JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

PERCEPTION OF YOUNG ADULTS ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER CULTURE IN PAKISTAN.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23913800

Keywords
Social media influencers, young adults, perception, social comparison, authenticity, Pakistan.

Article History
Received: *25 June 2026*
Accepted: *16 September 2026*
Published: *31 October 2026*

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Abstract
This study explores how young adults in Pakistan perceive and engage with social media influencers. Previous literature on influencers has largely focused on marketing and consumption issues with comparatively little emphasis on how youth perceive influencer culture. This research is based on a qualitative methodology whereby data have been collected from five semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion among young adults aged 20-25 years. For data analysis, thematic analysis was conducted. In total, four major themes were identified, which include ambiguous perception towards social media influencers, reliance upon perceived credibility of social media personalities, subtle persuasion with regard to lifestyle and decision-making, and the influence of pressure exerted due to unrealistic portrayals of people's lifestyles. Influencers are considered both entertaining and educational by most young people; however, these individuals have raised several issues, such as the issue of exaggerated claims, sponsorship issues, and the depiction of life that may be unrealistic. Despite claiming that they are not greatly influenced by the content on social media, results reveal the extent to which young people have been influenced with regard to self-perceptions, lifestyle choices, and social comparisons.

INTRODUCTION
Social media has become a routine part of everyday life, particularly for young adults. Its role goes beyond simple communication. It influences how people spend their time, what they pay attention to, and in some cases, how they think about themselves and others. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are not only used to connect with others but also to observe lifestyles, follow trends, and form opinions about what is desirable or acceptable. In that sense, social media is not just a tool, but an environment people are constantly exposed to.

Some research has suggested that repeated exposure to certain types of content can influence behaviour. For example, alcohol-related content is often presented in a positive or socially rewarding way online. Over time, this kind of portrayal may make such behaviour appear more normal than it actually is. Moreno and Whitehill (2014) found an association between exposure to alcohol content on social media and increased alcohol use among

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ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
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young people. While this does not establish a direct causal link, it does point towards a pattern where online content and offline behaviour are not entirely separate.

At the same time, the influence of social media is not limited to behaviour alone. It also appears to affect psychological experiences, although this relationship is not always clear-cut. Engagement with influencers, in particular, has been linked to fear of missing out (FOMO), which is associated with lower levels of well-being (Bartosiak et al., 2025). However, this does not mean that social media is always harmful. Some studies suggest that its effects depend on how it is used. Berryman et al. (2017), for instance, found no consistent evidence that social media use directly harms mental health, and in some cases, it may even support social connection. This mixed evidence makes it difficult to draw simple conclusions and suggests that individual differences in use may matter.

Social media influencers are a central part of this environment. People do not follow influencers randomly. They often follow them for specific reasons, such as entertainment, keeping up with trends, gaining information, or even for a sense of connection, even if that connection is not reciprocal (Croes & Bartels, 2021). In this sense, users are not entirely passive. They make choices about who to follow and what to engage with, although the extent to which these choices are fully independent is not always clear.

These patterns can be understood using Social Comparison Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory. Social Comparison Theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, appearance, and achievements to those of others. This process is likely to be more frequent in online environments, where people are constantly exposed to curated and often idealised content. These comparisons may not always be realistic, but they can still influence how individuals feel about themselves. Uses and Gratifications Theory offers a slightly different perspective. It suggests that individuals actively choose media that fulfil their needs, such as entertainment, information, or social interaction. This indicates that engagement with social media is not only shaped by the content itself, but also by what users are looking for when they use these platforms.

Despite the growing amount of research in this area, there are still some gaps. Much of the existing work relies on quantitative methods, which are useful for identifying general patterns but may not fully capture how individuals make sense of their experiences. In addition, a large proportion of studies have been conducted in Western populations. This raises questions about how well these findings apply in different cultural contexts, particularly in places where social media use is growing rapidly.

This is relevant in the case of Pakistan, where social media use has increased significantly in recent years. According to Kemp (2025), there were approximately 66.9 million social media users in early 2025, indicating a substantial level of engagement. A large proportion of these users are young adults, who are also among the most active users of social media platforms.

Young adults are therefore an important group to study. They are at a stage where identity, self-perception, and social comparison are still developing, and they are also heavily exposed to influencer content. While research has examined social media use more broadly, there is relatively limited work exploring how young adults in Pakistan understand and interpret social media influencers in their own words.

The present study aims to explore how young adults in Pakistan perceive and engage with social media influencers. A qualitative approach is used in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of their experiences, including how they interpret influencer content and what it means to them in their everyday lives.

Literature Review

Social media use has increased globally over the past decade, but in Pakistan, this growth has been

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particularly noticeable in recent years. Broadly, social media refers to digital platforms where users create and share content and interact within online communities, often without the usual limitations of distance or access (Vrontis et al., 2021). While this definition is fairly standard, its relevance in Pakistan becomes more interesting when considered alongside the country's demographic and technological context.

