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Influencer-consumer fit and intention to co-create brand value: The serial mediation of influencer authenticity and attitude toward brand

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Abstract: Social media influencer marketing has emerged as an essential marketing strategy in the online interactive environment. This study investigates the impact of influencer-consumer fit (ICF) on behavioral intentions; intention to co-create brand value (ICC) and purchase intention (PI), with the serial mediation of influencer authenticity (IA) and attitude toward brand (ATB). A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to followers of social media influencers in Pakistan. The data were collected from 421 female followers of social media influencers through survey and partial least squares—structural equation modeling was used for data analysis. The findings reveal that ICF impacts IA, while the latter impacts ATB. ATB in turn impacts behavioral intentions. The direct effects suggest that ICF impacts consumers' PI but not the ICC. However, with the serial mediation of IA and ATB, the relationship becomes significant. The findings of this study may assist managers in building brand strategies to achieve excellence in a highly dynamic and competitive market by leveraging the power of influencer marketing.

Keywords: influencer-consumer fit; influencer marketing; influencer authenticity; value co-creation; social media

1. Introduction

To break through the advertising clutter and reach their target audience, businesses use various marketing methods (Kelly et al., 2021). Influencer marketing involves brands and social media influencers (SMIs) working together to achieve behavioral goals (Belanche et al., 2021a). Influencer marketing is anticipated to grow to US$52.02 billion by 2028, up from US$21.1 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2023). Given the significance of SMIs in today's marketing environment, consumer behavior researchers have primarily focused on the role of these characteristics in achieving brand success (Jun and Yi, 2020; Masuda et al., 2022). For example, trustworthiness (Chekima et al., 2020; Faisal et al., 2022; Jin et al., 2019), expertise (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Aw and Chuah, 2021; Chekima et al., 2020; Faisal et al., 2022; Ki et al., 2020; Ki and Kim, 2019; Lee and Eastin, 2021), uniqueness (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Casaló et al., 2020; Lee and Eastin, 2021; Zniva et al., 2023), influencer-consumer relationship and authenticity (Li, 2022) are some of the influencer attributes creating positive behavioral intentions. It is worth emphasizing here that some prerequisite factors may lead customers to SMIs, encouraging them to follow their social media profiles and heed their advice. In fact, these factors are imperative in developing

marketing campaigns. Sirgy (2018) proposed that humans are drawn to social entities that match their self-concept. In influencer marketing, SMIs attract consumers who are similar to their personalities and self-image. To put it another way, consumers may regard these SMIs as authentic if their personalities match that of the consumers' authentic selves (Balaban and Szambolics, 2022), which may lead to desired behavioral results. Despite its significance, the effect of influencer-consumer fit (ICF), level of congruence between an individual's self-image and the personality image of a product, individual, or sponsored event (Sirgy, 1985; Sirgy et al., 2008), on influencer authenticity has been neglected. Therefore, the first objective of this study is to address this gap.

Influencer marketing is known to yield desired behavioral intentions, such as, purchase intention (PI) (Aw and Chuah, 2021; Jong-Hyeong Kim and Song, 2020; Pick, 2021; Pöyry et al., 2019; Trivedi and Sama, 2020; Weismueller et al., 2020; Zniva et al., 2023), intention to follow (Belanche et al., 2021a; Casaló et al., 2020), imitate (Belanche et al., 2021a; Casaló et al., 2020), recommend (Belanche et al., 2021a; Casaló et al., 2020), interact (Casaló et al., 2020), and revisit intention (Yu et al., 2021). Another factor which gauges influencer marketing success is the intention to co-create brand value (ICC) (Tajvidi et al., 2020), which emphasizes the intention of different stakeholders in achieving brand success by creating brand value (France et al., 2015). Bu et al. (2022) recently highlighted the impact of homophily on value co-creation, highlighting the significance of influencer-consumer connection in influencer marketing. However, there is a scarcity of literature in this regard. We propose that ICF may positively impact behavioral intentions, such as ICC and PI because a fit between personalities and lifestyles of consumers and SMIs is one of the prominent reasons the former connect with the latter (Xiao et al., 2018). Therefore, the second objective of this study is to find out the direct impact of ICF on ICC and PI.

In a recent study Chen et al. (2022) investigated the impact of self-congruity on trustworthiness and expertise of SMIs, while the latter impact trust leading to behavioral intentions. To gain a more comprehensive insight, we intend to find out the underlying mechanism through serial mediation of influencer authenticity (IA) and attitude toward brand (ATB), because authenticity is known to impact ATB, while ATB impacts PI (Zniva et al., 2023). Therefore, the third objective of this research is to find out the serial mediation of IA and ATB between ICF and behavioral intentions, ICC, and PI, through serial mediation. Moreover, for consumers SMIs are either authentic or inauthentic (Napoli et al., 2014), whereas the available research shows the impact of various authenticity dimensions on outcome variables (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Lee and Eastin, 2021). This practice increases the number of hypotheses and reduces model parsimony, especially in complex theoretical frameworks (Sarstedt et al., 2019). This research is aimed to find out the relationship between ICF and behavioral intention, with the mediating role of IA and ATB, therefore, we operationalized IA as a higher-order reflective-formative construct (Akbar and Wymer, 2017; Nunes et al., 2021).

