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INFLUENCER MARKETING: IMPACT OF AUTHENTICITY ON CUSTOMER PURCHASE INTENTIONS

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Abstract. Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are vital to the automotive sector by shaping consumer perceptions, increasing brand visibility, and driving purchase intentions through authentic and relatable content. Their ability to engage with specific audiences allows automotive brands to build trust and credibility, influencing the choices of prospective buyers. This study attempts to investigate the effect of SMI authenticity on consumer attitudes and purchasing intentions within the automobile sector in Pakistan. This study employs the Meaning Transfer Model of Celebrity Endorsement (McCracken, 1989) and the Authenticity Model of Computer-Mediated Communication (Lee, 2020) to investigate the impact of perceived authenticity on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions regarding automotive products. A quantitative approach was employed to collect data (N=385) from consumers in Pakistan who interact with SMIs in the automotive sector. The findings indicate that SMI authenticity significantly impacts consumer attitudes and purchase intentions, with consumer attitudes mediating between authenticity and purchase intentions. This study enhances the current literature on influencer marketing by highlighting the importance of authenticity in influencing consumer behaviour within high-involvement industries. The discourse encompasses ramifications for marketers and suggestions for subsequent research.

Keywords: social media influencers; perceived authenticity; consumer attitude toward SMI; consumer purchase intention

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1. Introduction

The automotive industry in Pakistan is a rapidly expanding sector that is making significant strides despite its relatively small size. Pakistan has established itself as an important player in the automobile industry, ranking 23rd in terms of production. This sector contributes around 3% to Pakistan's GDP and provides employment opportunities to over 3.5 million individuals annually. The automotive industry at large has faced challenges with no relief in sight. While the demand for cars has plummeted, the prices of products have increased due to the sharp fall in the value of Pakistan's rupee. Moreover, the Pakistan government has introduced high duties on the import of ancillary parts for the automotive industry to reduce the import bills, which has increased car prices. The sector has endured the most challenging financial year since the onset of the pandemic, which significantly impacted the economic performance and consumer demand. The provided data reveals that the

overall volume of automobiles sold across all sectors in fiscal year 2023 was 13.48 lakh units, representing a 37.7% decrease from the 21.63 lakh units sold in fiscal year 2022 (PAMA, 2023).

The decline of the automotive sector in Pakistan can be attributed to numerous factors, including escalating input costs, pervasive inflation, diminishing demand resulting from a faltering economy, currency devaluation, changes in consumer behaviour, disruptions in the supply chain, and the application of elevated taxes on vehicle acquisition. Notwithstanding the problems, Pakistan's automotive sector exhibits resilience and is positioned for recovery in 2024. The industry's potential is highlighted by an anticipated increased demand of 350,000 units every five years, propelled by the increasing young population in the country.

The automotive industry is currently characterized by intense competition among numerous brands worldwide. Each executes the latest and most innovative strategies to enhance their brands and engage with customers. The automotive industry is actively reaching out to potential customers through various channels alongside traditional media. Digital and social media are essential components of the marketing strategies employed by automobile brands (Rana & Lokhande, 2015). Social media as a marketing platform has emerged as a significant global trend within the automotive industry. An effectively formulated social media strategy is essential in the automotive sector. It empowers dealers to distribute premium information to potential customers and engage with them directly across various platforms, enhancing online visibility. The significance of viral impressions from widely used social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter can help boost automotive industry sales (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019). Moreover, strong engagement on social networks cultivates a loyal customer base that continually chooses the same dealership. As a result, several car dealerships are utilizing social media management tools to sustain their competitive advantage in this progressively digital landscape (Oranim, 2023). Social media discussions can enhance awareness and sales; nevertheless, alterations in brand perceptions on these platforms may adversely impact sales.

The advent of digital media has significantly transformed the realm of communication and interpersonal connections. Digital media can replace traditional media in almost all aspects of human existence (Mahmood et al., 2023). The proliferation of technology, along with improved accessibility, has rendered the Internet pervasive across all domains. Social media has revolutionized communication, providing convenient, user-friendly, and cost-effective access (Kasumovic, 2024). Furthermore, the ever-evolving world of technology has brought about new opportunities for individuals, known as SMIs and influencer marketing (Garcia-de-Frutos & Ramon, 2021). Influencer marketing implies brands adeptly address the growing resistance to conventional marketing approaches. In influencer marketing, product placement or native advertising involves integrating a sponsoring brand's product or service within an influencer's content. Through collaboration with SMIs, brands can successfully present their products to a highly engaged audience.

Influencers are today's leading digital opinion leaders, influencing consumer attitudes and behaviours (Mahmood et al., 2022; Lee, 2021). Consumers are relying on these SMIs for genuine brand information. They also effectively engaged with consumers by disseminating brand-promoted messages through social media platforms. (Peltier et al., 2020). SMIs employ diverse authenticity management tactics to establish a close relationship with their followers and enhance their online visibility (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022; Lee & Eastin, 2021). This accessibility positions influencers as more authentic and fosters a sense of closeness, enhancing the credibility of their brand endorsements (Audrezet et al., 2020). To put it differently, the authenticity of influencer marketing is the foundation of its success, a quality that the source credibility construct has not yet fully incorporated.

Roth-Cohen et al. (2024) see perceived authenticity as a key driver of effective advertising content. Authenticity is favourably connected with the advertising activities of SMIs, as it is underpinned by their sincere aim to endorse items or services in exchange for external earnings (Kim & Kim, 2020). In contrast, Audrezet et al. (2020) have highlighted that SMIs who regularly disseminate paid content are regarded as less authentic. Influencer marketing represents a complex relationship, wherein SMIs are linked to both the brands they promote and their audience (Kim & Kim, 2020). Authenticity is a significant factor influencing the communication outcomes of SMIs and contributes to their source credibility (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

However, different people participating in the communication process see it differently. Thus, the viewpoints of SMIs, their followers, and the brands they embody must be considered when discussing SMIs and authenticity (Poyry et al., 2019).