The rise in social media use in Pakistan is closely linked to increased access to mobile internet and the availability of relatively affordable smartphones. According to Kemp (2023), there were approximately 71.7 million social media users in Pakistan as of January 2023, representing around 30.1% of the total population. On its own, this figure may not seem particularly striking. However, when considered alongside the country's median age of 20.6 years, it suggests that social media use is largely concentrated among younger individuals. In that sense, young people are not only consuming content but are also actively contributing to it, whether through posts, engagement, or content creation.

Research conducted among Pakistani university students supports this pattern. Ghafar et al. (2024) found that social media is used on a daily basis, primarily for information-seeking, but also for entertainment and social interaction. This indicates that social media is not just a space for leisure, but also a platform where knowledge, opinions, and social identities are shaped. At the same time, patterns of use are not static. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a noticeable shift in how platforms are used. For example, while Facebook continues to retain a large user base, platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have seen increased engagement, particularly among younger users (Hamza et al., 2025). This shift towards more visual and short-form content is difficult to ignore, especially when considering how attention is captured and maintained online.

Taken together, these trends suggest that Pakistan's social media landscape is not only expanding but is also becoming increasingly youth-driven. It is within this context that new forms of visibility have emerged, particularly in the form of social media influencers. Their rise is not accidental but closely tied to these broader shifts in usage patterns and user behaviour, which makes it important to understand this background before examining influencer culture in more detail.

Alongside the rise in social media use, a parallel development has been the emergence of what is often described as influencer culture. Although sometimes framed as a recent trend, it can also be understood as an extension of older forms of celebrity culture, now made more accessible through digital platforms. Influencer culture generally refers to a social and commercial phenomenon in which individuals with a significant online following are able to shape the opinions, preferences, and behaviours of their audience (Vrontis et al., 2021). The terminology itself varies across the literature terms such as micro-celebrities, content creators, and opinion leaders are often used interchangeably, although they do not always refer to exactly the same type of online presence.

From a commercial perspective, influencers have become closely tied to marketing practices. Through brand collaborations, sponsored posts, and product endorsements, online self-presentation is increasingly monetised, sometimes to the extent that it becomes a full-time occupation (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In Pakistan, this shift is quite visible, particularly in industries such as fashion, beauty, food, and lifestyle, where influencer marketing has gradually moved from being supplementary to, in some cases, central to promotional strategies. Research suggests that factors such as perceived credibility and content quality play a key role in shaping consumer trust. For instance, a study published in the International Journal of Social Science Archives (2023) found that trustworthiness and perceived expertise significantly influence purchase intentions among Pakistani users. Similar findings have been reported elsewhere (e.g., Liu & Zheng,

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2024), although much of this work tends to remain focused on consumer behaviour rather than the influencers themselves.

What is less frequently explored, however, is the experience of being an influencer. Nasarullah et al. (2024) provide some insight into this by examining the perspectives of Pakistani social media influencers, particularly women. Their findings suggest that maintaining an online presence is not as effortless as it may appear. Participants reported pressure to meet audience expectations, especially in relation to appearance, consistency, and engagement. There was also mention of criticism and the need to present a carefully managed version of the self. While the study does not explicitly frame this as a discrepancy between online and offline identities, it does point towards a kind of tension. The idea that authenticity itself may be constructed, rather than simply expressed, begins to emerge here, even if it is not fully developed within the study.

This raises a slightly uncomfortable question. If influencer identities are, at least to some extent, curated and strategically maintained, then the nature of their influence becomes less straightforward. Despite this, much of the existing literature continues to treat authenticity and credibility as relatively stable traits that can be measured and linked to outcomes such as trust or purchase intention. What tends to be missing is a closer look at how audiences themselves interpret this potential gap between what is presented online and what may exist beyond it. The present study is particularly interested in this space, not only in terms of whether such a gap exists, but also how it is perceived and understood by young users within a Pakistani context.

Young adults, typically those between the ages of 18 and 25, are often described as the most active users of social media. This group largely overlaps with Generation Z and the younger segment of Millennials, both of whom have grown up with relatively easy access to the internet and digital technologies. As a result, social media is not something external to their lives but is woven into everyday routines in a way that feels almost habitual (Tirocchi, 2024). It shapes how they communicate, but also, more subtly, how they see themselves and others.

In this context, social media is not just a platform for interaction. It becomes a space where identity is explored, compared, and, at times, performed. Young users are continuously exposed to curated representations of others' lives, which can influence processes such as social comparison, aspiration, and self-evaluation. While these processes are not new, the scale and frequency at which they occur through digital platforms are quite different. Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison remains relevant here, but the environment in which these comparisons take place has changed significantly, often making them more immediate and difficult to disengage from.

One concept that helps explain the influence of online figures within this space is that of parasocial relationships. Originally introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), and later expanded in contemporary contexts, parasocial relationships refer to one-sided emotional connections that individuals form with media personalities who are unaware of their existence. In the case of social media influencers, these relationships can feel more personal, partly because of the interactive features of platforms and the informal style of content. Hoffner and Bond (2022) suggest that such relationships can contribute to a sense of closeness or familiarity, even in the absence of direct interaction.

