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Title: The Effect of Social Media Influencers on Brand Trust and the Moderating Role of Brand Reputation on Brand Commitment and Brand Loyalty

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Conflict of Interest

The author (s) declared no conflict of interest and have not received any funds for the project.

Social Media Influencers on Brand Trust and the Moderating Role of Brand Reputation on Brand Commitment and Brand Loyalty

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Abstract

Firms need help retaining and attracting new customers in the prevailing competitive era. Therefore, besides other strategies, they have started using social media influencers to enhance their brand image and trust. Given its importance, the study has examined the impact of social media influencers (expertise, authenticity, attractiveness, and homophily) on brand trust. It also examined the effect of brand trust on brand commitment and loyalty. The study also examined the moderating effect of brand reputation on brand commitment and loyalty. The study collected data from Karachi's social media users. The study found that the social media influencer's expertise and homophily positively affect brand trust. Social media influencer authenticity and attractiveness insignificantly affect brand trust. Brand trust promotes brand commitment and brand loyalty. Brand reputation significantly moderates brand trust and brand commitment. However, brand reputation insignificantly moderates brand trust and brand loyalty. We recommend that firms select authentic and attractive influencers while selecting social media influencers. We also suggest that firms confirm that their recruited social media share entertaining content and keep the followers engaged. Brand trust promotes brand commitment and brand loyalty. Therefore, we suggest that firms focus on increasing brand trust through adequate marketing strategies.

Keywords: *Social media influencers, expertise, authenticity, attractiveness, brand trust, brand reputation, brand loyalty, and brand commitment.*

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Introduction

Social media marketing has gained profound popularity in the last few decades since it is cost-effective and efficient. Moreover, due to the effectiveness of social media influencers, firms are using them to market their goods and services (Infante & Mardikaningsih). The size of the social influencer market was 21.1 billion US dollars in 2022, which is expected to increase with a phenomenal growth rate due to increased internet access (Statistica, 2023). Social media influencers have sizeable followers and are often domain experts (Malik et al., 2023). Social media can potentially engage followers by sharing interesting content and selling goods and services to the target audience (Nurudeen et al., 2023). Besides endorsing and recommending goods and services to the followers, social media influencers increase word-of-mouth, brand loyalty, commitment, and trust (Filieri et al., 2023). Malik, Thapa, and Paswan (2023) assert that because of the effectiveness of social media influencers, many brands now have long-term partnerships with them (Kim & Kim, 2021; Ouvrein et al., 2021). Moreover, researchers believe that firms must ensure that social media influencers share content that aligns with their market strategies. Voorveld (2018) reports that 92% of social media users trust social media influencers more than conventional marketing channels. Similarly, another study reports that 46% of the respondents do not trust “newspapers, magazines, TV.” The rest, 64%, give more importance to the recommendation of social media influencers than advertisements relayed through conventional media (Akoyeva et al., 2019).

Researchers believe that in the prevailing technological environment, social media influencers have built new marketing competencies and knowledge, increasing followers’ trust in social media influencers (Vaidya & Karnawat, 2023). However, this study addresses a significant research gap in understanding the relationship between social media influencers and trust. Past studies have mostly focused on transactional outcomes, including followers’ perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Apasrawirote & Yawised, 2022). Moreover, past studies have found inconclusive results on the association between trust and its outcomes, including brand commitment and loyalty (Ballester et al., 2023).

Given the above gaps and discussions, this study has extended Social Exchange Theory and formulated the following research questions:

1. *What is the impact of “influencers’ expertise, authenticity, and homophily” on brand trust?*
2. *How does brand trust affect (i) brand commitment and (ii) brand loyalty?*

3. *What is the moderating role of brand reputation on (i) brand trust and brand commitment and (ii) brand trust and brand loyalty?*

Literature Review

Theoretical Grounding

Social Exchange Theory and Interpersonal Communication

Social exchange Theory (Homans, 1961) helps researchers understand the social interaction of two or more parties. Many studies have extended the Social Exchange Theory to understand social interaction between two or more social media users (Zheng et al., 2023). The theory postulates that when individuals invest in a relationship, they expect the other partners to reciprocate positively. Thus, the relationship between two partners significantly depends on their mutual trust. In influencer marketing, social media users share enjoyable, entertaining, and engaging content on social media. If the followers find the content as per expectation, they share, like, and give comments on the content, suggesting that followers are satisfied and appreciative of the social media influencers (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2023).

Similarly, social media influencers sharing valuable information leads to social interaction among followers (Yahya et al., 2023). Thus, followers' dependency on social media influencers gives them social power. However, this social power significantly depends on social media influencers' expertise, authenticity, and homophily. In the same context, many researchers document that social exchange benefits social media users and influencers (Yahya et al., 2023). Social media users benefit by accessing valuable information. Social media influencers benefit from increased following.

