to persuasion: the central and the peripheral (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Individuals rest their decision-making process on environmental cues and the arguments provided by the source (Yang & Lee, 2024). Further, these decisions depend upon the relative relevance of the message to the recipient (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006). Deriving from ELM, influencer marketing success depends on the audience's level of involvement and motivation (Kitchen et al., 2014). A highly involved and motivated audience is more likely to engage in the central processing route, critically examine the influencer's message and make decisions based on the content's merits and arguments (Farivar et al., 2023). On the contrary, when consumers rely on heuristics and peripheral cues, they take the peripheral pathway to achieve desired behavioral outcomes (Farivar et al., 2023; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Therefore, the ELM has been applied to explain behavioral intentions, for example, PI (Farivar et al., 2023), eWOM intention (Leong et al., 2019), and intention to use services in tourism (Meng & Choi, 2019). Grounded in ELM, we developed the theoretical framework to explain that SMI's content serves as the environmental cues, which impact attitude formation, resulting in behavioral outcomes, as outlines by Petty & Cacioppo (1986). Due to the interactive nature of social media, these cues trigger the consumer's cognitive and affective components of attitude formation (Farivar et al., 2023) and the versatility of the ELM may lead to numerous attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Kitchen et al., 2014).

2.2. Perceived authenticity

The authenticity concept is applied to identities, including human brands. Grayson and Martinec (2004) presented two types of authenticity: indexical authenticity pertains to the factual, spatiotemporal history of an object or person, while iconic authenticity represents the accurate reproduction of the original object. MacCannell (1973) proposed existential authenticity from a unique perspective, explaining how consumers perceive staged experiences in an era of technology rooted in postmodernism. Leigh et al. (2006) put forth the concept of interpersonal authenticity. In this perspective, an object or experience serves as a means of bringing individuals together to establish authentic interpersonal relationships, and these relationships are based on the subjective perception of the consumers. Applying this concept to influencer marketing, SMIs present the information to engage consumers with their content, while consumers subjectively perceive it, depending on the quality of interaction and communication. Moulard et al. (2015) extended that the authenticity of a social entity is purely value-based. Individuals are authentic if they are sincere, accept responsibility for their actions, and state explicitly value-based decisions regarding their activities and appearances, as opposed to adopting pre-programmed or socially imposed beliefs and behaviors (Heidegger et al., 1962).

2.3. Perceived authenticity of social media influencer and behavioral intentions

The PASMI is defined as the overall evaluation of an SMI based on consumers' perceptions of the influencer's credibility, truthfulness, sincerity, expertise, and how open the SMI is about their life on social media (Lee & Eastin, 2021). It is one of the significant attributes of influencer marketing, which allows consumers to connect with fashion influencers based on their knowledge of fashion, lifestyle, health, or fitness (Zniva et al., 2023) and imitate them (Ki & Kim, 2019). Therefore, influencer authenticity can significantly impact the engagement-level of the consumers through SMI's content (Ren et al., 2023).

Influencer authenticity is known to impact consumers' brand related decision-making. For example, extant literature reveals that influencers' credibility and authenticity characteristics impact consumers' PI (e.g., Aw & Chuah, 2021; Belanche et al., 2021a; Lee & Eastin, 2021; Zniva et al., 2023), because consumers buying decisions are impacted by the purchase-relevant attributes of SMIs' content (Zniva et al., 2023). Social interactions and communications on social media are also predictors of ICC due to the interactive nature of these platforms, where consumers share their opinions and form a social community (Bu et al., 2022). Therefore, recent research has highlighted that ICC may serve as an important outcome of influencer marketing (Bu et al., 2022). ICC is derived from value co-creation defined as the collaboration between a supplier and a client in co-development, co-design, and co-ideation of the product (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). It is the intention of consumers to co-create brand value (Tajvidi et al., 2021). Service-dominant logic postulates that brands are not the sole value creators; consumers are the co-creators of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Social media platforms provide an excellent opportunity for SMIs to engage consumers not only with their content but also with the brand. Hence, the authenticity of SMIs may play an important role in directing the consumers towards their content, the brand, and creating an environment of value co-creation. Therefore, we predict:

H1: Perceived authenticity of social media influencer has a significant and positive impact on intention to co-create brand value.

H2: Perceived authenticity of social media influencer has a significant and positive impact on purchase intention.

2.4. Perceived authenticity of social media influencer and attitude formation

Attitude is defined as general evaluations of individuals about themselves, others, objects, or issues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Attitudes predict consumers' willingness to act in a particular manner (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Consumers follow and trust SMIs who resonate with their self-concept and this inclination is based on SMIs' credibility traits (Chekima et al., 2020), or authenticity attributes (Lee & Eastin, 2021). ATI is an individual's overall evaluation of the SMI ranging from positive to negative (Lee & Eastin, 2021), while ATB is the evaluative predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably towards a brand (Belanche et al., 2021b). As mentioned earlier ELM is a model of attitude change, therefore, deriving from ELM, we predict that SMI traits may impact attitude formation through heuristics, leading to ATI or by careful evaluation of the brand-related content, resulting in ATB which leads to desirable consumer behaviors (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). PASMI allows consumers to build an aura of authenticity which helps in developing attitudes toward the source (Lee & Eastin, 2021) and the message (Zniva et al., 2023). These attitudes, in turn, may lead to more comprehensive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Kitchen et al., 2014). Based on these studies we propose:

H3: Perceived authenticity of social media influencer has a significant and positive impact on attitude toward influencer.

H4: Perceived authenticity of social media influencer has a significant and positive impact on attitude toward brand.