However, the role of these relationships is not entirely straightforward. While they can enhance engagement and trust, they may also blur the distinction between familiarity and authenticity. Influencers often present aspects of their personal lives, which can make their content appear more relatable. At the same time, this perceived intimacy does not necessarily reflect a reciprocal or transparent relationship. For young adults, who are already navigating questions of identity and belonging, this dynamic may carry particular

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significance, although it is not always explicitly acknowledged in existing research.

Overall, it becomes difficult to separate social media use among young adults from broader processes of identity formation and social evaluation. Within this environment, influencers occupy a somewhat ambiguous position. They are not quite peers, but not entirely distant figures either. This in-between status may be part of what makes their influence more persuasive, but it also complicates how they are understood by those who follow them.

In psychological terms, perception refers to the way individuals interpret and make sense of the information they encounter. It is not simply about what is seen, but how meaning is assigned to it, often shaped by prior experiences, expectations, and context. When applied to social media, perception becomes particularly relevant in understanding how young users interpret the content shared by influencers, including judgments about credibility, authenticity, and usefulness.

Research suggests that these perceptions play a significant role in determining how audiences engage with influencers and the content they produce. For example, Barta et al. (2023) argue that perceived authenticity and usefulness contribute to the strength of the relationship between influencers and their followers, which in turn influences how brands are evaluated. In this sense, perception is not passive; it actively shapes both trust and behavioural responses. However, the idea of authenticity itself is less straightforward than it initially appears.

A growing body of research has begun to question whether authenticity on social media reflects genuine self-expression or a more deliberate performance. Kim et al. (2024), for instance, found that influencers often approach authenticity as something that is strategically managed rather than naturally occurring. This suggests that what is presented as "real" may, in fact, be carefully constructed to appear relatable and engaging. The distinction is subtle, but important. If authenticity is something that can be curated, then it becomes less of a stable personal trait and more of a communicative strategy.

This creates a degree of ambiguity in how influencer content is interpreted. On the one hand, followers may feel that they are engaging with someone genuine and relatable. On the other, there remains the possibility that this perceived authenticity is, at least in part, a crafted image. The tension between these two interpretations is not always openly recognised, but it likely shapes how influencers are understood and evaluated by their audience.

For young adults, who are already navigating questions of identity, trust, and social belonging, these perceptions may carry particular weight. Yet, despite the centrality of perception in shaping engagement with influencer content, relatively little attention has been given to how young users themselves interpret and make sense of this tension. This becomes especially relevant in a context like Pakistan, where cultural expectations and social norms may further influence how authenticity and credibility are understood.

Existing literature on influencer culture has largely centred around consumer behaviour, particularly in relation to purchasing decisions, brand engagement, and marketing effectiveness. While this body of work has provided useful insights, it tends to approach influencers primarily as marketing tools rather than as social actors embedded within everyday life. As a result, less attention has been given to how young audiences perceive influencers beyond their commercial role, particularly in terms of how they understand them as individuals and as representatives of a broader lifestyle.

This becomes more noticeable when considering the kinds of questions that remain underexplored. For instance, how young users relate to the everyday lives presented by influencers, how they form moral or social judgments about them, and how they interpret influencer culture as a possible way of living are areas that have not been examined in much depth. The focus on

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measurable outcomes, such as purchase intention, has perhaps limited engagement with these more subjective dimensions.

Methodologically, much of the existing research relies on quantitative approaches. While these methods are valuable for identifying patterns and associations, they are less suited to capturing the complexity of individual perception and interpretation. In particular, they offer limited insight into how young people make sense of what they see online, especially when it comes to more nuanced issues such as authenticity, relatability, or perceived discrepancies between online and offline identities. A qualitative approach, therefore, allows for a more detailed exploration of these experiences, even if it comes with its own limitations in terms of generalisability.

There is also a noticeable concentration of research within Western cultural contexts. Although some of these findings may be broadly applicable, they cannot be assumed to translate directly to settings such as Pakistan, where social norms, cultural expectations, and religious values may shape social media use in different ways. In particular, the ways in which young people interpret influencer behaviour, including judgments around authenticity, credibility, and appropriateness, are likely to be influenced by these contextual factors.

Taken together, these gaps point towards the need for a more context-sensitive and perception-focused exploration of influencer culture. Rather than focusing solely on what influencers do or how effective they are in marketing terms, there is value in examining how they are understood by those who engage with them, especially within underrepresented cultural settings.

Research Questions:

Primary Research Question

How do young adults perceive social media influencers?

Secondary Research Questions

1. What motivates young adults to follow social media influencers, and what do they feel they gain from this?
2. How do young adults evaluate influencers in terms of trust, credibility, and overall appeal?
3. In what ways do social media influencers shape how young adults compare themselves to others and view themselves?
4. How do young adults reflect on the positive and negative aspects of social media influencers?

The research questions come directly from the gaps in the literature. Since most studies focus on consumer behaviour and marketing, the main question shifts the focus towards how young adults actually see influencers as people, not just as part of advertising.

