

Consumers' Intention to Follow Influencers: The Role of Influencer Traits and Content with Perceived Content Authenticity as a Mediator

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ABSTRACT

Purpose—Despite the growing body of research regarding influencer marketing, there is still very little research on how different characteristics of influencers can shape the intention to follow. This study examines the influence of various traits (trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, similarity, entertainment value, and informative value) of social media influencers and their content's authenticity on people's intention to follow them on social media, and tests the mediating role of perceived content authenticity between these relationships.

Study Design/methodology/approach—The study utilizes responses from 302 respondents from Pakistan, selected through convenience sampling, to compare the influencers' six main characteristics. These traits were measured using multi-item scales and analyzed through descriptive statistics, reliability and correlation analysis, regression and mediation analysis.

Findings—The analysis reveals that authenticity is the key factor that supports the relationships of these traits. Similarity and entertainment value positively impact the followers' intention to follow the influencers, while expertise and attractiveness are important only when the content is authentic to the followers. Trustworthiness and informative value influence followers' intentions primarily through authenticity. Overall, the results show that the audience's preference is for content that is real, relatable, and transparent. The research supports the instinct of authenticity as a key factor in influencer marketing, suggesting that the impact of meaningful and trustworthy interactions is greater than that of polished appearances or technical expertise.

Practical Implications—The findings suggest that brands and influencers should prioritize transparent, authentic, true, and relatable content instead of relying on claimed expertise or physical attractiveness alone. For Pakistani marketers and other comparable markets, cultivating perceived authenticity offers a route to maintain follower engagement and long-term relationships with customers.

Originality/Value—The study contributes to influencer marketing research by simultaneously evaluating six influencer traits and positioning perceived content authenticity as the central mediating factor within the under-researched Pakistani context. It advances understanding of why authenticity, rather than surface-level appeal, ultimately drives the consumer's intention to follow.

Keywords: Influencer Characteristics, Influencer Content Value, Intention to Follow, Perceived Content Authenticity

JEL Classification Codes: D12, D91, M31, M37, M39

1 | INTRODUCTION

1.1 | Background and Context

Social media has become a virtual ecosystem far more than just an online listing site and has way more influence on consumers' thinking process, views, and purchasing behavior around the world ([Chung, 2025](#); [Ho & Ito, 2019](#)). However, as not every form of advertising works, today's consumers are shifting their attention to information and recommendations from their peers and digital creators ([Altay et al., 2025](#); [Shareef et al., 2020](#)). This structural change has enabled the meteoric growth of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) who create self-branded, relatable, and credible content that establishes them as credible opinion leader within their digital community ([Ao et al., 2023](#); [Vrontis et al., 2021](#)). SMIs, who devote their time to online interaction for a prolonged period, establish deep relations with followers that are known as personal and Parasocial relations ([Al-Zoubi, 2022](#); [Wang et al., 2025](#)). As a result, brands have resorted to implementing many of the influencer marketing strategies to influence consumers' opinions and increase sales ([Jamil et al., 2024](#); [Kim & Kim, 2021](#)). Even though this marketing paradigm is rapidly evolving, there is a major research problem that still needs to be clarified: what are the cognitive and socio-psychological mechanisms behind the initial Intention to follow (ITF) an SMI? Although a lot of research has been done on what happens after the click, such as the intention to purchase or increase brand awareness ([Ao et al., 2023](#)), the most fundamental step that takes a user to the “follow” button, and requires understanding, is still under-explained.

Moreover, previous research often views influencer attributes (such as similarity, attractiveness) as causal factors directly influencing consumers' reactions; a psychological filtering process occurs before this. People are very cynical today in an age that's driven by advertising. As a result, influencer characteristics don't necessarily equate with follow intentions. Rather, the consumer assesses these features to form a holistic judgment of Perceived Content Authenticity (PCA), so it becomes the cognitive barrier toward following actions. To solve this research problem, this study proposes that the conceptual concept connecting the traits of influencers, content value, PCA, and ITF be established clearly. This study is very crucial in developing markets such as Pakistan ([Khan et al., 2021](#); [Yodi et al., 2020](#)). There is a very low level of trust in digital transactions, and the culture of gaining a sense of authenticity in Pakistan is quite quirky; in general, this makes the Pakistani influencer ecosystem an excellent ground for experimenting to see how consumers behave when dealing with influencers and what their reaction is towards them.

