

**“The Role of Visual Centric Social Media Marketing in Enhancing Brand Engagement
among Local Fashion SMEs in Metropolitan Cities of Pakistan”**



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Author's Declaration

I, Madeeha Saleem, Enrollment Number 01-322241-008, hereby declare that the thesis titled *“The Role of Visual-Centric Social Media Marketing in Enhancing Brand Engagement among Local Fashion SMEs in Metropolitan Cities of Pakistan”* is my original work. This thesis has not been submitted previously by me for the award of any degree at Bahria University Islamabad or any other institution in Pakistan or abroad. I fully understand that should any part of this declaration be found to be wrong, even after the conferment of the degree, the University holds the right to revoke my MBA degree.

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Plagiarism Undertaking

I solemnly declare that the research work presented in this thesis, titled “*The Role of Visual-Centric Social Media Marketing in Enhancing Brand Engagement among Local Fashion SMEs in Metropolitan Cities of Pakistan*”, is entirely my own, and no significant contribution has been made by any individual other than myself. Any minor assistance or support received during this work has been properly acknowledged. I confirm that I have written the entire thesis independently.

I fully acknowledge the **zero-tolerance policy** of the **Higher Education Commission (HEC)** and **Bahria University Islamabad** regarding plagiarism. As the sole author of this thesis, I hereby declare that the work presented is entirely original. All sources of information and ideas borrowed from others have been properly cited and referenced under academic standards.

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(Madeeha Saleem)

Dedication

To

My beloved Parents, for showing me what it means to empower daughters,

My dedicated teachers, that taught me the value of effort and hard work,

My siblings, for bringing joy to my life whenever I forgot to smile,

&

To my biggest supporter that gave me the strength to persevere through countless nights,

My dearest Mother.

Table of Contents

	Acknowledgement	III
	Author's Declaration	IV
	Plagiarism Undertaking	V
	Dedication	VI
	Abstract	1
	Chapter 1	3
1.1	Introduction	3
1.2	Background of the Study	6
1.3	Research Gap	7
1.4	Problem Statement	7
1.5	Research Questions	7
1.6	Research Objectives	8
1.7	Hypothesis	8
1.8	Significance of the Study	9
	Chapter 2	
	Literature Review	11
2.1	Evolution of Social Media in Fashion Marketing	11
2.2	Theoretical Foundations of Visual Communication in Fashion Marketing	13
2.3	Visual-Centric SMM Dimensions	16
2.4	Brand Engagement in Digital Spaces	19
2.5	Contextual Factors	21
2.6	Synthesis and Critical Research Gaps	25
2.7	Theoretical Support	26
2.8	Theoretical Synthesis and Model Development	38

2.9	Conceptual Frame Work	41
	CHAPTER 3	
	Methodology	42
3.1	Research Design	42
3.2	Data	42
3.3	Sample Criteria and Justification	42
3.4	Variable Measurements	43
3.5	Estimation Techniques	44
	CHAPTER 4	
	ANALYSIS	45
4.1	Descriptive Analysis	45
4.2	Correlational Analysis	46
4.3	Regression Analysis	47
	CHAPTER 5	
	Conclusion and Recommendation	49
5.1	Summary of Key Findings and Discussion	49
5.2	Conclusion	50
5.3	Recommendations	51
5.4	Research Limitations	52
5.5	Future Directions	52
	REFERENCES	54

List of Annexures

Annexure 1	Consent Form	77
Annexure 2	Demographic Sheet	78
Annexure 3	Questionnaire	79

Abstract

This study focuses on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Pakistan's metropolitan cities, investigating the role of Visual-Centric Social Media Marketing (VCSMM) in driving Consumer-Brand Engagement (CBE). The vast body of literature in the field has overlooked the specific visual dimensions of social media marketing within the resource-constrained, culturally distinct context of emerging market SMEs. This research tries to fill that gap while proposing and testing a novel model where Visual Trendiness (the stylishness of content) and Visual Electronic Word-of-Mouth (customer-shared photos/videos) are antecedents to Brand Engagement. Conceptualized as a triad of Cognitive Processing, Affection, and Activation. Crucially, the model positions Visual Interaction (liking, commenting) not merely as an outcome but as the central mediating mechanism.

The study follows a quantitative, cross-sectional design grounded in an integrated theoretical framework of Media Richness Theory and the Consumer-Brand Engagement framework. A structured online survey was used to collect data from 296 social media users in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad/Rawalpindi who follow local fashion SMEs. Descriptive statistics, correlation, and multiple regression in SPSS were used to analyze the data leading to robust findings.

The results supported the claim that both Visual Trendiness and Visual EWOM are significant positive predictors of all three engagement dimensions. However, the paramount importance of Visual Interaction was only revealed once it was introduced into the regression models. It significantly increased each model's explanatory power and attenuated the direct effects of the primary visual stimuli, emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .426$ to $.494$). Specifically, it was also revealed that trendy visuals drive consumer actions only by first stimulating interactive engagement while the path from Visual Trendiness to Activation

becomes non-significant. This delineates a clear engagement pathway: visual stimuli (Trendiness, EWOM) → interactive Visual Interaction → multidimensional Brand Engagement.

Theoretically, the study contributes significantly by deconstructing VCSMM into specific constructs, using an underexplored context to validate them, and identifying Visual Interaction as a critical mediator, thereby refining the CBE framework. Practically, for SME marketers, it provides an actionable blueprint that shifts the strategic imperative from production of high-quality visuals to content with interaction-provoking designs that leverage cultural resonance and user-generated proof to activate community dialogue. The findings highlight that in Pakistan's digital fashion economy, competitive advantage lies not in polished aesthetics alone but in mastering the psychology of visual interaction to build sustainable brand relationships.

Key Words: *Visual Interaction, Visual Trendiness, Brand Engagement, Cognitive Processions*

Chapter 1:

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

With the introduction and expansion of the social media into the business world, the global marketing paradigm has shifted, altering the way in which brands, especially those in the fashion industry, would communicate with consumers (Kim and Ko, 2012). This shift gains support from the rise of visual based platforms like Instagram, pinterest, Tik Tok, and Facebook where image, video, and aesthetic narratives play a more active role as compared to the previous dominance of text based platforms (De Vries et al., 2012). In the case of the fashion industry, the existence of which relies heavily on image and style presentation, and aspirational identity, this change is rather existential (Phua et al., 2017). The method of consumption of fashion has been transformed into something more complicated as the social and identity-signaling behaviour infuses with visual content that is carefully edited on digital feeds (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2015). Brands around the world focus on creating a powerful brand narrative, inspiring communities, and prompting engagement and purchase using quality images, influencer associations, and interactivity (Lou and Xie, 2020).

At the same time, the small and medium-sized business (SMEs) forming the foundation of the global economy have discovered an efficient and inexpensive means of creating a leveled playing field among the larger and better-endowed competitors through social media (Durkin et al., 2013). In the case of SMEs, social media marketing presents unparalleled possibilities of reaching a larger, more focused target audience, interacting with the customer directly, and building the brand at a fraction of the high costs of conventional mass media (Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). In the fashion industry, where responsiveness, being able to follow trends, and direct relations with consumers it proves to be a relevant key resource that SMEs can successfully utilize (Borges-Tiago et al., 2021).

Pakistan proves to be an exceptional and interesting case in this international context. With a long history of textiles and craftsmanship spanning from the multifaceted embroideries of Multan and Sindh to the modern pret (ready-to-wear) designs that were embraced in the urban centers the fashion sector in the country is a dynamic and important branch of the economy (Ahmed & Shafique, 2020). The epicenters of this industry are Pakistani metropolitan cities, Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad/Rawalpindi. They also harbor a high concentration of local fashion SMEs that serve increasingly digitally-sensitive, young, and large urban middle-class that is growing fast (Husain et al., 2021). These SMEs are not only business enterprises, but also function as cultural representatives, where a distinctive Pakistani style is created by combining traditional motifs with modern silhouettes, finding their place both on the domestic and diasporic level.

The digital environment in Pakistan has grown rapidly. With more than 87 million broadband users and 116 million social media 3G/4G users, social media penetration is rapidly becoming sophisticated (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2023). The fashion discovery and commerce platform has moved to Instagram, where more than 16 million users, most of them aged 18-34 (DataReportal, 2023) spend their time. This group spends plenty of time actively watching the visual content on fashion, lifestyle, and personal identity (Raza et al., 2022). The functionalities of the platform such as Stories, Reels, Shopping tags have unified the process of discovery, evaluation and purchase, establishing a kind of a mini ecommerce ecosystem (Shah and Khan, 2023). To the local fashion SMEs, this transformative offer cuts short the traditional retail bottlenecks, creating direct to consumer (D2C) relationships and brand equity in an overcrowded market.

Though, there are important challenges that moderate the opportunity. The Pakistani SME sector is affected by the intricate environment, comprising of but not limited to infrastructural limitations (e.g., untrustworthy electricity, logistical challenges), economic fluctuations, and competition with both local market rivals and international fast-fashion brands and low-cost imports (Khan and Khan, 2021). Moreover, although the potential of social media is a universally accepted fact, not all local fashion SMEs are capable of composing an effective strategy. Most of their marketing activities are usually non-strategic and without professional visual content and a lack of serious consideration of the metrics that indicate meaningful engagements beyond the simple likes (Javed et al., 2022). It has been observed that there exists a sharp disconnect between the potential of visual-centric social media marketing (VCSMM) and its successful application by local SMEs to spur sustainable brand interaction.

The notion of brand engagement in the digital spaces has transformed into an active, multidimensional concept for which the attention is a passive metric. It can be described as the cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment that a consumer makes into brand interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2014). This, in the context of the social media, amounts to liking, commenting, sharing, saving content, taking part in the polls, and, finally, purchasing and recommending the brand (Dessart et al., 2015). The active aspect is the key to the difference between the simple brand awareness and brand loyalty; it creates a feeling of community, co-creation, and emotional attachment (Brodie et al., 2013). In the case of fashion SMEs, it is of paramount importance to develop high engagement to establish brand legitimacy, prompt a repeat buy, and produce invaluable electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in an environment where peer-to-peer recommendations are hugely important (Ismail, 2017).

This paper is theoretically based on Media Richness Theory (Daft and Lengel, 1986) and Consumer-Brand Engagement (CBE) Framework (Hollebeek et al., 2014). The Media Richness Theory is the view that the communication media have different capabilities to convey rich information and reduce ambiguity. Visual-based platforms are rich media due to the fact that they are used to convey several cues (images, colour, movement) at once, deliver immediate feedback (likes, comments) and invoke a personal emphasis thereby making them incredibly powerful in the subjective and emotional sphere of fashion marketing (Mollen and Wilson, 2010). CBE Framework gives the framework on how to understand the outcome variable where the positing is based on the assumption that the interaction between the brand experiences causes the state of engagement which results to value co-creation.

Although there is the increasing literature on social media marketing and brand engagement at the international level, there is still a high level of contextual and conceptual gap with regard to the local fashion SMEs of the metropolitan cities in Pakistan. The available studies have mainly centered on:

1. Western brands or fashion conglomerates are large, old and established (Kim and Ko, 2012; Godey et al., 2016).
2. Social media marketing approaches that are generic without isolating the vital visual-centric aspect, which is the blood of the fashion communication (Ashley and Tuten, 2015).
3. In the developed economies, SMEs with less volatile infrastructure and consumer behavior patterns (Durkin et al., 2013; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015).
4. Pakistani situation in isolation, which tends to address the general SME issues or general trends in e-commerce with a lack of a specific and thorough analysis of the visual strategies in fashion (Husain et al., 2021; Raza et al., 2022).