Efforts have been made to measure perceived authenticity, reality television personalities, and SMIs (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022; Lee & Eastin, 2021). In their seminal work, Lee and Eastin (2021) developed and validated a measurement scale for the perceived authenticity of social media influencers (PASMI). Exploratory factor analysis is performed to refine and establish an initial scale. This scale is then validated by confirming its structure and assessing convergent and discriminant validity. Additionally, the relationship between the underlying dimensions of PASMI and key consumer behaviour variables is examined as a measure of predictive validity. The findings indicated that perceived authenticity is a multifaceted construct comprising sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, knowledge, and originality. The five aspects influence customers' assessment of SMIs, their propensity to follow an SMI, and their desire to purchase things endorsed by SMIs (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022; Lee, 2020).

A substantial amount of study examines the increasing impact of social media on consumers' purchase decisions influenced by SMIs (Pop et al., 2022; Mahmood et al., 2023; Peltier et al., 2020). However, the perceived authenticity of SMIs in the context of the automotive industry has not yet been systematically explored.

This research seeks to evaluate the impact of the multidimensional construct of SMI authenticity, which includes sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness, on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions within the automobile industry of Pakistan. The findings are expected to guide current SMIs in effectively managing and presenting a genuine persona while offering brand managers improved criteria for evaluating the authenticity of influencers' authenticity before establishing potential collaborations. It will establish a foundational comprehension of perceived authenticity and augment the expanding literature on SMI authenticity.

2. Literature Review

Meaning Transferred Model of Celebrity Endorsement

The Meaning Transferred Model of Celebrity Endorsement (McCracken, 1989) asserts that meaning transfer occurs via a three-stage process and delineates how the images or meanings embodied by the celebrity endorser affect essential consumer behaviours, including attitudes toward the endorser, advertisement, brand, and purchase intention. Celebrities acquire many symbolic meanings in the preliminary stage through social media appearances. During the second stage, the brand endorsement phase, these significations are attributed to the brand as the celebrity associates with it. In the third stage, the importance shifts to the brand's consumers (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Consumers primarily obtain the conveyed meaning rather than the actual product or service. In influencer marketing, the transfer of meanings must be observable when companies weave their messages into the everyday narratives of SMIs. Branded endorsements exemplify how SMIs incorporate specific products or services into their everyday routines, seamlessly integrating them into the posts they share daily. It enables individuals to improve a facet of their self-perception by emulating the activities of another person. Social media extends consumption beyond material goods to encompass content purchase in a broader sense. Followers engage with SMIs' content, emulate their style and behaviour, and incorporate their inspiring material into everyday routines (Ki & Kim, 2019; Lee & Eastin, 2021).

The efficacy of perceived SMI authenticity can be elucidated using these theoretical perspectives. Emulating the practices of authentic SMIs and engaging with the products they promote enables customers to align themselves with authenticity (Wang & Weng, 2024). Research has demonstrated that perceptions of authenticity regarding an SMI foster a stronger emotional connection, thereby increasing consumers' propensity to purchase the brand supported by the SMI (Ki et al., 2020). Furthermore, considering that authenticity is an essential aspect of consumers' daily experiences, it is logical that they are attracted to authentic SMIs.

The Authenticity Model of Computer-Mediated Communication

Lee's (2020) Authenticity Model of Computer-Mediated Communication includes ideas like message credibility, perceived realism, and para-social relationships to give a complete picture of authenticity in digital interactions. The model consists of three key subcomponents: source authenticity, message authenticity, and interaction authenticity; each plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of credibility and trust.

Source authenticity refers to the genuineness of a communicator's identity, emphasizing credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise. In an era of AI-driven communication, maintaining source authenticity is increasingly complex. Message authenticity pertains to the accuracy and alignment of content with audience expectations, values, and beliefs. Studies suggest that authentic messages from SMIs significantly impact followers' purchase intentions (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022; Mahmood et al., 2023; Pöyry et al., 2019). Lastly, interaction authenticity reflects the perceived genuineness of digital engagements, shaped by reciprocity and spontaneity. SMIs cultivate authenticity by fostering meaningful connections with their audience, reinforcing trust and emotional attachment (Farrell & Campbell, 2020; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Ki et al., 2019). These interrelated dimensions contribute to authenticity perceptions, influencing consumer attitudes and behaviours. This study further explores how authenticity through sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness shapes consumer trust and purchase intentions toward SMIs.

Perceived Authenticity and SMIs

The perceived authenticity of SMIs is a key determinant of their ability to shape consumer purchasing decisions. As digital communication evolves, authenticity has become a central concept in marketing and branding, representing the genuine and truthful portrayal of oneself (Shoenberger & Kim, 2023). In the context of SMIs, authenticity involves aligning one's self-presentation with personal values and beliefs, fostering credibility and trust among followers (Ebben & Bull, 2023). Beyond trustworthiness, authenticity also encompasses relational and emotional dynamics that strengthen audience engagement (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Defining authenticity presents theoretical and practical challenges, as it involves ethical considerations, value congruence, and transparency in online interactions. Scholars argue that authenticity is subjective and socially constructed, shaped by environmental and ideological influences (Ebster & Guist, 2005). However, it remains a fundamental aspect of online identity, influencing self-perception and audience perception. Social media platforms provide various visual tools that enable SMIs to construct their digital personas and engage in meaningful, reciprocal connections with followers.

