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Role of Influencers in Digital Marketing: The moderating impact of follower's interaction

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Abstract

Extensive research conducted notes that no researchers holistically consider these problems. This research focus on the role of influencers in digital marketing, and the framework consist of a (Hwang, 2018) model with a UGT (User and Gratification Theory), and some variables are influenced by the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad, Wright, 1994). Additionally, researchers have done their research on one YouTube video for a particular brand, so there is a need to research a public domain in which the focus is on all platforms of social media so that the result can be holistic. Further, researchers have conducted their research on generation Y, so there is also a need to conduct this research holistically. The paper used the SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) technique to analyze the data we have collected. The present research is based on a broad framework; this is why the paper has used PLS (Partial Least Square) to evaluate the hypothetical model. The findings reveal that social media users' para-social relationship with the social media influencers has a positive and significant relationship with EWOM by social media users and a negative and not significant relationship with the purchase intention of the social media users. Thus, it shows that para-social relationships increase EWOM, not purchase intention. Moreover, social media users' para-social relationship also depicts a positive and significant relationship between influencers' credibility and EWOM. Moving further, results reveal that para-social relationships with (Parasocial Relationship -> Influencer Credibility -> Brand Trust) and (Influencer Credibility -> Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention) have a partial mediation relationship. Lastly, moderation analysis indicates that there is a two positive (MOD (PR with IC)_ -> Influencer Credibility), (MOD (IC with Willingness)_ -> Willingness to search) and 1 (MOD (IC with PK)_ -> Product Knowledge) moderation relationship. The findings serve as essential evidence for social media influencers that their credibility impacts the purchase intention of the social media user as well as their excellent para-social relationship with the social media users will highly impact their EWOM. This study indicates that the para-social relationship of social media users with the social media influencers enhances the consumers' purchase intention and increases the EWOM (electronic word of mouth) between the social media users.

Keywords: social media influencers, para-social relationship, influencer's credibility, brand trust, product knowledge

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1.INTRODUCTION

In the current era, social media platforms are the primary source of digital advertisement (Brettel et al., 2015; Lin & Kim, 2016). As stated by (Tsang et al., 2004), digital advertisements are considered more credible than advertisements that run on TV or radio, and it positively affects the brand attitudes and the purchase intention of the social media users (Wood & Burkhalter, 2014). Companies use a new method to use social media influencers for marketing their products/brands (Lou & Yuan, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017). Brands are endorsing their products through advertisements made by bloggers and influencers (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Pedroni, 2016).

Researchers are pointing out the importance of social media influencers and how they play an essential role in marketing (Hill, 2019; Petrofes, 2018). As stated by (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020), social media influencers endorse the product so that consumers think their statement about the product is authentic; influencers relate the product to their personal life and elaborate on it how it is essential to their followers' life. Social media influencers also influence teenagers who are about to enter adulthood, and their future purchases will be the shadow of the content that influencers are making nowadays (Duran, 2017; Forbes, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad M, Wright P, 1994), social media influencers have a more significant impact on social media users than celebrities. Social media users are influenced by the social media influencers only; because of the frequent interaction of the influencers with their followers (Dhanik 2016), consumers take the social media influencers as the reliable source of information (Forbes, 2019; Odell, 2016).

As per Khan, S., Rashid, A., Rasheed, R. and Amirah, N.A. (2022), influencers gradually make themselves a brand by making content on their platform (De Veirman et al., 2017). According to (Booth & Matic, 2011; Evans et al., 2017), credibility, authenticity, and reliability are the main reasons influencers

become brand endorsers. Social media users feel that the influencers are their friends as influencers share every part of their life with them through posts or stories (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Social media offers a broad and safe space for the individual content creators (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013); nowadays, it is way easy for the influencers to share whatever they want on their platforms to a large audience in the most credible way (Morris & Anderson, 2015). Social media influencers significantly build the social media user's behaviour towards the brand's product through different posts and stories (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg 2011).

These influencers cannot engage with a large audience (Ge & Gretzel, 2018), but their engagement is significantly high even though they have a small audience. Because of this, brands take advantage of the influencer's credibility and endorse their attitude (Munnukka et al., 2019), perception, and purchase intention (Lee & Watkins, 2016) through them. When it comes to the younger generation, social media influencers are an excellent option for marketing than traditional celebrities (Southgate, 2017) because social media users consider social media influencers more credible and authentic (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Khan, S., Rasheed, R., Rashid, A., Abbas, Q., & Mahboob, F. (2022), states that another important factor that proves an influencer's credibility is their face-to-face relationship with their followers. The para-social relationship is the relationship in which social media users

increase their trust in the influencers by consuming their content on a daily bases and knowing them well (Brown, 2015, p. 275), and according to the (Ballantine & Martin, 2005), consumption of the social media becomes the vital part of one's life.

Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl (1956) suggest creating para-social interaction through sharing personal information and the information through which the users can use and make their life easier. The best way to build para-social relations and interaction with the follower is to make content in a way that social media users make eye contact with the camera (Zhang, 2018), just like the traditional celebrities make eye contact with their audience (Frobenius, 2011).

Through para-social experience, the audience engages with the content and enjoys the generated content (Jin, 2011; Xiang, Zheng, Lee, & Zhao, 2016), and the concentration of the social media users (Yoo, Kwon, & Lee, 2016), impacts on the acceptance of the message created by the creator (Kim, Zhang, & Zhang, 2016). Purchase intention reflects the consumer behaviour towards the product or service that they would buy or not (Dodds et al., 1991; Blackwell et al., 2001). Consumer satisfaction is the factor that influences purchase intention related to SNS (Shin et al., 2012). Djafarova and Rushworth(2017) elucidated that compared to a traditional celebrity, a digital celebrity on Instagram or YouTube impacts the purchasing intention of females.