Hence, no integrated study that specifically discusses the collective effects of the visual-centric items of social media marketing, including aesthetic quality, visual storytelling, interactive visual functionalities, trend-related visuals, and user-generated visual content (visual eWOM), on the multidimensional construct of brand engagement of local fashion SMEs in the distinct socio-cultural and economic setting of urban Pakistan, exists. The proposed research aims at bridging this important gap. It will seek to go beyond generic prescriptions and give a more finer, evidence-based insight on what visual strategies will most resonate with the Pakistani metropolitan consumer, how they translate into greater engagement, and what particular challenges the SMEs encounter in this effort. In such a way, the study will add to the theoretical knowledge base in the area of digital marketing and the management of SMEs in the emerging economies, and it will provide real-life tips that can be applied to the community of young fashion entrepreneurs that runs one of the most active creative industries in Pakistan.

1.2 Research Gap

Even though in the global literature, the factors of social media marketing, including interaction, EWOM, and trendiness, have a strong impact on the consumer-brand engagement, very few studies isolate the elements of visual-centric aspect of the factors. Fashion is a very visual enterprise, particularly in a developing market as in Pakistan, but again no empirical research has been done to explore the relationship among visual appeal, visual information quality, visual interactivity, visual trendiness, and visual EWOM, and brand engagement.

Furthermore:

- Previous research is biased with the majority of international brands or high-involvement technological products such as smartphones; there is a gap in research on local fashion SMEs, which heavily depend on Instagram, Tik Tok and Facebook images.
- There is no current study that focuses on this relationship in metropolitan cities in Pakistan, and the rate of digital uptake and fashion consumers are quite different.
- The existing research quantifies the overall SMM and not the visual-focused strategy, although images prove to be more persuasive in fashion marketing.

Therefore, the gap is in the lack of the visual-based model of SMM as a predictor of brand involvement in the local Pakistani fashion SME sector..

1.3 Problem Statement

In Pakistan, local fashion SMEs are increasingly using social media that are heavy in visuals to interact with consumers. Nevertheless, in spite of excessive investment in visual content development, a significant number of brands do not reach the meaningful brand engagement. The literature in the world reference has identified some of the SMM elements that determine engagement, but no research has been performed on how the visual-based versions of these elements work in the cultural, economic and competitive environment of the Pakistani fashion SMEs. This empirical blindness poses a problem with SMEs: they are unaware of what visual content strategies are actually generating brand engagement, and the marketing is being inefficient and the level of customer relationships is low.

1.4 Research Questions

The main research question is as follows:

1. What is the effect of visual-centric social media marketing in brand engagement by consumers in local fashion SMEs in metropolis cities in Pakistan?

The sub-questions of the study are as follows:

1. What is the impact of visual interactivity on the brand engagement of the consumers?
2. What is the impact of visual trendiness on consumer brand engagement?
3. What is the impact of visual electronic word-of-mouth (visual EWOM) on the brand engagement among consumers?

1.5 Research Objectives

The main objective of the study is:

1. To investigate the effect of visual-based social media marketing in increasing brands engagement in the context of local fashion SMEs in metropolitan Pakistan.

The sub-objectives of the study are stated as follows:

1. To determine the impact of visual interactivity on brand engagement.
2. To determine the impact of visual trendiness on brand engagement.
3. To determine the impact of visual EWOM on brand engagement.

1.6 Hypothesis

1. H1: Visual Interactivity influences positively and significantly Brand Engagement.
2. H2: There exists a positive and significant relationship between Visual Trendiness and Brand Engagement.
3. H3: The positive and significant effect of Visual EWOM on Brand Engagement is positive.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The study is of much importance because it covers a key intersection between a radical global marketing event and the relatively untapped reality of the key economic sector in an emerging economy. In theory it is novel in its contribution to a deconstructed concept of visual-centric dimensions of social media marketing, the Visual Appeal, Information Quality, Interactivity, Trendiness, and Electronic Word-of-Mouth. This narrows a significant void in the literature as much of it has considered social media marketing as a generic concept despite the fact that the fashion industry is based on imagery. In addition, the research also presents itself as a significant contextual experiment to the already established theories such as Media Richness and Consumer-Brand Engagement in the specific socio-cultural and economic environment of urban Pakistan. It examines the implications of these theories in the case of limited resources and collectivist trust processes that mediate consumer behavior, to complement scholarly knowledge of the boundary conditions and their applicability in a non-Western, SME-based setting.

In practice, the results offer an evidence-based and much-needed framework to local fashion SME owners and marketers who in most cases have restricted resources and strategic focus. The study provides a concise roadmap on how to maximize content strategies by determining which dimensions of visual representations that, in particular, Visual EWOM and Visual Information Quality, have the strongest influence on meaningful engagement. It instructs SMEs to focus on real, community-driven images and informative description and not an expensive production that builds trust and perceived risk in a competitive digital marketplace. This practical wisdom will enable entrepreneurs to develop greater customer relationship and attain sustainable growth. The study is also useful to digital marketing instructors, consultants, and policy makers as it will allow them to create area-specific training

programs, services, and support programs based on localized empirical evidence, as opposed to generic models imported.

The research has larger socio-economic and cultural implications in addition to short-term business use. Fashion SMEs occupy a significant portion of the Pakistani economy in terms of job creation and preservation of the rich artisanal culture. The research creates employment, formalization of the economy, and preservation of cultural crafts based on commercial feasibility by opening opportunities through which such businesses can succeed in the digital realm. It shows how the traditional motifs can be conveyed to the current audience so that they remain relevant. Finally, through delivering a subtle insight into how visual storytelling can be used to drive brand engagement in the metropolitan centers of Pakistan, the present study can serve as an invaluable resource in terms of supporting the growth of an imaginative business that can become one of the keystones of the digital economy in the country.

1.8 Scheme of the Study

The research methodology of this research will be patterned as an explanatory sequential mixed research study, which is based on a pragmatic research philosophy placing emphasis on the issue of research and attaching importance to the measurement objectively and the contextual comprehension. The research process is carried out in two phases. The first, and the most fundamental stage is the quantitative one, where the deductive method is used to prove a hypothesized model. The data is gathered through a purposely sampled population of 308 social media users aged 18-45 in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad/Rawalpindi through a structured and self administered online questionnaire, which focuses on following local fashion SMEs. The survey tool will make use of confirmed Likert scale assessments to measure consumer attitudes towards the five independent factors of Visual Appeal, Visual Information Quality, Visual Interactivity and Visual Trendiness and their self-reported attitudes of

cognitive, affective as well as behavioral Brand Engagement. To determine both the reliability and validity of the measurement model and to test the statistical significance and strength of the postulated paths, this quantitative data is used on the partial least squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) of SmartPLS software.

The follow-up, qualitative step that follows is inductive and aimed at explaining, elaborating and contextualizing the quantitative findings. This step will entail face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 18 owners or marketing managers of the local fashion SMEs that are located in the target cities, and they have been chosen so that there is a business size and specialty diversity. At the same time, systematic analysis of the content of the social media feeds of these participating SMEs is carried out in a one-month period through the use of a structured codebook. Thematic analysis of qualitative data in transcripts and content notes is performed with the help of NVivo software to determine emergent trends, strategies, and challenges. The essence of the scheme is the combination of these two strands; the qualitative results are interpreted with the help of the qualitative findings and offer deeper, thicker explanations of the quantitative ones, including the explanation of why Visual EWOM has become the strongest predictor or how the resource constraints influence the implementation of Visual Appeal. The validity and richness of the conclusions becomes stronger with this triangulation of the findings, which make sure that the research presents not only statistical evidence of the relationships, but also the grounded conception of the operational realities of these relationships in the narrow context of Pakistani metropolitan fashion SMEs.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Evolution of Social Media in Fashion Marketing

The Visual Turn From Textual to Visual Dominance in Digital Communication

There has been a paradigmatic change in digital marketing environment where textual communication has been supplanted by a visual interactive environment which has fundamentally changed the brand consumer relations (Muntinga et al., 2011). The young internet age (1990s-early 2000s) was defined by communication through texts, in which websites and email marketing were used to carry out brand communication. Though, as broadband internet and smartphone use was spreading, visual communication became the dominant form of digital communication (De Vries et al., 2012). This visual shift is especially acute in fashion marketing, where the products are almost all experiential and sensual (Phua et al., 2017). The studies have shown that a human brain processes visual content 60,000 times quicker than a text, and it is essential in catching attention in digital media where information overloads the human brain (Choi and Taylor, 2014).

The change was boosted by the introduction of the visually-oriented launch. Pinterest (2010) implemented the idea of visual bookmarking, Instagram (2010) made filtered photography popular, and Tik Tok (2016) transformed the content of short-form video (Muller and Christandl, 2019). This development is a kind of what Kietzmann et al. (2011) call the visual honeycomb of the social media functionality where visual image is the layer on which all other activities on the platform would occur. Fashion brands, which for a long time preferred

visual catalog and runway shows, naturally came into these platforms, forming what Ashley and Teten (2015) term the visual imperative in digital fashion communication.

Platform-Specific Evolution and Affordances

The various platforms have also come up with different visual cultures that fashion brands have to manoeuvre through. Instagram turned into an advanced e-commerce platform, featuring Shopping tags, Reels, and Guides, to make it a so-called visual discovery-to-purchase funnel as defined by Shah and Khan (2023). The influence of aesthetically coherent feeds ranking used by the platform has forced companies to create such a thing that I would call visual brand consistency - a strategic selection of content that upholds aesthetic consistency across postings (De Vries et al., 2012).

Tik Tok is a more modern but revolutionary move, especially to fashion SMEs. It focuses on creation of fashion content that is more authentic and relatable over production quality, democratizing the fashion content creation (Muller & Christandl, 2019). The features of duet and stitch in the platform provide what we (Hudson et al., 2016) call participatory fashion discourse, in which users do not receive or passively consume brand content, but actively engage with it. This is a complete change to what can be described as a form of broadcast fashion to conversational fashion.

Although Facebook is not as visually focused as newer platforms, Groups and Marketplace integration should play an essential role in community building by using visual storytelling (Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015). Both environments provide what Gibson (1979) came to theorize as affordances, which are opportunities of action that influence the nature of interactions between the brands and the consumer in their visual form. Evans et al. (2017) apply this to the social media, where the researchers mark out the main visual affordances such as

editability, visibility, association, and persistence, which fashion-based businesses exploit variously between platforms.

The Visual Turn in Emerging Markets: The Pakistani Context

The fashion marketing visual turn is unique in a developing market such as Pakistan. Whereas Western markets have suffered a gradual process of substituting their print catalogues with digital image, Pakistani fashion SMEs tend to jump over the conventional marketing channels altogether (Husain et al., 2021). Such a fast adoption brings opportunities as well as challenges. The lack of legacy print marketing infrastructure implies that SMEs do not have predefined visual brand guidelines, and the limitation to use creative visual formats is few (Raza et al., 2022).

The visual social media in Pakistan is marked with what I describe as platform pluralism - the presence of various platforms used at the same time to accomplish various things. Instagram is the main visual storefront, WhatsApp helps to share collections with loyal customers privately with the help of visuals, Facebook Groups help people discuss visual content in communities, and Tik Tok promotes the discovery of visuals on the basis of viral trends (Shah and Khan, 2023). The resources needed to implement this multi-platform visual strategy are not always available in many SMEs, resulting in a conflict between the opportunity and capability which is the central issue of the research.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations of Visual Communication in Fashion Marketing

Cognitive Processing of Visual Stimuli: Beyond Media Richness Theory

The Media Richness Theory (Daft and Lengel, 1986) has dominated traditional conceptualization of the digital marketing visual communication by conceptualizing that richer media (characterized by multiple cues, immediate feedback, personal focus, and natural language) are more effective to reduce ambiguity. Nevertheless, this theory has shortcomings

in the explanation of the current dynamics of social media. MRT, as Evans et al. (2017) suggest, was created in the organizational communication setting and fails to take into account the interactive and network nature of social media.

What is more pertinent is the Affordance Theory (Gibson, 1979) that studies what a technology can or cannot do. Registered in the framework of visual social media marketing, these platforms support particular visual behaviors: Instagram supports filtered, aesthetically edited images; Tik Tok supports genuine and user-created video; Pinterest supports aspirational visual collection (Muller and Christandl, 2019). These affordances not only influence what the content brands communicate, but also how it is consumed by consumers. In the case of fashion SMEs, platform affordances are important to resource allocation - which visual actions will give the most payoff to the scarce marketing resources.