2.5. Attitudes and customer-brand relationship

The hierarchy of effects suggests that attitudes typically precede behavioral outcomes (Beatty & Kahle, 1988), on the contrary, some researchers argue that it is an imperfect predictor of behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), because of the halo effect, common method and respond bias (Bagozzi & Yi, 1991; Podsakoff et al., 2003). It means that consumers may hold a positive attitude towards an entity but that does not necessarily result in behavior or behavioral intentions (Khamitov et al., 2019). Research supports this notion within the CBR domain. For instance, only a small percentage of consumers who have favorable opinion about a brand actually show high levels of purchase intention in that category without the mediation of relational constructs (Khamitov et al., 2019). Thus, CBR may serve as a mechanism which explains the circumstances in which attitudes forecast behavioral intentions.

Hon and Grunig (1999) conceptualized CBR along six dimensions, of which trust, commitment, and satisfaction are the most widely used (Sharma et al., 2020). CBR is defined as the internal tie between brands and their customers that helps generate trust and commitment and produces customer satisfaction (Cheng & Jiang, 2022). According to Pang et al. (2009) CBR is a long-term commitment triggered by a consumer's affective components, such as trust and loyalty. Trust is an optimistic attitude (Faulkner, 2015), which reflects the confidence between two parties, while commitment, also conceptualized as an attitude (Kiesler & Sakumura, 1966), rests on their emotional desire to stay in a fortified association (Grunig & Huang, 2000). Satisfaction is akin to an attitude (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982), defined as a pleasant emotion towards another entity, valued for the positive anticipation of associations (Sharma et al., 2020). In a nutshell, CBR is a relational attitude founded on two-way communication, emotional attachment, and partnership quality (Ahn & Back, 2020). Since ATI is formed by the affective component of attitude formation, it is expected that it may impact CBR.

ATB is the consumer's evaluation of the brand in terms of its goodness or badness (Park et al., 2013). Customers with positive ATB are more likely to engage with its content, promotions, and events and build long-term, strategic relationships (Coelho et al., 2019). These relationships build partnership-strength between the brand and its customers (Fournier, 1998) and assist businesses in establishing trust and commitment with clients (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), the defining dimensions of brand relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

ELM is a comprehensive and versatile model, which may lead to a variety of behavioral outcomes (Kitchen et al., 2014). It suggests that the audience processes the information by evaluating the argument quality and environmental cues that determine the direction of message processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It means that ATI and ATB, resulting from effective communication of the SMI, may sway the message processing to build CBR. It is, therefore, hypothesized that:

H5: Attitude toward influencer has a significant and positive impact on customer-brand relationship.

H6: Attitude toward brand has a significant and positive impact on customer-brand relationship.

2.6. Customer-brand relationship and behavioral intentions

To achieve value, brands incorporate customer feedback and improve their products. However, misinterpretation may lead to erroneous product development (Nadeem et al., 2021). To counter this, brands co-create value with consumers on social media platforms (Tajvidi et al., 2021). Online reviews empower consumers to influence peers and other consumers (Vrontis et al., 2021). Businesses prioritize customer satisfaction and value over product quality (Raval & Grönroos, 1996). While value is the satisfaction derived from achieved outcomes (Sidorchuk, 2015), brand value measures equity, loyalty (Tajvidi et al., 2021), and trust and commitment (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999).

ELM emphasizes on persuasion to bring about desired outcomes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), therefore, in the context of the current study, SMI content is directed towards persuading consumers to develop a positive attitude towards the content and the endorsement. In the contemporary marketing scenario, mere attitude development may not be enough to succeed in the market (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), effective marketing depends upon building a lasting relational attitude to achieve the desired outcomes (Ahn & Back, 2020). This relational attitude, defined as CBR, serves as the missing link between attitude (ATI and ATB) and behavioral intentions (PI and ICC). In other words, CBR forms the basis of relationship marketing (Cheng & Jiang, 2022).

Relationship marketing involves consumers' experience with a company and its tangible or intangible products (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Bowen and Shoemaker (2003) noted that communication contributes to developing CBR by enhancing trust and commitment. However, satisfaction, commitment, and brand relationships affect brand value co-creation (Tajvidi et al., 2021). Cheung et al. (2021) put forth that firm-initiated communication and interaction initiate customer engagement with the brand and lead to value co-creation. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H7: Customer-brand relationship has a significant and positive impact on intention to co-create brand value.

CBR significantly impacts behavioral intentions (Cheng & Jiang, 2022; Gautam & Sharma, 2017), making a purchase and recommending the brand to others (Sharma et al., 2020). PI is a measure of

consumers' brand assessment and is a close predictor of future purchase behavior (Morwitz et al., 2007). Moreover, extant research has shown that CBR leads to PI (Cheung et al., 2021). Hence, we hypothesize that:

H8: Customer-brand relationship has a significant and positive impact on purchase intention.

2.7. Serial mediation

Serial mediation involves several mediating constructs describing the effect transmission between the independent variable and the dependent variable (Schuh et al., 2019). Based on ELM, this study explains the transmission of effect from PASMI to ICC and PI through the central and peripheral pathways. While previous studies (e.g., Farivar et al., 2023) give an overview of how purchase intention may be achieved through central and peripheral cues in the environment, they don't explain *how* and *when* the purchase decision is made. Based on the studies of Lee and Eastin (2021) and (Zniva et al., 2023), it is predicted that ATI and ATB may play a role in achieving behavioral outcomes, respectively. The serial mediation in this study may answer *how* and *when* behavioral intentions are achieved through the lens of ELM. When the decision-making process takes the central path, the cognitive component of attitude formation is active: PASMI will impact ATB, which will impact CBR, leading to behavioral intentions. However, when the peripheral route is at play, the affective component of attitude formation will be triggered: PASMI will impact behavioral intentions through the serial mediation of ATI and CBR. Based on these arguments, we propose the following serial mediation hypotheses:

H9a: The relationship between the perceived authenticity of social media influencers and the intention to co-create brand value is serially mediated by attitude toward influencer and customer-brand relationship.