Hypothesis Development

Expertise and Trust

Source expertise refers to a social media influencer's technical knowledge (Kim & Kim, (2021). Expert sources influence social media users more than non-experts. As a result, social media followers are more willing to accept the content shared by expert sources (Jin et al., 2019). Many researchers believe that besides other aspects, source expertise has two dimensions: speaker expertise and intent (Tikochinski & Babad, 2022). Speaker expertise has various dimensions: education, professional achievement, and objectivity (Vrontis et al., 2023). The intent of the source expertise relates to the "degree of confidence and the skills for pursuing" (Hovland & Janis, 1952).

Content shared by credible and expert sources is more effective in changing the attitudes and behaviors of the followers (Zhang, 2022). Similarly, the source intent profoundly depends on the ability of the social media influencers to persuade and manipulate followers (Zhang, 2022). Moreover, extant literature documents that social media influencers who share information about goods and services have lower intent than the sources that share persuasive messages to the followers (Ermeç, 2022). Extant literature also believes that social media influencers' intent profoundly depends on their authenticity (Antonopoulos, 2021). Meanwhile, authenticity implies "sincerity, genuineness, truthfulness, and originality" (Zniva et al., 2023). Similarly, researchers argue that authenticity also depends on "whether the practitioner is willing to openly, publicly, and personally be identified as the persuader" (Baker & Martinson, 2002). Conversely, researchers argue that consumers often ignore the persuasive content of social media influencers sponsored by firms (Koch & Schulz-Knappe, 2021).

H1: Social media influencers' expertise positively affects brand trust.

Influencer Authenticity and Brand Trust

Influencer authenticity refers to the rationality and objectivity of their shared content. Therefore, authentic messages are more persuasive and effective and lead to brand advocacy (Malik et al., 2023). On the other hand, when social media users believe that the content shared by social media influencers is not authentic and credible, they do not trust such influencers. Similarly, many researchers argue that authentic content shared by social media influencers enhances message receptivity and promotes a positive attitude towards goods and services (Saulite et al., 2022; Ong et al., 2022). Moreover, content shared by an authentic source expert in a relevant domain attracts more followers than content shared by others who are not experts in the relevant domain (Feng et al., 2021; Kamboj & Sharma, 2023). Furthermore, past literature also documents that Instagram users are more attentive and trust sources that are competent, knowledgeable, and experts in specific domains (Connell, 2023). Given the above theoretical discussions, we argue that authentic social media influencer' content promote brand trust.

H2: Social media influencer authenticity positively affects brand trust.

Source Attractiveness and Trust

Content shared by an attractive source enhances social interaction between followers and users and increases followers' engagement (Mir & Salo, 2023). Similarly, many researchers, including those of Bowden (2022), argue that followers are more receptive to the content an attractive source shares. In the context of attractiveness, Manchanda, Arora, and Sethi (2022) assert that attractions are not restrictive to physical attractiveness

but include personality traits like honesty and reliability (Damirchi et al., 2022). Moreover, the Source Attractiveness Model (McGuire, 1985) postulates that source attractiveness includes “familiarity, similarity, likability, physical attractiveness and homophily” (Gupta et al., 2023). Also, the literature cites that social media users draw judgment based on the source’s physical attractiveness (Margom & Amar, 2023). Because they perceive the source’s attractiveness as “interesting, sociable, strong, modest, and responsive” (Kim & Kim, 2021). In the same context, Van-der-Meer, Hameleers, and Kroon (2020) state that these traits of source attractiveness increase the creditability and acceptance of the shared content and messages (Mir & Salo, 2023). Thus, we argue that social media users develop positive attitudes towards a brand that an attractive social media influencer recommends.

H3: The attractiveness of social media influencers positively affects brand trust.

Homophily and Trust

Homophily refers to the similarity between social media influencers and users regarding values, experiences, and lifestyles (Khanam et al., 2023). The Social Comparison Theory also states that while comparing themselves with others, individuals are more attractive and receptive to those whose personality traits align with theirs (Kim & Kim, 2023; Ki et al., 2022). As a result, followers develop positive attitudes, confidence, and trust towards such social media influencers (Leonhardt et al., 2020). Moreover, many studies found that when social media users find similarities between themselves and social media influencers, they develop an impression that social media influencers’ backgrounds are similar to their backgrounds. Therefore, followers’ trust in social media influencers increases (Ertug et al., 2022). Apart from the similarity, if social media users find that the shared content of social media influencers is consistent and reliable, trust in them will further increase. As a result, consumers develop a positive attitude toward the brand recommended by source homophily (Cho et al., 2022).

H4: Homophily positively affects followers’ brand trust.