Research highlights the significance of authenticity in influencer advertising (Audrezet et al., 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2021). Followers are likelier to engage with SMIs they perceive as accurate, directly impacting their emotional and behavioural responses to influencer content (Lou, 2022). Pöyry et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of the "aura of authenticity," arguing that sponsored content aligned with an influencer's values enhances advertising effectiveness and positively influences consumer behaviour.

The effectiveness of SMIs depends on balancing authenticity with commercial endeavours (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019). Audrezet et al. (2020) propose two key strategies for maintaining authenticity: passionate authenticity, where influencers create content that is personally fulfilling, and transparent authenticity, where they openly disclose brand collaborations and share fact-based product information. Transparent authenticity is reinforced by sharing unfiltered content and providing clear disclosures about partnerships (Ebben & Bull, 2023). Lee and Eastin (2021) extend this to SMIs, identifying five key dimensions of authenticity: sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. These elements are critical in shaping influencer credibility and effectiveness in digital marketing. While building on this seminal literature, the present study adopts these five dimensions of authenticity as a framework for analysis. A detailed discussion of each of these aspects, supported by relevant literature, is provided in the subsequent section.

Relationship of SMIs Authenticity, Consumer Attitudes, and Purchase Intentions

Authenticity of media influencers plays a critical role in shaping consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Authentic influencers, perceived as genuine, relatable, and transparent, foster stronger emotional connections with their audiences, which can lead to greater trust (Erdoğan & Çiçek, 2012). Consumers often see these influencers as more reputable sources of information, improving favourable sentiments toward the items or services they promote. As a result, these favourable attitudes can increase purchase intentions, as consumers are more likely to buy from recommendations given by the influencers they trust (Mahmood et al., 2023). However, when influencers are perceived as inauthentic or overly commercial, their credibility and influence on purchase decisions can diminish. Studies suggest that authenticity in influencer marketing is a key determinant of consumer engagement and long-term brand loyalty (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Cabeza-Ramírez and Sánchez-Cañizares (2022) found that perceived authenticity significantly impacts consumer attitudes and purchase intentions, with message authenticity being the strongest determinant. Authentic influencers create content that aligns with their audience's expectations, beliefs, and personal experiences, fostering a sense of trust and credibility. Similarly, Balaban & Szabolcs (2022) introduced a model highlighting the self-perceived authenticity of SMIs as a key factor in consumer engagement. The study suggests authenticity goes beyond mere credibility since it involves emotional and relational components that enhance consumer-brand connections. This implies that brands collaborating with SMIs should prioritize influencers who resonate with their target audiences.

Several studies establish a direct correlation between influencer authenticity and consumer purchase intentions. Agnihotri et al. (2023) explored how para-social interactions mediate the relationship between SMI authenticity and purchase behaviour. Findings indicate that consumers are likelier to purchase products promoted by influencers they perceive as authentic, relatable, and knowledgeable. Similarly, Al Doghan and Arshad (2023) found that authenticity influences attitudes and predicts purchase intent. Their research suggests that influencers who engage in genuine interactions with their followers create a stronger sense of community, further reinforcing purchasing decisions. Based on the reviewed literature, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H₁: Consumers' attitudes toward a social media influencer are positively impacted by the social media influencer's authenticity.

H₂: Social media influencer authenticity has a significant positive impact on consumer purchase intention

H₃: Consumers' attitudes toward a social media influencers significantly impact purchase intention.

Perceived Sincerity

Sincerity is a fundamental component of perceived authenticity for SMIs, significantly shaping consumer attitudes toward influencers and brands they endorse. Perceived sincerity refers to the extent to which consumers believe an influencer's content is genuine, honest, and free from manipulative intent (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Sincerity is a distinctive asset of influencers in marketing products and fostering a profound social connection with their followers (Tsai & Men 2017). Several studies have examined the role of sincerity in influencer marketing. Bansal & Pruthi (2023) found that SMIs who exhibit sincerity in their endorsements generate higher trust and positive attitudes among consumers, as their messages are perceived as more relatable and honest. Similarly, Weismueller et al. (2020) highlighted that perceived sincerity mitigates scepticism toward sponsored content, increasing consumers' likelihood of engaging with and accepting influencer recommendations. Followers meticulously assess the authenticity of SMIs to ascertain their genuineness and convey authentic experiences (Audrezet et al., 2018). An SMI characterized by pragmatism and accessibility is perceived as authentic, with this trait being closely associated with relatability. Prior research by Al-Emadi and Yahia (2020), Lee and Eastin (2020), and Zhafira et al. (2022) posited that the honesty, compassion, and integrity of SMIs align strongly with the notion of sincerity, hence encouraging consumer engagement with these influencers. In light of the aforementioned literature, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_{1a}: Consumers' attitudes toward a social media influencer when purchasing automobiles are positively impacted by the perceived sincerity of the influencer.

Truthful Endorsements

When SMIs endorse firms that conflict with their personality and values, consumer marketing is inauthentic (Audrezet et al., 2020; Saima & Khan, 2020; Shan et al., 2020). SMIs strive to ensure transparency by clearly notifying their followers about any incentivized content, which reduces confusion and promotes authenticity through honest evaluations of products and services (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020; Audrezet et al., 2020). Authentic brand endorsements convey the perception that collaborations extend beyond the profit-driven exploitation of an influencer's audience. Instead, they serve as opportunities for influencers to express their identity and values by partnering with brands that resonate with their passions and personal interests (Aggad & Ahmad, 2021). Endorsements from SMIs hold significant influence when the endorser seems authentically driven to advocate for the product rather than acting out of self-interest (Choi et al., 2023). The perception of a post as being commercially motivated and under the control of a brand diminishes trust in the social media influencer, leads to a decline in interest in the content, and reduces the inclination to pursue further information regarding the promoted brand (Martínez-López et al., 2023). Deceptive endorsement tactics diminish consumer trust and engagement, while SMIs that excessively promote advertisements lead consumers to unfollow them owing to non-interest and ad avoidance (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). We suggest the following hypothesis based on the significant insights from the previously stated literature.

