

Crafting Personal Brands on Social Media: A Study of Pakistani Fashion Influencers on Instagram

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Abstract

With the social media breakthrough and the emergence of numerous social media platforms, the notion of self-branding is now dominating society. Significantly, the concept of women's empowerment has touched a new height with the advancement of digital media. The new age of digital media has given the power to women to empower themselves as brands and market themselves utilizing social media tools. Although there are various studies about the influence and impact of social media on society and individuals and how they market themselves on these social media platforms, this research empirically investigates how lifestyle and fashion bloggers employ social media as a medium for self-branding with a focus on Instagram self-branding. By employing the content analysis method, the researchers have studied 65 Instagram feed posts of the top five female Pakistani Instagram-style bloggers of October 2022. The data analysis was conducted using a systematic coding scheme. The study reveals that the most popular fashion bloggers still adhere to hierarchical norms and conventional beauty standards. However, with the growing recognition of women's rights, social media has become a valuable platform for women to promote themselves and establish personal brands. Additionally, it was found that a substantial portion of fashion bloggers' followers are influenced by the bloggers' self-presentation, facilitated by technology, creating a relatable and emotional connection between them. Researchers explore the theoretical and practical implications of these findings for self-branding on social media.

Keywords: Social Media; Post feminism; Instagram; Self-presentation; Self-branding; Blogger.

Introduction

During the last few years, there has been a noticeable rise in the trend of personal style blogging, and a myriad of social media users are jumping on the bandwagon to market themselves to gain the attention of marketers and earn monetary benefits.

With the acceptance of personal style blogging as a subcategory of blogging, the influence of style blogging has also increased (Marwick, 2013).

Primarily, these bloggers are females who post images and videos of themselves promoting their lifestyle and possessions (Liu & Suh, 2017). These bloggers are self-acclaimed style and fashion gurus and influence the choices of their followers because of their expertise in fashion and style. These bloggers utilize different self-branding tools and techniques to promote themselves and their pages and gain public recognition (Marwick, 2013).

Furthermore, many style bloggers have a huge following and have attained fame both online and offline world. Style bloggers are considered more trustworthy and authentic among their followers as compared to traditional fashion media because of the influence that they possess on their followers. Many businesses hire these bloggers to market their products because the power of social media is undeniable. The social media platforms are a democratic space where people have the liberty to express themselves and their creativity. Since fashion media is now not limited to traditional medium and has deviated toward online platforms, there has been a significant shift in beauty and fashion standards, and several stereotypes are also being broken (Khamis & Munt, 2010).

This research aims to understand the behavior of women using social media to gratify their needs for entertainment, social interaction, awareness, and individualism, in the light of Uses and gratification theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Goffman's gender advertisements framework. This study adds value to the academic as well as practical sphere since it also explores the data in relation to uses and gratification theory, helping marketers and advertisers to get an insight into audiences' behaviors and choices in the fashion and style domain with this shift in the consumerism culture.

Research Questions

How do people turn themselves into a brand on social media?

How do people use social media as a tool for self-branding?

Do brand-related posts get more recognition than other posts?

Literature Review

Self-branding on social media and Post Feminism

Self-branding means when a person considers themselves as a brand and markets themselves to the broader audience to become recognized and gain the perks of being an influencing figure. The concept of considering oneself as a brand and marketing oneself has spread widely among people since the late '90s (Vallas & Cummins, 2015). Because of the influences and power that come with self-branding, even social activists are encouraged to take the path of self-branding to promote themselves as a changemaker rather than a traditional social change approach (Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2012).

Self-branding shares a connection with traditional mainstreaming marketing, as the prominent self-branded Instagram influencers also attract their followers and audiences by implying strategies that conventional celebrities utilize, like showcasing their branded cars, high-end brands' clothing, and perfect physiques according to society's standard (Marwick, 2015). Professionals from various fields frequently use Instagram to promote their brands, regardless of their social standing or capacity for profit (Woods et al., 2023).