Another important theory that can be used to interpret the processing of visual information is Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988). This happens because fashion products that are offered on the internet impose intrinsic cognitive load (knowledge about the product itself), extraneous load (navigating the display) and germane load (making decisions using the information) (Fiore et al., 2005). Good visual content reduces the unnecessary load, and maximizes germane load. In a scenario where Pakistani consumers have to make some decisions regarding fashion purchase despite information asymmetry regarding quality and suitability, a visual content with lower perception of cognitive load but with reasonable information is especially worthy (Ismail, 2017).

Emotional Engagement through Imagery: The Neuroscience Perspective

The use of visuals in fashion marketing works more on the emotional than rational persuasion channels. Research on neuroscience proves that positive affective responses are formed by appealing visual stimuli that stimulate the reward centers of the brain, specifically

the nucleus accumbens (Choi and Taylor, 2014). This neuro-aesthetic reaction plays an important role in fashion marketing, in which buying behavior is often motivated by desire and not by utility (Seo and Buchanan-Oliver, 2015).

Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppa, 1986) assists in explaining the way in which the visual content aids in peripheral and central route processing. The aesthetically attractive visuals frequently become superfluous cues of fashion marketing that generate instant affective reactions (Park et al., 2015). But in the case of considered purchases, especially in markets such as Pakistan where perceived risk is high, central route processing is also involved, where consumers are required to have substantive visual data regarding quality, craftsmanship and suitability (Ahmed and Shafique, 2020). Successful visual messages of fashion SMEs should therefore have a balance in that aesthetic appeal (peripheral route) and clarity in information (central route).

The theory of Emotional Contagion (Hatfield et al., 1993) also elaborates how visual content can be used to make people engage. Visual stories can be transferred to consumers when fashion brands provide them with particular feelings - pride in the cultural background, happiness in partying, self-expression confidence - which can be transferred through visual imitation and social referencing (Hudson et al., 2016). This becomes especially influential in the collectivist cultures such as that of Pakistan, where emotional conditions are usually circulated in the social spheres (Ismail, 2017).

Social and Cultural Dimensions of Visual Consumption

The consumption of fashion is social and culturally ingrained meaning that visual material is an invaluable place of identity formation and the expression of social meaning. The Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) is that people derive self-conception through memberships in groups and fashion is the visible sign of this memberships. Consumers can use

visual content to undertake identity work - to indicate their membership in specific social, cultural, or religious groupings by influencing and sharing brand images (Seo and Buchanan-Oliver, 2015).

In the Pakistani situation, this identity signaling is done by means of a particular visual code. Small fashion is not simply about wearing something covering but is also about conveying images of religious and cultural beliefs visually (Ahmed & Shafique, 2020). Such conventional patterns as phulkari embroidery or ajrak designs are used as visual signs of regional and cultural identity. Fusion wear symbolically compromises between modern and traditional identities in the present times. When fashion SMEs are aware of these visual codes, they are able to produce content that is able to connect with identity projects of target audiences.

The Social Proof Theory (Cialdini, 1984) is especially applicable to the explanation of the strength of visual Electronic Word-of-Mouth (EWOM). When buying in an uncertain case - as is common with online fashion shopping - people use the behavior of others as a reference point. Visual EWOM (photos of customers, try-on videos, unboxing videos) offers strong social evidence as it shows actual users putting products to use and endorsing them (Schouten et al., 2020). It is even more pronounced in collectivist societies such as the one in Pakistan, in which the opinion of an in-group is exceptionally strong (Ismail, 2017).

Theoretical Gaps in Non-Western Contexts

The existing theoretical models used to explain visual fashion marketing are biased towards the west. A majority of the theories were created and experimented in individualistic, low-context societies where consumer behavior exhibits other trends as compared to collectivist, high-context societies such as those in Pakistan (Hofstede, 2001). An example is that the theories of visual persuasion focusing on individual aesthetic reaction might not

sufficiently highlight the social and relationship aspect that prevails in the collectivist society (Ismail, 2017).

Moreover, the majority of the theories presuppose some infrastructural requirements, including the availability of the reliable internet, smartphone penetration, digital literacy that do not clearly reflect on emergent markets. The fashion SMEs in Pakistan and their clients operate in what might be called infrastructural heterogeneity - different access and capability which define the production and distribution and consumption of visual content (Khan and Khan, 2021). Theoretical frameworks should take into consideration such heterogeneity as opposed to homogenous conditions.

There is need to have an integration of several theoretical perspectives. This study does not rely on either of the theories, but, to develop a holistic picture of the visual-based marketing of social media in the specific context of Pakistan, it may be referred to as a theoretical mosaic - taking the insights of the affordance theory, social identity theory, social proof theory, and elaboration likelihood model to build a complete picture of the issue.

2.3 Visual-Centric SMM Dimensions: Conceptual Deconstruction

Production-Centric Dimensions: Beyond Surface Aesthetics

The most obvious aspect of visual-centric SMM is Visual Quality and Aesthetics. But, modern conceptualizations tend to merge technical quality of production with aesthetic quality. Technical quality denotes the skill of resolution, light, composition, and editing, and the aesthetic appeal includes the subjective opinion concerning beauty, harmony, and stylistic integrity (Park et al., 2015). This is a critical difference in the case of fashion SMEs. A high level of production quality needs resources (equipment, software, skills), which many do not possess, whereas aesthetic appeal can be attained with creativity in styling, genuine settings, and cultural connection despite the lack of technical resources (Borges-Tiago et al., 2021).

The studies indicate that there is an inverted U-correlation between quality of production and involvement in SMEs. Over-polished content of small brands can cause authenticity issues, and the extreme low-quality content does not indicate professionalism (Schouten et al., 2020). The best point will depend on brand positioning and target audience. There could be a greater production value requirement of luxury-oriented SMEs, whereas brands with a stronger focus on the artisanal authenticity might be more inclined to use more raw and unpolished images, which could indicate the quality of handmade products (Beverland, 2005).

Visual Consistency and Brand Identity are an aspect that is under-researched critically. Although large brands have rigid visuals, SMEs do not have the strategic savvy or resources to continue to have uniform visual branding. Nevertheless, all that can be built with time is visual consistency - color palette, editing, composition, model selection, etc. - which creates brand recognition and trust (De Vries et al., 2012). Visual consistency in a congested Pakistani digital fashion market can be used to reduce clutter and allow SMEs to generate what I would call a scroll-stopping recognition - a visual recognition immediately in the face of endless competing content.

The Professional vs. Authentic Visuals Dichotomy puts SMEs through a strategic dilemma. Professional images indicate professionalism and excellence but demand resources and might seem detached. Real images (behind-the-scenes, unedited, user-generated) are more relatable and trustworthy, but they can lose their polish (Schouten et al., 2020). This tension has to pass through cultural limitations to which Pakistani fashion SMEs have to find their way. As an example, highly refined studio photography of small-scale clothing may be of professional quality and still lack how clothes appear in real-life situations, which is essential information to the customers (Ahmed & Shafique, 2020).

Content-Centric Dimensions: Story, Trend, and Culture

Visual Storytelling converts product displays to stories. Pakistani fashion SMEs can use distinctive storytelling opportunities about preserving crafts, family background, and the celebration of cultures where large brands tend to narrate aspirational tales about the way of life and the identity (Hudson et al., 2016). Images of craftsmen at work, designers detailing the use of historical images, or clients in clothes they wear during cultural events establish emotional links among people that do not rely on the transactions they make. This is consistent with what Napoli et al. (2014) refer to as a form of heritage branding - the use of true stories as competitive edge.

Trend Integration, Visual Innovation is a middle way between SMEs. Adherence to visual trends (filter effects, composition styles, content type) is an indicator of relevance, but homogeneity. Visual innovation development creates uniqueness but involves creativity and risk (Godey et al., 2016). Another challenge to the Pakistani fashion SMEs is the incorporation of fashion trends across the world with the local cultural relevance. An image fashion across borders may violate domestic standards of modesty or beauty, and it may have to be adjusted instead of copied (Ismail, 2017).

The most important dimension that Pakistani fashion SMEs may need is Cultural Localization and Visual Translation. Responsive visual contents do not merely include local products but they will be talking using culturally-coded visual language. These involve comprehending color symbolism (green to Eid, red to a wedding), setting (home or studio, urban or rural setting), model (diversity in skin tones, body shapes, hairstyling that is respectful of modesty standards), and the time of the year (festivals collections, summer vs. winter) (Ahmed and Shafique, 2020). Culturally intelligent visual content, as opposed to cultural representation, creates more resonance with target audiences.

Interaction-Centric Dimensions: From Broadcast to Dialogue

Interactive Visual Features denote a shift of the visual broadcast to the visual dialogue. Features in the platform such as polls, quizzes, questions, and sliders in the Stories make passive viewing an active one (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). These functions and attributes provide fashion SMEs with low cost market research, co-creation and amplification of engagement. Nevertheless, they have to work or rather they need to be responsive to the organization, SMEs need to respond on the feedback and continue the interface otherwise, the interactivity may bring expectations that remain unfulfilled and therefore ruins relationships instead of creating them.

There are several purposes of User-Generated Visual Content (UGC): social proof, community building, and content co-creation. By posting photos of customers in SME products, they will have more credible testimonials than those generated by the brand, which is authentic (Schouten et al., 2020). By reposting UGC (with permission), the community is built by congratulating customers, giving free content, and motivating more UGC by social praising. The collectivist culture of Pakistan places particular emphasis on UGC because it is a part of the social networks, and not the brand (Ismail, 2017).

VSPMs are not limited to UGC and can also be visual signs of popularity and approval. Social proofs in the form of countdown stickers with restricted number, badge on the product images indicating that it is a bestseller, even the display of the number of purchases are all examples of social proofs (Cialdini, 1984). Live shopping videos that demonstrate the purchases in real time create an urgency by being visible through social validation. The mechanisms are of special significance to SMEs that develop trust in the markets that are perceived to have a high risk of online buying (Husain et al., 2021).

Platform-Centric Dimensions: Strategic Optimization

Platform-Specific Visual Optimization acknowledges that every platform possesses a unique visual norms, formats and algorithms. Instagram focuses on aesthetic unity of grids and high-quality still images in the feeds, whereas it prefers authentic and vertical video in Reels (Muller & Christandl, 2019). Tik Tok does not value high quality of production, quick editing and being part of the trends with duets and stitches. Facebook appreciates the community building images in the Groups and product clarity in the Marketplace. SMEs need to maximize images on each platform instead of cross-posting the same post although they have limited resources.

An important dimension that is not thoroughly studied is Algorithmic Literacy and Visual Strategy. Platform algorithms control what visual content is visible to whom, depending on engagement indicators, a relevance score, and user behavioral patterns (De Vries et al., 2012). The basic understanding of algorithms is what SMEs require - that saving and sharing is more valuable than a like, that time spent watching a video counts, that consistency is important to reach. Without this literacy, the creation of visual content would be more of guesswork and not strategy.

Cross-Platform Visual Cohesion is a challenge of ensuring the brand identity shared between platforms with varying visual needs. A fashion SME may have to alter the same line to Instagram to fit into its curated content, TikTok into its authentic content, and Facebook into its community-oriented content but with similar recognizable visual branding. This involves a planned approach and not an improvised solution, and this is very difficult to the SMEs with limited resources.

2.4 Brand Engagement in Digital Spaces: From Vanity Metrics to Value Creation

Conceptual Evolution: From Passive Attention to Active Investment

Brand engagement is a concept that has undergone a tremendous change since the initial digital marketing metrics based on the reach and frequency. The first methods quantified what might be described as a passive attention, namely, views, impressions, the number of followers (Dessart et al., 2015). Nevertheless, these vanity measures were not effective predictors of business performance, and more advanced engagement constructs were created.