The motivation question builds on this by looking at why young people follow influencers in the first place, which is often mentioned in research but not really explored in detail from their point of view. The evaluation question links to ideas like trust and credibility, but instead of treating these as fixed, it looks at how young adults themselves judge influencers.

The question on social comparison connects to existing theory, but looks at how this plays out in everyday use of social media, rather than in a controlled or measured way. The final question allows space for more mixed or critical views, which are often missing when studies focus mainly on positive outcomes or clear patterns.

Overall, the questions are trying to get at the more subjective side of influencer culture, especially in a context like Pakistan where this hasn't been explored as much.

Rationale

Social media influencers have become a visible part of everyday life, particularly for young adults who spend a significant amount of time online. Although there is already a large body of work on this topic, much of it focuses on marketing outcomes, such as purchasing behaviour and brand engagement. This provides useful insight,

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but also means that online figures are often approached more as promotional tools than as individuals, with less attention given to how they are actually understood by those who follow them. This study focuses on young adults in Pakistan, where social media use is increasing but academic work in this area remains relatively limited. Cultural setting is important here, as social norms, religion, and everyday expectations may shape how online figures are viewed in ways that differ from Western settings. Looking at this setting more closely allows for a better understanding of how influencer culture is experienced rather than simply how it operates.

A qualitative approach is used to explore these perceptions in more depth. Since the study is interested in how young adults make sense of what they see online, including ideas of authenticity, relatability, and everyday life, it is important to allow space for more detailed and subjective responses rather than relying only on measurable patterns.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a small number of concepts that help in understanding how young adults make sense of social media influencers. The main focus is on perception, in terms of how people interpret what they see online and form opinions about it.

One relevant idea is social comparison, where individuals compare themselves to others, which tends to happen more frequently in online spaces (Leon Festinger, 1954). Parasocial relationships are also useful here, as they explain how people can feel a sense of connection with online figures even without direct interaction (Donald Horton & R. Richard Wohl, 1956; Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

The idea of authenticity is also considered, particularly the suggestion that what appears real online may be shaped or managed rather than simply expressed (Kim et al., 2024). These concepts are used to guide the analysis, especially when looking at how young adults interpret and evaluate influencers.

Methods

Research Design

The study follows a qualitative research method, as the main focus was the in-depth exploration of the perception of youth on social media influencers. A qualitative approach was adopted as it allows for a detailed understanding of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and meanings associated. Comprehensive data is collected by using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGD).

Participants

The data was gathered from participants who were between 20-25 years of age, including both males and females. Participants were selected to represent the perception of youth about social media influencers in our society. A total of five individual interviews were conducted; in addition, a six-person focus group discussion (FGD) was also conducted.

Inclusion Criteria

The participants included in the study were in the age range of 20-25 years. Both male an female, who were active users of social media platforms were included in the research. They had experienced interaction with social media influencers. They willingly signed the informed consent and allowed the audio recording of the interviews.

Exclusion Criteria

Individuals below or above the age range were excluded from the study. Those who don't use social media actively or had not experienced interaction with influencers are also excluded from the research study.

Sampling Technique

The study involves a purposive sampling technique, where participants matching the inclusive criteria were selected, and data was

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gathered from them to ensure that we get information rich responses.

Data collection method

Data was collected by semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The semi-structured interviews gave the participants flexibility in sharing their opinions and views about the key areas that needed to be addressed, while the FGD helped in observing the interactive and collective perspective of the individuals. The languages used were Urdu and English. Mostly mix of both languages were used by the participants.

Instrument

A set of open-ended questions addressing the main areas of research was used to gather detailed information from the individuals. All relevant topics were covered by it.

Procedure

The participants were informed about the research objective prior to the interview process. After that the participants were seated in a quiet, comfortable environment with no distractions. Informed consent was taken. Semi-structured interviews were conducted one by one from each participant and focus group discussion was conducted from a group separately. The researcher remained cautious and aware making sure no assumptions or personal bias was there and participants responses were recorded as provided. Each interview was conducted peacefully, in a respectful manner. All of it was audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process. The purpose and significance of the research was debriefed to the participants before the interview process. They were ensured that their information would be kept anonymous and all data gathered will remain confidential. Informed consent was taken. Participation was voluntary, and they were told they could withdraw at any time.

Data Analysis

The data from both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2012). All interviews and the focus group were transcribed and read several times to become familiar with the data. Initial codes were generated based on recurring ideas in participants' responses. These codes were developed inductively from the data rather than using pre-defined categories.

Coding was carried out manually, and the transcripts were reviewed more than once to ensure consistency. The coding and emerging themes were also discussed and rechecked by two members of the research team to improve clarity and reduce bias. The codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected patterns across the dataset. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they were clear and not overlapping. The analysis focused on participants' own perspectives.

While the same approach was used for both interviews and the focus group, the focus group data were also considered in terms of group interaction, including agreement, disagreement, and how participants responded to one another

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Themes and Sub-themes:

Table 1: Thematic analysis.