Brand Trust and Brand Commitment

Brand trust is consumers’ confidence that the brand will consistently deliver the promised value proposition (Valette-Florence & Valette-Florence, 2020). It also helps consumers make their buying decisions. Moreover, consumers with strong brand trust believe there is no risk while purchasing such a brand (Iqbal et al., 2023). Many past studies, including Rachmawati, Sutrisno, and Saiful (2023), document that brand trust is an important precursor of brand commitment. Moreover, the literature also documents that when a brand meets consumers’ expectations, it enhances their trust, leading

to brand commitment (Arshad, 2023). Similarly, many studies found that consumer trust is an important antecedent to brand commitment, leading to a sustainable relationship between consumers and brands (Yousaf et al., 2020; Nadeem et al., 2020). Moreover, brand commitment relates to consumers' dedication to a brand. A consumer committed to a brand would have a more positive attitude toward it than consumers with a low commitment would. Furthermore, past studies document that brand trust, commitment, and performance are highly correlated (Zeren et al., 2020). Thus, we argue that it is important for a brand to increase its performance (Arshad, 2023). We also argue that consumers' positive experience and brand image are highly correlated (Fatma et al., 2021). Researchers believe that brand image is consumers' perception of a brand. Apart from other factors, brand trust also depends on consumer experience and a brand's reputation (Le, 2023). Similarly, Parris and Guzmán (2023) argue that consumers' brand trust is an important precursor of brand commitment. At the same time, many studies found that brand commitment mediates brand trust and loyalty (Atulkar, 2020).

H5: Brand trust positively affects brand commitment.

Trust and Loyalty

Trust is essential in developing and sustaining the relationship between two exchange partners (Cardoso et al., 2022). Many researchers believe the three important components of brand trust are "credibility, integrity, and benevolence" (Hussein et al., 2023). All of them directly and indirectly affect brand loyalty. There are many definitions of brand loyalty. However, most researchers believe it relates to sustainable relationships between brands and consumers. Consumers who trust a brand are more loyal to it than those who do not (Alnaim et al., 2022). Moreover, Mansouri et al. (2022) suggest that consumers who strongly trust a brand are confident that it will deliver what they expect from it and that there will be no financial or other risks when purchasing it (Suhan et al., 2022). As a result, they become loyal to the brand and often become its spokesperson (Juwaini et al., 2022).

H6: Brand trust positively influences brand loyalty.

The Role of Brand Reputation

Extant literature documents that brand reputation builds a brand identity but has no association with the physical composition of a product (Shafiq et al., 2023). Past studies also suggest that brand reputation is not static. It keeps changing due to the exchange of information between brands and consumers (Ali, 2022). Similarly, Rivaldo, Kamanda, and Yusman (2022) assert that brand reputation depends on the perception of all the stakeholders of companies, including employees, suppliers, competitors, and customers.

Given its importance, firms focus on enhancing the brand reputation since it makes the brand more competitive, allowing firms to sell the brand at higher prices (Quaye et al., 2022). In the same context, Shafiq et al. (2023) argue that brand reputation depends on customers' perceptions based on firms' communication with consumers (Konuk, 2023). Studies also cite that brand reputation has a varying effect on the relationships between (i) brand trust and brand commitment and (ii) brand trust and brand loyalty (Kwan et al., 2019; Burhanudin, 2022). Thus, a strong brand reputation enhances the relationship between brand trust and commitment. We also argue that a strong brand reputation increases the association between brand trust and loyalty.

H7: Brand reputation moderates brand trust and brand commitment.

H8: Brand reputation moderates brand trust and brand loyalty.

Conceptual Framework

Given the above discussions, the study proposes a conceptual framework containing one moderating, four independent, and three dependent variables. Refer to Figure 1.