The framework by Hollebeek et al. (2014) contained a basic framework of Consumer-Brand Engagement (CBE) as a multidimensional construct that covers cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects. This was a paradigm shift of measuring what is seen by consumers to how they think, feel and behave about brands. This change is especially topical in fashion marketing since fashion is a product that can be purchased under the influence of identity, emotion, and social signaling (Seo and Buchanan-Oliver, 2015).

Later studies have also enhanced engagement conceptualization. Vivek et al. (2012) highlighted the experiential character of engagement, which is a psychological condition that is experienced when interacting with the brand. It is dynamic and iterative as Brodie et al. (2013) emphasized - engagement does not exist but grows due to repeated interactions. Calder et al. (2016) differentiated the interaction with the brand content and interaction with the brand, and they observed that not all of them are equally correlated with the latter.

The Engagement Funnel: From Awareness to Advocacy

In contemporary conceptualizations, engagement is seen to take place at multiple levels on what may be described as an engagement funnel. Passive engagement - liking, watching, following - as the simplest form of engagement demands few efforts, but it indicates preliminary interest (Dessart et al., 2015). Going further would be active engagement,

commenting, saving, which is more invested and an indication of more connection. The most profound is the co-creative (generating UGC), product development, brand advocacy - the complete psychological involvement in the brand relationship (Brodie et al., 2013).

In the case of fashion SMEs, knowledge of this funnel is important in strategic allocation of resources. There are various visual content strategies that are aimed at different levels of funnel. The visual trends that are catchy to the eye may produce passive (views, likes), interactive (comments, shares), and community-building (visual storytelling) engagement (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). The SMEs having fewer resources have to decide which level of funnel to focus on depending on the objectives of the business.

Measuring Engagement Beyond Vanity Metrics

The multidimensionality of engagement makes it a complex area requiring advanced measurement tools other than platform analytics. Cognitive involvement involves the evaluation of brand-related processing of thoughts, memory, and contemplation, and is frequently provided by the survey as opposed to behavioral monitoring (Hollebeek et al., 2014). The concept of emotional engagement is assessing affective reaction - inspiration, pride, connection - with the Likert scale (explicit) and a sentiment analysis of comments (implicit) (Brodie et al., 2013). Behavioral engagement refers to overt behaviors but must differentiate between low and high-value behaviors (likes and saves, shares, UGC creation, etc.) (Dessart et al., 2015).

Besides this, engagement measurement is more problematic to Pakistani fashion SMEs. Platform analytics could be missing cross-platform interaction (e.g. screenshots shared on WhatsApp) or personal interaction (saves to be used later) (Shah and Khan, 2023). There are cultural differences in the expression of engagement - collectivist cultures may express engagement by means of private sharing with trusted groups but not commenting publicly

(Ismail, 2017). The measurement should take into consideration these contextual factors as opposed to using general measures.

Engagement as Value Co-Creation

The modern view of engagement theory is that engaged consumers are not passive consumers but active co-creators of brand value (Brodie et al., 2013). This co-creation has many manifestations in the fashion industry: UGC serves as a source of authentic marketing content, feedback influences product development, community engagement is a part of brand culture, advocacy serves as a means of extension (Schouten et al., 2020). This is opportunity and challenge to SMEs. The chance is to focus on the involvement of the engaged communities as the extensions of scarce marketing resources. The issue is how to enable and coordinate co-creation and not strain constrained organizational capacity.

Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) is the theory that comes in handy in this situation, as all the interactions with the brand are in the form of service exchanges where the value is never created in isolation. The visual social media is transformed into a service platform, on which the brands and consumers co-produce fashion experiences, rather than transactions. This outlook also allows Pakistani fashion SMEs to develop richer and stronger relationships with customers, even when constrained by resource bases.

2.5 Contextual Factors: The Pakistani Fashion SME Ecosystem

Cultural and Religious Moderators of Visual Communication

The cultural and religious background of Pakistan is the key determinant in visual fashion communication. The norms of modesty (*haya*) do not only affect the design of clothes but also the visual representation - the manner in which models are dressed, which parts of their bodies are visible, conventional poses (Ahmed & Shafique, 2020). These standards are not applicable in all regions, urban/rural boundary, and socioeconomic status forming

segmentation problems to SMEs. The visual material that appeals to a liberal urban Karachi may not entertain conservative Karachi audiences in Peshawar, and will either need to be segmented or balanced carefully.

Seasonal visual opportunities and constraints are created through religious calendar and festivals. Eid collections do not have standard visual text - they need festal colors, family-focused imagery, celebration contexts (Ismail, 2017). Images of Ramadan should be treated with decency. The wedding season (throughout the year with its highest in winter) requires an opulent visual narrative of the wedding dress. The SMEs have to be sensitive to such cultural rhythms and yet retain brand identity.

The regional aesthetics and craft tradition offer the possibilities of visual differentiation and complexity. Multani embroidery, Sindhi ajrak, Kashmiri shawls, Punjab phulkari have their own visual signatures that appeal to the sense of regional identity (Ahmed and Shafique, 2020). The visual representation of heritage and innovation requires a SME to use these traditions in modern designs to respect the old but at the same time display the new relevancy. This needs advanced visual storytelling which most SMEs are not resource endowed to execute well.

Resource Constraints as Strategic Differentiators

The Pakistani fashion SMEs experience a condition of harsh resource limitation which essentially defines the possibilities of visual marketing. Budget constraints limit investments in professional photography, videography, software used to edit photos and videos, and the creation of content (Husain et al., 2021). Skill gaps imply that lots of SME owners are unskilled in terms of formal marketing background or visual design or even platform expertise. Time poverty is caused by the owners controlling a variety of business functions leaving them with less time to plan strategic visual contents.

Nevertheless, studies have indicated that they may be used as strategic implementations when redefined using the Resource-Based View theory (Barney, 1991). The scarcity of resources compels innovativeness and genuineness that competitors with resources may be deficient. It can be low-production-value content that is an indicator of authenticity and accessibility (Schouten et al., 2020). Stories facilitated direct communication with the owner that creates personal relationships that cannot be achieved with larger brands. Community co-creation will utilise customer resources instead of brand resources.

Strategic reframing is the key, not considering the constraints only as limitations. According to the theory of Dynamic Capabilities as Teece et al. (1997) put it, the aptitude to reorganize resources in accordance to constraints is, in turn, a capability. Pakistani fashion SMEs which create what may be called as constraint-driven creativity in visual content may convert constraints to competitive advantages.

The analysis of competition involves the company and its rivals regarding product pricing, promotion, and distribution aspects.

Competitive Landscape Analysis

The fashion SME industry in Pakistan is what may be described as hyper-competitive fragmentation - there are many small players with overlapping offerings and who have to compete with their resources such as customer attention and expenditure (Khan and Khan, 2021). Other local SMEs, larger Pakistani brands, international fast fashion (both official imports and unofficial copies) and traditional retail are also competitors on different levels.

All the forms of competition use various visual tools. The Pakistani professional photography and celebrity endorsement is applied by bigger brands. International fast fashion is capitalizing on global trend images. The conventional retailing is based on the in-store

experience and not online display. SMEs have to seek visual positioning that stands out among all these and operate with limited resources.

Mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) - imitation of winning competitors - is the most widespread but problematic. As a lot of SMEs imitate the same visual tactics (similar filters, compositions, model poses), differentiation is lost. But where there is uncertainty of the market, imitation offers apparent security. The dilemma is to strike its balance between imitation to gain legitimacy and innovation to gain differentiation what might be described as differentiated mimicry.

Infrastructure and Access Heterogeneity

The digital infrastructure of Pakistan is what I am calling layered heterogeneity - differences in access and ability across the levels. Network heterogeneity is a range of impressive internet speed, reliability, and cost in different regions and socioeconomic groups (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2023). The heterogeneity of the devices includes variations in the features, screen size and quality of smartphones. Literacy heterogeneity is the differences in digital literacy, platform familiarity and visual literacy among the demographic groups.

This heterogeneity entails visual content tactics, which would be effective in different circumstances or conditions. High-definition video, which consumes a lot of data may not be accessible to users with low connectivity or data packages. Multidimensional visual images may not display well on the lower-quality screens. Audits of visual literacy may not receive the visual sophisticated content well. SMEs need to come up with degradable visuals- material that performs effectively under different conditions of access.

The ability to distinguish between visual stimuli and trust signs (Garske et al., 2014).

Trust Deficit and Visual Signaling

The e-commerce climate of Pakistan is plagued with serious lack of trust in terms of quality of product, proper display, delivery and security of a transaction (Husain et al., 2021). The lack of trust enhances the significance of visual content as a trust signaling. Close-up shots of the products that display the stitching, fabric feel and quality of construction offer visual proof that minimizes the perception of risk (Choi and Taylor, 2014). Behind-the-scene shots of production processes are an indication of transparency. Social proof is obtained by displaying actual customers.

Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973) is applied to analyze the way visual content is used as signals of unobservable quality that are expensive to counterfeit. Regular aesthetic editing is an indication of brand unity and sophistication. Receptive interaction in remarks is an indicator of customer care. Nonetheless, to be credible, signals must conform to actual quality, which may be referred to as signal-reality congruence. When providing misleading signals of quality, SMEs who have turned to visual signaling fail to deliver as they claim may end up having a severe reputation backlash.

Gender Dynamics in Visual Consumption

In Pakistan, gender plays a major role in visual fashion consumption. Females control the fashion buying process, yet they usually have to operate in complicated social and family acceptance contexts (Ahmed and Shafique, 2020). The visual content that appeals to women has to take these dynamics into account, presenting the outfits in a setting that is acceptable or something that a family would think of, having models with more familiar faces than completely aspirational ones, and presenting any visual information that a woman might find useful to get family approval.

Fashion by men is an expanding yet different category that has dissimilar visual coded messages. Formalities, tradition, and hints tend to reign supreme instead of the trendiness and

experimentation. The imagery used in the fashion industry that caters to men has no choice but to strike a balance between shifting trends in gender, and still acknowledge the cultural conservatism towards appearance and self-expression in men.

Generational Shifts in Visual Preferences

The youth bulge that Pakistan is experiencing is generating vast generation gaps in the visual tastes. The younger consumer group (18-30) is a digital generation that is used to fast visual editing, meme culture, and the integration of trends worldwide (Raza et al., 2022). Older consumers (30-45) might be more interested in more ancient visual appeal, better product display, and cultural authenticity. The SMEs that aim at serving both generations will have to tread through these varying visual preference which may result in a segmented visual strategy or discover visual strategies that cut across the generations.

2.6 Synthesis and Critical Research Gaps

Although the world is well versed with the social media marketing and brand engagement literature, there is a great gap with regards to the visual specific mechanisms that promote engaging local fashion SMEs in emerging markets such as Pakistan. The existing studies have largely researched social media marketing in a generic way or have researched popular world brands whereas they have not isolated and quantified the effect of individual visual-based dimensions like visual trendiness, visual interactivity, and visual electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) in a specific cultural, economic and resources limited setting of Pakistani metropolitan fashion SMEs. Thus, no such empirically-proven model exists that would explain the increased multidimensional brand engagement by these visual features in this context and collectively and individually, providing SME marketers with no evidence-based guide to their visual content strategies.

2.7 Theoretical Support

The general premise of this study is a combination of communication, psychological, and sociological theories leading to the combination of which the processes of visual-centric social media marketing and brand engagement in a particular context take place. The theoretical framework relates the reasons why visual platforms are such powerful channels, the way the consumers process and react to the visual stimuli, and why these processes are so specific to the environmental and organizational contingencies.

The theoretical rationale that supports the potential focus on visual-based platforms in fashion marketing is the Media Richness Theory (MRT) developed by Daft and Lengel (1986). MRT assumes that not all communication media have the same ability to transfer rich information and less ambiguity (Daft and Lengel, 1986). More enriched media accomplish

instant feedback, convey numerous cues, natural language, and create individual focus. Instagram and Tik Tok are inherently rich media in digital marketing (Mollen and Wilson, 2010). They relay visual, auditory and written messages at the same time making communication subtle.