This study is theoretically grounded in three complementary frameworks: Source Credibility Theory (SCT), Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). While SCT explains how characteristics like expertise and trustworthiness influence persuasion ([Hovland & Weiss, 1951](#); [Ohanian, 1990](#)), PSI explains the relational bond formed via perceived similarity ([Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956](#)), and ELM serves as the overarching cognitive map ([Petty & Cacioppo, 1986](#)). Within the ELM framework, influencer traits and content attributes act as peripheral or central cues that are cognitively evaluated. PCA serves as the central evaluative filter (appraisal route) through which these cues are processed before transforming into a long-term behavioral commitment like ITF. Empirically, this research addresses key gaps highlighted in recent literature. While contemporary studies analyze influencer-follower dynamics, they focus heavily on virtual influencers ([Cao et al., 2025](#); [Liu et al., 2026](#)) or downstream purchase intentions ([Alharthi et al., 2026](#); [Barari et al., 2026](#)) in highly saturated Western or East Asian markets. Empirical gaps

persist regarding how multiple, multidimensional source traits are simultaneously evaluated to determine authenticity as a prerequisite for following in developing South Asian markets. This study fills these voids by providing an integrated, authenticity-centered model within the Pakistani context.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Content Value and Intention to Follow

Social media has become a primary source of information and entertainment for the younger generation, especially through the content from the influencers they follow ([Azmat et al., 2024](#); [Lou & Kim, 2019](#)). It has been found that in the case of influencers sharing visually appealing content, showcasing their skills, and being both informative and engaging, the audience will consider the influencers to be the trendsetters or opinion leaders. This belief, in turn, results in the followers engaging in good manners ([Ki & Kim, 2019](#); [Mir, 2026](#)). The distinctive qualities of the influencer's content, especially its informational and entertainment value, are among the main factors in the strong relationship between the influencer and their fans ([Han & Balabanis, 2024](#); [Lou & Kim, 2019](#)). If followers think of the content as unique and different, they will tend to follow the influencer, trust their judgment, and even try to convince others to do the same ([Casaló et al., 2020](#); [Khan et al., 2021](#)). While a cautious and neutral level of trust towards influencer promotions is exhibited by consumers, sustained transparency, content consistency, and perceived expertise are associated with stronger purchase intention ([Alharthi et al., 2026](#)).

By sharing their authentic stories, sharing their personal experiences, and giving valuable information, influencers can gain a loyal fan base, increase their popularity, and control their online persona ([Ao et al., 2023](#)). Content that provides emotional satisfaction, escapism, fun, and aesthetic pleasure to followers is considered to have entertainment value ([Gautam & Sharma, 2017](#)). Social media is social media and is mostly a place of leisure. Users have an immediate positive effect when the influencer conveys creative content, engaging, and funny content ([Ghauri et al., 2025](#)). This “here and now” satisfaction is a substantial direct contributor to follow purposes. Informative value is how useful the information shared is and how much one can learn from it ([Lou & Kim, 2019](#)). Consumers rely on social media as a source for trends, product reviews, and tips on how to do things ([Azmat et al., 2024](#)). To ensure that users gain functional value ([Han & Balabanis, 2024](#)), it is essential for the content created by social influencers to offer valuable, practical, and relevant information regularly. In order not to miss this usable utility, they intend to follow the creator. Hence:

H1: *The informative value of an influencer's content is positively associated with consumers' intention to follow.*

H2: *The entertainment value of an influencer's content is positively associated with consumers' intention to follow.*

2.2 | Influencer Traits and Intention to Follow

[Rani et al. \(2023\)](#) extend earlier work on influencer authenticity by showing that authenticity and perceived similarity strongly increase consumers' purchase intentions on Instagram. Similarly, it particularly

strengthens trust and enhances how followers judge an influencer's expertise, making them more receptive to the content. [Lou and Yuan \(2019\)](#) and [Rani et al. \(2023\)](#) also note that when followers see an influencer as like them in lifestyle or values, they are more likely to trust them and consider following them. Trustworthiness deepens this effect. [Berhanu and Raj \(2020\)](#) and [Abdullah et al. \(2024\)](#) depict trustworthiness as the quality of an influencer to show a reliable and credible self-image, whereas [Alyahya \(2021\)](#) argues that being sincere and behaving ethically are also part of perception. Influencer expertise has a positive impact on trust, while content quality has the same impact on perception ([Muthulingam & Amirtharaj, 2026](#)). Trustworthiness, according to prior research, has been the most stable predictor of consumers' readiness to rely on influencer recommendations ([Balaban & Mustătea, 2019](#); [Zaman et al., 2024](#)). Furthermore, physical attractiveness can strengthen these evaluations, as consumers often link it to good characteristics like kindness, trustworthiness, and the ability to educate, which then creates a stronger bond of trust ([Kim & Kim, 2021](#)).