One can self-brand by managing one's audience carefully and disclosing only selective personal information. Information that relays the true sense of the personality while maintaining healthy boundaries and sharing only selective details that are limited to carrying out promotional messages rather than putting their privacy at risk (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Self-branding has become a popular method of representing oneself. It is a result of several cultural, social, and economic influences. Self-branding has valorized ideas like self-promotion, self-governance, reflexivity, entrepreneurship, and individualistic thought patterns.

Social media influencers share their passions for shopping, clothes, accessories, etc. At the same time, some also utilize their professional qualifications and share their knowledge with their audiences to gain their trust (Pagis & Ailon, 2017). Social media influencers may control authenticity by using techniques that are honest and enthusiastic (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Influencers use their social media presence as a medium to interact with their friends and followers and maintain their public profile (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). In today's world of media, self-branding is an efficient way for professionals to establish their own brands and draw in social media followers (Hyrina, & Khliust, 2021). Researchers have linked the concept of self-branding in gender communication to the idea of post-feminism (Weiser & Arzumanova, 2012). Post-feminism emphasizes young women's autonomy and self-expression, significantly influenced by consumerism. It highlights women's autonomy, self-sufficiency, and freedom of speech, deeply rooted in consumerist culture.

Post-feminism celebrates women's freedom and self-expression, closely tied to consumerism. It asserts that women are empowered and free to make independent choices. Post-feminist ideas are connected to neoliberalism (Duffy & Hund, 2015). In many ways, post-feminism has reshaped the contours of contemporary female identity. Using post-feminist theory, numerous studies link self-branding with gender representation (Weiser & Arzumanova, 2012).

This research focuses on how women utilize social media for self-branding, drawing on the Uses and Gratification theory, Social Cognitive theory, and Goffman's framework on gender advertisements. To explore this concept, researchers reviewed literature on these three theories to illustrate their application to self-branding on social media and how women use social media to fulfill their social needs. These theories also shed light on how women leverage social media's power for empowerment.

Uses and Gratification Theory

The Uses and Gratification theory categorizes the audiences as active media users, focusing more on how people use media and the reason behind consuming the media rather than how media controls the person (Katz & Blumler, 1974).

According to this idea, people seek media to fulfill or gratify their needs, and people get certain fulfillment when they use media for specific reasons (Stafford et al., 2004). According to the uses and gratifications theory, three important gratifications that have a favorable influence on satisfaction are sociability, entertainment, and information. (Hsu, & Lin, 2021)

User motivations, platform affordances, user activity, and user results are important gratifications for creating, assessing, and selecting (Curnalia, & Ferris, 2020).

In other words, it is correct to presume that every user uses different media to fulfill their needs by meeting their demands from using media. In the context of social media networking sites, the social media user gratifies their various demands, like attaining information and the need for entertainment, communication, or interaction, by using social media. Compared to traditional media, social media gives more choices to the user; thus, it satisfies the content needs better than traditional media, where people passively consume the media (McGuire, 1974). With the advancement of new technologies, people can choose the medium, as now they hold the power of choosing the medium and the content of that medium, unlike earlier when people were passively consuming the content of the medium (McLuhan, 2016). Social media networking sites facilitate users to reach their intrapersonal communication needs and promise them more content satisfaction.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory, stemming from the social learning theory, demonstrates the process of online communication and its influence on building online relationships (Bandura, 2001). Social Cognitive theory aids in discerning people's behavior in various conditions (Pajares et al., 2009). Social Cognitive theory emphasizes that the active interaction of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors influences human behavior, and human functioning results from these consequences (Bandura, 1986). According to social cognitive theory, motivation is impacted by both external and internal influences. Important internal processes include values, self-regulation, goals, self-efficacy, and social comparisons (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020)

This theory serves as a basis for studying the content and investigating the effects of media portrayal through empirical research.

Goffman's gender advertisements framework

The researchers' primary aim of this study is to investigate how people portray themselves online and self-brand themselves on social networking sites; Goffman's gender advertisement framework helps this study. This research empirically analyzes how people self-brand themselves on the picture-sharing social media network Instagram. Therefore, this study examines how influencers present themselves through images posted on Instagram.