Social media users who have excellent para-social interaction with the vloggers significantly

impact the user's perception of the brand. Additionally, their para-social relationship with the vloggers significantly creates the desire to buy from the luxury brands (Lee and Watkins, 2016). Content and blogs play an essential role in a high level of para-social relationships between users and influencers that end up with the purchase intention. (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011). Reinikainen, H., Munnukka, J., Maity, D., & Luoma-aho, V. (2020), in their research, work on the para-social relationship as a dependent variable and purchase intention as an independent variable.

It is extensive research conducted, and it is noted that no researchers holistically consider these problems. This research focuses on the role of influencers in digital marketing, and the framework consists of a (Hwang K 2018) model with a UGT (Use and Gratification Theory) and some variables are influenced by the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad M, Wright P, 1994). Additionally, researchers have done their research on one YouTube video for a particular brand, so there is a need to research a public domain in which the focus is on all platforms of social media so that the result can be holistic. Further, researchers have conducted their research on generation Y, so there is also a need to conduct this research holistically. The motive of this study is to find out the role of influencers in digital marketing to fill the gap in past research. Some limitations lie in this study, but the central gap that has been discussed above is fulfilled.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical background

This study aims to find out the role of influencers in digital marketing and to understand the behaviour of social media users toward micro-influencers or social media influencers. The framework is based on the different research papers and also backup with models and theories. Hwang K (2018) conducted a research in which he mainly focused on how social media influencers have power in the social media advertising and how they are playing their role in controlling the purchase intention and EWOM of the social media users (Miao, M., Jalees, T., Zaman, S.I., Khan, S., Hanif, N.-u. and Javed, M.K. 2021). Through the concept of para-social relationships, it is clear that social media influencers have a more significant impact on social media users. Because of the (Hwang K, 2018) research, it is easy to understand how para-social relationships play an essential role in purchase intention and EWOM and further understand how empathy, loneliness, and low self-esteem affect para-social relationships with the help of UGT.

UGT (Use and Gratification Theory) is a part of (Hwang, K 2018) research; this theory indicates that social media users only use it because they want to fulfil their needs (social, informational, or can be entertainment). This theory helps identify certain factors for the research so more in-depth research can be done by shedding light on certain factors that are often overlooked. In the framework, there is also a touch of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad M, Wright P, 1994), which describes that the micro-influencers/social media influencers have a more extraordinary persuasive ability than the macro-influencers/celebrities on the social media

user's product knowledge and in their purchase intention. This is extremely important to study as many researchers shown that the younger population are influenced more on social media platforms. Keeping in mind that much research has been done on the role of celebrity endorsers, there is room to shed light on the role of social media and digital influencers.

2.2 Hypotheses development

2.2.1 Para-social relationship and empathy

A para-social relationship means a one-sided relationship that social media users virtually develop with the social media influencers or with the digital celebrities (Giles, 2002; Hartmann et al., 2008; Sanderson, 2009). According to Kim (2005), the para-social relationship that social media users and social media influencers have on social networking sites (SNS) can help us understand the user's behaviour because SNS has been used in building online relationships (Chiu et al., 2013). SNS can build a robust bilateral relationship, but it cannot be as strong as users' one-sided relationship with digital celebrities (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Traditional media viewers see the traditional media celebrities or television celebrities as their friends or colleagues (Livingstone 1988). Repetition of exposure through posting content is the main reason that users generate para-social relationships and start perceiving their information as credible as they perceive their friend's recommendations, so the para-social relationship with the influencers can impact the purchase decision or intention of the users (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011), (Kim et al., 2015).

Bane et al. (2010) highlight that one of the features of SNS is that the users can automatically find the other person who has similar taste and interests, and through the advancement in technology, users have access to interact with them whenever and wherever they want. The more you use SNS, the more you feel empathy towards the other individual to whom you can relate because of the facility of frequency and easiness users have in interacting nowadays (Caplan & Turner, 2007). Empathy works as the key to an interpersonal relationship (Akgün et al., 2015). Decety and Fotopoulou (2015) point up the importance of empathy in a social relationship because it reduces the stress and increases health and wellbeing, and the most crucial point is that people feel shy to talk and confront their issues one-on-one and feel more comfortable in confronting online (Caplan & Turner, 2007).

Empathy also pushes you to perform effectively in social interaction (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). Individuals who have a high level of empathy have a better understanding in understanding other individual situation, and they also can build good relationships (Chow et al., 2013), but if the individual cannot build good friendships and have a weak empathy, they will obstruct the relationships (Wang et al., 2014). Empathy also plays a role in solving interpersonal conflicts (Davis & Kraus, 1991) and developing para-social relationships (Derrick et al., 2008).

H1: Social media users' empathy with the social media celebrities significantly impacts their para-social relationships with the social media celebrity.

2.2.2 Para-social relationship and loneliness

(Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1973) Through Use and Gratification Theory (UGT), individuals use specific media with gratification to attain their needs (Lariscy et al., 2011). UGT also reveals that people try to attain their social, informational, and entertainment needs through high media usage that gives pleasure to the individual (Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017). Researchers suggested that para-social interaction between the SNS users and influencers should be attained (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). According to Ballantine and Martin (2005), para-social interaction should be studied in UGT because in the present study within UGT, self-esteem and loneliness are explained, and it is said that the individuals who feel a low level of self-esteem and high level of loneliness maintain high levels of para-social interaction.

Loneliness has two types (Weiss, 1973); one is social loneliness, and the other is emotional loneliness (Russell et al., 1984, p. 1314). Socially lonely people use social media to gratify their social needs (Knobloch, Westerwick, & Alter, 2006); because of the increase in the usage and quick access of devices (Shin, 2015), they are becoming heavy users of social media (Esen & Siyez, 2011; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003). People who face difficulty in communication or lack communication skills are more comfortable expressing their thoughts on social media. According to (Hood et al., 2017) people who prefer social isolation use social media to make good friends and find good relationships, as they spend more time on

social media and always seek more emotional support (Ehrenberg et al., 2008).