H_{1b}: Consumers' attitudes toward a social media influencer when purchasing automobiles are positively impacted by the truthful endorsements of the influencer.

Perceived Visibility

Visibility denotes a state of openness and transparency. SMIs are motivated to publicly curate their personalities to foster perceptions of authenticity, thereby augmenting their net worth, as evidenced by the volume of likes, shares, and followers. Heightened levels of self-disclosure blur the distinction between frontstage and backstage, depicting the influencer as showcasing their genuine self in both physical and digital domains. Content that reveals influencers' shortcomings and negative emotions suggests a lack of engagement in strategic impression management by SMIs (Audrezet et al., 2020). Studies suggest that openness and honest self-disclosure contribute to perceptions of a leader's authenticity (Javed et al., 2021). The benefits of social media visibility and the intentional sharing of personal information have been noted in various contexts, encompassing brand CEOs, politicians, and SMIs (Javed et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2020). Studies have shown that revelations by influential individuals on social media enhance likability and elevate the quality of life for consumers by cultivating a more profound sense of camaraderie and relational closeness (Kim & Kim, 2020). We propose the following hypothesis based on the profound insights from the literature above.

H_{1c}: Consumers' attitudes toward a social media influencer when purchasing automobiles are positively impacted by the visibility of the influencer.

Perceived Expertise

Expertise denotes a source's recognized knowledge, skills, and experience, shaped by elements like education and achievements-expertise centres around the qualifications and abilities of the source (Kim & Kim, 2021). The content seems genuine and cohesive, stemming from a natural proficiency in the subject matter rather than being influenced by external factors (Sharipudin et al., 2023). Individuals recognized as Subject Matter Experts in a particular domain are esteemed for their authenticity, as their skills reflect a profound enthusiasm, genuine authenticity, and unwavering diligence. Brand community members are regarded as authentic when they can independently repair their vehicles (Choi et al., 2023). Thus, the possession of talent not only amplifies perceptions of authenticity but also serves to validate their acclaim. Various studies illustrate the importance of knowledge in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours. Expertise in SMIs enhances views on opinion leadership, influences attitudes towards the SMI, shapes brand perceptions, affects product attitudes, and impacts purchase intentions while also promoting interaction with sponsored content (Akdevelioglu & Kara, 2020; Choi et al., 2023; Ki & Kim, 2019; Trivedi & Sama, 2020). Al-Emadi and Yahia (2020) recognized knowledge as a key factor influencing consumer engagement with SMIs, which are perceived as important

information sources. We put forth the following hypothesis based on the valuable insights from the earlier literature.

H_{1d}: The influencer's expertise positively impacts consumers' attitudes toward a social media influencer when purchasing automobiles.

Perceived Uniqueness

SMIs, differentiated from other influencers by their unique personality and content, serve as the origin of one's actions and ideas, rendering them authentic. McRae (2017) found that consumers perceive SMIs as producing often mundane and derivative content. The perceived uniqueness of a social media influencer's content has been shown to enhance consumers' willingness to engage with the influencer, adhere to their recommendations, and endorse the influencer to others (Casaló et al., 2018). This may stem from individuals' societal aspirations to preserve a sense of individuality, which serves as a driving factor for consumption. Consumers seek various forms of information, including brand-related data, and so pursue unique SMIs (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020). Based on the perceptive findings of the previously cited literature, we put out the following hypothesis.

H_{1e}: Consumers' attitudes toward a social media influencer when purchasing automobiles are positively impacted by the influencer's uniqueness.

Mediation Relationship of Consumer Attitudes Between SMIs Authenticity and Purchase Intentions

In the world of SMIs, authenticity significantly influences consumer attitudes, subsequently affecting purchase intentions (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Consumers are more inclined to form favourable attitudes toward an influencer and the products they endorse when they perceive the influencer as authentic. The attitudes mediate between the perceived authenticity of the SMI and the consumer's purchase intentions (Zhafira et al., 2022). To rephrase, the more honest and credible the influencer appears, the more favourable the consumer's attitude becomes, subsequently enhancing the likelihood of purchasing. This mediation relationship highlights the indirect effect of authenticity on purchase behaviour, emphasizing the importance of trust and relatability in the consumer decision-making process (Audrezet et al., 2020; Zhafira et al., 2022). Based on the perceptive findings of the previously cited literature on authenticity, customer attitude, and purchase intention, we put out the following hypothesis. The subsequent theoretical framework is employed to achieve the research objectives. This theoretical framework has been applied to examine the relationship between an influencer's trustworthiness, attractiveness, perceived similarity, and perceived sincerity, as mediated by attitude toward the brand and its impact on purchase intention.

H₄: Consumers' attitudes toward SMIs mediate the relationship between SMIs authenticity and consumer purchase intention when purchasing automobiles.

3. Research Methodology

The study's target population comprises individuals who actively engage with SMIs on Instagram and consume automobile-related content, including reviews, news, and posts about cars, auto accessories, and industry trends. The target population is also composed of individuals in the market who purchase or are already consumers of automobiles, influenced by marketing and recommendations, including those from SMIs. The target population consists of those residing in Lahore, Islamabad, and Karachi. The rationale for selecting these cities lies in their multi-ethnic demographics, the highest density of the Pakistani populace, and the most significant number of social media users. Furthermore, Instagram is among the most prevalent social media platforms, boasting approximately 17.69 million members (64.5% male and 35.5% female) as of January 2024 (Statista, 2020a). Respondents were sourced using online platforms through the networks of several SMIs in Pakistan. The survey link was disseminated through the Instagram story feature on the influencers' accounts. The public accessibility of these stories enabled a wider reach, extending beyond the influencers' followers and allowing for broader audience participation.