H9b: The relationship between the perceived authenticity of social media influencers and purchase intention is serially mediated by attitude toward influencer and customer-brand relationship.

H10a: The relationship between the perceived authenticity of social media influencers and the intention to co-create brand value is serially mediated by attitude toward brand and customer-brand relationship.

H10b: The relationship between the perceived authenticity of social media influencers and purchase intention is serially mediated by attitude toward brand and customer-brand relationship.

2.8. Theoretical framework

Based on the discussion in the preceding sections, the following theoretical framework (Figure 1) has been developed.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample selection

The study was conducted in Pakistan, home to 71.70 million social media users, which constitutes 30% of the total population (Kemp, 2023). According to a report by the World Bank (2021), 63% percent of Pakistan's population resides in rural areas with limited internet access. It is inferred from these statistics that most social media users are concentrated in cities. Therefore, five cities were selected for data collection, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta (the provincial capitals), and Islamabad (the federal capital), since these have higher income levels and are hub of local and foreign brands (Naseem et al., 2020). This also ensured the generalizability of data. Consistent with the reasoning of published research (Audrezet et al., 2020; Belanche et al., 2021a, 2021b; Casaló et al., 2020; Loussaïef et al., 2019) we chose fashion and lifestyle SMLs and collected data from female respondents. Fashion and lifestyle SMLs are the most successful forms of influencer marketing globally (TRBC, 2023) and in Pakistan, where a large majority of women follow female SMLs, sharing characteristics with them (Shahid, 2023; Walee, 2023). According to

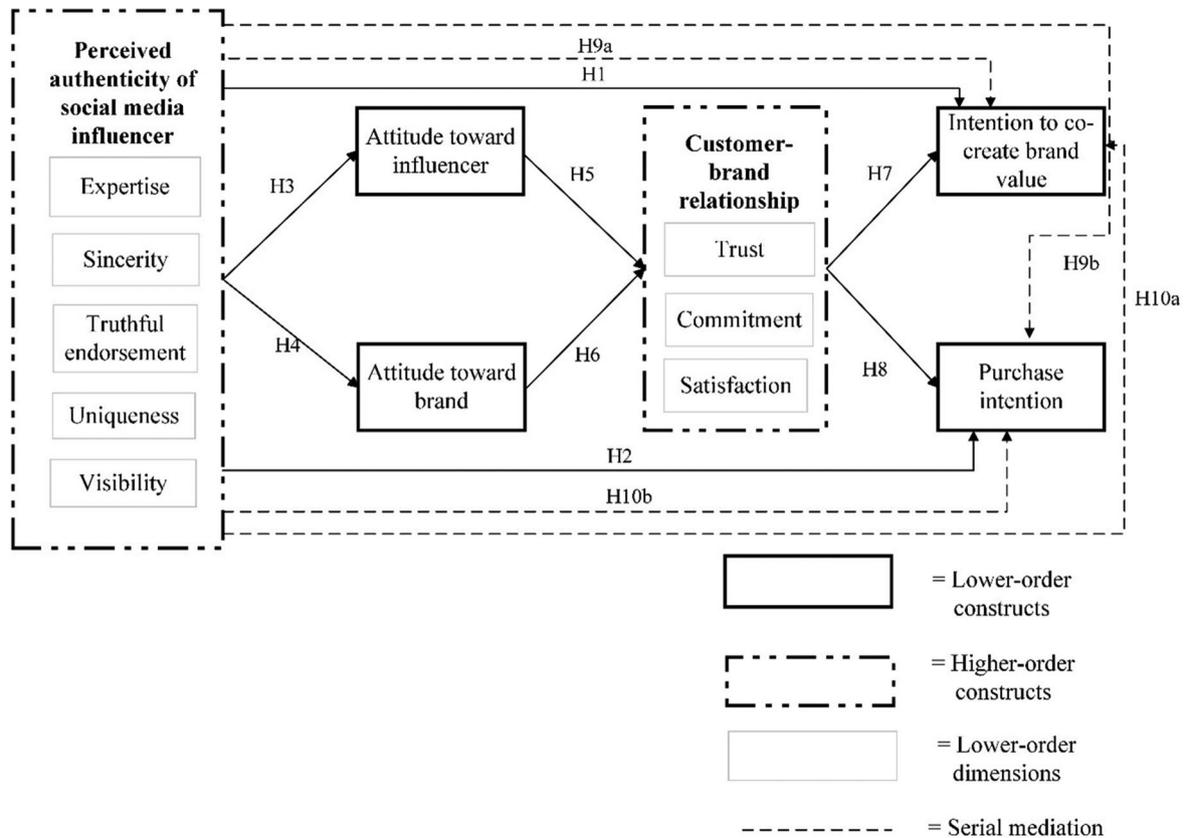


Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

research, female fashion-SMIs are more effective at engaging followers than male SMIs (von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021). Loussaief et al. (2019) found that women prioritize their physical appearance when it comes to fashion, cosmetics, clothes, and lifestyle. Generation Z and Millennials are particularly enthusiastic in following SMIs (Kennedy & Guzmán, 2016). Therefore, women aged 18 to 34 are Pakistan's most avid fashion consumers (Bhutto et al., 2023). As a result, it has emerged as the preferred demographic for fashion influencer marketing research globally in order to produce more generalizable results.

3.2. Ethical statement and consent disclosure statement

MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012) proposed methodological and procedural remedies to overcome difficulties related to common method bias and ensured consent of the participants. For example, participants were informed that there were no correct or incorrect answers, so they were free to express themselves while maintaining confidentiality. The participants also received adequate information about the objective of the research, their participation was voluntary, and they were given the option to opt out at any time during data collection. This information was also mentioned at the beginning of the questionnaires. At the time of administering the questionnaires, *verbal consent to participate* was taken from the participants by clearly asking, "Do you consent to participate in this study? Do you consent to participate in the two-step data collection procedure?". The respondents only proceeded if they consented as "Yes, we consent to participate". Once data collection and analysis were completed approval from the ethical committee was obtained from our institution, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan (Reference No. FMS/RSL/ERC/007).