Expertise is another key element [Lou and Yuan \(2019\)](#) and [Ao et al. \(2023\)](#) come to the same conclusion that more knowledgeable influencers get more attention and gain more trust. While entertaining content can be a way to attract audiences, it is the expertise that keeps the gradual trust of audiences and supports their purchasing decisions. According to [Sprout Social \(2024\)](#), the continuous interaction between an influencer and followers enables the audience to assess an influencer's skills and honesty, which eventually leads to an increase in trust, engagement, and the chances of one following them. Perceived similarity is the notion that a follower feels closer to an SMI in values, lifestyle, struggles, and demographics than any other person ([Lou & Yuan, 2019](#)). Similarity introduces a sense of closeness between the user and the maker and is based on PSI ([Rubin et al., 1985](#)). When users see an influencer who exemplifies their own experience, they feel validated and are likely to click on the Follow button so they can keep interacting with the peer; there is some evidence that shows perceived similarity is a strong and direct determinant of social media users' following decisions and engagement on social media platforms ([Rani et al., 2023](#)).

Trustworthiness is the follower's trust that the influencer is credible, trustworthy, and unbiased ([Berhanu & Raj, 2020](#)). Trustworthiness is an important aspect of psychological safety because there are so many misaligned promotions online. Trustworthiness is an essential dimension of psychological safety in an online world where there are a lot of misaligned promotions. Users who think of influencers as someone who really believes in them will be willing to accept their content into their normal feed ([Abdullah et al., 2024](#)). Direct trust has been repeatedly proven as a reliable direct predictor for long-term followers' retention ([Balaban & Mustătea, 2019](#); [Zaman et al., 2024](#)). Attractiveness involves two components: physical attractiveness and the manner in which an SMI's profile looks ([Ohanian, 1990](#)). The "halo effect" is a psychological phenomenon that implies that physical /visual attractiveness is correlated with positive human values, such as warmth, kindness, and status, which tend to rub off on people subconsciously ([Kim & Kim, 2021](#)).

Aesthetic appeal is an effective direct hook that instantly attracts attention, resulting in consumers making follow-ups on platforms where visuals are the primary focus, such as Instagram and TikTok. In visual-first platforms, aesthetic appeal is a formidable direct hook that entices customer attention and makes immediately following decisions ([Shabalina & Nelson, 2025](#)). Expertise is a person's perceived knowledge, authority, or skill in a particular niche ([Ohanian, 1990](#)). Supporting consumers' curiosity, increased uncertainty, and desire for learning will be naturally attractive features of expert creators ([Lou & Yuan, 2019](#)).

This direct expectation to gain accurate and expert information allows users to become followers of these opinion leaders to ensure high-quality information in their feeds ([Muthulingam & Amirtharaj, 2026](#)). Therefore, we can propose that:

H3: *The similarity of an influencer is positively associated with consumers' intention to follow.*

H4: *The expertise of an influencer is positively associated with consumers' intention to follow.*

H5: *The attractiveness of an influencer is positively associated with consumers' intention to follow.*

H6: *The trustworthiness of an influencer is positively associated with consumers' intention to follow.*

2.3 | Influencer Traits and Intention to Follow with the Mediation of Perceived Content

Authenticity

Research indicated that influencer posts made by genuine individuals facilitate better engagement amongst audiences. [Pöyry et al. \(2019\)](#) find that authentic posts result in strong reactions, good engagement, and even brand co-creation. Trust, however, comes in as a major factor. [Fritz et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Lou and Yuan \(2019\)](#) explain that authenticity, trustworthiness, and expertise increase followers' willingness to interact with influencers and consider their recommendations.

[Naderer et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Saternus et al. \(2024\)](#) suggest that when influencers disclose their sponsorships clearly, their audience trusts them more, and they remain loyal. Influencers' followers also consider themselves to be more connected to the brand if they believe that the influencer has similar values ([Kim & Kim, 2021](#); [Maghraoui & Khrouf, 2025](#)). According to prior research by [Schouten et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Han and Balabanis \(2024\)](#), it is trustworthiness that determines the followers' understanding of both the influencer's message and the brand. [Aldimi et al. \(2025\)](#) report that users often stop following those influencers who share misleading information or act irresponsibly. With the idea of what we know in our ELM framework, we imagine that our PCA is conceived as the essential cognitive link among all the peripheral/content cues that the individual must get through and the final follow behaviors of the individual, as described in the framework ([Petty & Cacioppo, 1986](#)). Some attributes such as expertise, attractiveness, and entertainment value can attract initial interest; however, these attributes, on their own, do not elicit any following intention unless they are filtered and validated through the standpoint of authenticity.