In the case of fashion SMEs, this is essential richness. There is a lot of ambiguity in fashion products online in terms of clothes fit, texture, and quality (Kim and Lennon 2008). Text descriptions are skimpy media which can never solve this uncertainty. The numerous cues required to minimize the perception of risk are the appearance of fabric drape on the video, detailed photos of the stitching, or hauls of the tried-on garment by customers (Choi and Taylor, 2014). MRT therefore supports the assumption that visual-centric strategies are not aesthetic decisions only but necessary ambiguity-limiting means. According to the theory, the more visual content is enriched with high-quality images and interactive features as well as with authentic stories, the better it will explain value propositions and create primary trust.

Consumer-Brand Engagement (CBE) Framework

The critical theoretical framework through which the deep psychological rectification of the efficient visual-centric social media marketing (VCSMM) can be understood is the Consumer-Brand Engagement (CBE) Framework developed by Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014). This model goes way beyond the shallow analysis of likes or follower counts to reflect the multidimensional, psychological condition of the relationships that result in valuable, long-term consumerbrand relations. Considering the Pakistani fashion SMEs, CBE is the key intermediary of the tactical visual content posting and the strategic brand building, the positive and motivational investment of the consumer in the interactive brand experiences.

Defining the Multidimensional Construct

CBE is theoretically different to similar notions as involvement, satisfaction, or loyalty. Whereas satisfaction is a transactional assessment and loyalty is a behavioral output, engagement is an active and state of mind that is psychological (Brodie et al., 2011). According to Hollebeek et al. (2014), it refers to a positively rated cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment of a consumer in particular interactions with a brand. The tripartite model is an accepted concept of explaining the holism of engagement (Dessart, 2017; Vivek et al., 2012). Cognitive engagement entails how attentive the consumer is, how they elaborate the mind and think about the brand. It means that the consumer is actively inclined to think and process the message of the brand, rather than merely watching it (Calder et al., 2009). Emotional engagement refers to the emotional reactions and feelings that are activated during the brand engagement, including enthusiasm, inspiration, enjoyment, and a feeling of connection (Brodie et al., 2013). Behavioral engagement describes the energy-consuming behavioral activity of a consumer outside of purchase, such as social media activities (liking, commenting, sharing), content creation, and brand advocacy (Van Doorn et al., 2010). These dimensions depend on each other, and in a dynamic loop, they tend to feed off each other and overpower the other.

Cognitive Engagement: The Gateway of Attention and Processing

The base layer is cognitive engagement that is a gateway of the consumer mind to the brand. The most important and the most essential challenge is securing and maintaining cognitive attention in the flooded digital scene of social media. The relevant one in this case is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which implies persuasion through central route (critical evaluation of arguments) or a peripheral route (following heuristic signals) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Both paths can be achieved through high quality visual content.

Visual-based stimuli are particularly efficient at gaining first, peripheral-level attention as the brain has the biological predisposition to process imagery rather than text (Choi and Taylor, 2014). Beautifully made photos or even interesting video thumbnails are such potent

heuristics that make users stop scrolling. Nevertheless, in the case of fashion which is a reflective purchase, it is vital to shift the consumer to the central route processing. Here is the point where the Visual Information Quality is the essential one. The substantive arguments that enable cognitive elaboration are detailed visuals which eliminate ambiguity (e.g. close-ups of fabric weave, videos showing drape and movement, infographics of sizes, etc.) (Fiore et al., 2005). The consumer is mentally involved in determining quality, visualizing how to use it, and comparing it to its suitability to his or her needs.

To Pakistani consumers, cognition can be further enhanced through the use of images that elicit cultural or nostalgic schema. A picture with traditional rilli work or a certain color of green that is used during Eid may generate deeper mental associations and recollections, stimulating the mode of thinking (Ahmed and Shafique, 2020). Cognitive engagement in this sense, therefore, does not involve seeing a post but involves actively thinking about the aesthetic, informational and cultural content of the post, which results in greater brand remembrance and consideration.

Emotional Engagement: Forging Affective and Identity-Based Bonds

In case the cognitive engagement is concerned with thinking, the emotional engagement is concerned with feeling. This dimension is particularly strong in the fashion industry where the products are closely associated with the individual identity, self-expression, and social aspiration (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2015). Emotional involvement will make a brand not a commercial object but inspiration, pride or belonging. The Social Identity Theory establishes that people get part of their self-concept through their memberships to groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The brands can be used as representational resources to build and express identity.

The main means of generating such emotive reactions is through visual material. The aspirations and positive affect are produced by Visual Appeal, with its harmonious aesthetics, attractive models, and desirable lifestyles (Park et al., 2015). Visual storytelling Visual storytelling To create admiration, respect, and emotional resonance that go beyond the product itself (Hudson et al., 2016), include a mini-documentary about an artisan family keeping a dying craft alive. In the case of Pakistani SMEs, the visual perception of the brand should be based on Visual Cultural Congruence, which ensures that the visual is consistent with the local values, aesthetics, making the consumer perceive that the brand understands him (Ismail, 2017).

Moreover, a potent reason of emotional engagement that is mediated by the social validation and belonging mechanism is the Visual Electronic Word-of-Mouth (EWOM). The perceived trust and community that influence seeing peers, people belonging to the same social or cultural group, enjoying a brand in a positive manner (Schau et al., 2009). This emotional reaction is even greater in such collectivist cultures as the one in Pakistan where in-group views are taken seriously. Reposting a photo of a client wearing their wedding outfit by an SME does not only give the social proof; it builds on an emotional feeling of communal feast and belonging to the community, which builds stronger affective relationships.

Behavioral Engagement: The Manifestation of Active Participation

The behavioral engagement is the action-based aspect of the CBE. It consists of how cognitive attention and emotional affinity are translated into physical and non-purchase brand-related behaviors (Dessart et al., 2015). These actions become the currency of algorithmic visibility and vitality in the community on social media. The most important behavioral measures are consumption behaviors (viewing, saving), contribution behaviors (liking, commenting, rating), and creation behaviors (sharing brand content, generating content of own). (Muntinga et al., 2011).

Most directly engineered dimension is Visual Interactivity which is to evoke behavioral response. Such platform functionalities as polls, quizzes, questions in Stories, and comment below are overt calls-to-action that change a monologic broadcast into a dialogue (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). This form of interactivity creates a feeling of agency and co-creation, and the consumer becomes an active part of the brand story. An example would be an SME with a poll on the color people want next in one of the most popular designs of kurti where the consumers have a significant part in the manufacturing of the product and thus become more interested in the final product.

Visual Trendiness

It also drives behavior participation especially creation and contribution. The more visually trendy the content is, the higher the chances of sharing it because users want to identify with what is up-to-date and trendy to use the content of the brand as a social currency (Godey et al., 2016). A catchy Reel or Challenge that a brand has launched can trigger mass behavioral adoption using imitations created by users. In the same way, the most attractive or emotionally active images are more likely to be saved (a personal behavioral response) to be used in the future as an inspiring tool or are shared in personal groups, such as WhatsApp, and spread the interaction outside the platform.

The Dynamic Interplay and Synergistic Effects

The three dimensions of CBE are not independent; they work in dynamic, reinforcing synergies, that is, in a cognitive-affective-behavioral loop. An informative (cognitive) visually appealing post that effectively decreases the degree of uncertainty can result in the positive attitude toward the transparency of the brand (emotional), which, in turn, will be more likely to save the post or ask the question in the comment (behavioral). On the other hand, a

behaviorally engaged consumer, who has tagged a friend in his comment, is also thinking about the brand and may be enjoying the creation of a stronger social-emotional connection.

This interaction is the key to the construction of brand community, which is one of the main results of high CBE. The engaged consumers are not only buyers, but also creators, innovators and promoters of the brand (Brodie et al., 2013). In the case of an SME, a well involved community is invaluable, as it gives a stable ground of sales, invaluable feedback, and organic marketing in the form of Visual EWOM. CBE framework therefore does not make engagement the goal but an intermediary that can lead to all important downstream results: trust, loyalty, advocacy, and sustainability to competitive pressures (Vivek et al., 2012).

Contextualizing CBE for Pakistani Fashion SMEs

The consideration of the CBE framework in terms of local fashion SMEs needs to be applied contextually. The local indications of each dimension can have local overtones. Cognitive process can be specifically targeted at quality and authenticity evaluation as perceived risk is greater with smaller brands. Emotional appeal can have a strong attachment to sense of cultural pride and family closeness, rather than personal desire. Drinking, eating, and talking may place as much emphasis on socializing in small, intimate groups (e.g., WhatsApp family groups) as it does on commenting publicly.

Moreover, drivers interpretation levels can vary. Since institutional norms suggest collectivism, Visual EWOM may be an overly influential source of each of the three dimensions of engagement: cognitively as an indicator of trust, emotionally as a bond, and behaviorally as a sharing act. Equally, Visual Information Quality may be more essential to cognitive action in this market than where there is more predetermined consumer confidence in brands.

Measurement and Strategic Implications

The CBE model requires complex measurement. It is important not to only use behavioral measurements (likes, shares) but other cognitive and emotive measures are needed as well. The study should use multi-item scales that are able to measure the separate but interconnected aspects of cognitive processing, affective relationship, and behavioral intention or action (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

The framework gives a blueprint to SMEs in a strategic manner. It proposes balanced visual content approach that meets all three pillars; Enlighten the mind with visuals of high information quality, Enchant the heart with emotionally engaging storytelling and cultural attraction, and Empower action with interactive options and shareable trendy content. With the realization that various visual strategies align to various objectives of engagement, SMEs can cease to post randomly but rather adopt a strategic collection of visual content aimed at creating a systematic creation of multidimensional consumer relationships. This depth of theory places CBE not only as a dependent variable but as the main driver of psychology that visual-centric social media marketing tries to engage to achieve sustainable brand development.

Contingency Theory

This forms the very basis that there is no single best strategic approach that is universal. The effectiveness of organizations is rather defined by the attainment of a strategic fit concerning certain situational factors (Donaldson, 2001; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). In the case of Pakistani fashion SMEs, that implies that their visual social media plan cannot be directly exported through the world brand playbooks. Its success depends on the correspondence with a specific number of external and internal conditions that constitute their working reality.

One of its main external contingencies is the competitive and consumer environment. The micro-enterprises and the SMEs are highly crowded in the metropolitan fashion market

and pose competition in the digital attention (Husain et al., 2021). The preferences of consumers also depend on the local culture, and the demand is high on wearing clothes that refer to modesty, attire befitting an occasion such as Eid, and styles combining both traditional and western features (Ahmed and Shafique, 2020; Raza et al., 2022). An aesthetic approach that works with minimalist Scandinavian brand might not work well here in this very colorful, detail oriented setting.

Strategic possibilities are also determined by technological and infrastructural contingencies. Lack of equal bandwidth of the internet, the popularity of middle-end smartphones, and different levels of digital literacy among consumer groups are practically limiting (Khan and Khan, 2021). This conditionally determines the most appropriate content in the form of a video; videos with high-definition and lots of data might not be accessible to users with low connectivity, whereas simple images or GIFs can be the more reliable choice, thereby impacting possible involvement.

The greatest internal contingency is extreme shortage of resources. A majority of fashion SMEs in the region are forced to work within stringent constraints on financial resources, marketing skills, and professionalism to produce fashion (Husain et al., 2021; Oztamur and Karakadilar, 2014). This lack is essentially a redefinition of implementing marketing theory. The contingency school of thought assumes that in such a bound, the strategic objective is not to realize the high production values but the high relevancy and authenticity within the resource boundaries.

Institutional Theory

This gives the lens insight to learn about the social and cultural regulations that control this contingent environment. Companies are interested in gaining the legitimacy of their environment and act in line with the institutional pillars in the environment: regulative,

normative, and cultural-cognitive (Scott, 1995). In the case of SMEs, there are normative and cultural-cognitive pressures that are especially influential when it comes to the visual marketing.