Sample Size and Data Analysis Tool

This research utilized Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to develop an integrated analysis model and to evaluate the hypothesis. The research sample comprised 385 respondents, established in accordance with the SEM sample size limitations.

Questionnaire Design and Measurement Scale

Questionnaires were disseminated to individuals via multiple social media platforms for data collection, utilizing the online survey software Question-Pro for this purpose. Perceived sincerity (SIN), truthful endorsement (TE), uniqueness (UNI), and visibility (VY) scales are adapted from the study of Lee and Eastin (2021), perceived expertise (EX) from the study of Mahmood et al. (2023). Nafees et al. (2020), customer attitude (CATT) towards SMIs from the study of Tan and Chia (2007) and Zhafira et al. (2022) the Consumer Purchase Intention (CPI) scale is derived from Mahmood et al. (2023). In contrast, the demographic scale is sourced from Zhafira et al. (2022) and Mahmood et al. (2023). Numerous components were incorporated and altered to align with the findings regarding influencers. The data were acquired using a five-point Likert scale, and SPSS was employed for preliminary data analysis, which indicated that the data collected for this study followed a normal distribution. The results of demographics are provided in Table 1.

4. Results

Following data screening and exploratory analyses that produced a sufficient dataset (N=385) for this research, the data were analyzed utilizing PLS-SEM to assess the hypotheses. Employing Smart-PLS for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), items with a threshold below 0.70 were removed, and the reliability of the constructs, along with their convergent and discriminant validity, was assessed.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Demographics		Frequency	Per cent
Gender	Male	296	77
	Female	89	23
Education	Higher Secondary	45	12
	Undergraduate	95	25
	Graduate	139	36
	Master	87	22
	Other	19	5
Age	25-30	90	23
	30-35	103	27
	35-40	107	27
	40-45	66	18
	Above 45	19	5
Income	Rs. 50,000-100,000	98	25
	Rs. 100,00-150,000	124	32
	Rs. 150,000-200,000	107	28
	Above 200,000	56	15
	6 months -1 year	10	2
	1-2 years	35	9
	3-5 Years	145	38
	More than 5 years	195	51
Have you ever considered buying automobiles promoted by a social media influencer on Instagram?	Yes	No	
	83%	17%	

The Measurement Model

Following the removal of items, a subsequent Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed on the remaining items, revealing that the reliability of most latent variables fell below the specified threshold. Demographic information is included to elucidate the characteristics of survey respondents (Table 1). The convergent validity of the components was assessed using composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). The results demonstrated that both CR and AVE values exceed the threshold, with CR values

ranging from 0.926 to 0.971 and AVE values ranging from 0.701 to 0.810 (Table 2). All three available criteria were employed to assess the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT) Criterion: The correlation coefficients of latent variables are recommended to remain below 0.90 as a lenient threshold. This study identified the highest correlation value between latent variables as 0.746, close to the HTMT cutoff value (Table 3).

Table 2. Latent Variables, Items Loading, and Convergent Validity

Sr.	Items	Perceived Authenticity	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE
Sincerity					
1	SIN1	My favourite social media influencer to follow on Instagram: seems kind and good-hearted.	0.901	0.941	0.710
2	SIN2	is sincere when recommending products.	0.881		
3	SIN3	comes off as very genuine in their content.	0.880		
4	SIN4	is down-to-earth.	0.810		
Truthful Endorsement					
5	TE1	My favourite social media influencer to follow on Instagram: although they post ads, they give meaningful insights into the products	0.756	0.965	0.728
6	TE2	gives very honest reviews on brands.	0.890		
7	TE3	the brands they endorse vibe well with their personality.	0.869		
8	TE4	promotes products that they would actually use	0.859		
Expertise					
9	EX1	My favourite social media influencer to follow on Instagram is: Experienced.	0.823	0.960	0.810
10	EX2	Knowledgeable	0.833		
11	EX3	Qualified	0.863		
12	EX4	Competent	0.865		
13	EX5	Professional	0.844		
Visibility					
14	VY1	My favourite social media influencer to follow on Instagram is: posts about the genuine condition of their life	0.898	0.971	0.721
15	VY2	talks about real-life issues in their life	0.924		
16	VY3	talks about their flaws publicly	0.894		
17	VY4	reveals a lot of their personal life to the public	0.912		
Uniqueness					
18	UNI1	My favourite social media influencer to follow on Instagram: has a unique personality	0.896	0.932	0.807
19	UNI2	make me feel new when presenting the skin care products	0.852		
20	UNI3	make me feel new when presenting the skin care products	0.891		
21	UNI4	has its unique characteristics	0.819		
Consumer Purchase Intention					
22	CPI1	I will make purchases of the automotive products and services that were suggested by the influencer on Instagram.	0.838	0.950	0.755
23	CPI2	I give great importance to the matter of acquiring automotive products and services proposed by the influencer	0.901		
24	CPI3	I like to consider all alternatives advised by the influencer before making my final decision for automotive products	0.881		
25	CPI4	I intend to continue making automotive purchases utilizing the platform built by the influencers I follow.	0.921		
26	CPI5	I would firmly advise others to adhere to my influencer recommendations while making automotive purchases.	0.868		
Attitude towards SMI					
27	CATT1	I regularly engage with my favourite SMIs.	0.768	0.926	0.718
28	CATT2	I view the endorsed post from my favourite social media influencer positively.	0.864		
29	CATT3	Overall, I value the endorsed posts from my favourite social media influencer.	0.857		
30	CATT4	I hold a favourable opinion of the endorsed posts by my favourite social media influencer.	0.859		