Lastly, although social networking has gained global awareness, scant literature is available to shed light on the trends in emerging economies, such as, Pakistan (Abbas Naqvi et al., 2020). 71.7 million of the country's population are social media users which constitutes 30% of the total population (DataReportal, 2023). The

previous literature has primarily focused on the frequency and popularity of social networking sites in the United States and Europe, where IT literacy is higher than in Pakistan and other South Asian countries, with very few insights on South Asian and other emerging markets (Shamim et al., 2024; Sheldon et al., 2017). This highlights a gap in influencer marketing research literature pertaining to emerging economies, which the present study intends to fill. Thus, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1) Does ICF play a significant role in achieving behavioral intentions, especially their intention to co-create brand value.

2) Given the popularity of influencer marketing and its application across the globe, what are the trends in emerging economies.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

Influencer marketing strategy allows SMIs with a large following on social media platforms to promote products, services, or brands (Kapitan et al., 2022). Influencers are trusted in their niche because of their reach and close connection with the target audiences (Ki et al., 2020). Their perceived originality resonates with followers, increasing brand exposure, credibility, and consumer response in terms of desired behaviors and behavioral intentions. Influencers can interact with their followers and receive feedback through this interactive process (Jun and Yi, 2020), which leads to higher consumer engagement. One important aspect of influencer marketing which sets it apart from celebrity endorsement is the level of trust SMIs gain over time due to their truthful endorsement which facilitates in positive attitude toward brand formation and purchase intention (Jia et al., 2023).

2.1. Self-congruity theory

Self-congruity Theory, presented by Sirgy (1982), asserts that self-congruity is a psychological process based on the match between consumer's self-concept (i.e., actual self, ideal self, social self) and the brand or brand-user's personality. Self-congruity theory asserts that individuals are more inclined towards objects or individuals, they deem closer to their self-image or self-concept (Chen et al., 2022). Self-concept refers to a person's thoughts and feelings related to themselves (Rosenberg, 1989). Nonetheless, there are many perspectives on how to approach self-concept. The organismic theory approaches the self from a functional and developmental standpoint, while cognitive theory portrays the self as a conceptual system that processes information about itself (Sirgy, 1982). Conversely, symbolic interactionism sees the self as a product of social interactions (Burn, 1979; Rosenberg, 1989). Consumer behavior suggests that consumers' purchase and consumption are directed towards enhancing their self-image, i.e., products communicate certain symbolic meanings and by consumption, consumers attain those meanings and reflect upon others (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967). In influencer marketing, the level of congruity between the consumer and SMI becomes an important factor in future behavioral intentions and consumption behaviors. **Table 1** gives an overview of prominent research exploring ICF, sheds light on the explored avenues, and highlights gaps identified in this study.

Table 1. Literature review of influencer-consumer fit.

Sr. No.	Author	Context	Role of ICF	Outcomes
1	Choi and Rifon (2012)	Celebrity endorsement	Predictor	Attitude toward ad, attitude toward brand, purchase intention
2	Lee and Lee (2015)	Corporate social responsibility	Mediator	Purchase Intention.
3	Xu and Pratt (2018)	Influencer marketing	Predictor	Attitude toward ad, attitude toward destination, revisit intention
4	Shan et al. (2020)	Influencer marketing	Predictor	Parasocial interaction, attitude toward brand, engagement, purchase intention
5	Pick (2021)	Influencer credibility	Mediator	Psychological ownership
6	Belanche et al. (2021b)	Influencer credibility	Predictor	Consumer-brand fit, attitude
7	Von Mettenheim and Wiedman (2021)	Influencer marketing	Predictor	Brand trust, post attitude, post belief
8	Zogaj et al. (2021)	Influencer credibility.	Predictor	Trustworthiness, competence

2.2. Authenticity

Research literature does not offer a common definition of authenticity (Zniva et al., 2023), however, authors agree that authenticity means genuine, true, or real (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Morhart et al. (2013) defined authenticity as being true to oneself. Authenticity is a socially constructed perception, rendering it high subjectivity (Napoli et al., 2014). It implies that the audience discerns various nuances of authenticity. In an age of technology steeped in postmodernism, MacCannell (1973) introduced existential authenticity as a form of authenticity to explain how consumers understand staged experiences. Leigh et al. (2006) introduced the concept of interpersonal authenticity, which proposes that individuals establish genuine interpersonal ties by engaging with a product or event, and the consumers' perceptions influence these connections. This approach is applied to influencer marketing, where SMIs create content to engage customers, which they evaluate based on the relatability of the experience.

Social media users are becoming more selective and seek genuine interactions (Agnihotri et al., 2023), as well as authentic and relatable experiences (Syahrivar and Ichlas, 2018). IA extends beyond aesthetics and tailored content—it portrays the SMI's beliefs, and personality impacting consumers' buying decisions (Belanche et al., 2021b).