There are normative pressures which are based on great socio-cultural and religious expectations. These standards are stipulated as guidelines to visual expression, particularly to modesty (*haya*), gender, and suitability (Ismail, 2017). The visual image that is seen as violating such norms, even in the context of its popularity all over the world, will face the threat of being illegitimate and rejected by consumers. This puts pressure on the SMEs to be culturally intelligent in their visual storytelling.

Mimetic pressures take place where there exists uncertainty. When given unclear measures of social media success, SMEs tend to copy the image tactics of the perceived market leaders or their successful competitors (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). It may result in visual isomorphism, when the feeds of the rivals are homogenized, using the same filters, compositions, and styling cliches. Although this mimicry decreases uncertainty, this mimicry leads to challenges in differentiation.

The cultural-cognitive pressures refer to the unofficial, usually unspoken, knowledge on how what can be deemed as desirable or tasteful can be explained. This encompasses a strong sense of appreciation to some crafts (*chikankari*, *phulkari*), color schemes associated with seasons and festivals, and symbolism in patterns in the context of fashion in Pakistan (Ahmed & Shafique, 2020). Visual information which corresponds to these common schemas is more easily perceived and appreciated.

The triad is finished by the Resource-Based View (RBV), which takes the emphasis off constraints and the assets of the strategy. RBV believes that sustainable advantage is exploitation of valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources (Barney,

1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). In the case of resource-constrained SMEs, they must establish competitive advantage in VCSMM with intangible VRIN resources, rather than the tangible ones they do not have.

Intangible resources are the best, and using Authenticity and Heritage is one of them. The real story of an artisanal workshop, a designer having a personal attachment to classic artisans, or the tale of restoring a local textile technology are authentic resources that cannot simply be imitated by large corporations (Beverland, 2005; Napoli et al., 2014). Having visual content that displays this authenticity in the form of artisan spotlights, design-process diaries, founder storytelling, is a unique and imitable indicator of value.

Deep Cultural and Community Embeddedness is a resource that is knowledge based. The owner of an SME may have implicit, tacit knowledge about local festivals, types of fabrics that are preferable in hot, humid summer, and subtle etiquette of modesty, which will enable them to create a content that has visual appeal (Borges-Tiago et al., 2021). Visual trendsetting within this cultural fluency, is locally relevant as opposed to outside imported.

Dynamic capabilities include Relational Agility and Social capital. SMEs can also take advantage of strong customer relationships to create content with them, quickly generate visuals in reaction to local news, and create tight-knit digital communities (Teece et al., 1997). This flexibility and embeddedness in the network is something that can not be substituted to enhance the behavioral engagement and loyalty.

The combination of these three theories results in a strong and contextualized framework. Contingency Theory recognizes the problem space which is a limited number of resources and a distinct market. RBV suggests the strategic alternative: compete with the help of special impossibilities of an intangible character such as authenticity and cultural knowledge. The rules of the game are established by the Institutional Theory: articulate these resources within the normative cultural frames to acquire legitimacy.

This synthesis redefines important constructs to the research environment. The Visual "Richness" (out of MRT) becomes resource-based. It can be done without involving costly manufacturing, but rather through culturally rich storytelling that gives numerous hints concerning tradition, quality, and identity, making consumer ambiguity more locally significant (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013).

Visual "Appeal" is moderated in an institution. It is not an aesthetic but a localized aesthetic subjected to local normative and cultural-cognitive filters. A post that appeals to the eyes combines color, model style, and location with the local ideals of beauty and decency (Park et al., 2015).

It is theorized that the way to Consumer-Brand Engagement is different. One of the antecedents of engagement is trust which is not constructed with signals of financial expenditure (high-gloss content) but rather with signals of authenticity, cultural congruence, and relational integrity (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Visual EWOM acquires undue strength because it integrates both institutional social evidences and relational resources of RBV.

There are some moderating effects also predicted by this theoretical triad. The connection between engagement and Visual Production Quality is probably conditional on the view of authenticity. Too polished content of a small SME can be perceived as inauthentic or wrongly resource-aligned and, thus, can undermine trust (Schouten et al., 2020).

Visual Trendiness is an institutionally modulated effect. To effectively drive attention, the content should be able to show "cultural trendiness," which means being innovative within reasonable normative limits instead of imitating the global runways (Godey et al., 2016).

Last, but not least, this model points out a strategic necessity of SMEs: Institutional Entrepreneurship. Instead of simply complying with pressures, SMEs have an opportunity to exercise the power of visual content by quietly redefining norms, promoting local crafts, and

shaping new culturally-based trends (Mair and Marti, 2006). Their visual feed turns into the source of the legitimate argument in the form of the combination of heritage and innovation.

To sum up, the combination of Contingency, Institutional and Resource-Based theories puts the analysis beyond generic marketing principles to a practicalized knowledge of VCSMM in the SME industry in Pakistan. It gives the theoretical rationale of anticipating that drivers of brand engagement will be contextual, based on the aspects of authenticity, cultural intelligence, and community connection and performed within a framework of socio-cultural legitimacy. This is the critical contextual prism of the whole research study.

Cultural and Religious Norms

These constitute strong institutional pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The socio-cultural landscape of Pakistan puts up restrictions on modesty, gender representation, and aesthetics (Ahmed and Shafique, 2020). Majority of visual content is forced to bypass such norms in order to be seen as desirable and acceptable. The visual trendy is culturally coded; it might mean introducing something new into the preexisting motifs instead of simply appropriating Western trends. This moderates the association of the visual stimuli and engagement responses.

Another contingency is market infrastructure. The differences in internet access and digital literacy imply that strategies, which were effective in developed markets, may not be effective when they are based on a high bandwidth or complicated interaction (Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). The content should be available on both sides of the technological lines. In addition, competition within thick SME industries generates mimetic isomorphism- need to emulate the effective visual strategies of competitors (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). It can create homogeneity unless the SMEs maximize special brand tales.

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) assists in connecting engagement with the results of behavior. According to TPB, intention, which is formed by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control is a predictor of behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Positive brand attitudes are developed through brand engagement. Visual EWOM has an impact on the formation of subjective norms through the display of simultaneous approval of peers. Perceived behavioral control is also maximized through clear visual information which minimizes uncertainty in purchase. In such a way, the VCSMM - CBE - Purchase Intention pathway is conceptually based.

The Social Identity Theory also adds to the framework. Brands may be utilized by the consumers to express and strengthen their social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). To Pakistani consumers, fashion is a product of cultural identification, contemporary aspirations and social associations. The visual imagery that appeals to these identity undertakings displaying traditional crafts in modern designs, etc. may generate a strong sense of in-group identification and community belonging around the brand, increasing the level of emotional and behavioral involvement.

The Signaling Theory is a theory explaining the use of visual material as a valid cue of unobservable product quality and brand credibility (Spence, 1973). Visual signals in information asymmetry markets include authenticity, care and professionalism that SMEs who are market adaptive can employ to convey their authenticity, care and professionalism. Excellent product photography implies that it pays attention to detail. The content that is placed behind the scenes signifies authenticity and openness. A continuous aesthetic management implies brand consistency and consistency. These signals are used in overcoming the liability of smallness and newness.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT): places emphasis on the active consumer. UGT also assumes the selection of media to serve particular needs: cognitive, affective, personal

integrative, social integrative and tension free (Katz et al., 1973). Consumers use visual platform to follow fashion SMEs to meet the needs of inspiration (affective), trends information (cognitive), self-expression (personal integrative), and social connection (social integrative). The following needs are strategic needs that can be met by VCSMM effectively thus leading to continued interest.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) explains the information processing channels. According to ELM, persuasion is fulfilled through central pathway (thoughtful consideration of arguments) or peripheral one (dependence on cues such as aesthetics or source attractiveness) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). In case of fashion, visual attractiveness becomes a peripheral message that evokes instant affective reactions. But in the case of considered purchases, Visual Information Quality can be used to support the use of central route processing because it presents a lot of product information. The two routes are likely to be used in effective strategies.

2.8 Theoretical Synthesis and Model Development

The combination of these theories yields a consistent theory. Media Richness Theory determines the ability of the channel of communication. The psychological outcome is explained in the Consumer-Brand Engagement Framework. The boundary conditions are defined by Contingency and Institutional Theories. The theory of TPB, Social Identity, Signaling, UGT, and ELM describe micro-mechanisms of association between stimuli and response within those limits.

The synthesis produces a number of context specific propositions of theory. To begin with, the relationship amid the quality of visual production and engagement is in the shape of an inverted U softened by the perceptions of authenticity. Moderate quality that is perceived as authentic can be better than low-quality and high-quality but impersonal content. This is a combination of MRT and RBV and Signaling Theory.

Second, cultural collectivism moderates the strength of Visual EWOM - Engagement relationship. Visual UGC peer validation might be a more effective engagement driver in collectivist culture, Pakistan than in individualistic societies. This links Social Identity Theory to Institutional Theory.

Third, the perceived risk in the market is specific, which increases the significance of Visual Information Quality. Detailed visual information is important in a setting that has fewer well-defined standards of consumer protection and it helps eliminate uncertainty and central route processing. This associates ELM to contingency factors.

Fourth, Visual Interactivity depends on organizational responsiveness to work. SMEs need to be able to respond to feedback provided by the use of interactive functionalities

otherwise the interactivity has the potential to blow back because it increases unmet expectations. This relates Contingency Theory to the behavioral part of CBE.

Fifth, Visual Trendiness will need to attain cultural congruence. Trendy images that do not conform to the local culture will not work; successful trendiness is an innovation which operates within the acceptable culture. This directly takes the normative pillar of Institutional Theory.

The mediated and moderated pathways are also predicted by the integrated framework. It is probable that trust mediates the correlation between visual signaling (quality, authenticity cues) and cognitive/affective involvement. A community identification mediates the relationship between visual social proof (EWOM) and the behavioral engagement. The effectiveness of the various visual dimensions is moderated by resource constraints, and thus the authenticity-oriented strategies have a greater effectiveness among the low resource SMEs compared to quality-mimicking strategies.

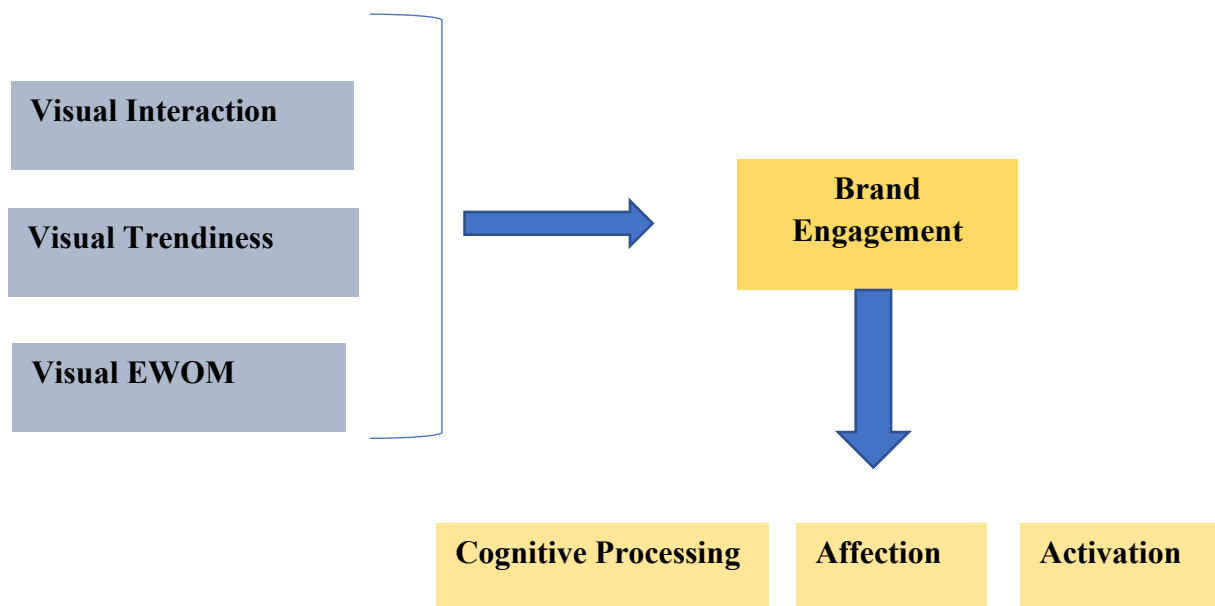
The approach to the research methodology is informed by this theoretical background. CBE is multidimensional in its nature and as such, it needs multi-item scales to capture the cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects. Contingency factors require introduction of control variables such as cultural orientation of the consumer and brand familiarity. The significance of contextual knowledge requires a mixed-methodology in which qualitative data are used to understand the implementation of theories in life.