According to (Lim and Kim, 2011), para-social relationships are high when the social media user feels lonely, and for gratification, they use social media to communicate with social media celebrities and build a para-social relationship (Hwang & Park, 2007). The hypothesis will be:

H2: Social media users' loneliness significantly impacts their para-social relationships with social media celebrities.

2.2.3 Para-social relationship and low self-esteem

Self-esteem is defined as the desire to be treated equally and to feel belonging (Leary, 1999). Individuals facing constant rejection and being excluded socially feel low self-esteem (Wirth et al., 2015). According to (Lee et al., 2012), individual who is facing low self-esteem and decreased social acceptance uses more social media and feel safer expressing their feelings (Forest & Wood, 2012; Andreassen et al., 2017) with social media celebrities and interact with them to boost their self-esteem (Escalas and Bettman, 2015). They do not want to be rejected; this is why they do not pursue genuine relationships (Murray et al., 2008).

This is the reason that people who feel low self-esteem use social platforms so they can interact with social media influencers through para-social interaction can maintain para-social relationships.

H3: Social media users' low self-esteem significantly impacts their para-social relationships with social media celebrities.

2.2.4 Para-social relationships and purchase intention, and eWOM intentions

Purchase intention reflects the consumer behaviour towards the product or service they would buy or not (Dodds et. al., 1991; Blackwell et. al., 2001); consumer satisfaction is the factor that influences purchase intention related to SNS (Shin et al., 2012). Djafarova and Rushworth(2017) elucidated that compared to a traditional celebrity, a digital celebrity on Instagram or YouTube impacts the purchasing intention of females (Khan, S., Rashid, A., Rasheed, R. and Amirah, N.A. 2022). Social media users who have excellent para-social interaction with the vloggers significantly impact the user's perception of the brand. Their para-social relationship with the vloggers significantly creates the desire to buy from the luxury brands (Lee and Watkins, 2016); content and blogs play an essential role in a high level of para-social relationships between users and influencers up with the purchase intention. (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011).

WOM is an essential factor that provides products or service information from the user's point of view and helps potential customers as a good source of information (Park & Kim, 2008). From a consumer perspective, WOM is the credible or reliable information they can trust (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Park & Kim (2008) found that promoting the product or services through electronic word of mouth will reduce the impact of traditional marketing, but it achieves a better market on social media.

Good tweets in which celebrities talk about the products or services to their vast followers promote consumer purchase intention and positively impact eWOM (Jin and Phua, 2014).

H4: Social media users' para-social relationships with the social media celebrity significantly impact the purchase intention of the social media users.

H5: Social media users' para-social relationships with the social media celebrity significantly impact the eWOM intention of the social media users.

2.2.5 Para-social relationships and influencer's credibility

Para-social relationships (PSRs) can be defined as face-to-face relationships in traditional media (Horton & Wohl, 1956). It is an imaginary relationship in which social media users spend much time and know the social media influencer well (Brown, 2015, p. 275). PSRs are based on para-social interaction in which users have an illusion that they are interacting with the social media influencers (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Another way social media influencers create the experience of para-social interaction is that the influencers focus on the personal, private and informal conversation (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl, 1956) and show the interaction as much as possible (Labrecque, 2014). Influencers look into the camera so they can make eye contact with the social media users (Zhang, 2018) so they can build a para-social relationship and para-social interaction with their followers, just like the traditional media celebrities who build their PSR and PSI through the eye contact (Frobenius, 2011). PSI and PSR play an

essential role in an audience member's life as it impacts significantly on their identity, lifestyle, attitude, and behaviour (Tian & Hoffner, 2010)

The perceived credibility of the influencers is the factor that determines the effectiveness of an influencer's endorsement (Chu & Kamal, 2008; Munnukka et al., 2019). Credibility can also get through the interaction, and the comments made by the other people also play an essential role in making a judgment of the endorser. Comments made by other people gave a signal or suggestion (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009). There is no direct effect of consumers' comments on the influencer's credibility, and it shows the influencers' expertise when they allow comments on the posts (Hayes & Carr, 2015).

Audiences build a strong relationship with the influencers and practice PSR (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Knowing social media influencers very well (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019) shows credibility. PSR with an influencer acts as a precursor to the influencer's perceived credibility.

H6: Social media users' para-social relationships with the social media celebrity significantly impact the influencer's credibility.

2.2.5 Audience comments as a moderator between PSR and IC

Even though the relationship between the social media users and social media influencers is very strong, the variability can happen in the brand endorsements made by influencers (Walther & Parks, 2002), and the

negative relationship can also build when focusing on the PSR (Sanderson, 2009). It has been witnessed that people's interaction with the influencers increases PSR (Frederick et al., 2012), and according to Hayes & Carr, 2015, there is no direct effect found between the comments and influencer's credibility.

H7: Audience comments by social media users moderates the relationship between the PSR and the influencer's credibility (IC).

2.2.6 Influencer's credibility and brand trust

As (Luoma-aho, 2018), trusting relationships can stimulate further trusting relationships, and trust can shift from one target to another (Stewart, 2003). So this statement indicates that the trust in social media influencers can shift to the brand that the influencers endorse.

H8: The influencer's credibility significantly impacts brand trust.

H9: Influencer credibility works as a mediator between PSR and BT.

2.2.7 Brand trust and Purchase intention:

Trust in the brand helps to clear the doubt of social media users and make them clear about their decision (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Lee et al., 2011). As mentioned by (Soni & Verghese, 2018), brand trust moderates the purchase intention of the social media users; this indicates that trust in the brand that the influencers recommend could influence purchase intention.

H10: BT significantly impacts the purchase intention of social media users.

H11: BT mediates between IC and PI.

2.2.8 Influencer's credibility and Willingness to search about the product/services and product knowledge:

Influencers should balance their content, and the content brands provide them (Sokolova & Kefifi, 2019). De Veirman and Hudders (2020) suggest that when the influencers share their view about the product/service, this will affect customers' acceptance of the influencers' knowledge and promote the Willingness to search for more information about the product/service. (N. J. Evans et al., 2017) (Tang et al., 2014).