H7: *The perceived authenticity of an influencer's content mediates the relationship between the similarity of an influencer and consumers' intention to follow.*

H8: *The perceived authenticity of an influencer's content mediates the relationship between the expertise of an influencer and consumers' intention to follow.*

H9: *The perceived authenticity of an influencer's content mediates the relationship between the attractiveness of an influencer and consumers' intention to follow.*

H10: *The perceived authenticity of an influencer's content mediates the relationship between the trustworthiness of an influencer and consumers' intention to follow.*

2.4 | Content Value and Intention to Follow with Mediation of Perception of Content

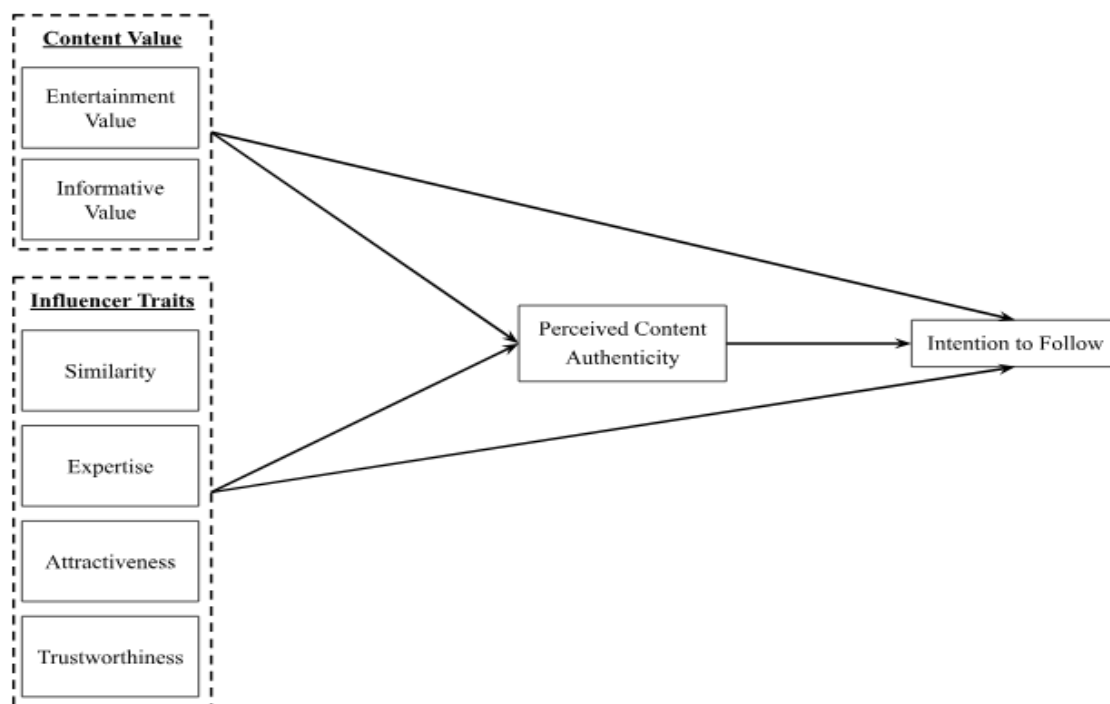
Authenticity

Content authenticity plays a central role in turning valuable content into real consumer behavior. It links what followers perceive with their behavior, thereby assisting in the transformation of content value into real intentions. According to [Cao et al. \(2025\)](#), if the influencer is considered trustworthy and his/her content is considered valuable, then purchase intent will increase because of the higher engagement and the lower perceived risk. On the other hand, even the most creative and amusing posts can be ineffective in creating support if authenticity is lacking. According to [Azouri \(2026\)](#), trustworthiness and expertise provide a positive contribution to customers' intentions. The term authenticity indicates the degree to which followers find an influencer's content real, credible, and believable. Audiences assess both the informative and entertaining aspects, and these assessments not only influence their buying decisions but also the way in which they interact with the influencer verbally ([Beverland & Farrelly, 2010](#)).

The latest findings on virtual influencers indicate that purchase intentions are reinforced by information, entertainment, and incentive-based content, though at times, the uniqueness might negatively impact credibility ([Cao et al., 2025](#)). Thus, virtual engagement works to strengthen this entire process. [Sardar et al. \(2024\)](#) point out that people are more interactive and receptive to the content they consider real, making that audience ready for purchase and keeping their link with the influencer. This concept is complemented by wider research on influencer marketing linking credibility and long-lasting trust to authenticity. In an environment with an overload of information, perceived authenticity turns out to be the determining factor for influencer content ratings ([Barari et al., 2026](#); [Slater & Rouner, 1996](#)). Besides, entertaining content contributes to building trust. The followers who find the content entertaining feel more positive toward the influencer and are consequently more likely to continue following them ([Gautam & Sharma, 2017](#); [Ghauri et al., 2025](#)). This content-value evidence replicates the trait-based evidence presented above but does not explicitly inform how informativeness and entertainment might become elaborated into a following decision (as is the case with the Elaboration Likelihood Model presented above), with authenticity representing the evaluative step between the two. Therefore, we can propose:

H11: *Perceived content authenticity mediates the relationship between the Informative Value of an influencer's content and intention to follow.*

H12: *Perceived content authenticity mediates the relationship between the Entertainment Value of an influencer's content and intention to follow.*

Figure 1*Theoretical Framework*

3 | METHODOLOGY & DESIGN

The data analysis employed IBM SPSS v26 for descriptive statistics, reliability testing, and OLS regression, while mediated relationships were analyzed with Hayes' PROCESS Macro ([Hayes, 2022](#)).