2.3. Influencer-consumer fit and influencer authenticity

In the digital era, where artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly replacing the human element, maintaining the aura of authenticity may become a challenging task for the brands. While virtual influencers may generate greater engagement level, the overall authenticity of the marketing pursuit may become questionable (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024). In this connection the human component of ICF may play a significant role in generating an influencer-consumer connection (Bu et al., 2022).

The connection between ICF and IA may be understood by first assessing and aligning consumer self-perception with influencer personality traits. The entirety of an individual's innate, unforced inclinations and dispositions, as seen in their motivations, beliefs, emotions, self-perceptions, worldview, and other characteristics, makes up

their authentic self (Leary, 2003). Human reaction to environmental cues is a result of their genetic composition and personal history. If left to their own devices, individuals may respond in a way consistent with these innate tendencies or honestly. Other times, they could resist their natural tendencies in favor of responses which align with their purported true selves due to interpersonal influences (Leary, 2003). Extrapolating from this explanation of authentic self, influencers may show an inclination to present themselves in ways that bring social approval. However, fallacy of self-presentation casts a shadow of inauthenticity over the SMIs (Grieve et al., 2020) and creates doubts in the mind of consumers who wish to project their authentic selves though consumption (Kwon and Kwon, 2014). On the other hand, an authentic SMI will have no inhibition in presenting their true selves and remain transparent through the brand endorsement process.

IA is a unique construct which measures the authenticity of the SMI as a human brand (Malik et al., 2023). Based on the conceptualization of Lee and Eastin (2021), the perceived IA is a measure of their expertise, sincerity, visibility, uniqueness, and truthful endorsement. Consumers perceive an influencer to be authentic if they are behaving according to their true selves (Moulard et al., 2015). People that have similar traits, such as culture, personality, interests, or views, are more inclined to interact with one another (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). In addition, Chin et al. (2020) showed that ICF has a significant role in the interpretation of source reliability. Extrapolating from these findings, we may say that when the characteristics of IA resonate with consumer's authentic selves, it allows them to find congruity between their self-image and the authentic image of SMI. ICF prevails when consumers perceive the SMI as authentic and they consider themselves to be authentic, hence there is a match in their perception of authentic personalities.

- H1: Influencer consumer fit has a significant and positive impact of influencer authenticity.

2.4. Influencer authenticity and attitude toward brand

ATB is a person's opinion of a brand (Solomon et al., 2014). Marketing relies on consumer perceptions to shape attitudes (Kotler et al., 2008). In the domain of content creation and communication, influencers aim for an authentic image to develop trust (Chen et al., 2022; Ki et al., 2020), while endorsing products and services (Audrezet et al., 2020). Breves et al. (2019) discovered a strong, positive link between SMI credibility and consumers' brand opinions in influencer marketing. Influencers' social media content, including blog posts and videos, reflects their genuine beliefs and tastes, not just sponsored content (Xiao et al., 2018). IA impacts the ATB by transferring their authenticity to the brand (Zniva et al., 2023). The brands assume the positive characteristics from the SMIs, as the consumers process the influencer content. Positive brand perceptions, such as reliability and genuineness result in favorable ATB (Bruhn et al., 2012). Thus, the genuineness of the influencer is reflected in their endorsed brands, which results in a positive ATB. Therefore, we propose:

- H2: Influencer authenticity has a significant and positive impact on attitudes toward brand.

2.5. Attitude toward brand and behavioral intentions

Consumers are no longer passive recipients of marketing information or mere buyers, according to Service-Dominant (S-D) logic, consumer are active participants in creating brand value (Grönroos, 2011). The concept of service in S-D logic refers to the assistance that consumers provide to the brand for co-ideation, co-production of the brand and its value (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Zadeh et al., 2019). Value co-creation is the collaborative activity between the brands and the consumers, whereby, the latter helps the brands to improve their performance and add value to the product (Grönroos, 2011; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). To better understand value co-creation, the concept asserts that the beneficiary of the product should be included its production (Moeller, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). ICC captures consumer's intention of brand value co-creation based on the brand relationship quality (Tajvidi et al., 2020).

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) suggests that behaviors and behavioral intentions may be predicted by attitudes (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2005). Extant literature shows that ATB is a common predictor of PI (Belanche et al., 2021b; Chetioui et al., 2020; Chin et al., 2020), and suggests its impact on intention to recommend (Belanche et al., 2021b), revisit intention (Foroudi et al., 2021), and value co-creation intention (Zadeh et al., 2019). Positive attitudes lead to higher engagement levels. Customers who feel positively about a brand are more likely to engage with its content, promotions, and events, further reinforcing their bond (Yang et al., 2017). Therefore, we propose that ATB should be helpful in predicting the ICC and PI.

- H3a: Attitude toward brand has a positive and significant impact on intention to co-create brand value.
- H3b: Attitude toward brand has a positive and significant impact on purchase intention.