3.3. Data

Data was collected using purposive sampling, because it suits best when only a certain type of individuals possess the required information (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013), and when only a small number of

persons have the needed information (Aw & Labrecque, 2020; Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). The purposive sampling technique enabled us to identify the actual SMI followers and invite them to participate in the two-stage data collection process. The two-wave time-lag approach also ensured that the predictor and outcome variables were separated temporally (Andreadis & Kartsounidou, 2020; MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012). Participants were requested to assign a code during the initial phase of data collection to match respondents after the data was compiled. To ensure a foolproof compilation of responses, an additional code was assigned by the researchers.

During the initial phase, participants were asked to identify a fashion and lifestyle SMI they closely follow, as well as the brand of interest endorsed by them. Next, they answered demographics and PASMI-related items. They assigned a code, kept it safe for future reference, and consented to be contacted for the next phase. 800 questionnaires were distributed, and 635 were returned. A fifteen-days gap was ensured between the first and second stage of data collection. This step reduces the probability of common method variance (CMV) and improves data quality (Andreadis & Kartsounidou, 2020). In the following wave, 635 questionnaires were delivered to the same participants, who wrote their code, the name of SMI and the brand from the first phase. Next, they answered questions about ATI, ATB, CBR, ICC, and PI. 532 questionnaires were returned in this stage, and after deleting the erroneous and incomplete questionnaires, a final sample of 421 was available for data analysis. The data associated with this research are available upon request.

Demographic information revealed that the majority of respondents were under the age of 30 and single. Approximately 74.8% held a bachelor's degree or more, and 78.6% spent more than two hours every day on social media. Khaadi, Sapphire, Al Karam, Stylo, and Asim Jofa were some of the most popular brands. Instagram was the most popular social media site, with 74.8% of participants. Table 1 exhibits the demographics details.

3.4. Measures

Table 1 presents the measurement items used in the study, adapted from existing scholarly literature, and assessed using a seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree). Dependent variables, PI, and ICC were measured with 4-item and 3-item scales from Xu and Pratt (2018) and Tajvidi et al. (2021), respectively. PASMI was measured using an 18-items scale developed by Lee and Eastin (2021). ATI (4-item scale) and ATB (4-item scale) were measured using Sengupta and Johar (2002) and Homer (1995), respectively. CBR was measured using a 13- items scale developed by Hon and Grunig (1999).

Scholars have conceptualized authenticity as a higher-order reflective-formative construct (Cheung et al., 2021; Nunes et al., 2021). In a formative construct, the dimensions of the construct are distinct

Table 1. Demographics.

Variable	Frequency	(%)
Age		
18–24	251	59.6
25–29	143	34.0
30–34	27	6.40
Education		
Matric/O-level	40	9.50
Intermediate/A-level	64	15.4
Undergraduate	169	40.1
Graduate	117	27.8
Postgraduate	29	6.9
Number of hours spent on social media (hours)		
<1	20	4.8
1–2	90	21.4
3–4	132	31.4
5–6	105	24.9
> 6	94	22.3
Social networking site used		
Instagram	330	78.4
YouTube	50	11.9
Facebook	21	5.0
TikTok	19	4.5

from each other. For example, truthful endorsement is distinct from uniqueness. PASMI has five dimensions (sincerity, truthful endorsement, visibility, uniqueness, and expertise). CBR, is also conceptualized as a higher-order reflective-formative construct (Adhikari & Panda, 2020; Dorai et al., 2021), with three dimensions (trust, satisfaction, and commitment).

4. Data analysis and results

PLS-SEM using SmartPLS 4.0 was employed for data analysis, because it's most suitable for higher-order constructs (Sarstedt et al., 2019), and allows measurement of formative constructs and complex models (Hair et al., 2021). Since the theoretical framework includes two composite constructs, PASMI and CBR, and both constructs are reflective-formative, PLS-SEM is a better choice (Dash & Paul, 2021).

4.1. Common method variance

Since a self-administered questionnaire was used, it was necessary to rule out CMV. For that, all lower-order constructs were loaded on an unrelated construct, and the inner VIF values were below 3.3 (Kock, 2015). In conclusion, all tests supported the validity of the measurement model, and CMV is not a concern.

4.2. Measurement model

Table 2 exhibits the psychometric scale properties of the instrument (Hair et al., 2017; UI Hassan et al., 2022). All outer loadings are >0.6 thus significant (Hair et al., 2011). Average variance extracted (AVE) is >0.5, Cronbach's α is >0.6 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and composite reliability is >0.7 (Aljanabi, 2018), ensuring internal consistency and construct reliability.

Table 2. Outer measurement model and confirmatory factor analysis.

Construct	Loadings	α	Rho_a	Rho_c	AVE
Perceived authenticity of social media influencer (PASMI)					
This influencer is skilled in their field.	0.743	0.852	0.853	0.910	0.772
This influencer is very knowledgeable in their field.	0.832				
This influencer demonstrates a natural ability in their field.	0.742				
This influencer seems kind and good hearted.	0.835	0.888	0.893	0.922	0.747
This influencer is sincere.	0.900				
This influencer seems genuine.	0.866				
This influencer is down-to-earth/humble.	0.857	0.858	0.863	0.904	0.701
Although this influencer posts ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.	0.815				
This influencer gives honest reviews on brands.	0.868				
The products and brands this influencer endorse match well with their personality.	0.864	0.796	0.808	0.881	0.711
This influencer promotes products they would actually use.	0.800				
This influencer is unique.	0.863				
This influencer has distinctive characteristics.	0.871	0.799	0.806	0.869	0.623
Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.	0.795				
This influencer not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships.	0.766				
This influencer talks about real-life issues going on in their life.	0.800	0.770	0.774	0.841	0.515
This influencer talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public.	0.834				
This influencer reveals a lot of their personal life to the public.	0.756				
Attitude toward brand (ATB)					
I think this brand is very good.	0.864	0.800	0.804	0.882	0.714
I think this brand is very useful.	0.848				
My opinion of this brand is very favorable.	0.823				
Attitude toward influencer (ATI)					
This influencer is believable.	0.878	0.759	0.831	0.856	0.624
This influencer is interesting.	0.889				
This influencer is attention-getting.	0.666				
Customer-brand relationship (CBR)					
This brand treats (will treat) people like me fairly and justly.	0.714	0.770	0.774	0.841	0.515
I believe whenever this brand will make an important decision, I know it will be concerned about me.	0.723				