3.1 | Research Design

A quantitative, deductive, cross-sectional survey design was followed in this research to observe the connection between social media influencer characteristics, content value, perceived content authenticity, and intention to follow. The assumed direct and indirect paths were guided by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

3.2 | Target Population and Sampling

The population comprised social media users in Pakistan who already follow at least one SMI. A convenience sampling method, which is highly effective and commonly practiced in influencer marketing research, was employed. Participants were screened based on their active follower status of SMIs. Of the 335 distributed questionnaires, 302 were retained after excluding responses with missing data. Among retained respondents, 74.1% (n=224) used Instagram and/or Facebook to follow creators.

3.3 | Data collection

Data were collected through a self-administered survey created in Google Forms and distributed across several social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp, over a defined data collection period. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and confidentiality was assured before commencement.

3.4 | Measures

All constructs were operationalized using established, validated multi-item scales drawn from prior research. Informative value was measured with items adapted from (Tsang et al., 2004). A sample item was (e.g., "I feel that content made by social media influencers offers timely information"). Entertainment value was measured with a scale extracted from Blanco et al. (2010), with a sample item (e.g., "I feel that the content made by the social media influencer is enjoyable and entertaining"); both were assessed on a five-point Likert scale. Attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise were measured using the seven-point semantic differential scales from Ohanian (1990) (e.g., "1 = Not an expert to 7 = An expert"). Similarity was measured with items drawn from Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) (e.g., "Influencer thinks like me") on a seven-point scale, and perceived content authenticity with items from Martins et al. (2019), with a sample item (e.g., "I do believe that influencers I follow are convincing"). Intention to follow was adapted from Casaló et al. (2020) (e.g., "I have the intention to visit this Instagram account soon"), and purchase intention was adapted from Jiang and Benbasat (2007) (e.g., "It is likely that I will buy a product that I read reviews on by the influencer"), both utilizing a seven-point Likert scale.

3.5 | Common Method Bias

To determine common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was employed. The single factor that emerged from all measurement items accounted for just 35.264% of total variance, which is significantly lower than the 50% cut-off point (Podsakoff et al., 2003), indicating common method bias does not pose a threat.

4 | RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 | Demographic Analysis

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents. The sample (N = 302) was predominantly female (55.3%), with males comprising 44.7%. Respondents were overwhelmingly young adults, with 78.7% aged 18–24 years, followed by 25–34 years (16.7%). Geographically, most were from Punjab (41.6%).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants

Demographic Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	135	44.7
	Female	167	55.3
Age Group	Under 18 Years	8	2.6
	18–24 Years	238	78.7
	25–34 Years	50	16.7
	Above 35 Years	6	2.0
Province	Punjab	126	41.6
	Federal Capital Territory	118	39.0
	Sindh	16	5.4
	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	42	14.0
Social Media Influence	Follows Influencers	224	74.1
	Does Not Follow Influencers	78	25.9
Social Media Platform Usage	Instagram	~121	~40.0

Facebook	~121	~40.0
Youtube	Growing	Growing Usage
Tiktok	Growing	Growing Usage
Snapchat	Growing	Growing Usage

4.2 | Measurement Model

The Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) methods were employed to determine convergent validity, while the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio was used to assess discriminant validity. All scales demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity (see Table 2). Cronbach's alpha exceeded 0.70 for every construct: expertise (.921), intention to follow (.914), similarity (.910), entertainment value (.900), informative value (.888), perceived content authenticity (.883), trustworthiness (.874), and attractiveness (.823). Composite reliability ranged from .883 to .946, and the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded 0.50 for all constructs (ranging from .644 to .854), confirming convergent validity ([Hair et al., 2019](#); [Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994](#)). The VIF values fell in the range of 1.224 to 2.608, with none of the values exceeding the safety limit of 3.0 ([Hair et al., 2019](#)). The trustworthiness variable was found to have the highest VIF value, while still staying within the safe limits of 2.608. These findings indicate that there is no multicollinearity present across all structural paths of the research.

Table 2

Composite Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Indicators	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
1. Expertise	5	.921	.942	.757
2. Intention to Follow	3	.914	.915	.854
3. Similarity	3	.910	.929	.786
4. Entertainment Value	4	.900	.904	.770
5. Informative Value	5	.888	.890	.644
6. Perceived Content Authenticity	4	.883	.891	.741
7. Trustworthiness	5	.874	.894	.678
8. Attractiveness	4	.823	.841	.653

Note. Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), computed from single-factor loadings on the raw item-level data (N=302). All CR > 0.70 and AVE > 0.50.