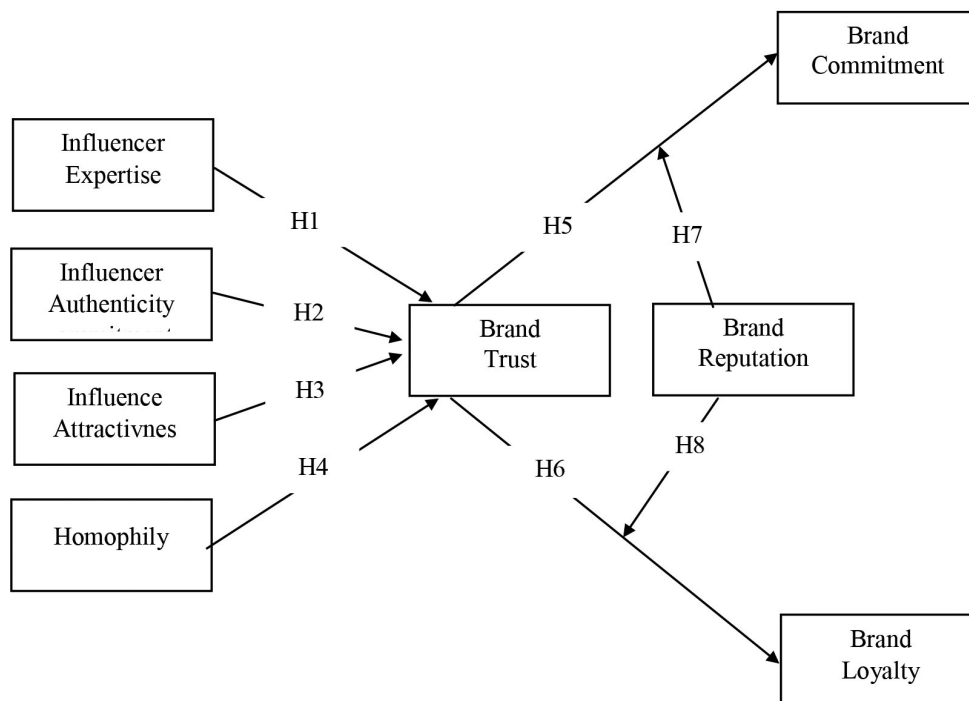


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research design

A Research design is a plan that helps researchers achieve their objectives. It has several steps, including the purpose of a study, how a researcher would collect the data, and the type of study (Salter et al., 2023). This study is descriptive (Siedlecki, 2020) because it has collected data from the target population based on a questionnaire adopted from earlier studies and used Smart PLS for statistical analysis. Moreover, this study has adopted a deductive approach (Casula et al., 2021) and empirically tested the proposed hypotheses using Smart PLS. Also, this study used a non-probability sampling technique (Proudfoot, 2023), since the sample frame of the target population was not available.

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study was Pakistani social media users. Despite being a developing country, Pakistan has seen significant social media and internet users growth in the last few years. According to an estimate, there were 87.35 million internet users and 71.70 million social media users in Pakistan in 2023. Also, in 2023, there were about 191.8 million active cellular mobile phone users in Pakistan (Data Report, 2023). Based on the population of 71.70 million, the study has calculated a minimum sample of 385. The study used an online method for collecting the data. About 500 respondents filled out the questionnaire, of which 476 cases were completed and used in the study for statistical analysis.

Pilot Test

Many researchers, including Kalkbrenner (2023), recommend pilot tests for studies that have adopted earlier-developed questionnaires. Since the study adopted the questionnaire from past studies, it recruited 45 MBA students from a local university for the pilot test. Initially, the recruited respondents filled out the questionnaires and reported that all the questions were non-ambiguous and none had the issue of social desirability. Subsequently, the study calculated the reliability of the constructs used in the questionnaire and found them within the acceptable range.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire used in the study has eight latent and 30 indicator variables. Table 1 shows the constructs, their sources, and the number of items. It also shows the reliability of the constructs in past studies.

Table 1: Instrumentation

Construct	Sources	Items	Reliability in Earlier Studies
Expertise	Ohanian (1990)	4	0.733 to 0.833
Authenticity	Ohanian (1990)	4	0.749 to 0.800
Attractiveness	Ohanian (1990)	4	0.766 to0.831
Homophily	Ohanian (1990)	3	0.786 to 0.824
Brand Commitment	Gurviez, and Korchia (2003)	3	0.755 to 0.826
Brand Loyalty	Delgado-Ballester et al. (2003)	5	0.718 to 0.834
Brand Trust	Delgado-Ballester et al. (2003)	4	0.774 to 0.825
Brand Reputation	Lau and Lee (1999).	3	0.713 to 0.843

Result

Respondents Profile

The respondents’ profile is important for generalizing the study (Santoso et al., 2023). It helps other firms identify the segments to target their value proposition. Table 2 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 2: Respondents Profile

Demographic	Category	Percentage
Age	16 to 25 Years	15%
	26 to 35 Years	28%
	36-45 Years	22%
	46-55 Years	20%
	56 Plus	15%
Gender	Male	63%
	Female	37%
Marital Status	Singe	63%
	Married	37%
Education	Intermediate	44%
	Bachelor Degree	30%
	Master Degree	23%
	Post-Graduation Degree	3%
Income Level	Up to Rs.50000	27%
	Rs.51000 to Rs.75000	23%
	Rs.76000 to Rs.100000	17%
	Rs.101000 to Rs.125000	19%
	Rs.126000 plus	14%

Measurement Model

The study generated a measurement model (Cheah et al., 2020) for results related to reliability (Santoso et al., 2023), validity (Moscato, 2023), and other required results. Figure 2 exhibits the measurement model.