2.6. Influencer-consumer fit and behavioral intentions

Serial mediation shows the transfer of effect from the independent variable to the dependent variable through a series of constructs (Schuh et al., 2019). The purpose of endorsement is to drive potential customers towards the brand, build lasting relationships and achieve the desired behavioral outcomes (Belanche et al., 2021a). Therefore, congruity proves a means of cutting through the advertising clutter and brings the brand to customers' attention. An authentic influencer transfers the authenticity to the endorsement developing positive ATB (Mccracken, 1989). Consequently, favorable ATB sparks consumers' interest in brand, thus they may have a greater desire to engage with the brand (Chin et al., 2020). Consumers desire to co-create brand value when highly motivated individuals engage with the brand, by giving their suggestions and opinions. Therefore, we predict that ICF may result in developing ICC. Moreover, in online scenario, the relationship between IA and PI, through the mediation of ATB is known to have been successful (Zniva et al., 2023).

- H4a: Influencer-consumer fit has significant and positive impact on intention to co-create brand value.
- H4b: Influencer-consumer fit has significant and positive impact on purchase intention.
- H5a: The relationship between influencer-consumer fit and intention to co-create

brand value is serially mediated by influencer authenticity and attitude toward brand.
- H5b: The relationship between influencer-consumer fit and purchase intention is serially mediated by influencer authenticity and attitude toward brand.

Figure 1 outlines the theoretical framework developed based on the Self-congruity theory. When consumers find congruity between the SMI and their self-concept, they develop a positive attitude toward the endorser and the endorsement. This positive attitude (ATB) assist in positive ICC and PI.
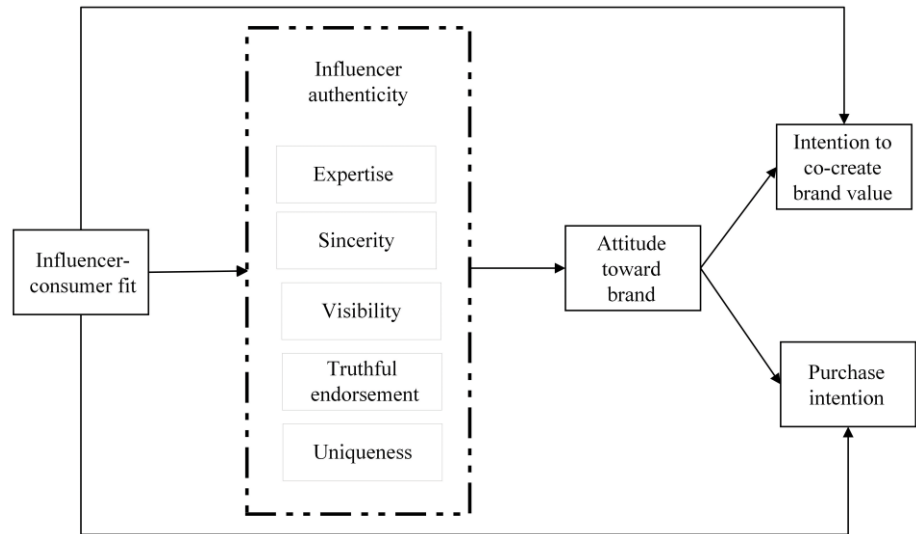

Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and data collection procedure

The study is set in Pakistan, where 30% of the total population (71.70 million) use social media (DataReportal, 2023). 63% of the country's population resides in the rural areas with little to no internet connectivity, which indicates that social media users are concentrated in the cities (World Bank, 2021). Out of these, five cities were selected for data collection, due to their higher income level and availability of local and foreign brands. These include four provincial capitals (Lahore, Karachi, Pecshawar, and Quetta) and the federal capital Islamabad. Data were collected using purposive sampling, which is the ideal method for gathering information from a specific set of people (Aw and Labrecque, 2020; Sekaran and Bougie, 2013). Consistent with the findings of this study's sample comprised exclusively of female respondents aged 18 to 34 (Audrezet et al., 2020; Belanche et al., 2021a, 2021b; Casaló et al., 2020; Loussaïef et al., 2019). We chose fashion and lifestyle SMIs because fashion influencer marketing is one of the most successful forms of influencer marketing globally (TRBC, 2023) and in Pakistan, where fashion, lifestyle, and cosmetics SMIs are the most popular with a large majority of female followers, sharing characteristics (The Nation, 2023; Walee, 2023). Research shows that female fashion-SMI engage followers more successfully than male SMIs (Von Mettenheim and Wiedmann, 2021). According to Loussaïef et al. (2019), women tend to have a more

favorable attitude towards fashion, cosmetics, clothes, and lifestyle due to their greater concern for physical appearance. Social media users of Generation Z and Millennials exhibit a high level of enthusiasm for following SMIs (Kennedy and Guzmán, 2016). Similarly, Pakistan's top fashion consumers are women aged 18 to 34 (Bhutto et al., 2022). As a result, it becomes the preferred demographic for fashion influencer marketing research in order to generate more broadly applicable results.