"Persuasion Knowledge Model" proves that the social media influencers have more credibility than the celebrities, so social media users mostly follow and listen to the social media influencers to gain knowledge about the product. According to the authorized people, social media influencers have the remarkable ability to influence their users and change their minds. For example, Dhanik (2016) said that social media influencers have a more significant influence on their followers because they are more connected with their followers, and the engagement rate of the users is also high.

When influencers maintain a good and interactive relationship with their followers, it will increase the followers' trust; because of the trust in the influencers, the information credibility increases compared to other sources (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The brands only select those influencers who have credibility (Enke & Borchers, 2019), so the product knowledge they convey through the

influencers will be accepted by the social media users (Jin et al., 2019; Shan et al., 2019).

H12: IC significantly impacts the social media user's Willingness to search.

H13: IC significantly impacts the social media user's product knowledge.

H14: Influencer interaction significantly moderates the relationship between IC and Willingness to search.

H15: Influencer interaction significantly moderates between IC and Product knowledge.

2.2.9 Product Knowledge and Purchase Intention:

Social media influencers usually make "how-to" videos so that users will think that they can easily use the product as they have proper knowledge of the product. Numerous study shows that knowledge plays an essential part in product knowledge and purchase intention (Claycomb, Dröge, & Germain, 2005; Kang, Manthiou, Sumarjan, & Tang, 2017). Van Nguyen, Lu, Hill, & Conduit (2019) also points out that increasing product knowledge is essential if you want to increase the purchase intention of social media users.

H16: Social media users' product knowledge significantly impacts their purchase intention.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Model

This research aims to find out the role of influencers in digital marketing and study the

relationship between different variables to find out how social media users behave towards the content of the social media influencers. They also study the reason for the credibility of social media influencers and why social media users consider micro-influencers as a trustworthy source of information compared to macro-influencers.

The framework analyzes the impact of para-social relationships (with the effect of empathy, loneliness, and low social self-esteem) on EWOM, purchase intention, and the Willingness to search for more information. Furthermore, it investigates how the effect of empathy, loneliness, and low social self-esteem on para-social relationships plays a mediating role in EWOM. In this research, we consider influencer credibility as a mediator between the para-social relationship and brand trust, and brand trust behaves as a mediator between the influencer's credibility and purchase intention. The influencer's credibility and brand trust work as a double mediator between the para-social relationship with the effect of empathy, loneliness, low social self-esteem and purchase intention.

3.2 Data Collection

For the research, data collection has been attained by the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire that ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The three questions to evaluate para-social relationships, three questions to evaluate influencer's credibility, two questions for the evaluation of brand trust, one question for the purchase intention, and one question for the moderator (audience comments) were taken from the (Reinikainen. H., Munnukka. J., Maity. D., &

Luoma-aho. V, 2020). Two questions for the product knowledge were taken from the (Kay. S, Mulcahy. R and Parkinson. J, 2020), and three questions for Willingness to search were taken from the (Martínez-López. F, Anaya-Sánchez. R, Esteban-Millat. I, Torrez-Meruvia. H, D'Alessandro.S and Miles. M 2020). The question for evaluating moderators, which is influencer's interaction with their followers, is taken from the (MoShi. Q 2020). The survey was distributed online in Karachi, Pakistan, using the most convenience sampling approach to collect the quantitative data for analysis. The reason for choosing the most straightforward technique is the Covid-19 situation; the collection of data only happens with those who are easily reachable. In total, 129 respondents participated. According to these researchers (Raza and Hanif (2013), Comrey and Lee (2013), Raza, Jawaid, and Hassan (2015), and Sharif and Raza (2017), 50 sample size is considered poor, and 300 is considered good. However, due to the Covid-19, we cannot collect the extensive sample data because of the unavailability of respondents, so the sample size of this research paper lies in between the category of sufficient sample size with the 129 respondents.

Figure 01 Conceptual Model

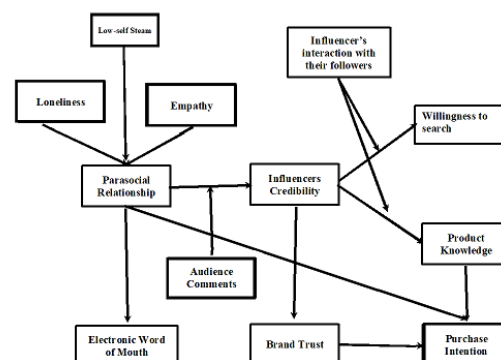


Table 01:

Demographics Items	Frequency	Percentile
Gender		
Male	24	19%
Female	102	81%

After collecting the survey, we found out the percentage and frequency of gender participation in the survey. It is evident in Table 01 that male respondents were only 24 (19%), and female respondents were 102 (81%).

Table 02:

	Items	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average variance extracted
Brand Trust	BT1	0.937	0.871	0.939	0.886
	BT2	0.945			
Electronic word of mouth	EWOM1	0.68	0.628	0.782	0.546
	EWOM2	0.738			
	EWOM3	0.794			
Empathy	E1	1	1	1	1
Perceive Influencer Credibility	PIC1	0.872	0.809	0.887	0.724
	PIC2	0.849			
	PIC3	0.832			
Influencer Interaction	IE1	1	1	1	1
Audience Comments	AC1	1	1	1	1
Loneliness	L1	0.894	0.727	0.88	0.785
	L2	0.878			
Low self esteem	LSE1	0.894	0.22	0.705	0.555
	LSE2	0.878			
Parasocial Relationship	PR1	0.898	0.794	0.88	0.711
	PR2	0.854			
	PR3	0.772			
Product Knowledge	PK1	0.94	0.867	0.938	0.883
	PK2	0.939			
Purchase Intention	PI1	0.94	0.855	0.932	0.873
	PI2	0.929			
Willingness to search	W1	0.92	0.881	0.931	0.817
	W2	0.911			
	W3	0.881			

Table 02 shows that the Cronbach's alpha value of all the variables should be greater than 0.5; if the value is 0.5 or greater than 0.5, it is meeting the benchmark. The criteria are that each Cronbach's alpha value should be greater than 0.5; Table 02 shows that every individual value's reliability has been meeting the criteria. Therefore we have confirmed the instrument's reliability or investigated the variables. AVE (Average Variance Extract) has been used to measure the convergent validity.

