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Abstract

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Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Pakistan, Cultural Challenges, Identity, Coping Mechanisms, Qualitative Research

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Title

Psychosocial and Cultural Challenges of Social Media Influencers in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Social media influence is a rapidly developing market in which influencers face unique challenges linked to their cultural context. The development of digital platforms in Pakistan has enabled influencers to endorse products and advocate for them. This study investigated the experiences and challenges of social media influencers in Pakistan. Using a qualitative research approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with N= 8 Instagram influencers who each have over 10,000 followers. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to analyze the collected data. Five superordinate themes emerged, including identity shaping, concerns, growth and resilience, challenges, and coping strategies. The findings indicate that while influencers experience a sense of self-identity construction and financial security, women express greater concern regarding appearance and prospects than their male counterparts do. The findings of this study highlight the need for increased awareness and support for social media influencers, particularly in culturally conservative countries such as Pakistan.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Pakistan, Cultural Challenges, Identity, Coping Mechanisms, Qualitative Research

Introduction

Social media have now become a very useful tool for all types of institutions to maintain a positive image among the general public. This is very significant in countries like Pakistan, where traditional media mostly works under pressure from external forces and biases due to commercialism (Shahid et al., 2018). Social media,

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on the contrary, provide an institution with flexible and accessible means of direct engagement with audiences and more control over how they are perceived by the public (Fuchs, 2015). One of the most obvious trends in this aspect in the last decade or so has been the birth of vloggers and social media influencers. Influencers are now central to attitudes, opinions, and trends throughout the globe. This sentiment moves audiences around institutions and the stories they tell about themselves, people find them relatable and personal (Tanwar et al., 2023). However, the rise of influencer culture comes with unique psychosocial challenges, including emotional distress, anxiety, and identity conflicts. Influencers often experience significant pressure to maintain an idealized online persona, leading to heightened stress and burnout (Casale & Fioravanti, 2018). Additionally, they face increased vulnerability to cyberbullying and online harassment, which further undermines their mental well-being (Chae, 2018). These challenges are particularly pronounced in regions such as Pakistan, where societal expectations and privacy norms intensify the emotional burden.

The digital platforms have not just provided a path for influencers to advocate for brands — they are advocating for larger ideas and even institutions. This phenomenon affects various sectors, including politics, entertainment, and consumer culture (Yaqub, 2021). Influencers with a high number of followers and trusted voices not only drive sales by companies but also change and dissect matters related to society and public attitudes (Yılmaz et al., 2020). Their influence goes beyond the commercial world, reflecting a broader cultural transformation that involves many aspects of everyday life (Vrontis et al., 2021).

The growing importance of influencer marketing is evident on a global scale: By 2022, the industry was valued at $8 billion (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018) and jumped to $15 billion. This market in Pakistan is anticipated to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.87% from 2023-2028, reaching $19.7 million in 2028. This growth can be attributed to the increase in the number of influencers, with approximately 7,000 active influencers with varying degrees of influence in Pakistan at the micro and macro levels (Alves De Castro, 2023).

Despite the growing demand for social media influencers around the world, they also face issues related to impression management, workload, and pressure to be liked (Yılmaz et al., 2020). In the sociocultural landscape of Pakistan, the influence of social media involves various opportunities and challenges. In the context of opportunities, these influencers can change consumer perceptions and motivation to purchase products or brands (Pervaiz et al., 2023) because their authenticity and participation can strongly affect the perceptions of consumers. Influencers who manage their online identities well and gain their followers' trust can positively influence consumer behavior, contributing to the growth of e-commerce and brand loyalty in the region (Yaqub, 2021; Kauser et al., 2021). The social media advertisements that influencers endorse have been demonstrated to influence consumer attitudes and intended purchasing behavior (Asfar et al., 2022).