Time-lagged data collection design was employed to gather data, and the data were collected in two stages, with a gap of 2–3 weeks. In the first step actual SMI-followers were identified through purposive sampling and were invited to participate in the data-collection process. To eliminate the possibility of common method bias, methodological and procedural remedies were followed, in accordance with the suggested research (MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012). For instance, the purpose of the study was described to the participants and that they could decline from further participation at any stage of data-collection. The participants were also explained that there are no right or wrong answers, and their confidentiality is guaranteed. The time-lagged design to ensure temporal separation between the predictor and outcome variables (Andreadis and Kartsounidou, 2020; MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012). The participants were asked to assign a code to their questionnaire and save it for future reference. The questionnaires were also given a code by the researchers to foolproof the compilation of results.

In the first stage the participants were asked to name the fashion, cosmetic or lifestyle SMI they closely follow, along with the brand of interest endorsed by them, demographics, and ICF, and IA-related items. 800 questionnaires were distributed in the first phase of data-collection, of which 635 questionnaires were received. In the second phase, 635 questionnaires were distributed to the same participants, who wrote their code, name of the SMI and the brand as mentioned in the first phase. Next, they responded to items pertaining to ATB, ICC, and PI. 532 questionnaires were returned and were consolidated with previous responses through assigned codes. After removing erroneous and incomplete questionnaire, 421 responses were available for data analysis.

3.2. Measures

Table 2 presents the items used in this study. All measurement items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree) and adapted from existing and published scales. Influencer consumer fit was measured using a 3-point scale developed by Casaló et al. (2020). An 18-item scale by Lee and Eastin (2021) was used to measure the IA. ATB was measured using a 3-item scale from Sengupta and Johar (2002). For PI and the ICC, 3-item, and 4-item scale each were adopted from Xu and Pratt (2018) and Tajvidi et al. (2020), respectively.

Nguyen (2020) argued that authenticity being subjective in nature, should be conceptualized as a higher-order formative construct. Akbar and Wymer (2017) and Nunes et al. (2021) also conceptualized authenticity as a higher-order reflective-formative concept. For a higher-order construct to be formative, each of its dimensions must be separate from one another (Jarvis et al., 2003). For instance, truthful endorsement differs from visibility. Therefore, IA is also conceptualized as a higher-

order reflective-formative construct, i.e., the mediating role of IA is measured as a composite construct rather than its dimensions.

Table 2. Outer measurement model and confirmatory factor analysis.

Construct	Loadings	*α*	CR	AVE
Influencer-consumer fit (ICF)				
The influencer (X) is congruent with my values.	0.858	0.839	0.842	0.756
The influencer (X) matched my personality.	0.894	-	-	-
I feel identified with influencer (X).	0.856	-	-	-
Influencer authenticity (IA)				
This influencer is skilled in their field.	0.875	0.852	0.854	0.771
This influencer is very knowledgeable in their field.	0.882	-	-	-
This influencer demonstrates a natural ability in their field.	0.877	-	-	-
This influencer seems kind and good hearted.	0.822	0.888	0.901	0.747
This influencer is sincere.	0.898	-	-	-
This influencer seems genuine.	0.869	-	-	-
This influencer is down-to-earth/humble.	0.869	-	-	-
Although this influencer posts ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.	0.814	0.858	0.863	0.701
This influencer gives honest reviews on brands.	0.875	-	-	-
The products and brands this influencer endorse match well with their personality.	0.861	-	-	-
This influencer promotes products they would actually use.	0.796	-	-	-
This influencer is unique.	0.869	0.796	0.808	0.711
This influencer has distinctive characteristics.	0.883	-	-	-
Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.	0.773	-	-	-
This influencer not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships.	0.776	0.799	0.807	0.623
This influencer talks about real-life issues going on in their life.	0.813	-	-	-
This influencer talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public.	0.825	-	-	-
This influencer reveals a lot of their personal life to the public.	0.741	-	-	-
Attitude toward brand (ATB)				
I think this brand is very good.	0.872	0.800	0.807	0.714
I think this brand is very useful.	0.836	-	-	-
My opinion of this brand is very favorable.	0.826	-	-	-
Purchase intention (PI)				
I would consider purchasing the product endorsed by this influencer.	0.774	0.751	0.769	0.572
I would think about the option of buying the product endorsed by this influencer.	0.768	-	-	-
It is likely that I am going to purchase the product endorsed by this influencer.	0.770	-	-	-
Next time I need this type of product, I will probably buy the one endorsed by this influencer.	0.714	-	-	-
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.	0.798	0.733	0.759	0.649
I am willing to buy the products of this brand recommended by my friends on my favorite social networking site.	0.796	-	-	-
I will consider the shopping experiences of my friends on my favorite social networking site when I want to shop this brand.	0.828	-	-	-

4. Results

PLS-SEM using SamrtPLS 4.0 was used for data analysis, since it is considered an appropriate tool for the analysis of higher-order reflective-formative constructs (Hair et al., 2019). According to Hair et al. (2019) the first-order constructs' outer weights and collinearity statistics should be used to evaluate the second-order formative construct, separately from the first-order constructs. All first-order constructs had significant outer weights and variance inflation factors (VIF) <5, hence ruling out multicollinearity issues (Hair Jr et al., 2021).