Even after the significant rise in feminist movements and awareness about how media sexualize females, female objectification can still be found in today's media (Liu & Suh, 2017).

Goffman Erving, in his book *Gender Advertisements*, explains how Western Media depicts masculinity and femineity. The gender stereotypes hypothesis proposed by Goffman is applied to the identification and assessment of theme components in television advertising (Shafi, 2020). His theory presents codes that can be implied to identify how genders are displayed in various advertisements (Goffman,1979). Goffman's framework model emphasizes the body and head postures, facial expressions, sizes, angles, positioning, gaze movement, and position to interpret the behavior or portrayal of the subjects. He believed that familiar or simple gestures, positioning or placement, or the way a person is depicted speak a lot about the societal influence on gender status (Kang, 1997).

Sampling and data collection

Content analysis is a systematic approach to quantifying qualitative data and is the methodical, detailed, empirical explanation of factual data (Tunison, 2023).

In this research, the researcher adopted a content analysis technique to study the user profiles, photography, and videography techniques, along with technological features like hashtags (#) and an asperand (@), empirically, on the social networking site Instagram.

A random stratified sampling was conducted to ensure the sample was an ideal model for this study. The criteria for selecting Pakistan's most influential personal style bloggers were as follows:

-The number of followers.

-Brand Extension (collaborating with other higher-end brands or bloggers)

-Studying Google News to research the influence of these style bloggers based on the numbers they appeared in the news articles.

The top five Pakistani female style and lifestyle bloggers on Instagram were selected in accordance with their number of followers on Instagram. These bloggers are renowned and have been part of various self-branding projects, so they fulfill the criteria for this study.

The data comprised 65 feed posts (pictures and reels) collected from the five most influential female style bloggers' Instagram feeds. October 2022 was selected as the timeline of the data gathering, as October is known as Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Since this study focuses on female style bloggers, this month was selected to understand how these style bloggers created awareness through their content about Breast Cancer.

Table 1.

Data of top five Pakistani female style and lifestyle bloggers.

Blogger/ Influencer	Number of followers on Instagram (As of May 2024)	Total number of Photos (October 2022)	Total number of Videos “Reels” (October 2022)	Total number of feed posts analyzed. (October 2022)
Hira Attique (Pakistan’s first award-winning influencer)	1M	---	11	11
Aaniat Khalid	647K	5	17	23
Hemayal Attique	659K	1	6	7
Hunaina Rasool	510K	---	11	11
Urooj Fatima	621K	2	11	13

Development of coding categories

The study involved analyzing the profiles of various style bloggers and evaluating their Instagram posts based on different themes and categories. These categories included image and video content, clothing preferences, types of posts, composition elements, and external relationships. The researchers utilized Goffman’s Gender Advertisement model to evaluate and understand the feminist representation in the photos and reels. The feminine touch, comparable size, function ranking, licensed withdrawal, and ritualization of subsidiaries, are the five sub-categories included in Goffman’s model. Moreover, to study the gender depiction, the body display, breast area, braless, pose, stance, touch, and withdrawal are the categories that were included. Therefore, combined coding schemes of ten categories were adopted from Kang (1997), Hatton & Trautner (2011), and Hu. et al., (2014).

Similarly, to evaluate photography and videography composition elements, a coding scheme of three subgroups: camera position and angle, visual composition, and types of shots were adopted from Marina & Ángeles (2016). The subcategories of Impression on posts were based on the coding scheme developed by Zhu et al. (2019) to analyze the quantified impacts of the posts. In addition, two categories of Types of attire preferences (eastern and western) and Types of posts (Paid and Not Paid) were also included.

Operational Definitions

Selfie: a photograph or video that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone.

Gazing the viewer: gazing or looking at the products, gadgets, attire, or another person.

Averting gaze: Turn eyes away from the camera and look here and there to pose. Back to the camera: Looking directly or straight to the camera's eye.