Theme	Subthemes	Description
1. Mixed Views on Influencers	• Seen as helpful (motivation, information) • Entertainment and lifestyle content • Watching without fully following	Participants didn't fully accept or reject influencers. They saw both value and problems.
2. Trust Depends on How Genuine They Seem	• Honesty and authenticity • Knowledge or expertise • Doubts about paid promotions • Checking things independently	Trust wasn't automatic. People judged influencers based on how real, knowledgeable and unbiased they seemed.
3. Influence Happens, But in Small Ways	• Changes in mindset or motivation • Influence on routines (skincare, fitness, dressing) • Rare buying behaviour • Not copying completely	Participants said they weren't heavily influenced but still showed small shifts in habits and thinking.
4. Unrealistic Content and Pressure	• Idealised beauty and lifestyle • Comparison with others • Feeling pressure to keep up • Not everyone is affected the same way	Influencer content was often seen as unrealistic and sometimes led to pressure or comparison.

Reference:

Braun, Virginia & Clarke, Victoria. (2012).

Table 2: Themes, Sub-themes, and Verbatim Quotes (Interview Data)

Theme	Subtheme	Verbatim Quote	Participant
1. Mixed views on influencers	Seen as both positive and negative	"Some are very good and promote positive things...others don't promote good things...overall, they are half good and half not."	P1
	Not very useful for some	"I do not find influencers very useful personally."	P2
	Mixed role (entertainment + marketing)	"I see them as a mix of entertainers and marketers."	P5
	Selective engagement	"I don't follow anyone, but I do watch them."	P1

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2. Trust depends on how genuine they seem	Lack of honesty/exaggeration	"Most of them exaggerate or lie to increase views."	P1
	Sponsorship and bias	"Some promote products for financial gain, even if those products are not reliable."	P2
	Importance of authenticity	"If they appear honest…I find them more trustworthy."	P5
	Independent verification	"I usually compare their information with other sources."	P5
	Expertise builds trust	"If they demonstrate real expertise…it becomes easier to trust them."	P2
3. Influence happens, but in small ways	Motivational influence	"Watching such content changes my mindset."	P1
	Lifestyle influence	"They have influenced my views on skincare and self-care routines."	P5
	Behavioural change	"Yes, in areas such as fitness, daily routines, and dietary habits."	P3
	Limited purchasing influence	"I prefer to conduct my own research before making purchases."	P3
	Rare purchases	"I once purchased a jilbab after seeing it online."	P2
4. Unrealistic content and pressure	Idealised lifestyles	"They mostly present an idealized version of their lives."	P3
	Beauty and lifestyle pressure	"It can lead to comparison and make me feel like I am not doing enough."	P5
	Social comparison	"Sometimes…it can contribute to self-esteem issues."	P3
	Pressure to follow trends	"We still feel pressured because influencers promote them."	P1

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	Not everyone affected equally	"I do not feel pressured to imitate them."	P4

Focus Group Codes:
The following key codes were identified:
- influencers seen as unrealistic or fake
- influencers as lifestyle figures
- content used mainly for entertainment
- mixed trust in influencers
- distrust due to sponsorships (PR)
- importance of authenticity
- influence on buying behaviour (e.g. skincare, clothes)
- peer influence in trying trends
- comparison and insecurity
- pressure to follow trends
- cultural concerns (influence on Pakistani values)
- influencers as a source of learning (e.g. makeup, fashion)

Table 3: Focus Group Data (Themes and Key Codes)

Theme	Key Codes	Representative Quotes from Focus Group
1. Mixed views on influencers	Unrealistic/fake Lifestyle content Entertainment use	"Lifestyle...whatever they wear, show, eat, drink." "They can't stay like this for 24 hours...they are like a reel." "It's just for time pass...I don't implement it in my life."
2. Trust depends on how genuine they seem	Mixed trust PR/sponsorship bias Authenticity	"They are normal people like us...so we can trust them." "They get PR...they don't think what will happen to the next person." "50%...some are good, some are bad."
3. Influence happens, but in small ways	Buying behaviour Peer influence Passive influence	"Yes. Many times...skincare products." "Everyone has tried it...I want to try it." "I just see it...it's for time pass."
4. Unrealistic content and pressure	Comparison/insecurity Pressure to follow trends	"That is very insecure...I should achieve that certain thing." "You feel that you should try it too."
5. Cultural Norms and Concerns	Not our culture	"Mostly they show outside culture...our societal norms are affected."

Results and Discussion
A qualitative study was conducted to explore the perceptions of young adults toward the culture of influencers in Pakistan. It has been found that the young adults of Pakistan have a highly mixed attitude toward social media influencers, with their perceptions marked by both skepticism and influence.
This chapter will discuss the findings obtained through the thematic analysis conducted on five semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion (n = 11) involving young adults aged 20–25 years. The participants differed in their level of involvement in influencer-related activities, with some being passive observers while others were more engaged. Different levels of usage of social media were observed among participants, with Instagram and TikTok emerging as popular platforms.