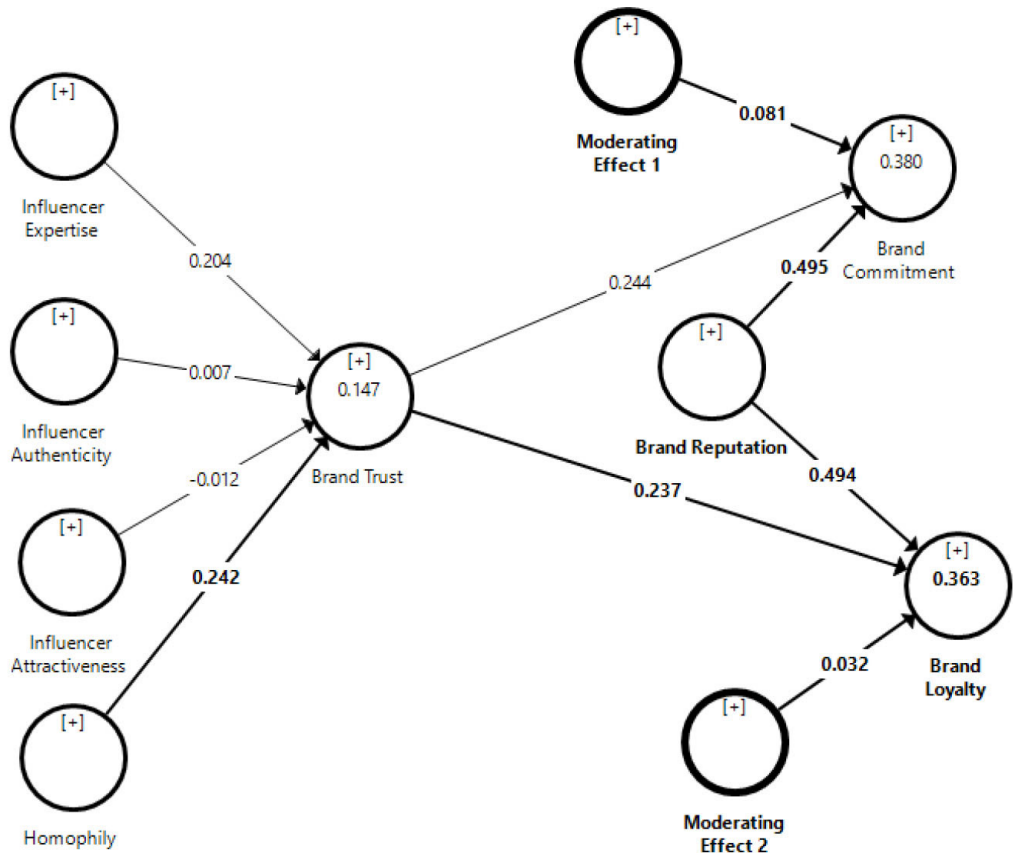


Figure 2: Measurement Model

Descriptive Analysis

We have presented results related to internal consistency, mean, standard deviation, Skewness and Kurtosis values in Table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Standard Dev	Kurtosis	Skewness
Brand Commitment	0.716	4.286	1.308	1.383	1.734
Brand Reputation	0.826	4.476	1.463	1.651	1.444
Brand Trust	0.828	4.070	1.406	1.396	1.036
Brand Loyalty	0.859	3.819	1.882	1.127	1.966
Homophily	0.882	4.159	2.473	1.743	2.210
Influence Attractiveness	0.880	4.621	1.831	2.037	2.255
Influencer Authenticity	0.848	3.840	2.061	1.415	1.661
Influencer Expertise	0.835	4.645	1.701	1.713	2.267

For internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha values must be at least 0.700 (Kalkbrenner, 2023). Our results in Table 3 show that Cronbach's Alpha values are within the prescribed range, suggesting that the constructs have adequate internal consistencies. Additionally, we found that the constructs used in the study have adequate univariate normality (Korkmaz & Demir, 2023) since all the Skewness (Loperfido, 2024) and Kurtosis values (Korkmaz & Demir, 2023) are between ± 3.5 .

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity is a theoretical association (Cheung et al., 2023) between a construct and its indicators. Table 4 shows the results related to composite reliability and AVE values necessary for ascertaining convergent validity.

Table 4: Convergent Validity

Constructs	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Band Commitment	0.752	0.836	0.631
Brand Reputation	0.828	0.885	0.66
Brand Trust	0.828	0.897	0.744
Brand Loyalty	0.86	0.904	0.703
Homophily	0.885	0.927	0.709
Influencer Attractiveness	0.888	0.926	0.806
Influencer Authenticity	0.868	0.907	0.765
Influencer Expertise	0.878	0.886	0.661

Researchers suggest that for convergent validity, the composite validity values must be greater than 0.700 (Amora, 2021), and AVE values must be at least 0.600 (Cheung et al., 2023). Our results fulfill both the requirements of convergent validity, suggesting the constructs have acceptable convergent validity.

Predictive Power of the Measurement Model

As suggested by many researchers, we have ascertained the predictive power of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2020) based on R-squared (Juwaini et al., 2021) and Q-squared values (Cheung et al., 2023). Table 5 shows the summary of results.

Table 5 R Square Values and Q Square Values

Construct	R Square	R Square Adjusted	SSO	SSE	Q ² (=1-SSE/SSO)
Brand Commitment	0.381	0.379	3594	2782.791	0.226
Brand Trust	0.147	0.143	3594	3211.675	0.106
Brand _Loyalty _	0.363	0.362	4792	3596.062	0.250

The results show that brand trust has the lowest R square value ($R^2=0.147$) and the lowest Q square value ($Q^2= 0.106$), “suggesting that the measurement model has adequate predictive power.”

Discriminant Validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981)

Before testing the proposed hypotheses, it is necessary to ascertain the uniqueness of the construct used in the study. Results presented in Table 6 show that “AVE square values are greater than Pearson Correlation values,” suggesting that the constructs used in the study are unique and empirically different.”