Fornell and Larcker's Criterion for establishing discriminant validity were comparing the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values (bolded in Table 3) with the squared correlation coefficients (the remaining values) between each pair of components. The results indicated that the AVE values exceeded the

squared correlation coefficients of analogous rows and columns among the constructs. Similarly, in the cross-loading criteria, all measurement items demonstrated a significantly higher loading to their respective latent variable than any other variable.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity through Fornell and Larcker Criterion

Latent Variables	TR	SIN	VY	UNI	EX	CATT	CPI
Truthful Endorsement	0.805						
Sincerity	0.705	0.790					
Visibility	0.494	0.475	0.814				
Uniqueness	0.668	0.755	0.501	0.800			
Expertise	0.482	0.507	0.631	0.490	0.806		
Attitude towards SMIs	0.427	0.467	0.589	0.406	0.604	0.792	
Consumer Purchase Intention	0.361	0.378	0.652	0.493	0.508	0.624	0.788

Discriminant Validity through Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT)

Latent Variables	TR	SIN	VY	UNI	EX	CATT	CPI
Truthful Endorsement							
Sincerity	0.700						
Visibility	0.485	0.472					
Uniqueness	0.594	0.746	0.490				
Expertise	0.464	0.493	0.602	0.476			
Attitude towards SMIs	0.397	0.449	0.569	0.395	0.592		
Consumer Purchase Intention	0.356	0.377	0.636	0.490	0.498	0.484	

The Structural Model

Collinearity Assessment through VIF: The study revealed that VIF values for all exogenous constructs (Perceived Authenticity =1.203, Attitude towards SMIs=2.448) stayed below the threshold value (Hair et al., 2020), indicating that the model did not have any collinearity concerns and was eligible for further evaluation.

The significance of path coefficient (β): Table 4 illustrates that the impact of SIN on CATT was statistically significant ($\beta=0.898$; $t=12.180$; $p=0.000$), supporting hypothesis H_{1a}. The result revealed that H_{1b}: TE on CATT was statistically significant ($\beta=0.821$; $t=11.65$; $p=0.000$), H_{1c}: VY has a significant effect on CATT ($\beta=0.874$; $t=9.953$; $p=0.000$), H_{1d}: EXP has a significant effect on CATT ($\beta=0.893$; $t=11.840$; $p=0.000$), and H_{1d}: UNI ($\beta=0.628$; $t=15.951$; $p=0.000$) has a significant effect on CATT. Hypothesis H₁ stated that PA had a significant influence on CATT ($\beta=0.639$; $t=16.153$; $p=0.000$), H₂ postulated that PA had a significant influence on CPI ($\beta=0.430$; $t=4.965$; $p=0.000$), while H₃ claimed that CATT had a significant influence on CPI ($\beta=0.746$; $t=18.312$; $p=0.000$).

Table 4. Result of Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing

	Hypothesis	Path Coefficient (β)	T-value	P-values	Decision
H ₁	PA → CATT	0.439	16.153	0.000	Supported
H _{1a}	SIN → CATT	0.898	12.180	0.000	Supported
H _{1b}	TE → CATT	0.821	11.651	0.000	Supported
H _{1c}	VY → CATT	0.874	9.953	0.000	Supported
H _{1d}	EXP → CATT	0.893	11.840	0.000	Supported
H _{1e}	UNI → CATT	0.628	15.951	0.000	Supported
H ₂	PA → CPI	0.390	4.965	0.000	Supported
H ₃	CATT → CPI	0.546	18.312	0.000	Supported
H ₄	PA → CATT → CPI	0.278	2.638	0.000	Supported

Bootstrapping with 2,000 subsamples at a confidence interval of 99%. The critical t-value for tests at a significance level of 0.01 is 2.57.