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Construct	Loadings	α	Rho_a	Rho_c	AVE
I believe this brand takes (will take) my opinions into account when making decisions.	0.732				
I believe I feel very confident about this brand's skills.	0.655				
This brand can be relied on to keep its promises.	0.742				
I believe I am happy with this brand.	0.859	0.825	0.851	0.883	0.656
I believe both this brand and I benefit (will benefit) from the relationship.	0.840				
Generally speaking, I am pleased with the relationship this brand has established with me.	0.835				
I believe I enjoy (will enjoy) dealing with this brand.	0.694				
I believe I feel that this brand is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to me.	0.743	0.763	0.767	0.849	0.584
I believe I can see that this brand wants to maintain a relationship with me.	0.832				
I believe compared to other brands; I value (will value) my relationship with this brand more.	0.742				
I believe I would rather work together with this brand than not.	0.739				
Purchase intention (PI)					
I would consider purchasing the product endorsed by this influencer.	0.792	0.751	0.758	0.843	0.572
I would think about the option of buying the product endorsed by this influencer.	0.751				
It is likely that I am going to purchase the product endorsed by this influencer.	0.775				
Next time I need this type of product, I will probably buy the one endorsed by this influencer.	0.709				
Intention to co-create brand value (ICC)					
I am willing to provide my experiences and suggestions when my friends on my favorite social networking site want my advice on buying something from this brand.	0.788	0.733	0.739	0.849	0.652
I am willing to buy the products of this brand recommended by my friends on my favorite social networking site.	0.812				
I will consider the shopping experiences of my friends on my favorite social networking site when I want to shop this brand.	0.823				

Table 3. Discriminant validity.

Construct	Mean	S.D	ATB	ATI	COM	IAE	IAS	IAT	IAU	IAV	ICC	PI	SAT	TRU
ATB	5.540	0.986	0.845											
ATI	5.437	0.986	0.168	0.817										
COM	5.137	1.160	0.353	0.113	0.765									
IAE	5.541	1.098	0.355	0.335	0.142	0.878								
IAS	5.307	1.212	0.329	0.293	0.169	0.584	0.865							
IAT	5.393	1.105	0.298	0.367	0.101	0.593	0.693	0.837						
IAU	5.562	1.041	0.28	0.381	0.107	0.728	0.49	0.531	0.843					
IAV	5.190	1.218	0.263	0.219	0.169	0.575	0.489	0.554	0.495	0.79				
ICC	5.581	0.911	0.380	0.097	0.353	0.284	0.267	0.227	0.213	0.208	0.807			
PI	5.536	1.006	0.389	0.100	0.506	0.316	0.24	0.255	0.225	0.330	0.573	0.757		
SAT	5.217	1.075	0.419	0.063	0.55	0.315	0.317	0.188	0.235	0.310	0.369	0.521	0.81	
TRU	5.518	0.875	0.417	0.113	0.544	0.322	0.255	0.298	0.272	0.306	0.416	0.484	0.497	0.717

ATB: Attitude toward brand; ATI: Attitude toward influencer; COM: Commitment; IAE: Influencer authenticity: expertise; IAS: Influencer authenticity: sincerity; IAT: Influencer authenticity: truthful endorsement; IAU: Influencer authenticity: uniqueness; IAV: Influencer authenticity: visibility; ICC: Intention to co-create brand value; PI: Purchase intention; SAT: Satisfaction; TRU: Trust.

Additionally, Table 3 shows discriminant validity (square roots of AVE), off-diagonal values are greater than the first-order inter-construct correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To confirm discriminant validity further we analyzed the HTMT ratio and according to the criterion, all values were less than 0.9 (Hair et al., 2021).

4.3. Structural model

We assessed higher-order constructs using a two-stage disjoint approach (Sarstedt et al., 2019). The latent variable scores were extracted and inserted into the original dataset. This dataset was then utilized to analyze the impact of PASMI on ATI, ATB, ICC, and PI. The outer weights and outer loadings were tested using bootstrapping at 10,000 iterations and were found to be significant at a 95% confidence level. Figure 2 shows the composite structural model. The VIF values were below 5, meeting the