4.3 | Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

The results show that all HTMT ratios fell below the conservative .85 threshold, verifying that discriminant validity is present. The highest HTMT ratio is that between trustworthiness and expertise (HTMT = .808), which is therefore well within accepted limits. In the case of PCA, all HTMT ratios vary between .429 and .619, while those for intention range between .193 and .557; all were less than the threshold of $\leq .85$ ([Sarstedt et al., 2021](#)). These results confirm discriminant validity across all constructs (see Table 3).

Table 3*Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio Matrix for Discriminant Validity*

Construct Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Attractiveness	--							
2. Expertise	.551	--						
3. Entertainment Value	.404	.292	--					
4. Informative Value	.372	.289	.681	--				
5. Intention to Follow (DV)	.327	.333	.557	.479	--			
6. Perceived Authenticity (Med)	.469	.429	.619	.613	.683	--		
7. Similarity (IV)	.193	.291	.320	.367	.490	.480	--	
8. Trustworthiness (IV)	.648	.808	.360	.366	.430	.523	.361	--

Note. HTMT matrix computed from item-level correlations (N=302). All values < 0.85 threshold, supporting discriminant validity.

4.4 | Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 4. Entertainment value (M = 3.80) and informative value (M = 3.51) scored moderately on the 5-point scale. Among influencer traits measured on the 7-point scale, attractiveness (M = 5.58) and expertise (M = 5.56) recorded the highest means. Perceived content authenticity (M = 3.64) indicated moderate believability, while intention to follow (M = 4.63) reflected a generally positive inclination toward following. Table 3 reports zero-order Pearson correlations among the study variables. All constructs were significantly and positively correlated in the hypothesized directions, with intention to follow most strongly associated with perceived content authenticity ($r = .613$).

Table 4*Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis*

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Informative Value	3.51	0.85								
2. Entertainment Value (EV)	3.80	0.88	.608**							
3. Attractiveness (ATT)	5.59	1.12	.318**	.342**						
4. Trustworthiness (TR)	5.23	1.13	.328**	.322**	.553**					
5. Expertise (EX)	5.56	1.20	.261**	.263**	.482**	.717**				
6. Similarity (SIM)	4.04	1.35	.327**	.289**	.165*	.320**	.265**			
7. Perceived Content Authenticity (PCA)	3.64	0.85	.543**	.549**	.399**	.457**	.385**	.427**		
8. Intention to Follow (IF)	4.63	1.57	.431**	.504**	.283**	.385**	.306**	.446**	.613**	

Note. N = 302; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. Coefficients below the diagonal are Pearson correlations.

Direct Effects

Table 5

Regression Analysis Predicting Intention to Follow

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
H1. Informative Value	0.022	0.125	.012	0.176	.860	[-0.224, 0.268]
H2. Entertainment Value	0.382	0.122	.214	3.131	.002	[0.142, 0.622]
H3. Similarity	0.227	0.069	.195	3.290	.001	[0.091, 0.363]
H4. Expertise	-0.100	0.091	-.008	-0.110	.914	[-0.189, 0.169]
H5. Attractiveness	-0.038	0.090	-.027	-0.422	.672	[-0.215, 0.139]
H6. Trustworthiness	0.138	0.110	.099	1.255	.210	[-0.078, 0.354]
Perceived Content Authenticity	0.691	0.127	.374	5.441	<.001	[0.441, 0.941]

Note. N = 302. B = unstandardized coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; CI = confidence interval. Outcome variable = intention to follow.

OLS regression revealed that two direct predictors of intention to follow are significant. Entertainment value ($\beta = .214$, $t = 3.131$, $p = .002$) and similarity ($\beta = .195$, $t = 3.290$, $p = .001$) were significant and positive predictors of intention to follow. Other predictors such as informative value, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise yielded no significant results at all since all their confidence intervals spanned zero. Moreover, PCA was identified as a significant predictor of intention to follow ($\beta = .374$, $t = 5.441$, $p = .001$). Therefore, H2 and H3 were supported.

Indirect Effects

Table 6

Mediation Analysis of Perceived Content Authenticity Between Predictors and Intention to Follow

Predictor (X)	X → PCA (a)	PCA → IF (b)	Direct X → IF (c')	Indirect effect [95% Boot CI]	Decision
H7. Similarity	.267***	.960***	.262***	.257 [.164, .366]	Partially Supported
H8. Expertise	.271***	1.081***	.107	.293 [.164, .440]	Fully Supported
H9. Attractiveness	.301***	1.105***	.064	.332 [.207, .464]	Fully Supported
H10. Trustworthiness	.344***	1.027***	.185*	.353 [.214, .493]	Partially Supported
H11. Informative Value	.545***	.999***	.259*	.544 [.346, .753]	Partially Supported
H12. Entertainment Value	.530***	.895***	.429***	.475 [.318, .638]	Partially Supported

Note. N = 302; Analyses conducted with the Hayes PROCESS macro (Model 4), 5,000 bootstrap resamples. PCA = perceived content authenticity; IF = intention to follow; a = predictor-PCA path; b = PCA-IF path; c' = direct effect of the predictor on IF. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Through the implementation of the Hayes PROCESS macro that utilized 5,000 bootstrap replications, mediation analysis was conducted where PCA was the mediator between the predictor and intention to follow (see Table 6). Across all six models, every antecedent was a significant positive predictor of PCA (a-paths ranging from $\beta = .267$ to $\beta = .545$, all $p < .001$), and PCA in turn significantly predicted intention to follow in each model (b-paths ranging from $\beta = .895$ to $\beta = 1.105$, all $p < .001$).