4.1. Demographics

The demographic information of respondents showed that 59.6% of responders were aged 18–23 years, while 40.4% were 24–34 years of age. 40.1% were undergraduates while 95% spent 3–6 h per day on social media, while Instagram was the most popular among 78.4% respondents.

4.2. Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the lower-order constructs was performed; all outer loadings were <6, hence significant (Hair et al., 2011), thus confirming the validity of the scale. **Table 2** shows the psychometric analysis of the scales. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), average variance extracted (AVE) values should be >0.5, and α-values should be >0.6. Aljanabi (2018) contends that composite reliability needs to be higher than 0.7. Since all values satisfy the requirements, convergent validity is not a concern.

Discriminant validity (square root of AVE) was determined by Fornell-Larcker criterion. All values shown in bold on the diagonal of **Table 3** are <9, thus confirming discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). HTMT ratios were also calculated to further confirm discriminant validity, and all values were <0.9 (Hair Jr et al., 2021).

Table 3. Mean, standard deviation and discriminant validity.

	Mean	S.D.	ATB	IAE	IAS	IAT	IAU	IAV	ICC	ICF	PI
ATB	5.540	0.986	0.845	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
IAE	5.541	1.098	0.358	0.878	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
IAS	5.307	1.212	0.332	0.585	0.864	-	-	-	-	-	-
IAT	5.393	1.105	0.299	0.592	0.697	0.837	-	-	-	-	-
IAU	5.562	1.041	0.283	0.728	0.489	0.530	0.843	-	-	-	-
IAV	5.190	1.218	0.266	0.575	0.491	0.556	0.494	0.790	-	-	-
ICC	5.581	0.911	0.375	0.290	0.270	0.233	0.220	0.214	0.807	-	-
ICF	5.439	1.155	0.149	0.171	0.162	0.260	0.225	0.131	0.116	0.869	-
PI	5.536	1.006	0.384	0.324	0.247	0.264	0.232	0.336	0.573	0.188	0.757

ICF = Influencer-consumer fit; ATB = Attitude toward brand; 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.

To rule out multicollinearity, VIF was calculated, and was found below the threshold value 5 (Hair Jr et al., 2021). Common method variance (CMV) is a common

occurrence in self-reported questionnaires, which was ruled out following Kock (2015). All lower-order constructs were loaded on a single unrelated construct, i.e., number of hours spent on social media; the VIF values were found <3.3, thus CMV was ruled out.

4.3. Structural model

Two-stage disjoint approach was used to operationalize the latent variables following the procedure suggested by Sarstedt et al. (2019). Latent variable scores were inserted to the original dataset and then imported into SmartPLS for further analysis. A one-tailed test with a 95% confidence interval was conducted, with the bootstrap set to 10,000 iterations, considering the direction of the hypotheses. Tests for model fit and validation of higher-order constructs were carried out before hypothesis testing. **Figure 2** shows the structural model. **Table 4** provides an overview of higher-order construct validity. The VIF values are <5, necessary to determine the significance of outer loadings (Hair Jr et al., 2021). To demonstrate the validity of higher-order reflective-formative constructs, the outer weights must be significant (Hair Jr et al., 2021), which were found to be significant as shown in the **Table 4**. The validity of higher-order constructs was further demonstrated by the significance of outer loadings (Hair Jr et al., 2021).
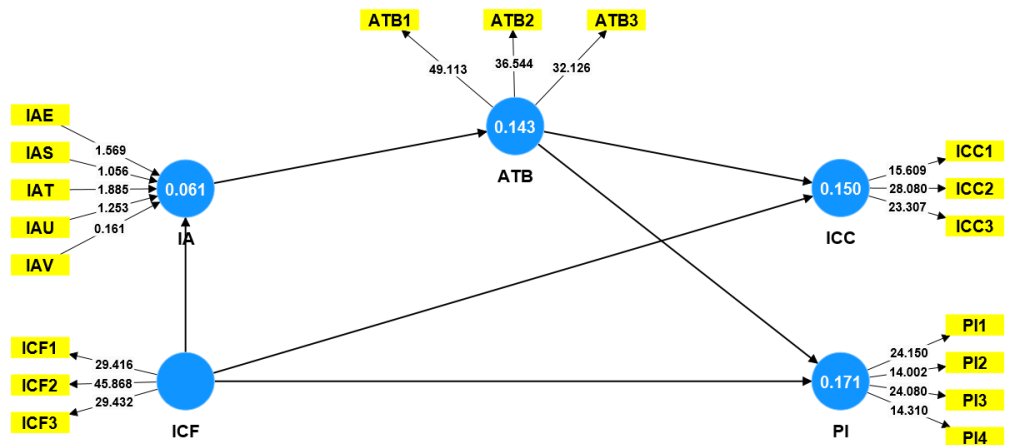

Figure 2. Structural model.

