

Micro, Macro, and Celebrity Influencers: Comparing Trust, Credibility, and Purchase Intent Among Urban Pakistani Consumers

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Abstract

Consumers don't view all the social media influencers equally. This study investigates and measures the level of trust, credibility, authenticity and purchase intent for micro-influencers as compared to celebrities and macro-influencers for the consumers in an urban setting of Pakistan. Micro-influencers were perceived as more credible and likable than celebrities, to a greater extent. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 600 digitally active consumers aged 18–39 across six Pakistani cities, the study analyses frequency distributions for statements concerning influencer type, cultural relatability, commercial scepticism, and marketer strategy. Findings show a clear consumer preference for micro-influencers: 96.7% agreed or strongly agreed that they find it better to choose products supported by micro-influencers rather than those backed by celebrities, and 94.2% preferred products advertised by micro-influencers because they found them more trustworthy. At the same time, respondents demonstrated cautious behaviour toward highly commercialised influencer content, signalling awareness of marketing intentions and the necessity of authenticity. Cultural fit and relatability strongly amplified appeal, with 96.5% finding a product more appealing when recommended by an influencer from their own cultural background, and a comparable share reported that greater exposure to influencer content increases their likelihood of purchase. The results confirm that the type of influencer moderates consumer responses and endorse a strategy of long-term, authenticity-driven micro-influencer partnerships in collectivist, culturally diverse markets. The study offers marketers evidence-based guidance for influencer selection, transparency, and culturally grounded campaign design.

Keywords: Micro-Influencers, Macro-Influencers, Celebrity Endorsement, Influencer Type, Trust, Authenticity, Purchase Intent, Pakistan

Introduction

The debate about the impact of influencers on consumers has evolved from one of whether to use influencers to how to use them to the best one. Marketing has evolved greatly over the last few years, and now, the people who have a huge number of followers on social media are a significant part of the purchasing decision making process, and brands are using a variety of social media platforms including Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Facebook to directly reach their target audience. Generally, influencers are divided into two types: macro influencers, who have a huge reach and audience awareness, and micro influencers, whose followers are smaller but more loyal. The scale and the perceived authenticity, relatability, and commercial distance of these categories also vary (Schouten et al., 2020; Gräve & Bartsch, 2022). To make an efficient allocation of influencer spending it is crucial to understand how these differences are taken into account by consumers (Delbaere et al., 2021).

This question is particularly significant in the collectivist market of Pakistan where the cultural traditions and beliefs significantly influence shopping and buying behaviors. Influencer type acts as a moderation between credibility and purchase intention: the greater the perceived authenticity and direct interaction, the greater the influencers' effect, particularly in specific segments usually targeted by micro-influencers. This study evaluates the differences in consumers' reactions to micro, macro and celebrity influencers among urban consumers of Pakistan and their trust, credibility, cultural relatability, and scepticism towards commercial content and the strategic preference that comes with it.

There are different types of social media influencers, which appeal to consumers at varying levels, and each of these has varying levels of effectiveness in terms of the level of trust, brand resonance, and purchase intent they engender. Based on the number of followers, approach to content creation, and authenticity of the influencer, the categories can be micro, macro, mega and celebrity influencers, each of which has an impact on consumers in a different way (Jamil et al., 2024; Chan, 2022). Micro-influencers can be perceived as regular people giving authentic feedback, and may be more believable than far away, more commercial celebrities, while celebrities and macro-influencers have a larger audience and awareness. Knowing how consumers perceive these differences is the key to choosing the right partner and also to budgeting an influencers' allocation in the multi faceted market.

The reason why these types work is the same as the reason for any other type of influencer marketing: the influencers can influence the purchasing behaviours of consumers by boosting brand awareness, creating trust between the brand and the consumer, and developing an emotional bond between the two, and they can also lower the perceived risk involved in using e-commerce. As consumers are not passive recipients of the information but active participants, developing preference and purchasing decisions, the influencer's persona and stature is a very real impact on the way the message is processed. This is confirmed by evidence from Pakistani media consumers: A strong correlation between exposure to ads and shared audience perception and purchasing intent is found by Abbas et al. (2024); in turn, media exposure can impact shared audience perception and memory, indicating that media