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Participants' choice of Instagram and TikTok as social media apps is consistent with the state of Pakistan's internet environment. According to Kemp (2023), Pakistan has experienced rapid social media development, with visual social media platforms (e.g., Instagram and TikTok) taking precedence as tools for connecting youth. Hamza et al. (2025) report that the pattern of use of social media in Pakistan underwent changes in pre-, during-, and post-COVID periods, including a surge in TikTok's popularity among youth in the country.

Theme 1

Social media influencers were not completely accepted or rejected by participants. Rather, participants held ambivalent attitudes toward them as influencers, recognizing the usefulness as well as certain constraints that they brought into participants' media consumption experiences. Participants acknowledged positive aspects, such as entertainment or useful advice for lifestyles.

"Some are very good and promote positive things, others don't promote good things; overall, they are half good and half not." (P1)

Other participants, however, perceived some of the content as having low practical value in their lives. For example, one interviewee explained her perception as follows:

"I do not find influencers very useful personally." (P2)

The focus group discussion revealed similar opinions among participants who characterized influencers as "entertainers and marketers" whose influence did not extend to their daily lives.

This theme aligns well with how human beings work. Every human is a unique being with a diverse background and different life experiences. Thus, it is very natural for people to have conflicting beliefs. One thing that is good in someone's eyes can be perceived badly by someone else. Or the majority of people can get influenced by something, but at the same time, another group can exist that is indifferent to the same phenomenon (Feng et al., 2023).

Theme 2

Authenticity became another key point that participants considered crucial for evaluating trustworthiness when they judged influencers. Participants saw authenticity through the lens of an influencer's honesty, competence, and lack of commercial interest. One major concern is related to dishonesty and exaggeration. Participant 1 mentioned:

"Most of them exaggerate or lie to increase views."

The importance of authenticity and expertise in influencing trust is consistent with past literature on credibility within influencer marketing. Ohanian (2020) outlined a conceptual model in which perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and physical attractiveness were key factors in source credibility. It follows that the current study's observation that participants consider expertise when judging influencers' trustworthiness is consistent with the above-mentioned model, given that participants find influencers who "have real expertise" attractive.

Another issue was connected with sponsorship and paid promotions, which prevented trust formation. As Participant 2 claimed:

"Some promote products for money, but these products are not even reliable."

These opinions were also shared during the focus group discussion in relation to the idea that influencers receive money for promoting products without any consideration of the effects this will have on their followers. The current study found that participants distrusted influencers based on their perceptions of sponsorship bias. There is a very famous saying that goes by, you will have to sing for those whose food you eat. It means that if influencers are getting paid for promoting a product, and the general public knows that it is a paid promotion, it is very natural to have a doubt in the back of their mind about that review being biased. This finding is also supported by the research findings of Lou and Yuan (2018).

To eliminate the trust concerns, the participants reported engaging in a verification process. Participant 5 stated:

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An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

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"I usually compare their information with other sources,"
This suggests that the young adult cross-checks the influencer recommendations with other sources before deciding anything. The finding from the present study that participants verify independently is in accordance with this trend towards critical consumer behavior. The study carried out by Qadir (2023) regarding credibility and purchase intent in the context of Pakistan supports this observation as well.

Theme 3
Although participants viewed their interaction with influencers as passive and superficial, it became evident that a certain subtle, yet significant influence existed in relation to motivational and lifestyle-related aspects. Yet this kind of influence was always qualified by participants as limited and selective.
In particular, motivation and lifestyle changes proved to be the most common types of influence exerted by influencers. Some participants extended this type of influence even further, to the behavioral sphere: Participant 3 commented,
“Yes, in areas such as fitness, daily routines, and dietary habits."
Still, when discussing their purchases, participants agreed that any influence in this regard was severely limited. For example . Participant 2, she admitted having purchased only one item promoted by influencers.
This indicates that the direct purchasing influence was limited. One of the most important findings of the study was the inconsistency between the level of influence that lifestyle factors had and the purchasing habits of the participants. Despite their high impact on the respondents' skin care routines, their physical activities, and their knowledge about fashion products, their decision-making process regarding buying products was quite restricted. According to Afzal et al. (2024), the role of influencers in the social media environment was explored in terms of their ability to influence consumers' purchasing behavior in the country of Pakistan. The researchers discovered that the role of influencers in this regard was significant since they were able to affect the brand awareness level and product consideration, but not their actual purchasing habits, which were associated with other variables. According to Liu and Zheng (2024), the influence of influencer credibility on purchase intentions was moderated by the perception of brand authenticity and economic feasibility of the products. The current finding suggesting that respondents preferred to "conduct own research before making purchases" could be linked to what Afzal et al. (2024) referred to as "critical consumer engagement." According to the conclusions drawn by Vrontis et al. (2021) in their systematic review of influencer marketing, the effectiveness of influencers varied depending on product category, target audiences, and cultural context.
Similar conclusions were reached in the focus group discussion, where individuals explained their reasons for trying out the content was peer pressure,
"Everyone has tried it...I want to try it".
Normative social influence is the pressure to conform in order to fit in, gain acceptance, and avoid rejection by the group, driven by our deep need to be liked and to belong (Drew, 2024). When applied to influencer culture, conformity facilitates social exploration, particularly during periods of identity uncertainty, when individuals are more focused on being liked by others and belonging to peer groups

Theme 4
Many participants understood that the portrayal of lifestyle through influencer content is not a reflection of reality but a representation of idealization. This realization was often coupled with knowledge of possible psychological implications, such as social comparisons, conforming pressures, and self-esteem problems. Participant 3 asserted,
“They mostly present an idealized version of their lives,”

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and the focus group participants characterized influencer content as follows:

"They can't stay like this for 24 hours...they are like a reel."