On the other hand, as smartphone adoption and wireless broadband availability drive increased social media usage, concerns related to cybercrime and identity protection remain significant, impacting the safety and credibility of influencers and their audiences (Memon et al., 2018). In Pakistan, the general population of women utilizes social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram in both positive and negative ways. A critical dimension of influencer culture in Pakistan is related to gender dynamics. On the one hand, social media has the potential to empower women in terms of self-organization, communication, and expression (Aksar et al., 2023); on the other hand, culture obstructs women's activity. Pakistani women spend much of their time on social media, and similar to other aspects of their lives, their usage is culturally determined and impacts their psychological health (He et al., 2024). Online abuse, sexual violence, unsolicited sexual engagement, and sexting are all issues that women face, and they can have a negative psychological impact (Shabir et al., 2021).

According to Siddiqua et al. (2023), influencers are particularly susceptible to online harassment and trolling, as well as doxxing, which is detrimental to their mental health. This is particularly true for female influencers, as they experience gender-specific abuse and negative comments. The online activities of women, such as

free speech and interaction within the web space, are restricted by the strict social order in Pakistan (Han & Liu, 2024). However, politically active women are right away oppressed and usurped through a social media platform known as Twitter (Shah et al., 2019). The cases of body image satisfaction and self-misrepresentation in the younger population of females may be associated with overreliance on social networks, particularly Instagram (Islam & Wajid, 2023). Nevertheless, the availability of services has increased in Pakistani society and created risks for identity and cybercrimes (Memon et al., 2018).

Individuals' actions, beliefs, and values are susceptible to the influence of others — a theory that is particularly related to today's world of social media and where posts, tweets, and blogs can so greatly affect perceptions is Kelmon's (1985) theory of social influence. The social influence theories of Kelman (1958, 1961) and Becker et al. (1995) can be used to explain the social behavior of individuals with respect to identities. Since social media has been growing in developing countries such as Pakistan, understanding the complexities of influencer marketing in these markets is important. In Pakistan, social media influencers have a hard time, peer pressures are high, technology access is limited, and local dynamics create hurdles that they need to break. Their practices at times are intermediating between preserving their values from one side and fulfilling the consumers' requirements from another side while aligning with the sociocultural context of a conservative society. This study aims to explore the sociocultural aspects and challenges of social media influencers in Pakistan.

Objectives

The objective of this research was to better understand the psychological, social, and professional experiences of social media influencers in Pakistan. It also aimed to explore how these influencers deal with the challenges of their roles and the strategies they use to adapt to the changing, multicultural world of social media.

Research Questions

- What main challenges do social media influencers face in Pakistan?
- What are the psychosocial experiences of social media influencers in the Pakistani context?

Research Methodology

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to explore the experiences of social media influencers. The IPA was selected as it allows for a flexible approach when interpreting the detailed, subjective perspectives of individuals and has high adaptability in capturing abstract issues related to influencer opinions (Larkin et al., 2018). IPA retains the concept of symbolic interactionism in terms of the focus on a person (rather, experience) in a social context which ultimately leads to an interacting meaning position between influencers (Denzin, 2014). This method is also reflexive, taking into account the position of the researcher (Willig, 2001). From a methodical point of view, the study applied an inductive approach; interviews were recorded and the theme emerged from the data. This was important because it created the need to let stories of the influencers unfold in their own voice (Smith et al, 2009). It enabled the exploration of influencers and their work, as well as details of their practices in the evolving Pakistani digital context.

Participants

A volunteer sample of N=8 social media influencers from Pakistan was carefully selected. To be deemed social media influencers, individuals need more than 10,000 Instagram followers (De Veirman et al., 2017). This screening process ensured that the participants were active Pakistani influencers. The "small, homogeneous samples recruited through purposeful sampling" technique of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) emphasized gathering their first-hand "lived experiences." The inclusion/exclusion criteria for participant selection matched the study's goal of comprehensively examining Pakistani social media influencers' unique challenges (Smith & Osborn, 2004). Thus, participants were carefully selected to provide contextual insights into the interpersonal interactions and sociocultural dynamics of Pakistani digital media.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the participants

Participant Pseudonyms	Age (in years)	Sex (M/F)	Background	Working Experience
A	20	F	Urban	1 year
B	23	F	Urban	6 months
C	21	M	Urban	2 years
D	24	M	Urban	1.5 years
E	20	F	Urban	1 year
F	26	F	Urban	2 years
G	25	F	Urban	2.5 years
H	22	F	Urban	1 year