Table 6: Discriminant Validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981)

Constructs	BC	BR	BT	BL	HM	I.ATR.	I.AUT	I. Expt.
Br. Commitment	0.794							
Br. Reputation	0.566	0.813						
Br. Trust	0.366	0.252	0.863					
Br. Loyalty	0.644	0.557	0.36	0.839				
Homophily	0.64	0.712	0.339	0.555	0.842			
Inf. Attractiveness	0.536	0.739	0.243	0.559	0.656	0.898		
Inf. Authenticity	0.454	0.679	0.215	0.434	0.512	0.591	0.875	
Inf. Expertise	0.621	0.447	0.322	0.467	0.496	0.451	0.444	0.813

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity based on Fornell and Larckher (1981) criteria has certain limitations (Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). Therefore, we have ascertained the uniqueness of the construct using the HTMT ratio. The results in Table 7 show that all the HTMT ratio values are less than 0.90, suggesting the constructs are unique and have no collinearity issue (Rasoolimanesh, 2022).

Table 7: Discriminant Validity HTMT Ratio

Constructs	BC	BR	BT	BL	HM	I.ATR.	I.AUT	I. Expt.
Br. Commitment	--							
Br. Reputation	0.708							
Br. Trust	0.447	0.303						
Br. Loyalty	0.795	0.658	0.424					
Homophily	0.785	0.831	0.396	0.634				
Inf. Attractiveness	0.651	0.868	0.282	0.64	0.741			
Inf. Authenticity	0.561	0.816	0.251	0.5	0.592	0.692		
Inf. Expertise	0.818	0.52	0.365	0.54	0.577	0.509	0.523	--

Structural Model

We generated a structural model for the hypotheses results after ensuring reliability, construct validity, and discriminate validity are within the prescribed limit. Figure 3 exhibits the structural model.

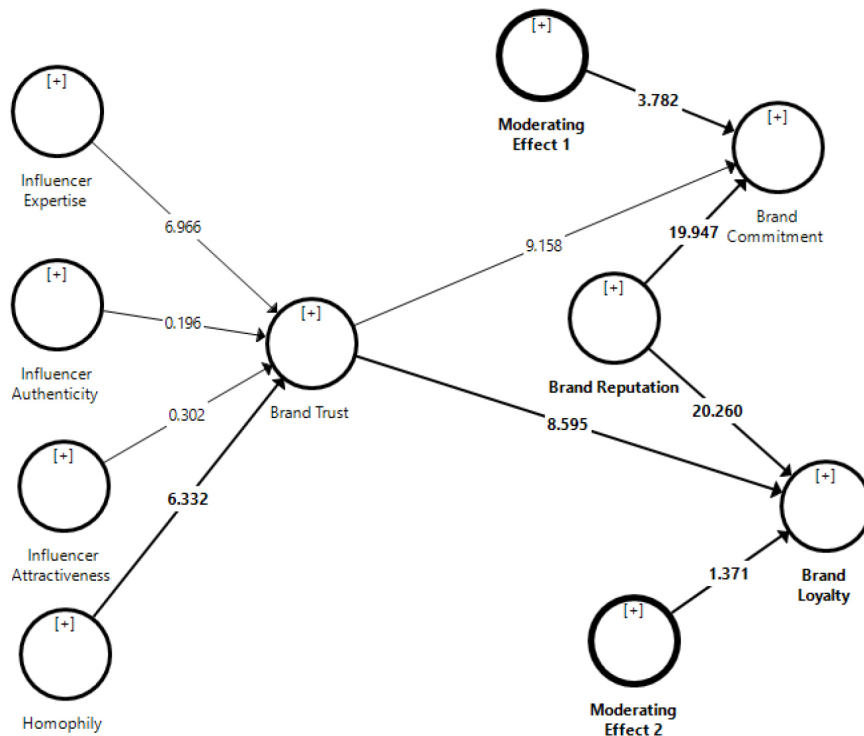


Figure 3: Structure Model

Results

The study used bootstrapping to test the proposed hypotheses. Table 8 shows the summary of results.

Table 8: Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	β	T Stat.	P Values	Results
Influencer Expertise -> Brand Trust (H1)	0.204	6.966	0.000	Accepted
Influencer Authenticity -> Brand Trust (H2)	0.007	0.196	0.845	Rejected
Influencer Attractiveness -> Brand Trust (H3)	-0.012	0.302	0.763	Rejected
Homophily -> Brand Trust (H4)	0.242	6.332	0.000	Accepted
Brand Trust -> Brand Commitment (H5)	0.244	9.158	0.000	Accepted
Brand Trust -> Brand Loyalty (H6)	0.237	8.595	0.000	Accepted
Brand Reputaiton*Brand trust -> Brand Commitment (H7)	0.081	3.782	0.000	Accepted
Brand Reputaiton*Brand trust -> Brand Loyalty (H8)	0.032	1.371	0.171	Rejected