The participants were aware that influencer content does not necessarily reflect reality but is a curated presentation of selected moments.

Despite this, participants reported experiencing psychological pressure from the content. Participant 5 admitted:

"It can lead to comparison and make me feel like I am not doing enough,"

These observations from participants regarding social comparison and social pressure correspond with previous research into the process of social comparison. According to Festinger (1954), social comparisons are made between people, and increased social comparisons can lead to negative emotions and low self-regard. The finding of the current study that pressure is experienced by participants who acknowledge that the influencer content is an idealization shows the power of social comparison processes even when cognitive awareness exists.

Moreover, it is important to mention that participants experienced different degrees of psychological pressure from the content. Participant 4 shared: "I do not feel pressured to imitate them." Thus, participants perceived different levels of comparison and conformity pressures. Hoffner and Bond (2022) found that feeling friendships/intimacies in one direction with the influencers can increase one's susceptibility to being influenced and comparing oneself with others. In line with these researchers, the findings of this study show how participants feel pressured to achieve something: "That is very insecure...I should achieve that certain thing."

The current results indicate that participants either experience pressure or deny being susceptible to influencers' messages. This corresponds with the results and conclusions drawn by Hoffner and Bond (2022) study.

Theme5

Finally, participants raised issues related to cultural norms and values. For instance, one of the participants said:

"Mostly they show outside culture...our societal norms are affected."

It means that Western-oriented influencer content could conflict with Pakistani cultural values. Moreover, participants pointed out the need to follow certain trends. For example, participant 1 mentioned:

"We still feel pressured because influencers promote them."

One of the findings unique to the current study is the articulation of cultural tension in the form of the observation that influencers "mostly show outside culture" and that "our societal norms are affected." It is worth noting that there have been prior studies of the cultural tensions involved in being a social media influencer within Pakistan's context, such as the work of Nasarullah et al. (2025), who did a qualitative study on the psychosocial and cultural issues faced by social media influencers in Pakistan, and observed how young adults have to negotiate competing cultural discourses and find themselves in conflict between digital cultures and traditional ones.

Implications

- It has implications in research, academia, and digital literacy initiatives.
- It can contribute to critical evaluation frameworks addressing commercial structures and sponsorship disclosure.
- It has implications for marketing and regulatory strategies.

Conclusion

The study aims to explore how young generation of Pakistan perceive and engage with social media influencers, beyond the dominant focus on marketing outcomes found in existing literature. The key findings imply that influencer culture is not interpreted in a single, uniform way. Instead, young adults demonstrate a variety of responses

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that reflects both engagement and critical awareness.

Information, entertainment and a sense of connection is the main reason for following influencers, supporting the idea that social media is shaped by user motivations, as proposed in Users and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974). At the same time, curated and idealized content fuels social comparison (Festinger, 1954), shaping self-evaluation and perceptions of others. This highlights the dual nature of influencers content which can be engaging and psychologically impactful.

Additionally, participants seemed to be aware of the possibility of influencer identities being controlled or created. This is in accordance with recent studies suggesting that social media authenticity may be purposefully displayed rather than always occurring naturally (Kim et al., 2024). Influencers can still be seen as relatable and reliable in spite of this awareness, especially when parasocial relationships are established (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

The study's overall findings demonstrate that young adults are active consumers of influencer content. They actively evaluate, understand, and occasionally challenge what they come across on the internet. However, the larger social environment, individual experiences, and cultural context all influence these views. By concentrating on Pakistan, this study fills gaps in primarily Western-focused literature and advances a more context-sensitive understanding of influencer culture

Recommendations

Based on the identified gaps, several recommendations can be made.

For future research

A qualitative approach should be used to capture the depth and complexity of user perceptions. Qualitative approaches shed light on how people understand influencer content in everyday situations, while quantitative research finds trends. Comparative research in various cultural contexts may also be useful in identifying the many ways that cultural norms influence perceptions.

Including Diverse Groups

Participants from a range of social, educational, and geographic backgrounds should be included in research, in addition to university students. Influencer culture in Pakistan might be better understood as a result.

Give Priority to Digital Literacy

Young individuals should be encouraged to be digitally literate by educational institutions and policymakers. One aspect of this is assisting users with critical evaluation.

Influencers' Ethical Behaviour

Influencers should be urged to be open, especially when it comes to self-presentation and sponsored content. Building more genuine and reliable connections with viewers may be facilitated by responsible content production and transparent disclosure (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Awareness of Mental Health

Awareness campaigns should focus on the psychological effects of social media use because of the significance of social comparison and FOMO (Bartosiak et al., 2025). Potential harmful impacts can be lessened by promoting critical evaluation and balanced interaction.