messages play an active role in shaping audiences' cognition, as reported by Sikandar et al. (2024). This means that from the practical perspective, this study examines the question of which one of the two types of influencers – micro or celebrity – is trusted, is more culturally relatable and acts upon by Pakistani consumers of these influencers, and what does this suggest for brands?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Existing studies indicate that endorsement-purchase intention relationship is moderated by the type of the influencer. Using multiple types of influencers can help achieve maximum visibility and engagement; celebrity influencers for brand awareness, micro-influencers for niche conversions and nano-influencers for hyper-local campaigns. Hazari and Sethna (2023) discovered that the kind of influencer, based on content and positioning, impacts on customer engagement, whereas Jamil et al. (2024) revealed that micro-influencers create deeper parasocial connections through their actual interactions, which boosts purchase intention. Micro-influencers are found to be effective in niche markets (Kausar et al., 2024); comparative studies contest if micro-influencers or mega-influencers are more successful in winning audiences' trust (Britt et al., 2020); and the audience feels more attached to and trusts the influence compared to the traditional celebrities (Schouten et al., 2020). Consumer characterizations facilitate the purchase intentions of the influencers that they are considered trustworthy and experts in the field (Masuda et al., 2022), while the complete picture of the micro-influencer marketing is that performable authenticity shapes their impact (Chen et al., 2024). Al-Saify and Darwish (2024) point out that commercial messages can instil a sense of scepticism among consumers, leading to a greater valuation of authenticity, an attribute that has been demonstrated to boost purchase intent (Zniva et al., 2023) and one that is influenced by both advertising disclosure and source credibility (Weismueller et al., 2020).

This is further complicated by the lifestyles/brands division. Hazari and Sethna (2023) also found that the personality approach to influencers was a mediator between the two groups, rather than gender, as being a personality approach made them more appealing to Gen Z'ers who value authenticity and entertainment, while the brand approach made them more appealing to consumers who value product information. According to Kausar et al. (2024) the credibility, engagement and homophily of fashion bloggers (micro-influencers) have a positive impact on the purchase intent of users in Lahore. Influencer marketing is a relatively new idea, but the literature supports the idea that type of influencer influences consumer behaviour: micro-influencers can work in many parts of the world due to their relatable and trustworthy nature, however, there are still some segments where a Mega or celebrity influencer is valued for their brand authority and expertise. All of the aforementioned studies (Chan 2022, Jamil et al. 2024, Rizwan and Qamar 2023, Pourazad et al. 2023, Ganeshkumar et al. 2023) have highlighted this discrepancy and the necessity of creating targeted marketing strategies based on demographic segmentation.

Authenticity and credibility are two key factors among a limited number that determine the success of every type of influencer, and for the micro-influencer

advantage, these two stand out. Another tenet is content relevance and resonance: messages that align with consumers' values and lifestyles tend to have more reach than brand-centred messages (Chan, 2022; Hazari & Sethna, 2023). That's why relatable micro-influencers have bigger impact on trust than distant celebrities even though they're not as reachable. This is because influencers and followers can increase the authenticity and trustworthiness of content, which is why "feeling the same" is so important. The outcomes are additionally influenced immediately by trust, authenticity, and transparency, and credible and clearly disclosed collaborations are vital to establishing brand and consumer loyalty, especially in culturally sensitive markets like Pakistan (Lakho & Rashid, 2025).

Drawing from the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Jamil et al. (2024) conclude that mega-influencers who have more followers and have higher social status heavily depend on the quality of the arguments and the credibility of the source to persuade consumers, while macro-influencers try to convince consumers through kindness and being relatable to others in the social circle. Their findings suggest that the two types of influencers require different approaches to achieve their objective, with mega-influencers needing to invest more effort into establishing their credibility and macro-influencers appearing more warm and relatable. In a quantitative study of TikTok users, Al Kurdi et al. (2022) discovered that source credibility and content quality had a negative impact on purchase intentions, while source relatability did not have a significant impact on attitude, indicating that the changing landscape of short-video influencers may offer different rewards than traditional formats. Another study by Chan (2022) on the UK market further confirms that the type of influencer has an impact on consumer decision imitation, as higher income groups are more responsive to content complexity and the personality of the influencer.

Consumer perception and response to various types can also vary based on the type of platform that an influencer uses. Pourazad et al. (2023) explored performance metrics on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter and found that the effectiveness of influencers was dependent on the maturity of the platform and the level of engagement of the audience: Micro-influencers on TikTok have higher engagement rates per follower than those on more mature platforms, meaning, the type of influencer needs to be assessed within a specific system where the follower responds. In the fashion industry, bloggers are considered micro-influencers, as they tend to be more relatable and credible than celebrities are in a far distance, which leads to higher relatability and engagement capabilities and encourages increased purchase intentions (Keru 2024; Kausar et al. 2024). Similarity perception or homophily helps influencers and followers enhance the credibility and authenticity of content (Shahid & Ikram, 2024; Rizwan & Qamar, 2023).