Critically, the bootstrapped indirect effect of each antecedent on intention to follow through PCA was significant, as none of the 95% confidence intervals contained zero. The results showed that informative value ($c' = .259$, $p = .027$), entertainment value ($c' = .429$, $p < .001$), similarity ($c' = .262$, $p < .001$), and trustworthiness ($c' = .185$, $p = .026$), the direct effect on intention to follow remained significant after PCA was included, indicating partial mediation, each of these predictors influences intention to follow both directly and indirectly through PCA. In contrast, the direct effects of attractiveness ($c' = .064$, $p = .430$) and expertise ($c' = .107$, $p = .153$) became non-significant once PCA was accounted for, indicating full mediation, as their effects on intention to follow operate entirely through perceived content authenticity. Hence, all six hypotheses (H7-H12) were supported.

Table 7

Cohen's Effect Size (f^2) Predictive Dynamic Metrics

Predictive Structural Pathway	Perceived Content Authenticity	Intention to Follow
1. Informative Value	.053	.000
2. Entertainment Value	.082	.047
3. Attractiveness	.010	.000
4. Trustworthiness	.015	.008
5. Similarity	.072	.055
6. Expertise	.004	.001
7. Perceived Content Authenticity		.128

Cohen's values of f^2 are presented in Table 7. PCA had the strongest predictive influence on the intention to follow ($f^2 = .128$, indicating a moderate level). The entertainment value and similarity had small to medium effects on PCA ($f^2 = .082$ and $.072$, respectively) as well as on intent to follow ($f^2 = .047$ and $.055$, respectively). The value related to informative value and attractiveness had a very low influence on intent to follow ($f^2 = .000$), supporting the mediated pathway through PCA.

Table 8

Coefficient of Determination for Endogenous Constructs

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Perceived Content Authenticity	.489	.475

The structural model explained 48.9% of the variance in PCA (adj $R^2 = .475$) and 45.8% in intention to follow (adj $R^2 = .441$), indicating strong predictive accuracy. PCA demonstrated the highest explanatory power, reinforcing its central role as a mediator in the model (see Table 8).

Table 9*Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results*

Hyp	Structural Pathway	Path Type	Decision
H1	Informative Value → ITF	Direct	Not Supported
H2	Entertainment Value → ITF	Direct	Supported
H3	Similarity → ITF	Direct	Supported
H4	Expertise → ITF	Direct	Not Supported
H5	Attractiveness → ITF	Direct	Not Supported
H6	Trustworthiness → ITF	Direct	Not Supported
H7	Similarity → PCA → ITF	Indirect	Supported (Partial)
H8	Expertise → PCA → ITF	Indirect	Supported (Full)
H9	Attractiveness → PCA → ITF	Indirect	Supported (Full)
H10	Trustworthiness → PCA → ITF	Indirect	Supported (Partial)
H11	Informative Value → PCA → ITF	Indirect	Supported (Partial)
H12	Entertainment Value → PCA → ITF	Indirect	Supported (Partial)

Note. PCA = Perceived Content Authenticity; ITF = Intention to Follow. Bootstrap resamples = 5,000. Indirect effects reported with bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals.

5 | DISCUSSION

Taking into account the direct effects first, only similarity and entertainment value were significant and direct predictors of the intention to follow ($p = .001$ and $p = .002$) in line with previous studies ([Casaló et al., 2020](#); [Ki & Kim, 2019](#); [Lou & Yuan, 2019](#); [Rani et al., 2023](#)), attractiveness and expertise did not have any significant direct influence ($p = .672$ and $p = .914$). However, trustworthiness and informative value impacted the outcome primarily through perceived content authenticity, with trustworthiness also showing a direct effect in the mediation model. The reasons for this are discussed below.

In the current study, there were no direct effects from either expertise or attractiveness. One possible reason for this may be that those studies were done mostly in Western countries whose influencer market was saturated, where people had enough time to develop stable rules of associating expertise or attractiveness with credibility. Pakistani influencer market is relatively new and led by Instagram and Facebook, and the culture of platform-level disclosures is relatively low in it; thus, people in this environment might base their decision mainly on one comprehensive judgment of "does this look real," and not decomposing it into traits like trustworthiness and expertise.