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

HOC	LOC	Outer weights	*t*-statistics	*p*-values	Outer loadings	VIF
PASMI	IAE	0.329	1.569	0.058	0.869***	2.721
	IAS	0.222	1.056	0.145	0.808***	2.145
	IAT	0.384	1.885	0.030	0.870***	2.332
	IAU	0.231	1.253	0.105	0.795***	2.211
	IAV	0.026	0.161	0.436	0.652***	1.693

IAE = Influencer authenticity: expertise; IAS = Influencer authenticity: sincerity; IAT = Influencer authenticity: truthful endorsement; IAU = Influencer authenticity: uniqueness; IAV = Influencer authenticity: Visibility; ***: *p* < 0.001.

The observed standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) was 0.068, which is less than the threshold value of 0.08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999) and thus indicates a

good model fit. The predictive relevance of the model Q^2 was confirmed since all the values (i.e., IA, ATB, ICC, and PI) were >0 (Hair Jr et al., 2021). Additionally, f^2 values were found to be >0.02 in most of the correlations, confirming that the impact size of influencer consumer fit is substantial (Cohen, 1988).

4.4. Hypothesis testing

The R^2 values represent the explanatory power of the conceptual model. For IA, ATB, ICC, and PI, the R^2 values are 0.061, 0.143, 0.150, and 0.1471, respectively. **Table 5** exhibit path coefficients of direct effects and mediation analysis. The results show that ICF has a significant positive impact on IA ($\beta = 0.247$, $t = 3.331$, $p < 0.01$), thus H1 is supported. IA is found to have a significant positive impact on ATB ($\beta = 0.378$, $t = 6.165$, $p < 0.01$), thus H2 is also supported. H3a and H3b predicted the impact of ATB on ICC and PI, which are supported by the results ($\beta = 0.379$, $t = 6.865$, $p < 0.01$) and ($\beta = 0.369$, $t = 6.767$, $p < 0.01$), respectively.

Table 5. Path coefficients.

Hypothesis	β	*T* value	*P* value
H1: ICF → IA	0.247	3.331	0.000
H2: IA → ATB	0.378	6.165	0.000
H3a: ATB → ICC	0.379	6.865	0.000
H3b: ATB → PI	0.369	6.767	0.000
H4a: ICF → ICC	0.042	0.809	0.209[n.s.]
H4b: ICF → PI	0.139	2.692	0.004
H5a: ICF → IA → ATB → ICC	0.035	3.119	0.001
H5b: ICF → IA → ATB → PI	0.034	3.095	0.001

SC = Self-congruity; IA = Influencer authenticity; ATB = Attitude toward brand; ICC = Intention to co-create brand value; PI = Purchase intention; n.s. = not significant.

The direct effect of ICF on the outcome variables, i.e., ICC and PI were hypothesized in H4a and H4b. The results show that ICF does not have a significant positive impact on ICC ($\beta = 0.042$, $t = 0.809$, $p = $ n.s.), thus H4a is not supported. However, H4b is supported suggesting that PI is directly impacted by ICF ($\beta = 0.139$ $t = 2.692$, $p < 0.01$). The serial mediation was hypothesized by H5a and H5b; both hypotheses are supported, suggesting full mediation of IA and ATB between ICF and ICC ($\beta = 0.035$, $t = 3.119$, $p < 0.05$), while partial mediation between ICF and PI ($\beta = 0.034$, $t = 3.095$, $p < 0.05$).

5. Discussion

This study found three gaps in influencer marketing literature, and the results offer valuable insights into consumer behavior. First, ICF's impact on IA was determined. Results confirm H1, indicating that consumers' perceptions of self-congruity and IA are linked. The explanation derives from Leary's research on the authentic self (Leary, 2003). Humans have an intrinsic predisposition to behave authentically when there is no social pressure to conform to a defined standard. Thus, the conceptualization of self-concept and authenticity is an innate appraisal, not

influenced by social compliance. Authentic influencers represent their true self. Because authenticity can be highly subjective, consumers regard an influencer as authentic if they are consistent with their self-concept. This indicates that the higher the ICF, the higher the perceived authenticity of SMI. Influencer authenticity then transfers positive perceptions to the brand, resulting in favorable behavioral intentions (Zniva et al., 2023), as seen in H2, H3a, and H3b.

Second, the study sought to determine the direct impact of ICF on behavioral intentions (H4a, H4b). The results demonstrate that ICF has a direct impact on the PI but no significant positive impact on the ICC. However, full mediation is found between the predictor and ICC (H5a), but partial mediation is confirmed in the case of PI (H5b). The findings of Choi and Rifon (2012) and Shan et al. (2020) show that self-congruent celebrities and SMIs operate as a channel to capture customer attention, communicate cultural meanings associated with the brand, and shape consumer behavior in terms of behavioral outcomes. The present study contributes to the body of knowledge by demonstrating previously unknown effects of ICF on ICC. Consumer behavioral responses are influenced by their perceptions, motivations, evaluations, and attitudes (Kotler et al., 2008). Self-concept is a significant motivator for customers in the decision-making process. Consumers tend to follow self-congruent SMIs and their counsel, which directs them towards the brand in order to develop better brand relationships (Hapsari and Adiwijaya, 2014). These strong brand relationships motivate consumers to interact with the brand and participate in the co-creation of their value, laying the groundwork for brand value co-creation (Tajvidi et al., 2020).