The criteria are given by the (Fornell and Larcker,1981); the criteria are that each value should be 0.5 or greater than 0.5. Apart from that, Table 02 verifies the convergent validity of the measurement model because every AVE value is higher than 0.5.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We used the SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) technique to analyze the collected data. As stated by (Ringle, Wende, and Will, 2005), SEM helps find out the validity of the theory with the help of facts and analytical figures. The present research is based on a broad framework; this is why we have used PLS (Partial Least Square) to evaluate the hypothetical model. There are several reasons we have used PLS-SEM in this research; this technique is considered an accurate technique for evaluating a high dimensional framework. The most important reason for using this technique is that it is best for the precise measurement of the framework. PLS can work with the unknown variable, and according to (Chin, 1998), it can also reduce the error by improving the hidden constructs.

4. 1 Measurement Model:

To evaluate the conceptual model, we have measured the construct reliability, individual item reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. **Table 03 Fornell–Larcker criterion (Discriminant Validity)**

	AC	BT	EWOM	E	PIC	II	L	LSE	MOD (IC & PK)	MOD (IC & W)	MOD (PR & IC)	PR	PK	PI	W
AC	1														
BT	0.292	0.941													
EWOM	0.479	0.41	0.739												
Empathy	0.396	0.437	0.466	1											
PIC	0.396	0.721	0.473	0.508	0.851										
II	0.47	0.309	0.507	0.443	0.438	1									
Loneliness	0.317	0.377	0.575	0.364	0.448	0.377	0.886								
LSE	0.555	0.318	0.466	0.46	0.43	0.536	0.453	0.745							
MOD	-0.405	-0.335	-0.386	-0.378	-0.459	-0.2888	-0.249	-0.362	1						
MOD (IC)	-0.405	-0.335	-0.386	-0.378	-0.459	-0.2888	-0.249	-0.362	1	1					
MOD (PR)	-0.269	-0.398	-0.398	-0.357	-0.497	-0.303	-0.285	-0.331	0.864	0.864	1				
PSR	0.276	0.55	0.401	0.497	0.696	0.368	0.395	0.373	-0.3	-0.394	-0.413	0.843			
PK	0.335	0.574	0.469	0.296	0.515	0.432	0.449	0.402	-0.3	-0.301	-0.31	0.483	0.94		
PI	0.3	0.809	0.412	0.409	0.607	0.269	0.394	0.252	-0.3	-0.371	-0.403	0.482	0.507	0.934	
WTS	0.451	0.531	0.472	0.407	0.582	0.492	0.387	0.426	-0.5	-0.504	-0.517	0.373	0.481	0.511	0.90

Table 3 demonstrates discriminatory validity by means of cross loadings and AVE (average variance extracted). According to (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), AVE values must be larger than construct correlation. According to the outcomes of FLC, diagonal values satisfy the requirements of (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In Table 03, cross-loading and AVE have been used to assess the discriminant validity. The criteria given by Fornell and Larcker (1981) is that the value of the square root of AVE should be in the diagonal form. They also state that AVE should also be higher than the correlation of the variables. In Table 04, the individual items of each item are loaded higher in their relevant construct than other constructs due to their cross-loading difference being higher than the recommended criteria of 0.1 suggested by Gefen and Straub (2005), which confirms the discriminant validity. In table 05, the criteria of HTMT are proposed by Henseler et al. (2015); he stated that the values should be less than 0.85, confirming the validity of the table. Hence, after all the analysis, we can use it to measure the structural model because now the measurement model confirms the convergent validity and discriminant validity.

4.2 Ethical Consideration

Before collecting data from the respondents, researchers assure the respondents that their

responses will be anonymous and that their identity will be confidential.

