

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND PERCEIVED BRAND AUTHENTICITY IN THE TRANSITION FROM INTERNATIONAL TO LOCAL FOOD BRANDS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

**Background:** In recent years, there has been a growing trend among young adults in Pakistan transitioning from international to local food brands. This shift is influenced by factors such as social dynamics and the perceived authenticity of local brands. The present study was conducted with the main objective to investigate the role of social influence and perceived brand authenticity in the transition from international to local food brands among young adults in Pakistan.

**Methods:** This was a cross-sectional study employed a correlational research design and utilized purposive sampling to recruit participants. The total sample size for the study consisted of young adults ( $N = 320$ ), with participants ranging in age from 20 to 40 years. Data was collected from the district Lahore, Pakistan.

**Results:** The results indicated that both social influence and perceived brand authenticity are positively associated with preferences for local fast-food. In the multiple regression analysis, these factors strengthen the model, demonstrating their combined influence in young adults' shift from international to local food brands.

**Conclusion:** In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of social influence and brand authenticity in young adults' shift to local food brands. These insights can guide brand strategists in fostering loyalty by aligning brand messaging with young consumers' social and cultural values, strengthening local brands' market position.

**Keywords.** social influence, brand authenticity, transition from international to local food brands, young adults, Pakistan

### INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, consumer behavior in Pakistan has witnessed a noticeable shift, particularly among young adults, who are increasingly transitioning from international to local food brands. This trend is influenced by various factors, including social influence and the perceived authenticity of local brands, which play a pivotal role in shaping purchasing decisions (Nisar et al., 2024). As young consumers become more discerning, the authenticity of brands and social dynamics surrounding consumption have gained prominence in driving brand loyalty and preferences (Opati, 2023). The present study aims to explore the impact of social influence and perceived brand authenticity on this transition, shedding light on the underlying factors influencing young adults' choices in Pakistan's evolving food market.

Social influence is a critical concept in understanding consumer behavior, as it encompasses the ways in which individuals are affected by the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of others in their social environment. This influence can manifest in various forms, including conformity, compliance, and socialization, significantly shaping individuals' preferences and choices (Krezel & Krezel, 2017). In the context of consumer behavior, social influence plays a pivotal role in determining how consumers perceive products and brands, often leading them to make decisions that align with those of their peers, family, or social networks (Bian & Moutinho, 2011). As young adults increasingly seek validation and acceptance within their social circles, the impact of social influence on brand choice and loyalty has become more pronounced, driving them towards brands that resonate with their social identity (Lam et al., 2010).

Moreover, the rise of social media has amplified the effects of social influence, creating new avenues through which individuals can connect, share experiences, and seek recommendations. Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook enable users to share their opinions on various products and brands, often swaying the preferences of their followers (Souki et al., 2022). This digital landscape has transformed how social influence operates, allowing for rapid dissemination of information and the formation of trends that can significantly impact consumer behavior. As young adults navigate this interconnected environment, understanding the dynamics of social influence becomes essential for brands aiming to engage this demographic effectively and foster brand loyalty (Ruediger Kaufmann, 2012).

Social influence and perceived brand authenticity are interrelated concepts that significantly impact consumer behavior. Social influence shapes how individuals perceive brands, often guiding them toward those that are deemed authentic by their peers or social networks. In a marketplace where consumers increasingly seek products that resonate with their values and beliefs, the authenticity of a brand becomes a critical factor in their decision-making process (Fritz et al., 2017). As young adults navigate their choices, they are not only influenced by their immediate social circles but also by broader societal trends and narratives that emphasize the importance of authenticity in branding. Consequently, understanding the dynamics between social influence and perceived brand authenticity can provide valuable insights into how brands can effectively engage and connect with consumers.

Perceived brand authenticity is increasingly recognized as a vital factor influencing consumer preferences and behaviors in today's competitive marketplace. It refers to the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be genuine, trustworthy, and aligned with their values and beliefs (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020). Authenticity is not merely about the product's quality or functionality; it encompasses the brand's heritage, mission, and the emotional connections it fosters with its consumers. As consumers become more discerning and seek meaningful experiences, brands that convey a sense of authenticity are more likely to foster loyalty and advocacy (Oh et al., 2019). The rise of social media and digital communication has further heightened the importance of perceived brand authenticity, allowing consumers to evaluate a brand's authenticity based on their interactions and experiences (Yang et al., 2021). In particular, young adults are drawn to brands that resonate with their identity and values, making perceived authenticity a crucial driver in their purchasing decisions. Understanding the factors that contribute to perceived brand authenticity can provide valuable insights for marketers aiming to cultivate loyalty and engagement in an ever-evolving marketplace.

The transition from international to local food brands among young adults represents a significant shift in consumer behavior, driven by the interplay of social influence and perceived brand authenticity. As young adults seek to align their purchasing decisions with their values and cultural identity, they increasingly turn to local brands that reflect their community and heritage (De Mooij, 2019). Social influence plays a crucial role in this transition, as individuals are often guided by the preferences and recommendations of their peers, family, and social networks. These influences can create a sense of belonging and validation, prompting young consumers to favour local brands over international counterparts (Strizhakova et al., 2008).