Theoretically, the study is based on Source Credibility Model and Social Influence theories. Perceived authenticity and perceived expertise are causal factors in persuading others, and social influence and social identity mechanisms are causal factors in the attraction of consumers to influencers who are similar to and share the same cultural values and perspectives. These frameworks anticipate that the type and level of influencers will impact the consumer response, with the more authentic and

culturally congruent micro-influencers seen to have better trust and purchase intent than the distant celebrities.

Because of this, there are two hypotheses that follow. The reviewed literature indicates that there are systematic differences among influencer types in terms of credibility, relatability, and parasocial closeness, and that these, instead of mere reach, are what lead to engagement (Jamil et al., 2024; Hazari & Sethna, 2023; Al Kurdi et al., 2022); influencer type should therefore serve as a moderator of consumers' responses to a post. And because the same body of work links audience characteristics and cultural fit to the effectiveness of an endorsement (Chan, 2022; Pourazad et al., 2023; Ganeshkumar et al., 2023), strategies that deliberately match influencer type and content to the target segment should raise engagement and purchase. The study therefore tests the following hypotheses:

H1: *The type of influence (micro, macro, celebrity) moderates consumer responses to influencer posts.*

H2: *Targeted marketing strategies that consider demographic diversity enhance consumer engagement and purchase through influencer marketing.*

H1 is examined through the frequency distribution of responses on influencers' impact on the consumer and market (Table 1), where support would appear as a clear preference for micro-influencers over celebrities and heightened appeal for culturally relatable sources. H2 is examined through the consumer-oriented marketing preferences (Table 2), where support would appear as agreement that trustworthy, well-matched micro-influencers and repeated, targeted exposure raise the likelihood of purchase.

Methodology

The study was designed descriptively, cross sectional and pragmatist paradigm deductive approach. The sample was purposively selected so that it represents diversity of users in terms of age, gender, income, education and geographic groups in Pakistan as the aim was to compare user responses across various variables. The study was purposive sampling which facilitated to connect with 600 university students, working professionals, and social media enthusiasts from six cities; Gujrat, Jhelum, Sarai Alamgir, Sialkot, Lahore, and Gujranwala so as to make meaningful comparisons (Saunders et al., 2019).

The research team developed a questionnaire that included closed-ended questions (with 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) as well as multiple choice questions, and a few open-ended questions regarding the participants' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours towards social media influencers. The closed-ended questions allowed for the quantification of variables like social media use, trust in influencers and purchases influenced by social media content, whereas questions regarding influencers' perceived honesty and reliability relied on scales that measured source credibility. Google Forms were used primarily to distribute the survey on the web, which meant it was easily and cheaply disseminated and could be accessed by those who lived far or in rural areas (Evans & Mathur, 2005). To minimize the influence of social-desirability bias, anonymity was used, and

informed consent was achieved with all participants (Bryman, 2016). The polarities of the responses from two thematic blocks are reported: 'influencers' impact on the consumer and market' and 'consumer-oriented marketing preferences'. Frequency distributions were used to analyse the data in SPSS.

Results

Influencer Type, Cultural Relatability, and Commercial Scepticism

Table 1 shows the results of five statements about the influence of influencers on the consumer and the market. The findings show that cultural fit and relatability are crucial factors in influencing consumer appeal, along with the type of influencer. The most congruent consensus came when the respondents stated they would prefer to buy a product that was endorsed by micro-influencers over a celebrity: 96.7% agreed or strongly agreed; and when they said they would like a product more if it was supported by an influencer from their own cultural background: 96.5% agreed or strongly agreed. Concurrently, 96.5% of the respondents were cautious about influencer content that seems to be created primarily for monetary gain, indicating that they were aware of the marketing intent and that authenticity is required. Similar percentages also indicated that influencers know what they want better than traditional advertisers, further emphasizing the evolution of traditional advertising to personalised peer-to-peer recommendation. Both of these distributions support the alternative hypothesis that H1 cannot be rejected as consumers respond more strongly to micro-influencers than celebrities and more strongly to culturally relevant sources than to culturally irrelevant sources, thus showing that the type of the influencer moderates their reactions to the influencer posts.