Our study accepted four direct hypotheses (i.e., H1, H4, H5, and H6) and rejected two direct hypotheses (i.e., H2 and H3). Regarding moderating relationships, we accepted H7 and rejected H8.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 states that “influencer expertise positively affects brand trust,” which we accepted ($\beta=0.204$, $t=6.966$, < 0.05). Many researchers believe that besides other aspects, source expertise has two dimensions: speaker expertise and intent (Tikochinski & Babad, 2022). Speaker expertise has various dimensions: education, professional achievement, and objectivity (Vrontis et al., 2023). The intent of the source relates to the “degree of confidence and the skills for pursuing” (Hovland & Janis, 1952). Content shared by credible and expert sources is more effective in changing the attitude and behavior of the followers (Zhang, 2022). The source intent profoundly depends on the ability of the social media influencers to persuade and manipulate followers (Zhang, 2022). Moreover, extant literature documents that social media influencers who share information about goods and services have lower intent than the sources that share persuasive messages to the followers (Ermeç, 2022). Furthermore, extant literature also believes that social media influencers’ intent profoundly depends on their authenticity (Antonopoulos, 2021). Meanwhile, authenticity implies “sincerity, genuineness, truthfulness, and originality” (Zniva et al., 2023). Similarly, researchers argue that authenticity depends on “whether the social media influencer is willing to openly, publicly, and personally be identified as a firm-sponsored persuader” (Baker &

Martinson, 2002). Conversely, researchers argue that consumers ignore the messages of a firm-sponsored social media influencer (Koch & Schulz-Knappe, 2021).

Hypothesis 2 states that “influencer authenticity positively affects brand trust,” which we rejected ($\beta=0.007$, $t=0.196$, > 0.05). Authentic messages are more persuasive and effective and lead to brand advocacy (Malik et al., 2023). On the other hand, when social media users believe that the content shared by social media influencers is not authentic and credible, they do not trust such influencers. Similarly, many researchers argue that authentic content shared by social media influencers enhances message receptivity and promotes a positive attitude toward goods and services (Saulite et al., 2022; Ong et al., 2022). Moreover, content shared by an authentic source expert in a relevant domain attracts more followers than content shared by others who are not experts in the relevant domain (Feng et al., 2021; Kamboj & Sharma, 2023). Furthermore, past literature also documents that Instagram users are more attentive and trust sources that are competent, knowledgeable, and experts in specific domains (Connell, 2023).

Hypothesis 3 states that “influencer attractiveness positively affects brand trust,” which we rejected ($\beta= - 0.012$, $t=0.302$, > 0.05). Many researchers, including those of Bowden (2022), argue that followers are more receptive to the content an attractive source shares. In the context of attractiveness, Manchanda, Arora, and Sethi (2022) assert that attractions are not restrictive to physical attractiveness but include personality traits like honesty and reliability (Damirchi et al., 2022). Moreover, the Source Attractiveness Model (McGuire, 1985) postulates that source attractiveness includes “familiarity, similarity, likability, physical attractiveness and homophily (Gupta et al., 2023). Also, the literature cites that social media users draw judgment based on the source’s physical attractiveness (Margom & Amar, 2023). Because they perceive the source’s attractiveness as “interesting, sociable, strong, modest, and responsive” (Kim & Kim, 2021).

Hypothesis 4 states that “homophily positively affects brand trust,” which we accepted ($\beta= 0.242$, $t=6.332$, < 0.05). Homophily refers to the similarity between social media influencers and users regarding values, experiences, and lifestyles (Khanam et al., 2023). The Social Comparison Theory also states that while comparing themselves with others, individuals are more attractive to those whose personality traits align with theirs (Kim & Kim, 2023; Ki et al., 2022). As a result, followers develop positive attitudes, confidence, and trust towards such social media influencers (Leonhardt et al., 2020). Moreover, many studies found that when social media users find similarities between themselves and social media influencers, they develop an impression that social media influencers’ backgrounds are similar to their backgrounds. Therefore, followers trust brands recommended by them (Ertug et al., 2022).

Hypothesis 5 states that “brand trust positively affects brand commitment,” which we accepted ($\beta = 0.244$, $t = 9.158$, < 0.05). Brand trust is consumers’ confidence that the brand will consistently deliver the promised value proposition (Valette-Florence & Valette-Florence, 2020). It also helps consumers in their buying decisions. Moreover, consumers with strong brand trust believe there is no risk while purchasing such a brand (Iqbal et al., 2023). Furthermore, many past studies, including Rachmawati, Sutrisno, and Saiful (2023), document that brand trust is an important precursor of brand commitment. Literature also documents that when a brand meets consumers’ expectations, it enhances their trust, leading to brand commitment (Arshad, 2023). Similarly, many studies found that consumer trust is an important antecedent to brand commitment, leading to a sustainable relationship between consumers and brands (Yousaf et al., 2020; Nadeem et al., 2020).

Hypothesis 6 states that “brand trust positively affects brand loyalty,” which we accepted ($\beta = 0.237$, $t = 8.595$, < 0.05). Many researchers believe the three important components of brand trust are “credibility, integrity, and benevolence” (Hussein et al., 2023). All of them directly and indirectly affect brand loyalty. There are many definitions of brand loyalty. However, most researchers believe it relates to sustainable relationships between brands and consumers. Consumers who trust a brand are more loyal to it than those who do not (Alnaim et al., 2022). Moreover, Mansouri et al. (2022) suggest that consumers who strongly trust a brand are confident that it will deliver what they expect from it and that there will be no financial or other risks when purchasing it (Suhan et al., 2022). As a result, they become loyal to the brand and often become its spokesperson (Juwaini et al., 2022).