Table 04 Loading and Cross Loading

	AC	BT	EWOM	E	PIC	II	L	LSE	MOD (IC & PK)	MOD (IC & W)	MOD (PR & IC)	PR	PK	PI	W
AMC1	1	0.292	0.479	0.396	0.396	0.47	0.317	0.555	-0.405	-0.405	-0.269	0.276	0.335	0.3	0.451
BT1	0.232	0.937	0.415	0.436	0.666	0.27	0.353	0.284	-0.305	-0.305	-0.356	0.572	0.526	0.722	0.454
BT2	0.314	0.945	0.359	0.388	0.69	0.31	0.357	0.313	-0.326	-0.326	-0.392	0.467	0.555	0.797	0.542
E1	0.396	0.437	0.466	1	0.508	0.443	0.364	0.46	-0.378	-0.378	-0.357	0.497	0.296	0.409	0.407
EWOM1	0.367	0.326	0.68	0.275	0.281	0.358	0.37	0.409	-0.311	-0.311	-0.273	0.198	0.378	0.315	0.425
EWOM2	0.361	0.317	0.738	0.403	0.349	0.317	0.484	0.37	-0.264	-0.264	-0.222	0.229	0.328	0.275	0.347
EWOM3	0.355	0.294	0.794	0.357	0.396	0.43	0.433	0.308	-0.294	-0.294	-0.358	0.394	0.353	0.326	0.323
II1	0.47	0.309	0.507	0.443	0.438	1	0.377	0.536	-0.288	-0.288	-0.303	0.368	0.432	0.269	0.492
IC* II	-0.405	-0.335	-0.386	-0.378	-0.459	-0.288	-0.249	-0.362	1	1	0.864	-0.394	-0.301	-0.371	-0.504
IC* II	-0.405	-0.335	-0.386	-0.378	-0.459	-0.288	-0.249	-0.362	1	1	0.864	-0.394	-0.301	-0.371	-0.504
L1	0.565	0.21	0.423	0.462	0.371	0.529	0.343	0.882	-0.351	-0.351	-0.274	0.36	0.313	0.226	0.382
L2	0.19	0.305	0.249	0.168	0.261	0.213	0.361	0.576	-0.154	-0.154	-0.223	0.196	0.303	0.139	0.234
LSE1	0.412	0.39	0.544	0.385	0.482	0.431	0.894	0.426	-0.237	-0.237	-0.268	0.361	0.481	0.403	0.444
LSE2	0.141	0.276	0.473	0.256	0.306	0.231	0.878	0.376	-0.204	-0.204	-0.236	0.339	0.309	0.292	0.236
PI1	0.248	0.789	0.363	0.352	0.544	0.211	0.325	0.197	-0.333	-0.333	-0.368	0.411	0.461	0.94	0.408
PI2	0.314	0.72	0.408	0.415	0.592	0.296	0.415	0.277	-0.362	-0.362	-0.386	0.493	0.489	0.929	0.554
PI3	0.318	0.692	0.435	0.384	0.872	0.393	0.408	0.336	-0.351	-0.351	-0.398	0.591	0.438	0.568	0.46
PK1	0.291	0.544	0.354	0.557	0.849	0.31	0.379	0.356	-0.377	-0.377	-0.437	0.627	0.405	0.483	0.476
PK2	0.4	0.599	0.415	0.363	0.832	0.413	0.355	0.407	-0.446	-0.446	-0.435	0.56	0.407	0.484	0.55
PK3	0.358	0.529	0.442	0.268	0.496	0.408	0.411	0.348	-0.306	-0.306	-0.321	0.49	0.94	0.473	0.465
PR1	0.272	0.551	0.439	0.288	0.472	0.404	0.432	0.407	-0.259	-0.259	-0.262	0.417	0.939	0.481	0.439
PR2	0.204	0.436	0.373	0.533	0.578	0.256	0.326	0.32	-0.369	-0.369	-0.378	0.898	0.389	0.383	0.304
PR3	0.236	0.482	0.34	0.391	0.599	0.358	0.274	0.362	-0.337	-0.337	-0.377	0.854	0.382	0.411	0.343
PR4	0.261	0.474	0.299	0.323	0.581	0.32	0.402	0.259	-0.287	-0.287	-0.288	0.772	0.453	0.427	0.296
PR* AC	-0.269	-0.398	-0.398	-0.357	-0.497	-0.303	-0.285	-0.331	0.864	0.864	1	-0.413	-0.31	-0.403	-0.517
W1	0.447	0.493	0.396	0.391	0.572	0.479	0.316	0.392	-0.471	-0.471	-0.465	0.38	0.499	0.446	0.92
W2	0.418	0.512	0.434	0.349	0.487	0.457	0.349	0.385	-0.437	-0.437	-0.484	0.295	0.459	0.518	0.911
W3	0.353	0.433	0.455	0.362	0.513	0.394	0.392	0.379	-0.459	-0.459	-0.452	0.333	0.338	0.425	0.881

Note: All self-loading are significant (bold)

Table 05 Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	AC	BT	EWOM	Empath	PIC	II	Loneli	LSE	MOD (IC & PK)	MOD (IC & W)	MOD (PR & IC)	PR	PK	PI	W
AC															
BT	0.311														
EWOM	0.602	0.558													
Empathy	0.396	0.469	0.575												
PIC	0.439	0.856	0.632	0.568											
II	0.47	0.331	0.613	0.443	0.486										
Loneliness	0.366	0.472	0.836	0.424	0.579	0.438									
LSE	1.073	0.782	1.233	0.896	0.999	1.054	1.172								
MOD	0.405	0.359	0.482	0.378	0.511	0.288	0.292	0.717							
MOD (IC)	0.405	0.359	0.482	0.378	0.511	0.288	0.292	0.717	1						
MOD (PR)	0.269	0.426	0.472	0.357	0.553	0.303	0.333	0.706	0.864	0.864					
PSR	0.312	0.666	0.512	0.555	0.871	0.416	0.522	0.855	0.441	0.441	0.464				
PK	0.36	0.66	0.631	0.318	0.612	0.464	0.562	0.94	0.323	0.323	0.333	0.584			
PI	0.326	0.934	0.551	0.443	0.729	0.293	0.5	0.562	0.402	0.402	0.436	0.589	0.59		
WTS	0.477	0.601	0.648	0.431	0.684	0.52	0.48	0.93	0.535	0.535	0.549	0.443	0.544	0.591	

4. 3 Structural Model

We have analyzed the structural model by examining the standardized paths to find the result. Every path that is corresponding to the hypothesis tested in this research paper. Results of the path analysis are in Table 06, and Table 07. Results of the mediation analysis have been listed, and moderators are shown in Table 08. The R square value (as seen in table 9 in the annexure), shows that all

R square values have a magnitude that shows exceptional predictor power with the exception of EWOM.