Procedure

First, departmental approval was requested for this study. After clearance, an interview technique was created to gather participant data on the intended subject. Informed permission was obtained from the participant information sheets, which stated that the interviews would be audio recorded. Patients' pseudonyms were abbreviated to protect their privacy. The participants might have quit the research without explanation. Urdu interviewers utilized prompts to elaborate. The participants were urged to provide thorough details. The duration of the interviews varied from 45-60 minutes; each participant recorded and transcribed their experiences. The participants were debriefed and invited to ask questions after the interview. All the rules were followed. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. The native Urdu transcriptions were translated into English. The data were anonymized during transcription. The average interview lasted 30 minutes.

Ethical considerations

- The researcher explained the nature of the study and asked the participants to sign the informed consent form.
- All the interviews were recorded after the participants provided consent.
- All the participants were assured that the obtained data would be used solely for the research.
- There were no distress-causing questions, and a comfortable environment was provided.
- The participants had the right to withdraw at any time during the study.

Data Analyses

The interviews involved rigorous interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) following the methodology outlined by Smith and Osborn (2004). The analytical approach was adaptive, transitioning from a focus on specific instances to identifying shared patterns, employing a descriptive-to-interpretative progression (Ried et al., 2005). This iterative and inductive procedure allowed for flexibility in line with the research objectives, with the IPA researcher adopting flexible guidelines for data analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2004). The analysis involved an in-depth examination of one-to-one interviews with idiographic intensity, elucidating detailed "thick descriptions" of respondents as opposed to a prescriptive approach.

Results

The study revealed 5 superordinate themes with 34 subthemes in total that are listed on the master table of themes.

Table 2

Master table of themes

Superordinate Theme	Theme	Subthemes
1. Identity Shaping and Role Negotiation	Identity Formation	- Empowerment through public persona - Challenges with authenticity and

Superordinate Theme	Theme	Subthemes
		maintaining a public image
	Public and Social Interactions	- Support from followers
		- Backlash and criticism in social settings
	Gender and Social Expectations	- Struggles for women in conservative society
		- Pressure to conform to societal roles
2. Concerns (Physical/Social)	Physical Appearance and Presentation	- Pressure to dress modern
		- Financial burden of appearance
		- Trolling to promote modernity
	Social and Cultural Judgment	- Moral policing
		- Backlash against cultural deviations
	Fear of Replacement	- Fear of being replaced by newer influencers
		- Constant competition for followers
3. Growth and Resilience	Personal Growth	- Improved self-awareness and identity
		- Enhanced communication skills
	Professional Growth	- Improved content creation skills
		- Expansion into new ventures (e.g., podcasting, merchandising)
	Resilience	- Ability to cope with criticism
		- Sense of social obligation
4. Challenges	Cultural and Societal Challenges	- Cultural backlash, especially for women
		- Lack of societal and family support
	Cyberbullying and Harassment	- Body shaming
		- Harassment through fake accounts
		- Personal information threats
	Commercial and Marketing Issues	- Unfair compensation by brands
		- Distrust from followers
5. Coping Strategies	Adaptive Coping Strategies	- Building resilience against negativity
		- Support from family and friends
		- Faith and spirituality
	Activism and Persona Management	- Redefining life through activism
		- Creating an online persona for emotional detachment
	Maladaptive Coping Strategies	- Isolation from real-world interactions
		- Smoking as a stress response

Theme 1: Identity shaping

The participants in the study shared quite personal and powerful stories about how their identity was created by becoming social media influencers in Pakistan. For many, it was empowering and gave confidence, but it also showed the hardships of living a public life. According to one of the participants:

"I feel that in the process of becoming the social media influencer, I came to understand how people

treat, judge, and control one another on the basis of their social identities." [A]

The social media influencers expressed that their interaction had made them more mature and enabled them to understand the fakeness of the world outside. Another participant shared how the role expanded her social network:

"You interact with others, go to parties, make friends, learn about business legitimacy and promotion, and get to understand how people pretend themselves." [F]

While these strengths were acknowledged, there was clearly a great deal of disillusionment around the place. One participant described it bluntly:

"This is a fake world. The world of glamor is truly a world of putting on an act, and to be able to exist in it, you need to put on an act too". [C]

Another echoed this sentiment, highlighting the unique challenges faced by women:

"Social media is what we are fake and full of glamour zones where you have to fight for your life to survive in society as a woman."[B]

Despite these challenges, the majority of the participants noted that support from their followers was encouraging. As one influencer reported,

"I know my followers are always sending me encouraging messages, which truly motivates me to keep going. It is moments like these that remind me how a single word of praise can truly boost confidence." [C]

From the participants' experiences, it seems that while social media introduced chances, it also placed the participants in a center where reality looks distorted.

Theme 2: Concerns (Physical/Social)

The participants reported heightened self-consciousness about their appearance and how they were perceived, especially as social media figures. This pressure extended beyond just their looks, as they also faced concerns about their future. In particular, female influencers felt the need to be mindful of both their appearance and their words. One participant noted,

"Getting ready and making stories for people is all I do. On days when I do not have to, it is incredibly relaxing." [B]

Many felt the need to appear trendy, often leading them to choose modern styles that were costly to maintain. However, this also exposed them to harsh criticism. As one influencer explained,

"Clothing costs a lot, and we usually have to opt for modern outfits. Some people harass us, calling us a vulgar influence that spoils their culture." [E]

The backlash did not stop at criticism of their style choices; they frequently encountered cruel, personal attacks. One participant recalled receiving a message saying,

"Teach yourself to wear proper attire. You will burn in hell. I pity your kids for having such ignorant parents." [A]

Another major concern for influencers was the fear of being replaced in this competitive space, where maintaining relevance requires continuous engagement. One male participant admitted,

"I know if I stop posting stories, my followers will become bored and move on to someone else who entertains them." [D]

This constant pressure to create content, maintain a certain appearance, and withstand judgment weighs heavily on these influencers, impacting not only their public personas but also their self-worth.

Theme 3: Growth and Resilience

The participants in the study experienced remarkable growth both personally and professionally as influencers. Personally, many participants demonstrated improved self-awareness and self-acceptance, as one of the participants stated:

"I have become more conscious of my identity and more assertive about my opinions. This position has made me more coherent in public and in private." [F]

Moreover, this has improved their interpersonal relationships and communication skills; as one of the participants stated,

"I have become much better at effective communication, especially as I have learned to engage with people from diverse perspectives. I have realized I need to adapt my communication approach to connect with different individuals effectively." [E]

Some participants showed greater resilience to the pressures of public criticism and surveillance. As one participant shared,

"It used to bother me when people criticized me publicly, and I would become anxious, but that is not the case anymore." [B]

Influencers also began to view their roles as carrying a sense of social responsibility. One participant explained,

"I now consider social issues that need attention, and I want to be at the heart of change. It is no longer just about entertainment; it is about using this platform to raise awareness on important issues and make a meaningful impact in society." [G]

Professionally, influencers refined their content creation skills. One participant noted,

"I have developed a high level of consistency in crafting engaging content. It is not just about posting something; it is about understanding what people want. Now, every piece of content feels purposeful and tailored to specific audience interests." [C]

Others expanded their ventures beyond social media, exploring new creative outlets and revenue streams. As another participant shared,

"I have started podcasting and merchandising, which has opened up new income avenues. I have been able to experiment with different forms of creativity, expand my business to other platforms, and create more stability beyond social media." [D]

Theme 4: Challenges

The participants shared a range of social and cultural challenges they faced as social media influencers, especially in Pakistan, where the use of social media is often viewed negatively. Limited awareness and low literacy rates contribute to a lack of understanding of the profession, particularly for female influencers, who face cultural pressures around appearance. One of the participants expressed,

"In terms of culture, clothing is often seen as sacred, but it goes beyond that, affecting perceptions of one's physical condition." [A]