Hypothesis 7 states that “brand reputation moderates trust and brand commitment,” which we accepted ($\beta = 0.081$, $t = 3.782$, < 0.05). Hypothesis 8 states that brand reputation moderates trust and brand loyalty,” which we rejected ($\beta = 0.0032$, $t = 1.371$, > 0.05). Past studies suggest that brand reputation is not static. It keeps changing due to the exchange of information between brands and consumers (Ali, 2022). Similarly, Rivaldo, Kamanda, and Yusman (2022) assert that brand reputation depends on the perception of all the stakeholders of companies, including employees, suppliers, competitors, and customers. Given its importance, firms focus on enhancing the brand reputation since it makes the brand more competitive, allowing firms to sell the brand at higher prices (Quaye et al., 2022). In the same context, Shafiq et al. (2023) argue that brand reputation depends on customers’ perceptions based on firms’ communication with consumers (Konuk, 2023). Studies also cite that brand reputation has a varying effect on the relationships between (i) brand trust and brand commitment and (i) brand trust and brand loyalty (Kwan et al., 2019; Burhanudin, 2022).

Conclusion

Given technological diffusion, social media usage and internet connectivity have increased significantly in recent years. Moreover, individuals' reliance on the internet and social media to seek information about goods and services has also increased. The literature documents that consumers follow credible and reliable social media influencers for advice and comments on goods and services. Given its importance, the study has examined the impact of social media influencers on brand trust. The study also examined the antecedents and consequences of brand trust. It collected data from social media users in Karachi. The study found that the influencer's expertise and homophily positively affect brand trust. Influencer authenticity and attractiveness insignificantly affect brand trust. Brand trust promotes brand commitment and brand loyalty. Brand reputation significantly moderates brand trust and brand commitment. However, brand reputation insignificantly moderates brand trust and brand loyalty.

Implications

Social media influencers in the present era have become an essential tool for marketers to promote their goods and services. However, the influence of social media on the followers significantly depends on the influencers' expertise and homophily. However, we did not find support for the association between (i) influencers' authenticity and brand trust and (ii) attractiveness and brand trust. Authenticity and attractiveness are important traits of social media influencers. While selecting social media influencers, firms must also select authentic and attractive influencers. We also suggest that firms confirm that their recruited social media share entertaining content and keep the followers engaged. Brand trust promotes brand commitment and brand loyalty. Therefore, we suggest that firms focus on increasing brand trust through adequate marketing strategies.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has focused on social media users of one city, i.e., Karachi. Other studies may focus on other cities of Pakistan. The study did not use any stimulus. Other studies may use a reputable brand as a stimulus for seeking social media users' opinions. The study has examined the impact of influencers' expertise, creditability, and attractiveness on brand trust. Other studies may examine the impact of these factors on attitude and purchase intention. We have used brand reputation as a moderator between (i) brand trust and commitment and (ii) brand trust and brand loyalty. Future studies may use Hofstede's cultural dimensions as moderators between antecedents of brand brand trust and its consequences.

Annexure: 1

Constructs and Items Used in the Questionnaire

Expertise

- EX1. Social media influencers are knowledgeable.
- EX2. Social media influencers are qualified.
- EX3. Social media influencers have the required skills.
- EX4. Social media influencers are experts in their domain.

Authenticity

- ATH1. Social media influencers are dependable.
- ATH2. Social media influencers are honest.
- ATH3. Social media influencers are reliable.
- ATH4. Social media influencers are sincere.

Attractiveness

- ATR1. Social media influencers are attractive.
- ATR2. Social media influencers are beautiful.
- ATR3. Social media influencers are sexy.
- ATR4. Social media influencers are elegant.

Homophily

- HM1. My social media influencer interest is similar to my interest.
- HM2. My Social media influencer is as enthusiastic as I am.
- HM3. My social media influencer values are similar to my values.

Brand Commitment

- BC1. If necessary, I would make a few small sacrifices to continue using this brand.
- BC2. I tend to praise and defend this brand.
- BC3. I think I will appreciate this brand for a long time

Brand Loyalty

- BL1. I consider myself loyal to the brand I use.
- BL2. Under extreme circumstances, I would consider purchasing another brand.
- BL3. If the store does not have my brand, I would go to another store to buy my brand.
- BL4. The brand I use gives the best value than other brands.
- BL5. I recommend others to buy the brand I use.

Brand Trust

BT1. The brand I use meets my expectations.

BT2. I have confidence in the brand I use.

BT3. The brand I use never disappoints me.

BT4. The brand I use guarantees satisfaction.

Brand Reputation

BR1. The brand I use has a reputation for being good.

BR2. Other people have told me that the brand I use is good.

BR3. The brand I use is reputed to perform well.

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