Figure 02 Results of Path Analysis

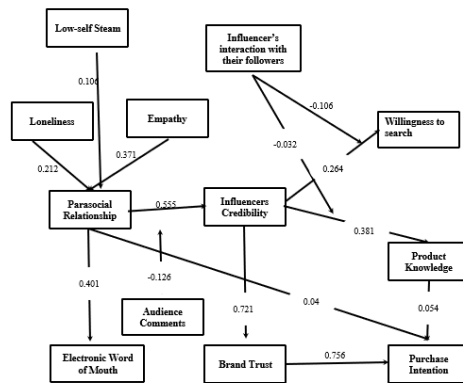


Table 06 Results of Path Analysis

Hypotheses	Regression Path	Effect Type	SRW	Sig Values	Remarks
1	Empathy -> Parasocial Relationship	Direct Effect	0.371	0	Supported
2	Loneliness -> Parasocial Relationship	Direct Effect	0.212	0.032	Supported
3	Low self-esteem -> Parasocial Relationship	Direct Effect	0.106	0.28	Not Supported
4	Parasocial Relationship -> Purchase Intention	Direct Effect	0.04	0.611	Not Supported
5	Parasocial Relationship -> Electronic word of mouth	Direct Effect	0.401	0	Supported
6	Parasocial Relationship -> Influencer Credibility	Direct Effect	0.555	0	Supported
8	Influencer Credibility -> Brand Trust	Direct Effect	0.721	0	Supported
10	Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention	Direct Effect	0.756	0	Supported
12	Influencer Credibility -> Willingness to search	Direct Effect	0.264	0	Supported
13	Influencer Credibility -> Product Knowledge	Direct Effect	0.381	0	Supported
16	Product Knowledge -> Purchase Intention	Direct Effect	0.054	0.451	Supported

Table 07 Mediation Analysis

Hypotheses	Regression Path	Effect Type	Sig Values	Remarks
9	Parasocial Relationship -> Influencer Credibility -> Brand Trust	Indirect Effect	0	Partial Mediation
11	Influencer Credibility -> Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention	Indirect Effect	0	Partial Mediation

Table 08 Moderator Analysis

Hypotheses	Regression Path	Sig Values	Remarks
7	MOD (PR with IC) -> Influencer Credibility	0.002	Supported
14	MOD (IC with Willingness) -> Willingness to search	0.001	Supported
15	MOD (IC with PK) -> Product Knowledge	0.486	Not Supported

4.4 Discussion

Table 06 indicates the results of the path analysis. There are 16 hypotheses, and of them, 14 are direct hypotheses in which, 11 hypotheses show the positive and significant results, and three hypotheses show the

insignificant result, which means that they are rejected. Two mediation analyses show partial mediation in Table 07. Lastly, in Table 08, there is a moderation analysis in which three hypotheses are listed, two hypotheses show the positive and significant results, and 1 hypothesis shows an insignificant result which means that it is rejected.

4.5 Results of Path Analysis

The H1 (**Empathy -> Parasocial Relationship**) shows that there is a positive and significant relationship between social media users' empathy and para-social relationship with the social media influencers (beta = 0.371, sig value = 0). H2 (**Loneliness -> Parasocial Relationship**) indicates that there is a positive and significant relationship between social media users' loneliness and the para-social relationship with the social media influencers (beta = 0.212, sig value = 0.032). H3 (**Low self-esteem -> Parasocial Relationship**) specifies that there is an insignificant relationship between social media users' low self-esteem and para-social relationship with the social media influencers (beta = 0.106, sig value = 0.28). The H4 shows (**Parasocial Relationship -> Purchase Intention**) that there is an insignificant relationship between social media users' para-social relationship with the social media users' purchase intention (beta = 0.04, sig value = 0.611). H5 (**Parasocial Relationship -> Electronic word of mouth**) indicates that there is a positive and significant relationship between social media users' para-social relationship with the electronic word of mouth social media users (beta = 0.401, sig value = 0). These all hypotheses depict that para-social relationship with the influencers

increases when the social media users have low empathy and feel lonely. It also indicates that when social media users feel low self-esteem, they do not reach out to social media influencers to increase their self-esteem. When the social media users increase their para-social relationship with the social media influencers, it does not indicate that a high level of para-social relation impacts the purchase intention of the social media users. Lastly, social media users increase their EWOM when they practice a high para-social relationship with the influencers.

The H6 (**Parasocial Relationship -> Influencer Credibility**) shows that there is a positive and significant relationship between social media users' para-social relationship with the social media influencers and the influencer's credibility (beta = 0.555, sig value = 0). H8 (**Influencer Credibility -> Brand Trust**) indicates that there is a positive and significant relationship between social media influencers' credibility and the brand trust influencers intended to increase (beta = 0.721, sig value = 0). The H10 (**Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention**) specifies that there is a positive and significant relationship between the brands and the purchase intention of the social media users (beta = 0.756, sig value = 0). This hypothesis depicts that when social media users increase their para-social relation with the social media influencers, they trust them more. In this way, it affects the high level of influencers' credibility and when their credibility increases, their influence on the using a particular brand impacts the social media users. Hence, they eventually started trusting the brand, and their purchase intention

toward the brand increased because of the trust.

The H12 (**Influencer Credibility -> Willingness to search**) shows that there is a positive and significant relationship between the influencers' credibility and the Willingness to search about the product by the social media users (beta = 0.264, sig value = 0). H13 (**Influencer Credibility -> Product Knowledge**) indicates that there is a positive and significant relationship between the influencers' credibility and the product knowledge of the social media users (beta = 0.381, sig value = 0). Lastly, H16 (**Product Knowledge -> Purchase Intention**) indicates that there is a positive and significant relationship between the product knowledge of social media users that is provided by the influencers and the purchase intention (beta = 0.054, sig value = 0.451). These hypotheses depict that a high level of influencers' credibility forces the social media users to search more about the product of their own will. When social media users trust the credibility of the influencers, they eventually start trusting the knowledge about the product provided by the influencers. This way, users' knowledge of the products increases, and when the knowledge increases, social media users know every pro and con related to the product. Hence, in this way, it impacts their purchase intention.

4.6 Mediation Analysis

The hypotheses with a mediation relation are H 09 and 11, and both mediations show partial mediation.

Hypothesis 09 (**Parasocial Relationship -> Influencer Credibility -> Brand Trust**) specifies the mediation of influencers' credibility between parasocial relationship and brand trust (sig value = 0). It shows that when social media users trust the credibility of the influencers, that trust builds a bridge between para-social relationships and brand trust. However, indirect effect (**Parasocial Relationship -> Influencer Credibility**) the results are positive and significant (beta = 0.555, sig value = 0).