Limitations

Although this study offers insightful information, a number of drawbacks should be noted: **Limited Applicability**

The results cannot be applied to all young adults in Pakistan because of the study's qualitative design and limited sample size. Rather, they provide deep insights into certain perceptions and experiences.

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
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Features of the Sample

The sample might not accurately reflect the diversity of the larger population if it is mostly made up of college students or people with similar backgrounds. Perceptions may be impacted by variations in access to education, technology, and cultural exposure.

Subjectivity in Reactions

The study uses self-reported data, which could be impacted by individuals' capacity for thought expression or social desirability. Responses are context-dependent because perceptions of influencers can also shift over time.

Focus on Perception Rather than Behaviour

While the study explores how influencers are perceived, it does not directly measure behavioural outcomes such as actual purchasing decisions or long-term psychological effects. This limits the ability to establish broader implications.

Context-Specific Findings

The research is situated within the Pakistani context. While this is a strength in addressing gaps in the literature, it also means that findings may not be directly applicable to other cultural settings without further investigation.

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An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

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Annexures

Demographics of the participants

Name	Age	location	gender	Profession
Mustafa	25	Islamabad	Male	Dentist
Usman	24	Islamabad	Male	Environmental scientist
Monica	23	Islamabad	Female	Teacher
Fiza	24	Islamabad	Female	Student
Ayesha	20	Islamabad	Female	Student
Amna	20	Islamabad	Female	Student
Ifra	21	Islamabad	Female	Student
Zarnain	20	Islamabad	Female	Student
Munazza	21	Islamabad	Female	Student
Noor	22	Islamabad	Female	Student
Humna	22	Islamabad	Female	Student
Haris	21	Islamabad	Male	Student

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Study: Perceptions of Young Adults on Social Media Influencers

Social Media Usage Patterns

1.What kind of content do you usually engage with?

2.Do you watch educational content, or mostly entertainment-based content?

Understanding of Influencers

1.What comes to your mind when you hear the term *"social media influencer"*?

2.How would you describe influencers in general?

Following Influencers

1.Do you follow any influencers? If yes, what type (e.g., lifestyle, fashion, travel)?

2.What attracts you to follow an influencer?

Follow/Unfollow Behavior

1.What makes you decide to follow or unfollow an influencer?

2.What qualities make an influencer appealing or unappealing?

Trust and Credibility

1.Do you trust influencers? Why or why not?

2.What qualities make an influencer credible or trustworthy?

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Perceived Impact
1.Do influencers impact people's thoughts, behaviors, or choices? How?
2.Do you think influencers affect self-esteem or mental well-being?
Lifestyle and Consumer Behavior
1.Have you ever bought something because of an influencer?
2.Do influencers affect your lifestyle choices (e.g., fashion, food, trends)?
Cultural Representation
1.Do influencers reflect Pakistani culture and values accurately?
2.How do influencers affect societal norms or cultural values?
Positive and Negative Effects
1.What are the positive impacts of influencers?
2.What are the negative impacts?
Responsibility
1.Do influencers have a responsibility toward their audience? What kind?
2.Who do you think is more responsible—the influencer or the audience?
Closing Questions
1.Is there anything else you would like to share about influencers?
2.Overall, how would you describe your perception of social media influencers?

INTERVIEW GUIDE
Study: Perceptions of Young Adults on Social Media Influencers
Demographic & Social Media Usage
1.How many hours per day do you spend on social media?
2.Which social media platforms do you use most frequently?
3.What type of content do you usually engage with?
Understanding of Influencers
1.What comes to your mind when you hear the term *"social media influencer"*?
2.How would you describe social media influencers in Pakistan?
3.What are your views about influencers as a profession?
Engagement with Influencers
1.Do you follow any influencers? Why or why not?
2.What type of influencers do you usually watch or prefer?
3.What makes you follow or unfollow an influencer?
Trust and Credibility
1.Do you think influencers are generally honest? Why or why not?
2.What makes an influencer trustworthy or credible?
3.How do you decide whether to trust or ignore influencer content?
Influence and Impact
1.Have influencers affected your opinions or attitudes? How?
2.Do influencers affect your lifestyle, habits, or goals?
3.Have you ever purchased something because of an influencer? Explain your experience.
Psychological and Social Impact
1.Do you ever compare yourself to influencers? How does that make you feel?
2.Do influencers affect self-esteem, confidence, or body image?
3.Do you feel any pressure to follow trends promoted by influencers?
Cultural Context
1.Do influencers reflect Pakistani culture and values accurately?
2.How do influencers impact societal norms and youth behavior?
Positive and Negative Aspects
1.What do you think are the positive effects of influencers?
2.What are the negative effects?
Responsibility and Critical Thinking
1.Do influencers have a responsibility toward their audience?

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2.Do you think young adults critically evaluate influencer content or follow it blindly?

Closing

1.How would you summarize your overall perception of social media influencers?

2.Is there anything else you would like to add?