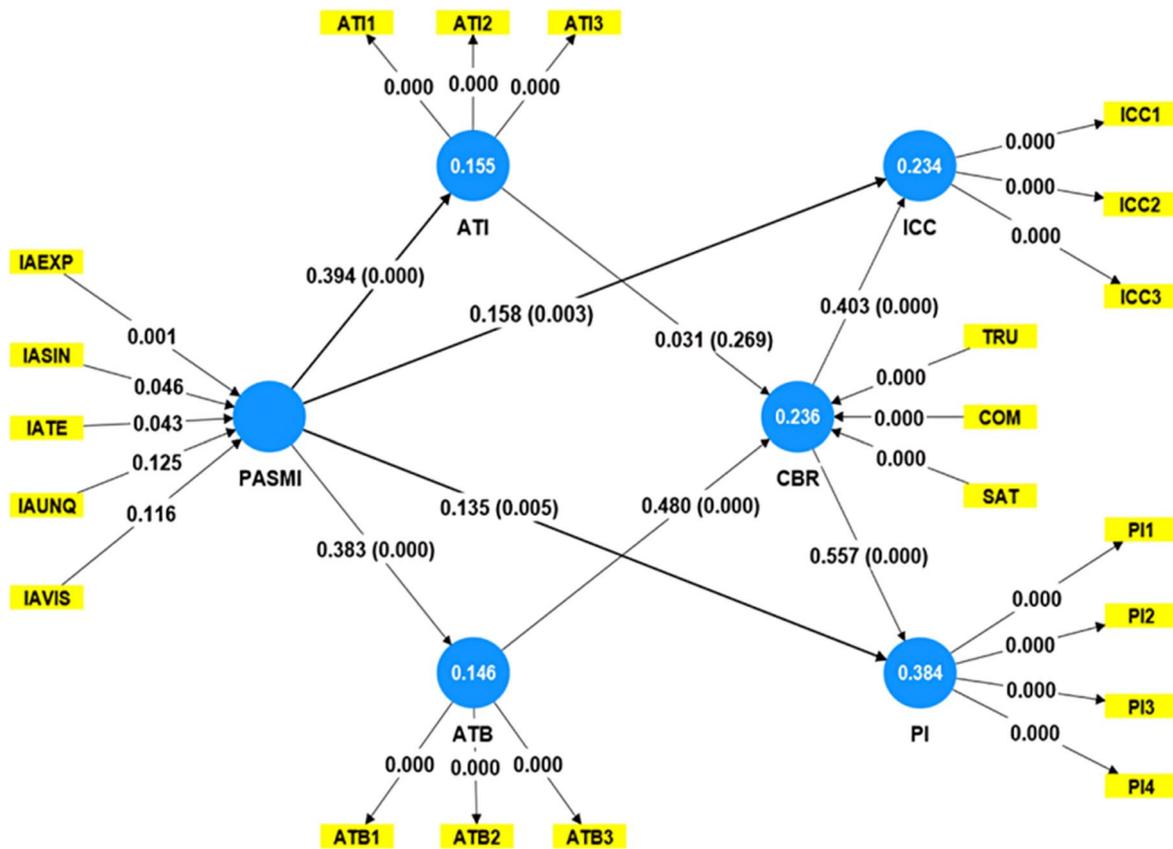


Figure 2. Structural model of higher-order constructs.

Table 4. Loading of lower-order constructs for higher-order constructs.

HOC	LOC	Outer weights	t-statistics	p-values	Outer loadings	VIF
PASMI	IAE	0.366	2.754	.003	0.896***	2.722
	IAS	0.285	2.077	.019	0.812***	2.126
	IAT	0.187	1.367	.086	0.804***	2.315
	IAU	0.236	1.801	.036	0.811***	2.218
	IAV	0.140	1.157	.124	0.710***	1.688
CBR	TRU	0.493	5.632	.000	0.853***	1.543
	COM	0.214	2.322	.010	0.752***	1.665
	SAT	0.491	6.344	.000	0.853***	1.543

IAE: Influencer authenticity: expertise; IAS: Influencer authenticity: sincerity; IAT: Influencer authenticity: truthful endorsement; IAU: Influencer authenticity: uniqueness; IAV: Influencer authenticity: visibility; SAT: Satisfaction; TRU: Trust; COM: Commitment.

significance-criterion for outer loadings (Hair et al., 2021). The assessment of higher-order constructs is presented in Table 4. The observed standardized root mean square residual was 0.078, below the acceptable threshold of 0.08, indicating an acceptable model fit. The predictive relevance of structural model Q^2 was also confirmed, with Q^2 values > 0 for ATI, ATB, PI, and ICC (Hair et al., 2021). Moreover, most relationships showed f^2 values > 0.02, indicating a large effect size of PASMI. All outer loadings of the lower-order constructs on higher-order constructs were significant, confirming the validity of the higher-order constructs.

For hypothesis testing, the subsamples were set at 10,000 iterations. Given that the direction of the hypothesis is known, a one-tailed test was used at a 95% confident interval. The explanatory power of the conceptual model represented by adjusted R^2 for ATI, ATB, CBR, ICC, and PI are 0.150, 0.144, 0.276, 0.240, and 0.372 respectively.

The results (Table 5) reveal that PASMI impacts ICC ($\beta=0.158$, $t=2.750$, $p<.05$) and PI ($\beta=0.135$, $t=2.590$, $p<.05$), hence H1 and H2 are supported. Similarly, PASMI impacts ATI ($\beta=0.389$, $t=6.304$, $p<.01$), and ATB ($\beta=0.382$, $t=6.735$, $p<.01$), hence supporting H3 and H4. However, H5 is not supported ($\beta = -0.048$, $t=0.818$, $p=n.s.$), indicating that ATI does not impact CBR significantly, although ATB impacts

Table 5. Path coefficients.

Hypothesis	β	T value	p value
H1: PASMI \rightarrow ICC	0.158	2.750	.003
H2: PASMI \rightarrow PI	0.135	2.590	.005
H3: PASMI \rightarrow ATI	0.389	6.304	.000
H4: PASMI \rightarrow ATB	0.382	6.735	.000
H5: ATI \rightarrow CBR	-0.048	0.818	.207
H6: ATB \rightarrow CBR	0.403	7.225	.000
H7: CBR \rightarrow ICC	0.362	5.350	.000
H8: CBR \rightarrow PI	0.542	9.150	.000
H9a: PASMI \rightarrow ATI \rightarrow CBR \rightarrow ICC	-0.007	0.764	.764
H9b: PASMI \rightarrow ATI \rightarrow CBR \rightarrow PI	-0.010	0.781	.217
H10a: PASMI \rightarrow ATB \rightarrow CBR \rightarrow ICC	0.056	3.680	.000
H10b: PASMI \rightarrow ATB \rightarrow CBR \rightarrow PI	0.083	4.604	.000

PASMI: perceived authenticity of social media influencer; ATB: Attitude toward brand; ATI: Attitude toward influencer; CBR: customer-brand relationship; ICC: Intention to co-create brand value; PI: Purchase intention.