Coding table

Instagram technological features were utilized to create the code for each post for the following seventeen items to assess the posts' external relationship. The coding schemes consist of several key categories, and each category includes other unique subcategories. The image and Video content category encompasses codes such as selfies, portraits, friends and family, and fashion. The shot types, like close-ups and camera angles, like high and low, were assigned to the composition elements. The external relationship category employs codes, brands, people, and so on. Types of attire preferences, types of posts, and Quantified impact are some more key categories of the coding scheme adopted to conduct the systematic analysis of content characteristics, which aid in-depth data analysis. (See Table 2 Content analysis and coding scheme in the appendix)

Results and Findings

According to the findings, the Portrait theme (81.5%) was the most well-liked, followed by the Fashion theme (67.7%) and the Theme for Captioned Videos or Photos (20%). Only four of the analyzed images or videos were selfies, indicating that

the top style bloggers did not find the selfie subject particularly popular. Most of the posts were solo (84.6%), indicating that the style blogger was the only person in the postings, according to the analysis of the number of individuals in the videos and photos. 6.2% of the posts were composed of the group, 1.5% by nobody, and two to three people made up 7.7% of the posts. 65 postings were examined for the seven categories of Goffman's scheme for analyzing gender display. According to the findings, style bloggers were framed in standing stances in 74.6% of the images and videos, sitting poses in 44.4% of the posts, bent leg poses in 34.9% of the shots, and strolling poses in 47.6% of the photos and videos. Only in 1 post was the blogger squatting down, and in only two posts, the blogger was lying down. Also, 28.6% of the images or videos were in other positions in comparison. It was discovered that most of the posts (96.9%) were in a normal pose. Poses that were overly sexual or suggestive were less common, with proportions of 0% and 3.1%, respectively. 98.4% of the images or videos depicted the fashion blogger casually touching or being touched, whereas only one video featured suggestive touch. Regarding withdrawal, 44.8% showed fashion bloggers averting their gaze, while 15.5% of the images and videos consisted of fashion bloggers gazing at the viewer. In 84.5% of posts, the style bloggers were facing the camera. In contrast, the blogger only covered her face in one post. Regarding body presentation, around 11.5% of the posts showed fashion bloggers wearing slightly revealing attire, and 88.5% fashion bloggers showed unrevealing clothing. No body revealing or naked posts were displayed by fashion bloggers. It was discovered that 11.5% of the shots somewhat emphasized the breast area, while 90.2% of the shots did not focus on the breast area. In contrast, bloggers wore bras in 65.1% of videos or images, 1.6% of them were braless, and 33.3% were unknown. The close shot (61.5%) and the medium shot (58.5%) were the two most popular types of shot. Only seven shots were cut in, and seven were wide. The camera angle in an image or video shows the perception of the person taking the shot. In this research, it was found that 21.5% of images were taken from a high angle, 10.8% from a low angle, while 93.8% of the images and videos were captured from an eye level. Only 32 posts stick to the rule of thirds, as most of the style bloggers, approximately 97%, were positioned in the center of the images and videos. When looking at the external relationships, 92% of the Instagram posts utilized the Tag with @ brand feature, which was frequently placed in the posts. In this study's analysis of all posts, 28% of the posts featured people tags, and 2% featured other tags. In contrast, bloggers left out hashtags from 20 postings. The captions of posts contain the hashtag and @. Compared to Brand (56.8%) and People (2.7%), other hashtags had the highest percentage (62.2%). Only four posts lacked any mentions for @. However, the most common type of @ in these posts was @ Brand. The bloggers' preferred style of clothing was Western (34 entries), followed by Eastern (31 entries). Paid or collaborative posts comprised 70.4% of all posts, while unpaid or non-collaborative ones comprised 29.6%.

Discussion

This study focused on style bloggers who were young Asian Pakistani women with disciplined physiques, with no overweight individuals included. This supports the consistency of traditional and post-feminist beauty ideals. However, through the posts of these fashion bloggers, researchers noted a rise in awareness of women's rights. The analysis showed that 96.9% of the posts featured normal poses, with bloggers avoiding suggestive stances. Moreover, these bloggers predominantly wore modest clothing, with minimal emphasis on the breast area in their images and videos. This aligns with post-feminist principles, indicating they do not rely on sexual body displays.