The impact of trustworthiness consisted of a direct impact and an indirect impact via authenticity, implying that the reason for the influence of a trusted influencer is the importance of trust in itself and in making the content seem authentic. Full mediation of attractiveness reflects that visual appeal only matters when filtered through authenticity, while partial mediation of similarity suggests that perceived commonalities have both a direct and authenticity-mediated influence on following intention. The current study also indicates that the entertainment influence on following is mediated by authenticity and, thus, supports the view that entertainment leads to engagement with branded social content. Finally, informative content also demonstrated both direct and partially mediated effects.

5.1 | Practical and Theoretical Implications

The outcomes of this study suggest certain things that can be done. As similarity and entertainment value affect intention to follow directly, marketers can utilize creator-audience fit and entertainment value as quick tools, for instance, by determining potential followers based on their beliefs and lifestyle, rather than only reach. For example, fitness brands can partner with fitness creators and sustainability brands with eco-friendly influencers. Since attractiveness and expertise lead to intention to follow through authenticity perception, it is not recommended for brands to choose influencers based on their image and expertise only because neither guarantees followership if content is not viewed as authentic. As trustworthiness and informative value worked primarily through authenticity, with trustworthiness also showing a direct effect in the mediation model, influencers should create informative and reliable content and use clear and consistent self-presentation. For influencers, the main concern should be demonstrable authenticity, rather than perfect production of the content.

The results also enhance the theoretical foundation of the research. In particular, they broaden Source Credibility Theory by demonstrating that credibility signals are not interchangeable, as trustworthiness affects the intention to follow directly, while expertise and attractiveness come into play only after the content is perceived as authentic. This supports Parasocial Interaction Theory since following is based more on the perceived authenticity rather than on surface characteristics, and corresponds with the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which proposes that authenticity determines whether peripheral signals turn into following. Overall, it is evident that the concept of perceived authenticity serves as the connecting mechanism for all three theories.

5.2 | Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations in this research. Firstly, it is possible that some participants did not give genuine answers since the data was collected through a Google Form, and they might not have read or understood the questions properly. Secondly, even though the research aimed to collect data from all over Pakistan, most of the respondents came from Rawalpindi and Islamabad, which impairs the representation of the whole country, especially rural areas with little or no internet access. There's also potential for overlap, as influencer marketing is a topic that has already been extensively studied in many other research works. Lastly, the implications of the results are mainly for the Pakistani market and may not be entirely applicable to other countries.

5.3 | Future Research Directions

Many restrictions suggest further research might be needed in certain areas. First, longitudinal studies that keep track of the same followers will show whether authenticity and following behavior develop in the assumed order, as well as whether the value of authenticity varies with the growth of the influencer market and industry regulation in Pakistan. Second, a field experiment that manipulates authenticity of content or message quality would demonstrate the cause-and-effect relationship directly rather than using a correlational approach. Third, with the development of a new generation of influencers (e.g., AI-generated and virtual influencers), an issue arises that might be studied with the help of the framework discussed here: whether the standards of authenticity are applied to non-human influencers or whether the followers consider other aspects of these personas (e.g., AI identity). Fourth, a cross-cultural study of different markets will also show whether and to what extent the concept under discussion applies to other collectivist countries with a low level of trust.

Finally, different other variables (such as tier of influencers, type of product, and type of platforms) should be explored in future studies.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this research, the focus was to investigate the impact of six influencer traits such as trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, similarity, entertainment value, and informative value on Pakistani consumers' intention to follow social media influencers and to determine the role of content authenticity in mediating the relationship between these traits and following intention. It has been found that authenticity is not a secondary construct but a key mediator through which the majority of influencer traits have an impact on following intention. The constructs of expertise and attractiveness did not have any significant impact on the intention to follow, and only became relevant when channeled through the construct of authenticity (full mediation), which is inconsistent with prior studies that regard trustworthiness and expertise as reliable predictors of audience behavior ([Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019](#); [Zaman et al., 2024](#)). On the contrary, the variables of trustworthiness, similarity, entertainment value, and informative value maintained their direct influence along with their authenticity-mediated path (partial mediation), just as described by [Lou and Kim \(2019\)](#). This study makes two main contributions. Firstly, the study theoretically extends the literature on influencer marketing into the poorly studied South Asian environment by analyzing at once six characteristics in the framework of mediation and by proving that the role of authenticity in such an environment is not additive but substitutive. Secondly, the study empirically adds new knowledge about the fact that the bonds between audience and influencers in South and Southeast Asian markets are based on socio-cognitive pathways, such as the Parasocial pathway described by [Muhmin et al. \(2026\)](#) for Indonesian beauty followers, which, according to this study, might go through perceived authenticity. Moreover, practically, these results can provide a basis for decision-making for brands, influencers, platforms, and regulators. In doing so, the study draws on Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model into a single authenticity-centered account, showing that in this context credibility and content cues convert into a sustained following only when they are perceived as genuine.

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