Many female participants reported that society and even their families view social media influence as an unrespectable profession. One shared,

"Dealing with my family's disapproval has been one of the hardest parts of this job. They do not see it as valuable and worried, 'Who will marry you?'" [B]

Another participant explained,

"People often see influencing as a trivial job. When I incorporate Western styles, I get backlash for supposedly straying from cultural norms." [H]

Influencers also face societal pressures for validation from family, competition, and general approval. One participant reflected on this, saying,

"Despite being in the glamorous world, I often feel lonely. The numerous challenges as a woman in this industry make me feel isolated, and I am rarely respected." [C]

Another shared,

"I constantly receive harsh comments and negative feedback. It seems there is always something for people to criticize." [E]

Trust issues are prevalent, with one participant noting,

"People here are often double-faced." [B]

Influencers experience moral policing regarding their clothing and behavior; as one stated,

"Everyone has an opinion on how I should dress and act." [F]

Those who address cultural taboos face additional criticism, with a participant explaining,

"Discussing taboo topics leads to judgment from people who feel I am crossing boundaries." [D]

Older generations often view influencers' work as unorthodox, as one participant shared:

"Older family members see my work as disrespectful and do not grasp its value or impact." [C]

Privacy concerns add another layer of difficulty; as another influencer stated,

"There is always the fear of my personal information being exposed or used against me." [G]

One participant expressed that female influencers face further challenges from unwanted male attention,

"I frequently receive uncomfortable, even threatening, attention from male followers." [B]

Additionally, there are commercial challenges, with influencers reporting unfair treatment from brands. One shared,

"Brands give me products and expect a full review for free. When I ask for payment, they decline, saying I can use the product instead." [G]

Followers also misjudge influencers' intentions, with one participant noting, "People say,

'She does not even use the products; she is just in it for the money,' which hurts my credibility."[H]

Many female influencers face cyberbullying, harassment, and body shaming, often aimed at damaging their reputations. Comments on appearance, like

"The dress does not suit you because you are too thin or too fat" is common. [A]

Some influencers are targeted by fake accounts that spread hateful messages. One participant shared,

"Haters use fake accounts to send messages, calling me an attention seeker and even cursing and harassing me." [E]

Harassment often extends to their family, with one influencer recounting a message sent to her husband:

"Teach your wife to dress properly. Hell awaits you both. I feel sorry for your children." [C]

The participants highlighted the broader impact of cyberbullying and noted the lack of regulatory enforcement on social media. One participant expressed,

"There is a lack of oversight on social media, which allows cyberbullying to happen unchecked." [D]

These insights reveal the intricate social, cultural, and professional pressures faced by influencers, who navigate judgment, harassment, and misunderstanding in their quest to make meaningful contributions.

Theme 5: Coping Strategies

This study found that participants utilized various forms of adaptive and maladaptive strategies to cope with the role of an influencer. Adaptive strategies specifically involve becoming resilient to negative things such as those critical comments. A strategy one of the participants learned:

"I have learned how to build a wall so that negative comments do not affect me too much. Your outlook changes with time; the constant outrage no longer becomes reality. "[E]

Another important strategy was to make use of supportive networks—family, friends, or even other influencers—with one of them saying:

"My family and friends are my biggest supporters. When things get tough, their encouragement helps me stay grounded and focused." [A]

There were still influencers who were also able to redefine their lives through activism, and one said,

"Being an activist has provided me with a good outlet to express my anxiety and frustration. It has made me realize that I can use my platform for something much larger than me. "[C]

Most participants found solace in faith and spirituality; as one participant reflected,

"I am confident that my faith has given me inner strength and peace during hard times." I believe in something that makes my life worth living and that keeps me going even when things look extremely bad" [D]

Maladaptive strategies included isolation from real-world interactions; when asked about family gatherings, one female said that she no longer attends them. Cigarette smoking was the sole type of intropunitive avoidance behavior observed by men.