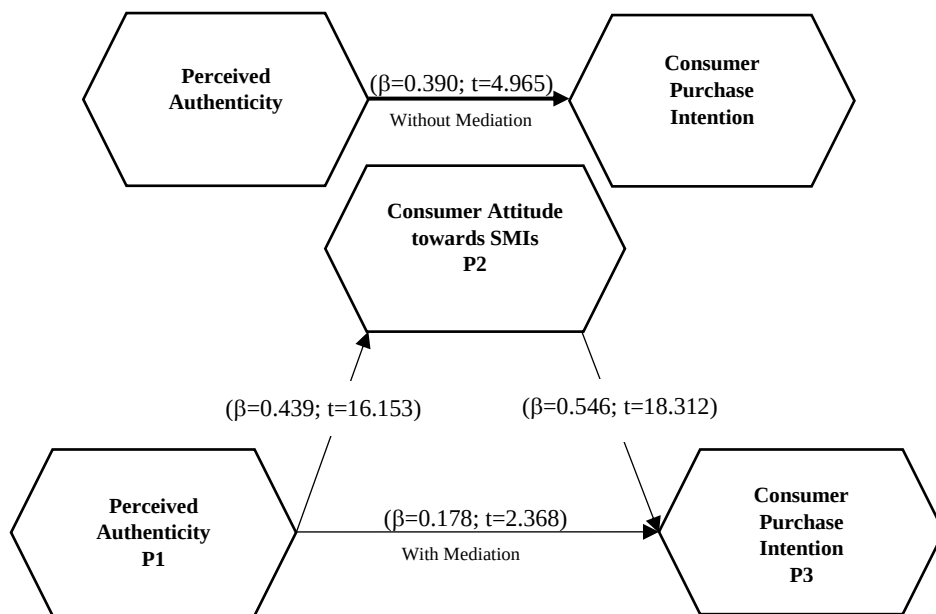


Figure 2. Mediation effect between Variables

Assessment of Mediating Effect: Hair et al. (2020) stated that specific conditions must be met for a model to assert mediation. The initial direct effect ($\beta=0.390$; $t=4.965$), as illustrated in Figure 2, and indirect effect through a mediator $\{P12(\beta=0.439; t=16.153) \times P23(\beta=0.546; t=18.312)\}$ must be significant. Furthermore, the direct effect (excluding the mediator) is expected to diminish following the incorporation of the mediator variable, while all values maintain significance throughout all stages. Finally, the calculation of mediation should be based on the variance accounted for (VAF), expressed as $VAF = \{P12(\beta=0.439; t=16.153) \times P23(\beta=0.546; t=18.312)\} / \{P12(\beta=0.439; t=16.153) \times P23(\beta=0.546; t=18.312) + P13(\beta=0.178; t=2.368)\}$. A VAF value below 20% indicates no mediation, while a value between 20% and 80% signifies partial mediation and a value exceeding 80% is regarded as full mediation. The VAF analysis results indicated that consumer attitude towards SMIs partially mediates ($VAF=46.2\%$) the relationship between perceived authenticity and consumer purchase intention.

Model Fit: The SRMR and NFI meet the criteria for model fit, and the initial index values are below the upper limit of the 99 per cent confidence interval, signifying an acceptable model fit. This study complied with the guidelines established by Hair et al. (2020).

Table 5: Results of Model Fit Indices

Sr.	Indices	Model	Original Means	Confidence Interval		Cutt-off Criteria
				1% lower bound	99% upper bound	
1	SRMR	Saturated	0.037	0.013	0.040	< 0.08 should be compared against the upper bound of the confidence interval
		Estimated	0.037	0.013	0.040	
2	d_ULS	Saturated	0.049	0.011	0.064	
		Estimated	0.049	0.011	0.064	
3	d_G1	Saturated	0.045	0.012	0.046	
		Estimated	0.045	0.012	0.046	
4	d_G2	Saturated	0.036	0.066	0.039	> 0.90
		Estimated	0.036	0.066	0.039	
5	NFI			0.914		

The explanatory Power of the Model (f^2) and Predictive Relevance (Q^2): The endogenous construct CPI accounts for 57.4% of Perceived Authenticity and Attitude towards SMIs (exogenous variables), supported by statistically significant t-values and p-values at a 99% confidence level (Hair et al., 2020). Thus, the results indicated that the model is parsimonious, as the R² values for the endogenous construct satisfied the minimum threshold criteria. This study encompassed one endogenous construct (CPI) with Q² values of 0.460.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to accomplish two primary objectives. First, to measure the effect of SMI perceived authenticity (multidimensional construct consisting of sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness) on consumer attitude towards SMIs and purchase intention. Second, to test whether consumer attitude towards SMIs mediates between SMI perceived authenticity and consumer purchase intention. This study utilized the Meaning Transferred Model of Celebrity Endorsement (McCracken, 1989) and the Authenticity Model of Computer-Mediated Communication (Lee, 2020), which are primarily grounded in source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1990), to seek the SMI perceived authenticity and consumer attitude towards SMIs impact on consumer purchase intention while buying automotive product is Pakistan. The study's findings were consistent with previous literature about the constructs examined.

Study results revealed that all multidimensional constructs of perceived authenticity significantly impact consumer attitudes toward SMIs. For instance, study verdicts revealed (H_{1a}) that perceived sincerity significantly impacts consumer attitudes toward SMIs. Verdicts further explained that customer feedback has overwhelmingly affirmed positive sentiments towards their SMIs. Results shed light on why the SMI resonates so powerfully with their audience. They are admired not only for their content but also for the qualities that make them both trustworthy and relatable. The results also highlight that the SMI's success is built on their kindness, sincerity, genuine content, and down-to-earth nature.

The findings align with recent studies, for instance. Lee & Eastin (2020) discovered that perceived sincerity significantly influences attitudes toward a brand. Endorsements from high-sincerity influencers lead to a more positive attitude toward the brand for the product, in contrast to endorsements from low-sincerity influencers. Fans meticulously assess the authenticity of SMIs to ascertain the influencer's genuineness, presenting a genuine personality and conveying real-life experiences (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Results indicated that truthful endorsement significantly influences consumer attitudes toward the SMIs. The findings are consistent with recent studies, for example. Audrezet et al. (2020) and Shan et al. (2020) posited that when SMIs endorse brands that do not align with their personality and values, consumers view the partnership as being driven by external motivations (such as financial compensation) and consequently perceive it as inauthentic. SMIs endeavour to uphold transparency concerning their collaborations by explicitly notifying

their audience about any incentivized content to prevent ambiguity. They cultivate a sense of authenticity by providing candid assessments of products and services (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020; Audrezet et al., 2020).

The findings indicated that perceived visibility substantially influences customer opinions toward the SMIs. Heightened self-disclosure blurs the line between frontstage and backstage, portraying the influencers as disclosing themselves in both physical and digital contexts.

Findings proved that perceived expertise significantly influences consumer attitudes toward the SMIs. The findings are consistent with recent studies; for example, researchers indicate that the endorser's expertise can impact brand attitude and facilitate changes in favour attitude (Zhu et al., 2022; Lee & Eastin, 2020), as well as influence opinion agreement (Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010). Contradictory results are evident in the literature, indicating that readers of reviews seldom consider source expertise indicators, such as the volume of reviews submitted (Filiari et al., 2021). Furthermore, source expertise has been found to have a weak or negative correlation with the perceived helpfulness of information (Breves, 2021).

Likewise, the results proved that perceived uniqueness significantly influences consumer attitudes toward the SMIs. The findings are consistent with recent studies, for example. Lee & Eastin (2020) posited that SMIs, characterized by their unique personality and content, serve as the origin of individual actions and ideas, thus establishing their authenticity. The perceived uniqueness of a social media influencer's content has been shown to enhance customers' willingness to engage with the influencer, adhere to their recommendations, and promote the influencer to others. This can be attributed to individuals' social aspirations to preserve a sense of distinctiveness, which drives consumption (Casaló et al., 2018).