CBR ($\beta=0.403$, $t=7.225$, $p<.01$), supporting H6. H7 and H8 are supported indicating that CBR impacts ICC ($\beta=0.362$, $t=5.350$, $p<.01$) and PI ($\beta=0.542$, $t=9.150$, $p<.01$).

4.4. Mediation analysis

There are four serial mediation hypotheses in this study (Table 5). In H9a it was hypothesized that the relationship between PASMI and ICC is serially mediated by ATI, and CBR, however, the results do not indicate a significant relationship ($\beta = -0.007$, $t=0.764$, $p=n.s.$). In addition, serial mediation of ATI and CBR between PASMI and PI also does not exist, thus H9b ($\beta = -0.010$, $t=0.781$, $p=n.s.$) is not supported either. However, the results show serial mediation of ATB and CBR between PASMI and ICC ($\beta=0.362$, $t=5.350$, $p<.01$) and PI ($\beta=0.362$, $t=5.350$, $p<.01$) exists, therefore, H10a and H10b are supported, respectively. The results indicate complementary partial mediation since the total effects of PASMI and ICC ($\beta=0.237$, $t=4.143$, $p<.01$) do not have a negative value. Similarly, the total effect of PASMI and PI ($\beta=0.244$, $t=4.774$, $p<.01$) are also complementary.

5. Discussion and implications

Brands collaborate with SMIs to reap the benefits of their reach in a more organic manner (Audrezet et al., 2020; Belanche et al., 2021b). Many influencer marketing avenues have been studied, while others remain unexplored (Bu et al., 2022). This study investigated how the PASMI (a composite construct) affects ICC and PI directly and through serial mediation of ATI, ATB, and CBR. The findings show influencer authenticity strongly affects ICC and PI directly and serially. Thus, the independent and dependent variables are partially mediated, and these findings address the first and the second objective of the study. Zniva et al. (2023) identified a partial mediation between influencer authenticity and PI, thus supporting our findings regarding PI. Consumers desire truthful and expert opinions before making buying decisions. The association between PASMI and ICC is a significant finding of this study. Fashion and lifestyle SMIs communicate brand experiences, views, and suggestions on social media. These interactive platforms let consumers see reviews and engage with SMIs, laying the groundwork for value co-creation (Zhao et al., 2019).

Using ELM, this study examined whether influencer authenticity's impact on behavioral intentions takes a central or peripheral route in fashion brand recommendations. Results reveal that PASMI impacts ATI and ATB, however, only ATB impacts CBR significantly, while CBR impacts behavioral intentions. ELM suggests that despite having the right attitudes, situational and individual factors influence the extent of issue-relevant elaboration individuals undertake to evaluate a message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Authentic SMI content motivates consumers to process the brand based on its merits, fostering better brand engagement, and increasing the propensity for value co-creation (Tajvidi et al., 2021). Another explanation comes from the work of Gresham and Shimp (1985), who explained the transfer of attitude toward ad to brand through classical conditioning. Their study showed that consumers' brand-related decision-making is linked to cognitive structure, while the affective component showed no link towards

favorable brand-related outcomes. Farivar et al. (2023) provide the initial support to our findings by showing that cognitive characteristics impact purchase intention while affective do not. This study elaborates that the peripheral cues impact ATI while central cues lead to ATB. Thereafter, only cognitive evaluation builds relational attitude such as CBR and brand-related behavioral intentions. Consumers invest their time and finances when seeking information regarding brands. The entertainment value of SMI content does not suffice for such an investment. Thus, heuristics may serve as an attention-getting tool, but final decision-making needs cognitive evaluation. Our findings further elaborate the concept by a detailed focus on attitude formation because ELM is a framework of attitude formation and consequent behavioral outcomes. In addition, the findings confirm the bridging role of CBR between attitudes and behavioral intentions. Positive ATB improves relationship quality and partnership-strength (Fournier, 1998), resulting in a favorable sentiment towards brands (Coelho et al., 2019).

Consumers use the peripheral or lower elaboration path to persuasion when they rely on heuristics rather than message evaluation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This study reveals that consumers evaluate brand information before decision-making. Therefore, ATB (central route) is a significant determinant of CBR (Jurisic & Azevedo, 2011) since it increases satisfaction (Clarke, 2001) and brand trust (Faulkner, 2015).

CBR significantly impacts ICC and PI, which is congruent with the prior research: CBR affects PI (Cheng & Jiang, 2022; Gautam & Sharma, 2017) and brand value co-creation (Tajvidi et al., 2021). Relationships with brands increase consumers' interest in the brand, thus increasing the likelihood of purchase and co-creation of value. This study revealed the underlying mechanism and the role of the central route of persuasion, which shows that ATB and CBR bridge the gap between PASMI and future behavioral intention (ICC and PI).

5.1. Theoretical implications

The findings of our research contribute to the theoretical understanding of influencer authenticity and ELM. First, the study conceptualised PASMI as a composite construct which, to our knowledge was not previous done in the influencer authenticity literature. Authenticity is subjective in nature, and consumers view SMI-authenticity based on their perceptions (Napoli et al., 2014). Hence, the composite conceptualisation of PASMI, while studying the direct and indirect effects on ICC and PI, may yield more comprehensive results. Secondly, contemporary marketing research literature is focused on finding ways to engage consumers and indulge them in value co-creation. This study has highlighted influencer authenticity as a means of diverting consumers towards the brand to co-create its value. Third, the study shows the underlying mechanism through serial mediation. PASMI impacts attitude formation, while only ATB leads to CBR. CBR is a relational attitude (Ahn & Back, 2020) representing customers' engagement with the brand, leading to ICC and PI. Our study shows a sequence of events that may bring success to the brands. Lastly, this study has maintained a keen focus on attitude formation, which is a key postulate of ELM (Kitchen et al., 2014). The theoretical framework includes three forms of attitudes, ATI, ATB, and CBR. As mentioned earlier behavioral intentions may be achieved through ATI or ATB, but our study has further broken down the attitude concept and introduced CBR an attitude component, bridging between attitudes and intentions and strengthening the theoretical understanding of ELM. By viewing influencer marketing through the lens of ELM, we have shown ICC as one of the key outcomes of influencer marketing and shown a comprehensive underlying process through serial mediation.