Finally, this framework does not only apply existing theories but it builds on them. It puts MRT to the test in a high-resource and a high-ambiguity environment. It looks at CBE in collectivist cultural context. It delves into the effect of institutional pressures on strategic visual communication. The study thus makes contributions to the theory explaining that there are boundary conditions and contextual adaptations and the studies are heading towards more

context sensitive and nuanced models of digital marketing efficacies of SMEs in emerging economies.

All the theories used support the proposed model according to which five dimensions of visual focus have a direct effect on the engagement with the brand, and these relations are determined by cultural, organizational, and market contingency. They give the rational foundation to anticipate positive relationships as well as to justify the reason why the relationships may not be equally strong and expressed as the results of Western corporate situations. This intellectual and rigor makes sure the research makes a valuable input into the body of literature as well as produces practical implications to practitioners working in the unique opportunities and threats of the dynamic fashion SME industry in Pakistan.

2.9 Conceptual Frame Work



The conceptual framework in this figure is the route between visual social media marketing and the brand engagement. The process is triggered by the independent variables, Visual Trendiness and Visual EWOM, which trigger the process through stimulating Visual Interaction (e.g., liking and commenting). This interacting process then leads to the dependent variable, which is Brand Engagement and that is a combination of three dimensions known as: Cognitive Processing, Affection and Activation. The model also hypothesizes that such dimensions evolve in a chronological order that cognitive attention triggers emotional connection, which in turn inspires active behavioral reactions.

Source of the Conceptual Framework

Conceptual framework of this work is elaborated on the basis of a thorough review and synthesis of the existing theories and previous empirical studies of the area of social media marketing, consumer engagement, and brand equity. In particular, the framework is informed

by the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991) which theorizes the capability of social media marketing as strategic intangible resources that bring about sustainable competitive advantage.

Moreover, the framework is guided by the Customer Engagement Theory (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014), which details how it is possible to generate better engagement results because of interactive brand-consumer relationships created via social media platforms. Relationship Marketing and Commitment- Trust Theory serve as another example in favor of consumer engagement (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) as the central theme of which is the necessity to build on the trust and commitment to enhance brand-related results.

Moreover, the influence of interactive and visually rich social media content in contributing to consumer knowledge and emotional attitudes is supported by Media Richness Theory (Daft and Lengel, 1986) especially in the fashion industry. The proposed relationships are empirically supported by the previous research on social media marketing and brand equity (Kim and Ko, 2012; Godey et al., 2016; Ahmed and Shafique, 2020) and consumer involvement in online brand communities (Dessart et al., 2015; Vivek et al., 2012).

Based on this, conceptual framework can be viewed as a combination of these theoretical viewpoints and empirical evidence to analyze the effects of the social media marketing activities on brand equity by consumer engagement as applied to the Pakistani fashion industry.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is quantitative and cross-sectional research design because the hypothesized relationships will be experimented empirically using the conceptual framework proposed. The method applied is deductive, in which the collected data through a formalized survey is statistically analyzed to prove the theoretical framework of the connection between the Visual-Centric Social Media Marketing (VCSMM) dimensions and the Consumer-Brand Engagement (CBE). The design is chosen due to its capability to measure the relationships between variables, be able to generalize the results obtained on the identified population, and the objective and numerical evidence to prove or reject the research hypotheses.

3.2 Data

Only primary quantitative data was used in the research. The data were captured using a structured online questionnaire that was distributed as a self-administered google form questionnaire to a sample of targeted population of the social media users in the metropolitan cities of Pakistan. The data set was a numerical data based on Likert scales, which was a measure of perceptions of visual marketing stimulus and self-report engagement behavior. There were no secondary data or qualitative data included (using interviews) to be analyzed and focused on the quantitative relationships as postulated in the research model.

3.3 Sample Criteria and Justification

Inclusion Criteria

- 18 to 45 females
- Active buyers
- Engaging with brands on social media

Exclusion Criteria

- Below 18 or above the age of 45 or males
- No engagements with brands on social media
- Mostly not engaged with brands on social media

Target Population

The target market had include social media users aged between 18-45 years who live in one of the metropolitan cities of Karachi, Lahore, or Islamabad/Rawalpindi and have actively followed/or purchased at least one local fashion Small and Medium-sized Enterprise (SME) to display content in visual-centric platforms such as Instagram or Facebook.

Sampling Technique and Justification

A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was used which is a combination of a non-probability sampling method. The probability sampling was not possible as there was no clear cut sampling frame to this particular segment of digital consumers. Purposive sampling was adopted so initial respondents passed the basic requirements (location, age, involvement in SMEs). This was followed by snowball sampling to access an expanded, but relevant, network of possible respondents, which is appropriate in the context of social media studies since target populations in digital communities are connected with each other.

Sample Size and Justification

The final sample obtained is $N = 308$ valid responses. This is a strictly justified sample size considering the selected method of analysis which is Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). It is already much larger than the suggested minimum size of sample, which usually is 10 times the maximum number of structural paths going to a specific latent construct in the model (Hair et al., 2019). Since the model includes the most complex construct, which is fed by several variables, a population of 308 guarantees a statistically strong power, consistency of the parameter estimates and accuracy of bootstrapping tests to determine the significance.

3.4 Variable Measurements

Variable Operationalization and Measurement Scales

All constructs were measured as reflective latent variables using multi-item scales adapted from established literature to ensure validity. Responses were captured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

Independent Variables (IV)

Visual Trendiness: Measured by 4 items assessing the perceived alignment of brand visuals with current fashion aesthetics (e.g., "This brand's social media posts are visually stylish and contemporary").

Visual EWOM: Measured by 4 items assessing the prevalence and influence of user-generated visual content (e.g., "I frequently see photos or videos from other customers featuring this brand's products").

Visual Interaction: Measured by 4 items capturing interactive behaviors toward visual content (e.g., "I often 'like' this brand's image/video posts").

Dependent Variable (DV)

Brand Engagement: Modeled as a second-order reflective construct comprising three first-order dimensions:

Cognitive Processing: 3 items measuring focused attention and mental elaboration.

Affection: 3 items measuring emotional attachment and positive feelings.

Activation: 3 items measuring behavioral intention and active participation.

3.5 Estimation Techniques

IBM SPSS Statistics 27 was applied to analyze data. Data screening of missing values, outliers and normality was initiated in the analysis. All constructs were evaluated and verified with the help of the Cronbach alpha scale reliability. In order to test the direct hypotheses, the multiple linear regression analysis was used. They were fitted using separate regression models with Cognitive Processing, Affection, and Activation in the form of the dependent variables and Visual Trendiness and Visual EWOM in the form of the independent variables. The models were tested on the basis of the standardized beta coefficients (b), t-statistics, p-values, and adjusted R² figures. The assumptions of regression such as linearity, homoscedasticity, errors independence and multicollinearity (measured through VIF scores) were verified and met before interpretation.

3.6 Instrument of Research

A self administered questionnaire was used to gather the data. To collect and evaluate the perceptions and interest of the respondents in visual content placed by social media by local fashion small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) on their social media profiles, the instrument has used a 7-point Likert scale, with the range of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The measurement items applied in the current research were based on the existing scales that were developed in previous studies on the issue of consumer engagement and social media marketing.

Namely, the scale of consumer engagement with the content of visual social media is conceptualized on the basis of Customer Engagement Theory and operationalized and empirically tested by Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014). Multidimensionality of engagement was further narrowed down and confirmed by Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012) and Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2015) as engaging in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. It is the studies on online and social media engagement that gave the

items corresponding to interactivity, information sharing, and the two-way communication (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Calder et al., 2009), but the measures related to sharing, reposting, and participation behavior were based on the COBRAs framework suggested by Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011).

The prior empirical research employing these scales established high rates of internal consistency, with the values of Cronbach alpha usually being higher than the accepted level according to which a scale with satisfactory reliability is attained (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Dessart et al., 2015). Past studies have also determined the validity of the instrument quite well. The content validity will be ensured by adopting measurement items in widely referenced studies whereas convergent and discriminant validities have been established using the factor loading, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability in structural equation modeling models (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2019). Based on this, the modified scale to be adopted in this research is deemed reliable as well as valid to test the consumer involvement with the visual-focused social media content with regard to the Pakistani fashion industry.

Chapter 4

Analysis

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed for all six variables: the two primary independent variables (Visual Trendiness, Visual EWOM), the mediating/interactive variable (Visual Interaction), and the three dimensions of the dependent variable, Brand Engagement (Cognitive Processing, Affection, Activation). The results are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Descriptive Statistics of All Variables (N=296)

Variable	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Visual Trendiness	3.85	0.71	-0.42	0.18
Visual EWOM	3.92	0.78	-0.51	-0.05
Visual Interaction	3.69	0.82	-0.28	-0.34
Cognitive Processing	3.78	0.69	-0.21	-0.31
Affection	3.96	0.73	-0.38	-0.22
Activation	3.61	0.75	-0.15	-0.42
Brand Engagement	3.78	0.62	-0.25	-0.28

Note. All variables were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Brand Engagement (BE) is a composite score calculated as the mean of its three dimensions: Cognitive Processing, Affection, and Activation.

As shown in Table 1, participants reported moderately high levels of agreement for all constructs. The mean scores ranged from 3.61 (Activation) to 3.96 (Affection). The composite Brand Engagement score was 3.78 (SD = 0.62), indicating a positive overall level of engagement. The standard deviations, ranging from 0.62 (Brand Engagement) to 0.82 (Visual Interaction), indicate a moderate spread of responses around the means. The absolute values

for skewness and kurtosis for all variables were well below the thresholds of 2 and 7, respectively (Curran et al., 1996), indicating that the data did not significantly deviate from a normal univariate distribution. This supports the use of parametric statistical tests for subsequent analyses.

4.2 Correlational Analysis

A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables. The correlation matrix, including the composite Brand Engagement score, is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 296)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Visual Trendiness							
Visual EWOM	.523**						
Visual Interaction	.471**	.512**					
Cognitive Processing	.436**	.452**	.586**				
Affection	.461**	.498**	.601**	.567**			
Activation	.387**	.421**	.534**	.483**	.512**		
Brand Engagement	.518**	.554**	.695**	.819**	.841**	.814**	

Note. Brand Engagement is a composite variable calculated as the mean of Cognitive Processing, Affection, and Activation.

** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

The correlation matrix reveals strong, positive, and significant relationships among all variables ($p < .01$). Visual Interaction (VI) shows notably strong correlations with the three brand engagement dimensions: strongest with Affection ($r = .601$), followed by Cognitive Processing ($r = .586$) and Activation ($r = .534$). This pattern provides initial, compelling evidence for its potential role as a key linking mechanism. The correlations between the two

primary independent variables (VT, VE) and VI are also substantial (.471 and .512, respectively), supporting the premise that trendy visuals and peer content stimulate interactive behaviors. All correlations are below 0.7, indicating that multicollinearity should not be a critical issue in subsequent regression analyses.

4.3 Regression Analysis

To test the hypothesized relationships, three separate standard multiple regression analyses were conducted. Each model regressed one dimension of Brand Engagement (Cognitive Processing, Affection, Activation) on the two independent variables (Visual Trendiness and Visual EWOM) and Visual Interaction.