"I used to smoke when I got hatred from the people around me because of my work. However, in reality, there is nothing wrong with my work. "[F]

Discussion

The study's results shed light on a variety of issues, including the possibilities, social and cultural issues, and real-world experiences of Pakistani social media influencers. The evolving landscape of social media has introduced a new breed of influencers in Pakistan who face unique sociocultural challenges and opportunities. This discussion explores these experiences through five main themes: identity creation, social and cultural concerns, growth and resilience challenges, and coping mechanisms.

The findings of this study are consistent with the literature on social media influencers; however, they also highlight unique cultural pressures specific to Pakistan. Similar challenges are faced globally, such as managing public identity and dealing with online harassment. However, the

added cultural component of morality policing and limited family support makes the experience of Pakistani influencers distinct. For example, previous studies conducted in Western contexts (Latif et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2023) reported that influencers deal with societal expectations around appearance, but Pakistani influencers face more intense scrutiny, especially women, regarding adherence to cultural norms (Islam & Wajid, 2023; He et al., 2024). This comparative perspective helps position the current findings within a global context, highlighting both the universal challenges of influencing social media and those unique to conservative cultural environments such as Pakistan (Yaqub, 2021; Yılmaz et al., 2020).

Within the context of Pakistan, social media influencers have constructed and molded their identity and social presence. According to the latest research, influencers frequently possess dual freedom and self-assurance. As an example, Gupta and Chauhan (2023) showed that social networks serve more than just communication but rather self-presentation and self-definition, thus giving power to influencers to handle their followers. This phenomenon is prevalent in Pakistan, as there has been more of a traditional media age in society, as noted by Shah and Malik (2022).

Like other countries, social media influencers in Pakistan face several challenges and pressures due to their increased visibility. Cyberbullying is a major problem, with influencers leaning toward various forms of cyber abuse, such as flaming, trolling, and slandering (Willard, 2007; Kansara & Shekokar, 2015). Many studies have acknowledged and documented negative facets of cyberbullying, especially with respect to mental health. As observed by Espelage and Swearer (2009), this may cause a deep and disturbing level of depression and thoughts of suicide. The work of Ortega et al. (2012) recently highlighted how damaging cyberbullying can be for the feelings of influencers, which aligns with the findings of Ybarra et al. (2006) regarding psychological distress due to cyberbullying. In addition, Davison and Stein (2014) examine productive resources lost due to cyberbullying and indirect and direct monetary costs due to cyberbullying, such as contributory damage.

To address these problems, influencers adopt different strategies. For example, women often employ intropunitive avoidance through withdrawal from social events, whereas men may engage in smoking. Cognitive–behavioral theories elucidate how the intropunitive avoidance articulated by Thompson, Kent, and Smith (2002) contributes to both coping mechanisms and the suppression of anger. Moreover, not only do influencers not gain large-scale benefits, but their methods of coping predominantly have a religious character. The majority of the respondents cited performing spiritual rituals such as reading the Quran or praying, even in general. These coping strategies also address the sociocultural challenges that influencers face in Pakistan with respect to social media prayers (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007)

Suggestions and Implications

This study highlights the importance of supporting social media influencers, especially in more conservative societies such as Pakistan. Influencers often face challenges such as identity struggles, moral backlash, and cyberbullying, which can affect their mental health. Psychological support can make a large difference—counseling sessions could help them navigate these pressures, whereas support groups could offer a safe space to share experiences and learn coping strategies from one another.

Digital literacy educators could develop programs aimed at helping influencers deal with harassment, resilience, and balanced online life. These types of programs help influencers take care of their online lifestyles without compromising their mental health. Similarly, stakeholders—social platforms and brands—should create environments that treat influence as a job, encourage digital literacy, and offer mental health support. Personalized mental health assistance, such as counseling and peer support, is necessary to help influencers address the emotional toll of having people judge them.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. This study was a single-method study and relied only on qualitative data from the participants. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts. In-depth interviews were conducted with the individuals, so it is possible that the research interviews contributed to the development of a positive social desirability

response. However, this appeared unlikely, considering the range of opinions expressed. We used a deliberate sample technique, despite certain limitations, to identify people with a range of demographic characteristics and who accurately represented the views of social media influencers on the topic of interest.

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