In the same way, outcomes suggested that perceived authenticity significantly influences consumer attitudes toward SMIs. The findings are consistent with recent studies, for example. Lee and Eastin (2020) and Mahmood et al. (2023) demonstrate that when SMIs are perceived as authentic, they enhance their credibility and trustworthiness, positively influencing consumer perceptions of their recommendations, opinions, and content. Similarly, Audrezet et al. (2020) and Lee (2021) indicate that when consumers view SMIs as authentic, it typically results in positive attitudes, enhanced engagement, and a greater propensity to purchase or endorse the promoted products or services. A deficiency in authenticity may result in scepticism, reduced trust, and a detrimental effect on the influencer's perceived credibility.

Correspondingly, research findings indicated that perceived authenticity significantly influences consumer purchase intention. The findings are consistent with recent studies, for example. Erdogmuş and Çiçek (2012) suggest that a heightened perception of authenticity significantly increases the likelihood of consumers being influenced in purchasing decisions, establishing it as a crucial element in driving purchase intentions via influencer marketing. Lee & Eastin (2020) assert that perceived authenticity significantly influences consumer purchase intentions, particularly regarding SMIs. When consumers view an influencer as genuine, it enhances their readiness to buy products or services endorsed by that influencer.

Verdicts indicated that consumer attitudes towards SMIs significantly influence consumer purchase intentions. The findings are consistent with recent studies, for example. Consumers' attitudes towards SMIs considerably affect their intentions to make purchases. A favourable perception of a social media influencer enhances consumers' propensity to buy the products or services they promote. Similarly, Mahmood et al. (2023) posited that SMIs who evoke a positive response from consumers are viewed as more persuasive. Consumers tend to be swayed by the opinions, suggestions, and recommendations of influencers they hold in high regard, resulting in increased purchase intentions. Al-Emadi and Yahia (2020) determined that a consumer's positive attitude toward a social media influencer significantly increases the likelihood of considering and acting upon the influencer's product recommendations, resulting in enhanced purchase intentions.

The results also indicated that consumer attitude toward SMIs mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and consumer purchase intention. The findings align with recent studies, for instance. Phua et al. (2020) argued that when an influencer is perceived as authentic, it positively shapes the consumer's attitude

toward the influencer, and this improved attitude, in turn, enhances purchase intention. Their study found that the perceived authenticity of SMIs enhances consumers' attitudes toward the influencer, positively impacting purchase intentions. They suggest that authenticity fosters emotional connections, which mediate the influence of authenticity on consumer behaviour.

Audrezet et al. (2020) argue that authenticity in influencer marketing results in more favourable consumer attitudes. The favourable perception of the influencer enhances the likelihood of purchasing the products they promote. The research indicates that attitude is a significant mediating variable between perceived authenticity and purchase intention. Lou and Yuan (2019) investigated the impact of authenticity in influencer marketing, revealing that perceived authenticity positively influences consumers' attitudes toward the influencer and their purchase intentions. Consumer attitude is a mediating factor, indicating that positive consumer attitudes arising from authenticity result in increased purchase intentions.

Theoretical Contributions

This study adds to the existing literature on influencer marketing by examining the effect of SMI authenticity on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions within the automobile sector in Pakistan. This study integrates the Meaning Transfer Model of Celebrity Endorsement (McCracken, 1989) with the Authenticity Model of Computer-Mediated Communication (Lee, 2020). the study provides a novel framework for understanding how authenticity, as perceived by consumers, influences their behaviour in a technology-mediated environment. Both models, grounded in Ohanian's (1990) Source Credibility Theory, are adapted to reflect the unique dynamics of SMIs, extending the theoretical application of these models beyond traditional celebrity endorsements to the digital sphere.

The study also advances the understanding of the Meaning Transfer Model by demonstrating that the symbolic meaning associated with SMIs, when perceived as authentic, can effectively transfer to products in the automotive industry, influencing consumer attitudes and purchase decisions. This extends McCracken's original model, traditionally applied to celebrity endorsements, into a social media context, further validating its relevance in modern marketing strategies. Moreover, by applying the Authenticity Model of Computer-Mediated Communication to the automotive industry, this research contributes to understanding how consumers evaluate authenticity in influencer marketing within a specific sector. This focus on the automobile industry enriches the generalizability of authenticity models, offering new insights into how authenticity influences consumer attitudes and purchase intention in high-involvement, decision-heavy markets like automotive purchases.

Implications for Marketers

Marketers in the automotive industry should prioritize partnering with SMIs perceived as authentic and trustworthy by their audience. Authenticity strengthens consumer trust, which positively impacts attitudes and purchase intentions. To maximize the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns, marketers should ensure that influencers authentically align with the brand's values and products. Additionally, marketers can leverage influencers to create content that resonates emotionally with consumers, as this can foster stronger brand loyalty and engagement in high-involvement purchasing decisions, such as those related to automobiles.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study focuses exclusively on the automobile industry in Pakistan, potentially limiting the applicability of the findings to other sectors or geographical areas. Consumer behaviour and attitudes toward social media influencers vary significantly across cultures and markets, meaning the results may not fully apply to other countries or industries. Future research should examine the impact of social media influencer authenticity domains on consumer purchase intention in other product lines. Exploring how different authenticity dimensions, such as sincerity, visibility, expertise, truthful endorsement, and uniqueness, affect consumer trust and decision-making across various industries can provide valuable insights for marketers. Additionally, future studies could analyze the role of perceived alignment between an influencer's personal brand and the endorsed product, as this alignment may influence consumer engagement and brand perception.

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