Table 3

Summary of Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Dimensions of Brand Engagement (Without Visual Interaction)

Criterion/Predictor	B	SE B	β	T	p	95% of CI	
						L.L	U.L
Cognitive Processing							
Constant	1.422	0.817		7.615	<.001	1.054	1.789
Visual Trendiness	0.203	0.053	.209	3.848	<.001	0.099	0.307
Visual EWOM	0.254	0.049	.288	5.209	<.001	0.158	0.350
R ² = .349, F(2, 293) = 78.582, p < .001							
Affection							
Constant	1.311	0.192		6.839	<.001	0.933	1.68
Visual Trendiness	0.239	0.054	.232	4.407	<.001	0.133	0.346
Visual EWOM	0.287	0.050	.307	5.757	<.001	0.189	0.385
R ² = .406, F(2, 293) = 100.206, p < .001							
Activation							
Constant	1.588	0.206		7.695	<.001	1.182	1.993

Visual Trendiness	0.177	0.058	.168	3.038	<.001	0.062	0.291
Visual EWOM	0.228	0.054	.237	4.235	<.001	0.122	0.334

Note. CI = confidence interval.

As shown in Table 3, the initial regression models, which included only Visual Trendiness and Visual EWOM as predictors, were all statistically significant. Visual Trendiness and Visual EWOM were significant positive predictors of all three dimensions of Brand Engagement. Visual EWOM (β s = .237 to .307) consistently showed a stronger standardized effect than Visual Trendiness (β s = .168 to .232). The models explained between 30.1% (Activation) and 40.6% (Affection) of the variance in the engagement dimensions.

Chapter 5

Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Summary of Key Findings and Discussion

The findings validate the fact that visual-based approaches are powerful in consumer-brand relationships in this particular setting. But the results bring out some important subtlety: the effect is not direct but it is sublimely mediated through the interaction with consumers.

The Most Important Discovery of the present research is the predominant role of Visual Interaction (VI). As presented in Table 4, VI was also found to be the strongest predictor of all three channels of engagement when it was included in the regression models (426 to 494, $p < .001$). Its addition enhanced similarly the degree of explanatory power of every model (ΔR^2 between .105 and .130). This proves that it is not enough to post visually trendy content or have photos of customers available. It is the interactive liking behaviour, commenting, saving that this content provokes as the essential stimulus to further involvement. Visual Interaction is the key to the transition between mere perception and active psychological investment.

The Attenuated Direct Effects of Visual Stimuli: The first regression models (Table 3) revealed that both VT and VE were important direct predictors of CP, AFF and ACT. Nonetheless, the generalized models (Table 4) give a more accurate account. The direct impact of VT and VE was lesser and in one scenario, insignificant since VI was included in the equation. In particular, Visual Trendiness was no longer having a special direct influence on Activation ($\beta = -.086, p = .115$). It means that the stage between the perception of a trendy image and a practical action (sharing or willing to buy) is completely mediated by the middle phase of an interactive process. In the case of Visual EWOM, no significant but moderate direct influence on Activation was found ($\beta = .115, p = .047$), which may indicate that peer visuals may have a much smaller but significant direct influence on Activation without public interaction, such as through personal social validation.

The Hierarchy of Influence on Engagement Dimensions: The results of analysis have invariably indicated that the models best predicted Affection (Adj. $R^2 = .506$), Cognitive Processing (Adj. $R^2 = .473$) and Activation (Adj. $R^2 = .408$). This is in accordance with the cognitive insights that visual information is naturally good at responding to emotional reactions. The reduced predictive power on Activation is an indication that even though visual marketing is great at creating attention and affection, it could be the case that it needs other factors outside the confines of this study like post-purchase experience or excellent customer service to turn into a characteristic of predictive conversion to consistent behavioral advocacy.

5.2 Conclusion

This study concludes that in the case of local fashion small and medium-sized businesses in the metropolitan cities of Pakistan, interactive consumer behavior is the mediating factor in the route to meaningful brand involvement. The researcher aimed to investigate the particular effect of visual-focused social media marketing on cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of engagement, in this case, the perceived trendiness of visuals of a brand and the rate of visual electronic word-of-mouth. The results show that although both Visual Trendiness and Visual EWOM are influential antecedents, they do not have a direct strong impact. Rather, they harness their authority by driving Visual Interaction which is a quantifiable behavior of liking, commenting, and saving the visuals. This makes Visual Interaction not just a measurement tool but the key psychological and behavioral catalyst that will turn passive viewing into active investment in brand relations.

In theory, these findings narrow down the use of Media Richness Theory and Consumer-Brand Engagement framework in a unique socio-economic environment. They show that media richness in the form of trendy aesthetics or social proof is not sufficient to decrease the perceived risk and ambiguity in the case of smaller brands. It is the interactive possibility and instant of feedback of the platform, which is fulfilled through the participation of the user, that makes the communication loop complete and contributes to more significant psychological investment. This highlights the contingent model in which the efficiency of visual stimuli is conditional depending upon its capacity to produce an interactive response and this indicates a finer, stepwise interaction pathway peculiar to the resource-bound SMEs in emerging markets.

In practice, this provides a strategic switch point of entrepreneurs and marketers. The strategy of the content that evokes interaction is superior to the chasing of perfect, high-produced visual material though aesthetically worthy. The best visual strategy that can help a local fashion SME to build a community is the one, which can be relatable and culturally resonant images which stimulate dialogue and sharing and which, systematically, can use customer-created visuals as the most believable marketing tool. It is in maximizing the feedback loop each visual post should be an invitation to a conversation.

This cross-sectional study is characterized by the acknowledgment of its limitations, which allows the establishment of correlations within a particular sample at one moment in time. Future longitudinal studies can follow the development of engagement, and experimental studies can manipulate a particular element of visualization in order to build causality. It would be more powerful to use real data on behavior in platform analytics. Finally, this thesis offers empirical data that in competitive digital bazaars of the urban centers of Pakistan, the most useful visual resource that any fashion SME can have is not a perfectly curated feed, but a dedicated community in which active involvement makes the brand come to life and inject sustainable worth in it.

5.3 Recommendations

1. Conduct longitudinal studies to track how Visual Interaction and brand loyalty evolve over time, moving beyond the cross-sectional snapshot of this research to understand the long-term return on investment for visual marketing strategies.
2. Undertake comparative cross-cultural research within South Asia (e.g., comparing Pakistan with India or Bangladesh) to disentangle which findings are unique to the Pakistani context and which are generalizable to similar emerging markets.

3. Employ experimental designs (A/B testing) to establish causal relationships, manipulating specific visual elements like color schemes, model diversity, or content format (Reels vs. static posts) to determine their precise impact on engagement metrics.
4. Integrate qualitative depth through in-depth case studies of successful and struggling SMEs to uncover the nuanced decision-making processes, resource allocation challenges, and improvisational strategies behind their visual content calendars.
5. Investigate the role of potential mediating and moderating variables not covered in this study, such as the influence of platform algorithms, the impact of consumer materialism, or the moderating effect of brand authenticity on the visual trendiness-engagement link.
6. Expand the scope to include a wider range of platform dynamics, particularly the growing influence of TikTok and video-based commerce features, to understand how moving imagery and shoppable content alter the engagement paradigm.
7. Explore sub-sector specificities within the fashion industry, such as comparing marketing strategies and consumer engagement for luxury pret versus budget-friendly everyday wear, to provide more targeted guidance for niche SMEs.

5.4 Research Limitations

1. The study was constrained by a limited research budget, which restricted the geographical scope to three major metropolitan cities and precluded the use of probability sampling methods or financial incentives to boost survey response rates, potentially affecting sample representativeness.
2. As a cross-sectional study conducted within a tight timeframe, the research captures perceptions and behaviors at a single point in time. This design cannot establish causality or observe how Visual Interaction dynamics evolve over the long term or in response to specific marketing campaigns.

3. The reliance on self-reported data from consumer surveys introduces the possibility of common method bias and social desirability bias, where respondents may overreport positive engagement behaviors or perceptions.
4. The focus on active social media users creates a sample bias, as the findings may not represent the perceptions of the broader market, including less digitally engaged or offline consumer segments crucial to SME business.

5.5 Future Directions

1. Future studies should adopt a longitudinal design to track changes in Visual Interaction and brand perception over time. This would help establish causal relationships and understand the long-term return on investment of specific visual content strategies for SMEs.
2. To complement survey data, experimental designs (e.g., A/B testing of different visual ads) could establish causality. Deeper mixed-methods approaches, including detailed ethnographic case studies of SME operations, would provide richer context on strategy implementation.
3. Research should compare findings across different cities in Pakistan (e.g., metropolitan vs. second-tier cities) and with other South Asian markets. This would identify which results are context-specific and which are regionally generalizable, enhancing the theoretical model's robustness.
4. Future work should correlate survey-based engagement metrics with objective platform data (e.g., reach, saves, click-through rates) and, where possible, actual sales figures. This bridges the gap between perceived engagement and tangible business outcomes for SMEs.

5. The visual social media landscape is rapidly evolving. Research should explore the impact of emerging formats like short-form video (Reels, TikTok), live commerce, and augmented reality (AR) filters on consumer engagement for fashion SMEs.
6. Further investigation is needed on factors like consumer cultural identity, brand authenticity perceptions, and the role of nano/micro-influencers as mediators or moderators in the visual marketing-to-engagement pathway.
7. The "fashion" sector is diverse. Future studies could compare engagement drivers for different niches, such as luxury pret, modest wear, sustainable fashion, or menswear, to provide more specialized strategic insights.

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Annexures

Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study that forms part of an MBA thesis. The study aims to understand how visual content such as images, videos, and Reels shared by local Pakistani fashion small and medium enterprises (SMEs) on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook influences consumer engagement. Specifically, it explores how visual appeal, trendiness, and user-shared photos contribute to your attention, emotional connection, and interactions with these brands.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete an anonymous online questionnaire about your perceptions and experiences. This will take approximately 5–7 minutes. There are no right or wrong answers; your honest opinions are valuable. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may skip any question or withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence.

All information you provide is strictly confidential. No personal identifying information (such as your name or contact details) is collected. Your responses will be aggregated with others for analysis and will only be reported in summary form in the final thesis. Data will be stored securely on a password-protected device and used solely for this academic purpose.

By proceeding to the survey and submitting your responses, you confirm that you have read this information, understand it, voluntarily agree to participate, and are at least 18 years of age. Thank you for your valuable contribution to this research.

Demographic Sheet

Gender	Male	Female	Prefer Not to Say		
Age Group	Under 25	25- 34	35-44	45-54	55 and above
Which city do you currently live in?	Karachi	Lahore	Islamabad and Rawalpindi	Other	
Which social media platforms do you use to follow local fashion SMEs?	Instagram	Facebook	TikTok	You tube	Other

Questionnaire

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Some what Agree	Neutral	Some what Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
It is easy to respond to visual content posted by local fashion SMEs on social media.							
It is easy to interact with other users through the visual posts shared by local fashion SMEs							
The visual content shared by local fashion SMEs allows two-way interaction on social media.							
The visuals on social media make it easy to share information or							

opinions with other users.							
The visual content shared by local fashion SMEs on social media is up-to-date.							
The social media visuals posted by local fashion SMEs reflect current fashion trends.							
The visual content from local fashion SMEs provides the newest and latest fashion information.							
I would like to pass along visual content (images, videos, reels) from fashion SMEs to my friends on social media.							

I would like to repost or upload visual posts from fashion SMEs on my own social media accounts							
I would like to share fashion-related visuals (outfits, collections, product photos) from local SMEs with others							
The visual content shared by local fashion SMEs makes me think about their products and styles							
I think a lot about the visual content posted by local fashion SMEs when I am viewing it.							
The visual posts from local							

fashion SMEs stimulate my interest to learn more about their offerings.							
I feel very positive when I view visual content from local fashion SMEs.							
Seeing visual posts from local fashion SMEs makes me feel happy.							
I feel good when I engage with visual content shared by local fashion SMEs.							
I feel proud to support or follow visual content from local fashion SMEs.							

I spend a lot of time engaging with visual content from local fashion SMEs compared to other pages.							
Whenever I am on social media, I usually view or interact with content from local fashion SMEs							
I engage with visual content from local fashion SMEs more frequently than with other types of content.							