Table 1

Influencers' Impact on the Consumer and Market (% , N = 600)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. A product is more appealing when an influencer from my cultural background recommends it	—	0.3	3.2	40.3	56.2
2. I am impacted by a social media personality on whichever platform they use	—	0.3	3.2	49.3	47.2
3. I find it better to choose products supported by micro-influencers rather than celebrities	—	0.3	3.0	47.7	49.0
4. I am cautious about endorsements by popular influencers that appear made for profit	—	0.3	3.2	49.7	46.8
5. Influencers understand what I want more than traditional advertisers	—	0.3	3.2	48.2	48.3

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree. Rows may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Marketer Strategy: Micro-Influencer Preference and Exposure Effects

Table 2 shows the results of the three statements related to marketer strategy. Majorities believe that micro-influencers are more trustworthy and the more consumers see content from an influencer, the more likely they are to purchase the product. 94.2% said they buy products that are advertised by micro-influencers because they trust them more and 94.1% said they are more likely to purchase products the more they see from influencers. The majority of individuals (94.2%) agreed that influencer marketing is a way for companies to reach a variety of consumers. The confirmed exposure-to-purchase relationship is theoretically significant: it suggests that repeated (but true) exposure carries greater persuasive weight over time than single exposures from celebrities, and this relationship is more easily maintained with the consistent exposure provided by micro-influencers. Combined with the findings on preference and trust in Table 1, these results present a consumer who is receptive, but also selective and prefers a voice that is sustained, credible and culturally similar rather than distant, commercial and over-sold. This pattern aligns with H2: that consumers believe trustworthy, relevant micro-influencers and frequent, personalized exposure is effective; which suggests that marketing campaigns that resonate with demographic diversity can increase engagement and sales.

Table 2

Consumer-Oriented Marketing Preferences (% , N = 600)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. Influencer marketing enables companies to connect with diverse groups of consumers	—	0.3	5.5	38.5	55.7
2. I pick products advertised by micro-influencers because I find them more trustworthy	—	0.3	5.5	47.0	47.2
3. The more I see influencer content, the more likely I am to make a purchase	—	0.3	5.5	43.3	50.8

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree. Rows may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Consolidated Comparative Preferences

The main comparative indicators have been summarized in Table 3. In all dimensions that characterised the different types of influencers, consumers showed a preference for the micro-influencers who were authentic and culturally relatable as well as being cautious towards promotional celebrity content. All of the margins are in the mid-ninetieths, suggesting that the preference is not marginal or context-dependent but is a consistent orientation across the sample, and across the demographic range of the six cities sampled. This convergence lends greater confidence that the type of influencer is a real moderator of consumer response in this market, and not just a consequence of any single sub-group. Pair this with the fact that close to all of these consumers report

a positive purchasing experience, the answer to the question for brands is not whether influencers work, but which type of influencer is trusted in order to influence?

Table 3

Consolidated Comparative Indicators (Agree + Strongly Agree, %)

Comparative indicator	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)
Prefer micro-influencers over celebrities (product choice)	96.7
Choose micro-influencer products because more trustworthy	94.2
Product more appealing when recommended by culturally congruent influencer	96.5
Cautious about profit-driven celebrity endorsements	96.5
Greater exposure increases purchase likelihood	94.1
Influencers understand consumers better than traditional advertisers	96.5

Note. Values are combined 'agree' and 'strongly agree' percentages drawn from Tables 1 and 2.

Discussion

The results indicate that the type of influencer significantly affects consumer response, thereby supporting H1. Whether it was reach or trustworthiness and authenticity, it is undeniable that the urban Pakistani consumers are more inclined towards micro influencers than celebrities or macro influencers. This supports H1 and aligns with the study by Jamil et al. (2024), Hazari and Sethna (2023) and Kausar et al. (2024) that has focused on the niche market role of micro-influencers. The importance of these findings is that they question the pervasiveness of celebrity endorsement and point to a trend toward increased personalisation of influencer marketing and more grass-roots-level engagement. The double doubt regarding the commercial nature of the celebrity content reflects the study of Al-Saify and Darwish (2024), Kapitan et al. (2022), and indicates that consumers' choices may be affected by the perceived authenticity of the content, the match between content and social sphere, and the prominent fuzziness of promotional messages. Ahmed et al. (2025) have already shown that the persuasive power of visual and textual media framing in Pakistani campaigns is clearly evident in related contexts, as they analysed the design of political posters and how they are crafted to guide the interpretation of the audience.