5.2. Managerial implications

The study has several managerial implications. First, managers should only partially depend on SMIs' image to build CBR to achieve behavioral intentions. This implies that like any successful marketing technique, SMIs play a significant role in creating brand awareness and brand image, however, in order to achieve brand loyalty and brand equity, a brand should intellectually convey the brand merits. Thus, a marketer's primary focus should be on showcasing the brand's merits and delivering the promise by utilizing the power of SMIs.

Second, the central route of decision-making shows that brands need to communicate with their consumers, listen to their opinions, tailor their offerings according to consumers' needs and wants, and

create better value (Jacobsen et al., 2021). In the fast-moving fashion industry (Gazzola et al., 2020), customers are the finest co-creators because they are a better judge of their needs and wants. Managers should maintain an accessible brand image that encourages customer feedback and participation.

Third, to benefit from SMI authenticity, managers should conduct in-depth investigations beyond follower count and engagement metrics (Torres et al., 2019). Interviews with potential SMIs can help managers understand whether their image and authenticity perception align with brand promises (Wellman et al., 2020). It can also be done by analysing customer feedback on previous endorsements, as it reflects consumer perception and SMI's reputation (Ooi et al., 2023). Linking brands with credible influencers helps marketers reach a larger and more targeted audience (Belanche et al., 2021b).

5.3. Limitations and future directions

Our study serves as a starting point to understand the routes to attitude formation and brand-related outcomes in influencer marketing. Despite the contribution, this study is not short of limitations. Firstly, the study is only conducted in one country. Future researchers may perform a cross-culture analysis to understand the impact of cultural difference on consumers' decision-making process. Moreover, a comparative analysis of various geographic regions may also give a keen insight into variances in behavioral outcomes. Second, the study has only focused on the fashion and lifestyle industries. Future studies may include other sectors, for example, tourism, including male followers in the sampling frame. Third, this study focused on the brand-related outcomes of influencer marketing, however, the results of ATI may yield different outcomes when studying SMI-specific behavioral outcomes such as intention to follow SMI or intention to spread eWOM about SMI. Future studies may include influencer-related as well as brand-related outcome variables to further elaborate the success of central and peripheral routes in achieving desired outcomes. Future researchers may also include moderators (e.g., congruence between SMI, consumers, and brands) or mediators (e.g., attitude toward content) to explore the conditions under which ATI may lead to positive behavioral outcomes. Lastly, the demographics indicate that individuals between 18 and 24 years are most inclined towards influencer marketing, future studies may explore the impact of demographics as moderating factors between SMI authenticity and attitude, and also between attitude and CBR.

Authors contributions

This study is a part of a PhD thesis and is supervised by Dr. Hasan Zahid (supervisor) and Dr. Abdul Qayyum (co-supervisor), while Shermeen Hasan is the PhD scholar.

Conception and design: Shermeen Hasan and Dr. Abdul Qayyum.

Data analysis and interpretation of data: Shermeen Hasan.

Data collection and drafting of the paper: Shermeen Hasan.

Revisions for intellectual content: Dr. Hasan Zahid, Dr. Abdul Qayyum, and Shermeen Hasan.

Final approval of version to be published: Dr. Hasan Zahid and Dr. Abdul Qayyum.

Ethics statement

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Riphah International University, Islamabad, Reference No. FMS/RSL/ERC/007. The duly signed letter is provided at submission.

Disclosure statement

- None of the authors of this paper has a financial or personal relationship with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence the content of the paper.
- It is to specifically state that "No Competing interests are at stake and there is No Conflict of Interest" with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence or bias the content of the paper.

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About the authors

Ms. Shermeen Hasan earned her Master of Business and Information Technology (Marketing) degree from the University of the Punjab in 2006. She earned her MS (Marketing) from Riphah International University, Islamabad in 2020 and is currently a PhD scholar at the same institute. She has worked in various organisations holding marketing and administrative positions. She has also been a visiting faculty member at various Universities.

Dr. Hasan Zahid is currently working as an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Management Sciences, Riphah International University, Pakistan. He earned his Ph.D. degree of Marketing in Public Administration from School of Government, Universiti Utara Malaysia. He has been teaching various courses of Marketing on the study plan of masters and undergraduates. At the moment, he is supervising research students. Prior to joining the academia, he has been associated with HR corporations and has extensive experience as Business Development Manager and Recruitment Manager in the United Arab Emirates. He was engaged with small businesses (SMEs) as a consultant in order to solve or develop business models in the United Arab Emirates and Malaysia.

Dr. Abdul Qayyum obtained his PhD in Marketing from School of Management, Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Bangkok, Thailand. His areas of interest are services marketing, social marketing, marketing ethics and marketing from Islamic perspective. He has published in several well reputed national and international journals. He has been supervising several MS and PhD students of Marketing. He has served as Professor at Faculty of Management Sciences, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Currently he is serving National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan as a professor.

ORCID

Shermeen Hasan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7598-8776>

Data availability statement

I hereby confirm that the data associated with this is available upon request. The corresponding author Shermeen Hasan may be contacted for further information on data files submission at amirshermeen@gmail.com.

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