According to Goffman, women can express both independence and vulnerability through body language, directing viewers' attention by shifting their bodies (Goffman, 1979). Nonetheless, researchers found that style bloggers' direct eye contact with the camera was nearly as common as averting their gaze. This contradicts Goffman's theory, which suggests women are depicted as less powerful than men. Furthermore, Goffman posits that feminine touch implies women are delicate, frail, and sexually accessible (Goffman, 1979). The study's findings, however, challenge this conclusion, suggesting that fashion bloggers prefer to portray themselves as independent women, defying stereotypes and societal expectations. A surprising finding was that all fashion bloggers opted for Western attire in their personal or non-collaborative posts despite being from Asian and Eastern backgrounds. They wore Eastern clothing primarily for paid or collaborative campaigns. This indicates a shift in Pakistani society, with a preference for modest, simple, and comfortable clothing, whether Western or Eastern.

Researchers also found that fashion bloggers actively used hashtags and the @ brand feature to establish external connections. This feature allows bloggers to form subtle and latent relationships with commercial brands. Close and medium shots were popular for their composition, offering more detail and perspective. Bloggers favored shots where individuals were centered and taken at eye level.

Additionally, fashion bloggers aim to build relationships with specific commercial businesses for promotional purposes. This strategy helps them secure social and financial resources through collaboration. Bloggers frequently used hashtags or tagged others, such as friends, family, and influential figures, leveraging their popularity to enhance visibility and create awareness. The study found that solo portraits garnered more engagement regarding self-presentation. Posts featuring friends, family, or loved ones also attracted more attention, as they conveyed familiarity and relatability to the audience. Another trend observed was that personal posts without tags, hashtags, or @ mentions had the most significant impact in terms of engagement, such as comments and likes. Even brand collaborations with a personal touch were highly popular.

Tag and @ People is a useful tool for connecting people with others when it comes to technology functions. Considering that the number of times the audience views a post is a good indicator of online performance, employing hashtags is another efficient strategy to broaden exposure, boost page views, and build popularity.

Instagram has evolved in the previous two years to favor short videos over still images. Reels made up 86.5% of the posts examined. Only ten postings contained images. As a result, bloggers develop more interesting techniques to produce fresh, distinct, and competitive material. The most frequently used were transition reels. A single 30-second reel contains more items and content than a single image can, which suggests that it gives brands greater exposure, implying increasing brand exposure.

This study bridged the knowledge gap in how people brand themselves and represent themselves on social media. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to scientifically evaluate how Pakistan's most influential style bloggers employ technology features to draw viewers and build their brands. To better comprehend self-branding on social media, researchers specifically reexamined Goffman's gender advertisements paradigm. This study indicated that the conventional model for self-branding practice and self-presentation, which has been widely utilized in media research, should be re-evaluated, and revised according to the digital medium because social media gives power to the people to portray and present themselves differently and goes beyond the frame of the traditional limitations imposed on women.

This study suggests that technological features of social media enable users to express their authentic and true selves, which results in online popularity. Moreover, this research provides insights into the significance of social media in the promotion of oneself as a brand in the digital space where ordinary people can turn into online celebrities. Researchers can use the mentioned coding schemes to test, validate, and improve the framework for traditional gender advertisements in a variety of online domains.

In this study, Researchers have offered some tips for social media users who desire to attract a large audience and become popular. By frequently publishing images or videos of their family or friends, for instance, they can boost the authenticity of their post content and draw more attention from their audience to the compositional components. Sharing personal experiences, ideas, or challenges and triumphs with the audience can establish a connection with them. Additionally, they can broaden their reach online by utilizing hashtags, and to uphold a brand's unity, each post on an Instagram account should adhere to the same tone and style. Additionally, establishing cordial ties with other closely connected niche brands has a leveraging effect of promoting the branded selves.

Recommendations

This study is empirically restricted to Pakistan's top fashion/style bloggers within the context of Pakistan, based on the data observed for one month. Moreover, the findings are strictly limited to the data from the style bloggers' Instagram feed posts. The future researchers can benefit from longitudinal research and from studying the findings of global fashion blogging across different social media platforms.

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