Consumers are most likely to be persuaded by those who are culturally relatable, in line with the social-influence and social-identity perspective: consumers are more likely to be persuaded by those who are culturally similar to them and embody their values. This congruence is not as peripheral of a trust factor as it might be in a liberal market; in a collectivist market like Pakistan, identity, community, and shared social customs are a big part of what people rely on when judging a recommendation. Micro-influencers are particularly suited to provide this congruence, seeing that they're perceived as ordinary individuals within the same social circles as their followers, and share fair and credible evaluative information and their own experience rather than the cool of a distant, commercial endorsement. The affirmed exposure to purchase relationship also suggests that cumulative exposure, which is more likely to occur with the repeated contact of the micro-influencer versus the one-off celebrity contact, over time leads to increased purchase intentions, and that the credibility of the repeated exposure with culturally close consumers is more likely to lead to purchase intentions than the reach of one-time exposures.

Strategically, these findings support H2 and the marketing findings provided by Ganeshkumar et al. (2023) and Kausar et al. (2024). One of the most noticeable discoveries is the preference of consumers for micro-influencers rather than celebrities and macro-influencers: people were much more trusting of and relatable to micro-influencers, which can be explained by their authenticity and evident completeness. In contrast to celebrities, who are perceived as very distant and too commercial, micro-influencers are considered to be real people sharing fair judgments and personal life experiences. This conclusion is in line with Jamil et al. (2024), who hold that micro-influencers produce a more pronounced parasocial relationship because of their direct contact with followers, and with Hazari and Sethna (2023), who point out that micro-influencers tend to represent smaller communities and are therefore better at creating interest in a product and brand loyalty among the desired demographics.

Accordingly, a substantial share of the influencer budget should be diverted to micro-level collaborations. In practice, this can mean identifying influencers who have ten to fifty thousand followers, actively communicate with them, and are valued as experts in their field or in the way they live, and it should involve long-term associations rather than a one-off post, so as to build gradual credibility and confidence (Berné-Manero & Marzé-Aizpurua, 2020). The growth of influencer marketing has also some consumers skeptical of paid promotions: some participants were wary of influencers with overly commercial or promotional content, further highlighting the need for transparency. Educating consumers and reinforcing their confidence in the product is best achieved by clearly marking the paid partnership with a hashtag, like #sponsored or #ad, which helps consumers understand that it is a paid partnership and meets expectations of consumer protection. In a country as culturally diverse as Pakistan, it's essential to consider cultural factors when choosing influencers, and transparency with authenticity ultimately leads to a higher conversion rate, otherwise consumers will feel the content is just a sales pitch.

As consumers in this study were using multiple platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook), a type-aware strategy should also be multi-platform. Different platforms have different content cultures, algorithms and audience compositions, so the same micro-influencer partnership can have vastly different results when deployed and used on each platform; short, engaging content works well for some platforms, while longer product stories work well for others. When combined with platform-specific content, and when measuring success beyond reach to engagement, click-through and conversion, brands can leverage the trust that comes with a relatable influencer into tangible results. This redefines the celebrity vs. micro debate as much more than just an endorser, or choice of celebrity, but a question of how to establish a presence that is culturally resonant, credible, and long lasting on the channels where target consumers are present.

Conclusion

In this study, three types of influencers (micro, macro and celebrity) were compared on consumer responses, with a significant preference towards micro-influencers based on the criteria of trust and authenticity, a high sensitivity to cultural congruence and measured scepticism towards overtly commercial celebrity content. The patterns found show that the type of influencer influences the consumer response, and that culturally aligned and authenticity-driven micro-influencer strategies are suitable for this market. The significance of these findings is that they challenge the ubiquity of celebrity endorsement and herald a new era of personalisation and more grass-roots marketing, in which consumers trust people they do not perceive as being selling products on behalf of a company, and rather are seen as having a first-hand account of the company's products and their opinion about them.

The results suggest that brands need to consider micro-influencers as a key channel, invest in ongoing partnerships, and combine transparency on paid partnerships with culturally and linguistically relevant content in the target community for practice purposes. Some limitations are that the study only used cross-sectional data, and the study did not directly measure the influence of celebrities and micro-influencers on audiences in terms of their actual behaviors when spending money on them, respectively. In future studies, these preferences should be validated in an experiment, should also explore new categories like 'nano-influencers' and 'expert bloggers' on social media platforms, and should be backed up by survey results and behavioural and platform-analytics data to understand the impact of influencer type on real purchases over time.

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