Thirdly, we pursued influencer authenticity as a composite construct to ascertain its mediating role. Based on the scope of this study, and the conceptualization by Akbar and Wymer (2017) and Nunes et al. (2021), we operationalized influencer authenticity as higher-order reflective-formative. The findings therefore highlight the derived meaning of influencer authenticity from the multidimensional construct. This study is the first to our knowledge to conceptualize influencer authenticity as a reflective-formative higher-order construct and capture its overall meaning to evaluate brand related outcomes.

5.1. Theoretical implications

The current study examined the effectiveness of influencer marketing through the lens of Self-congruity Theory. Congruity between endorser, endorsement, and consumers has been previously highlighted for gaining desired behavioral intentions (Belanche et al., 2021b; von Mettenheim and Wiedmann, 2021). However, this research was aimed at studying the impact of ICF on consumers' perceptions of IA, their ICC and PI. Moreover, we specifically aimed to map the underlying mechanism which starts with ICF and builds authenticity perception. IA is previously known to establish favorable ATB leading to PI (Chin et al., 2020). Our contribution adds the theoretical understanding of Self-congruity Theory and highlights the consumers' engagement level with the brand which leads to the value co-creation intention. The findings of this study confirm our initial conceptualization that since the aim of every marketing campaign is to achieve consumer attention, persuade and direct then towards the marketed brand (Choi and Rifon, 2012; Kotler et al., 2008). IA also castes

an aura of authenticity on the brand that leading to desired behavioral outcomes. By examining the endorsement process, we have highlighted the implicit process of engaging consumers with the brand and driving them towards value co-creation.

5.2. Managerial implications

The findings of this study offer several managerial implications for global marketers in general, and for South Asian and emerging markets in particular. Although globalization has rendered homogenous communication and marketing culture (Cecilia de Burgh-Woodman, 2014), psychological, sociological, and situational factors may stimulate diverse consumer responses to SMIs (Shah et al., 2023). To accomplish successful marketing outcomes, it is critical to understand the target consumer's culture and match the brand and SMI image properly. The managers should select influencers who align with the self-image of the target market. Marketers can achieve success by selecting SMIs with whom the target consumers can connect based on self-congruity. The purpose of influencer marketing is to direct the consumers towards the brand by seeking customers' attention (Choi and Rifon, 2012). In doing so the influencers act as an effective marketing tool to capture the target market and deliver the brand message. Self-congruity may facilitate the consumers to connect with the SMI based on social status, their life experiences, and expertise in a certain category. Secondly, firms can repurpose influencers' content in their marketing communication which may increase the propensity of value co-creation and PI. The consumers posts, like inquiries, suggestions and experiences with the brand and other consumers, may increase consumers engagement. Moreover, since SMIs are tagged in this repurposed content, these ads may bring all three players of influencer marketing, influencer, consumers, and the brand, on the shared platform to co-create brand value.

Thirdly, IA and its connection with consumers' self-image can provide the basis for bands' positioning. Influencer selection is a strategic process, which may prove pivotal in achieving the marketing campaign outcomes (Belanche et al., 2021b). By selecting SMIs befitting consumers' self-image, as well as their brand image, effective marketing campaigns may be formulated to gain desired consumer responses. To achieve this, firms should conduct rigorous research and analysis of their consumers and of potential SMIs. Mere follower count may not be enough to reach the target audience, the congruity between the influencers and their followers as well as the brand personality may play a significant role in achieving brand success.

5.3. Future directions

While a rigorous data collection approach was utilized to gather representative data from real SMI followers and consumers, this study is not short of limitations. The study only focused on the fashion SMIs, due to their popularity in Pakistan and global generalizability. This leaves out other important areas of influencer marketing, for example tourism, health, and fitness. The lack of SMIs in these fields in Pakistan posed a limitation. Future studies may consider a comparative analysis of influencer marketing success in these areas. Another limitation of this study was the selection of female SMIs and female followers. The popularity of influencer marketing with this demographic group resulted in exclusion of male respondents which may have

affected the results by inclusion of non-representative data (Zagheni and Weber, 2015).

Qualitative research techniques could be used in addition to causal relationships between IA, brand relationships, and value co-creation. The dynamic nature of influencer marketing may lead to the introduction of novel concepts and themes, encouraging further study in this area by researchers in the future. Text mining and sentiment analysis is also an important tool for identifying the trajectory of customer preferences and wishes in the field of influencer marketing research. Another interesting area for research is the effects of influencers and their audiences' cross-platform involvement on brand perceptions and relationships. The importance of a diverse digital presence in modern influencer marketing can be better understood by examining how participation on multiple social media platforms affects brand authenticity and customer sentiments.

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