Hypothesis 11 (**Influencer Credibility -> Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention**) indicates the mediation of brand trust between the influencers' credibility and purchase intention (sig value = 0). It depicts that when social media users' trust increases in the brands, that trust in the brand builds a bridge between the influencers' credibility and the purchase intention.

Moderator Analysis

Finally, the hypotheses which have a moderation relation are H 07 and 14 and 15, in which H 07 and 14 are positive and significant while H 15 is negative and does not significantly moderate.

In H 07 (**MOD (PR with IC)_ -> Influencer Credibility**), "audience comments" is significant and moderate the relationship between para-social relationships and influencers' credibility (Sig value = 0.002).

In H 14 (**MOD (IC with Willingness)_ -> Willingness to search**), "influencers' interaction with their followers" is significant and moderates the relationship between

influencer's credibility and Willingness to search about the product (Sig value = 0.001).

In H15 (**MOD (IC with PK)_ -> Product Knowledge**), "influencer's interaction with their followers" is insignificant and does not moderate the relationship between influencer's credibility and the product knowledge of the social media users (Sig value = 0.486).

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

5.1 Conclusion

After determining the literature, the para-social relationship was found as a critical factor in determining the behaviour of social media users toward the social media influencers. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the literature by examining several factors that influence Willingness to search about the product, purchase intention, and EWOM (electronic word of mouth) using the "UGT (Use and Gratification Theory)" (Hwang K, 2018) and "Persuasion Knowledge Model" (Friestad M, Wright P, 1994). This study investigates whether para-social relationships promote purchase intention and EWOM by incorporating influencers' credibility and brand trust as a mediator. The data have been collected from 128 people using social media daily. The sample data is collected through the survey, which is based on the questionnaire, and the SEM technique has been used to analyze the data. There are a total of 16 hypotheses in which, and from them, 14 are direct hypotheses in which, 11 hypotheses show a positive result, and three hypotheses show a negative result which means that they are rejected. The findings reveal that social media users' para-social relationship with the social media influencers has a positive and significant relationship with EWOM by social

media users and a negative and not significant relationship with the purchase intention of the social media users. Thus, it shows that para-social relationships increase EWOM, not purchase intention. Moreover, social media users' para-social relationship also depicts a positive and significant relationship between influencers' credibility and EWOM. Moving further, results reveal that para-social relationships with (Parasocial Relationship → Influencer Credibility → Brand Trust) and (Influencer Credibility → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention) have a partial mediation relationship. Lastly, moderation analysis indicates that there is a two positive (MOD (PR with IC) → Influencer Credibility), (MOD (IC with Willingness) → Willingness to search) and 1 (MOD (IC with PK) → Product Knowledge) moderation relationship. The findings serve as essential evidence for social media influencers that their credibility impacts the purchase intention of the social media user as well as their excellent para-social relationship with the social media users will highly impact their EWOM.

5.2 Practical Implications

The government should focus on the most crucial factor is no policy for social media content creators (SMCC). Because in the covid-19 situation, some cases raise the importance of regulation as some influencers misguide their followers with false information, which will lead to uncertain situations, so the government should take steps against these issues. On the other hand, SMCC also promotes the country globally, as foreign influencers come to Pakistan and document the beauty of Pakistan. This has led Pakistan to the Top 10 holiday countries by Forbes,

while Conde Nast listed Pakistan as No 01. This indicates that if the government focuses more on the foreigner influencers, it will promote Pakistan because the government has already worked on foreign travel influencers, but they should also focus on the Pakistani or maybe the other foreign influencers who have some other interests.

5.3 Managerial and Theoretical Implications

The fact that most of us know that many times influencers only share the content because they want a sponsorship of some particular brand even though they do not even prefer that brand or their product in their real life. Influencers should try only to share those products in which they have their faith; spreading false information just because they will gain some PR or money in exchange for the information is not ethical, as followers trust the influencers, and according to the researchers, followers consider influencers as their friends.

Influencers should also focus on their para-social relationship with their followers because, in this way, they will end up having credibility, followers will start believing and trusting them, and this also brings to the increase in EWOM (electronic word of mouth), their followers' product knowledge and the trust in the brand, and lastly the purchase intention towards the product. Only excellent and effective para-social relationships will impact many factors positively.

The research sheds light on the theories that were used as the basis of the research by

addition geographical elements to it. The study done in the Pakistani perspective, focusing on the biggest city of the country brings into light the role the influencers play in the lives of people, and all the factors that were considered. Additionally the research shows that the theories should not be considered in isolation, as human behavior is dynamic, and need to be explored in all angles to see what effects it.

5.4 Future recommendations

It is essential to highlight the limitation of this study so that future researchers will fill their limitations. The most critical gap that should be highlighted is that this research was done in Karachi, Pakistan, which means future researchers should take this research to other cities and countries. Future researchers should also focus on increasing the sample size as this time, due to the covid-19 situation, the survey was held among a few people. Lastly, this research is based on a comprehensive conceptual framework so that future researchers can find the mediation relation of influencers' credibility between para-social relationships and the Willingness to search about the product, the mediation relation of influencers' credibility between para-social relationship and product knowledge and double mediation of influencers credibility and product knowledge in between the para-social relationship and purchase intention.

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ANNEXURE

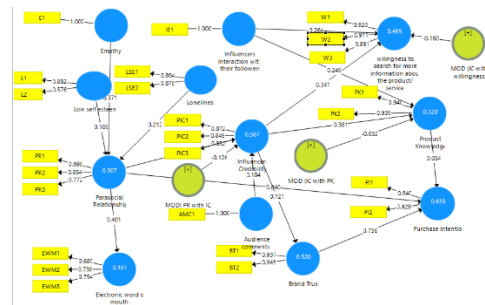


Figure 3 Path Model with R2 values

Table 9 – R square value

	R Square
Brand Trust	0.520
Electronic wor...	0.161
Influencers Cre...	0.567
Parasocial Rela...	0.307
Product Knowl...	0.320
Purchase inten...	0.658
willingness to s...	0.465