Perceived brand authenticity further enhances this transition, as consumers are more likely to support brands they perceive as genuine and trustworthy (Huang & Guo, 2021). Local food brands often leverage their heritage, storytelling, and community involvement to establish authenticity, resonating with young adults who prioritize values-driven consumption (Verhaal et al., 2023). This connection between social influence and perceived brand authenticity

underscores the importance of community and cultural relevance in shaping consumer preferences. By understanding these dynamics, marketers can develop strategies that effectively engage young adults, fostering brand loyalty and encouraging the shift toward local food brands in an increasingly globalized market.

The rationale for this study stems from the increasing trend of young adults in Pakistan transitioning from international to local food brands, a shift that reflects broader changes in consumer behavior influenced by social dynamics and brand authenticity. Understanding this phenomenon is crucial for several reasons. First, as young adults represent a significant portion of the consumer market, their preferences and purchasing decisions can shape the future landscape of the food industry. Second, the interplay between social influence and perceived brand authenticity offers valuable insights into the factors that drive brand loyalty and preference in an era marked by globalization and cultural shifts. This study aims to fill the existing gap in the literature by investigating how social influences and perceptions of authenticity interact to affect young adults' choices, providing actionable insights for marketers seeking to engage this demographic effectively. By exploring these relationships, the research not only contributes to academic knowledge but also offers practical implications for brands aiming to resonate with young consumers in a competitive marketplace.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the relationship among social influence, perceived brand authenticity, and transition from international to local food brands among young adults.
- To assess the predicting role of social influence and perceived brand authenticity in the Transition from International to Local Food Brands among Young Adults.
- To differentiate the gender differences in in the Transition from International to Local Food Brands among Young Adults.

### METHODOLOGY

In the present study, a correlational research design and purposive sampling technique was employed to collect data from the participants. The total sample size was ( $N=300$ ) and it was distributed into two categories i.e., ( $n=150$ ) men and ( $n=150$ ) women. All procedures in this research adhered strictly to established professional ethics standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participant confidentiality and data privacy were rigorously maintained, with all personal information anonymized to protect their identity. The study also received approval from the relevant ethics committee, aligning with ethical guidelines to prioritize participants' well-being and respect throughout the research process.

### MEASURES

#### *Demographic Performa*

Demographic sheet consisted of the basic information of the participants including gender, age, and education.

#### *Preferences of Local Fast-Food*

The *Preferences of Local Fast-Food Questionnaire*, developed by Selvi et al. (2022), consists of 21 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree Strongly to 5 = Agree Strongly). This measure demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.74, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

#### *Social Influence Scale*

Social Influence Scale developed by Stibe and Cugelman (2019) consists of 42 items. This scale consists of six different sub-factors i.e., social learning, social comparison, social norms, social facilitation, social cooperation, social competition, and social recognition. The average range of the Cronbach's alpha reliability was found .85-.90. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree Strongly to 5 = Agree Strongly).

**The Brand Authenticity Scale**

The Brand Authenticity Scale was developed by Tran and Keng (2018) as a self-report instrument for the assessment of perception regarding brand authenticity. It was an 18-items scale with a .70 Cronbach's Alpha. Each item was evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree".

**RESULTS**

**Table 1**

*Number of Items and Cronbach's Alpha Reliability of Social Influence, Perceived Brand Authenticity, and Preferences of Local Fast-Food Scales*

| Variable                       | <i>k</i> | <i>α</i> |
|--------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Social Influence               | 42       | 0.87     |
| Perceived Brand Authenticity   | 18       | 0.68     |
| Preferences of Local Fast-Food | 21       | 0.75     |

*Note.* K= Number of items, *α*= Cronbach's Alpha Reliability

Table 1 provides the number of items and Cronbach's alpha reliability scores for three scales used in the study. The Social Influence scale includes 42 items with a reliability of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency. The Perceived Brand Authenticity scale has 18 items with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.68, reflecting moderate reliability. The Preferences of Local Fast-Food Scale comprises 21 items with a reliability of 0.75, suggesting acceptable internal consistency for this measure.

**Table 2**

*Pearson Product Movement Correlation among Social Influence, Perceived Brand Authenticity, and Preferences of Local Fast-Food in Young Adults*

| Factors | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1   | 2     | 3      |
|---------|----------|----------|-----------|-----|-------|--------|
| 1. SI   | 300      | 49.96    | 7.17      | --- | .48** | .57*** |
| 2. PBA  | 300      | 55.67    | 14.3      | --- | ---   | .49**  |
| 3. PLFF | 300      | 48.17    | 7.45      | --- | ---   | ---    |

*Note.* SI= Social Influence, PBA= Perceived Brand Authenticity, PLFF= Preferences of Local Fast-Food, \*\**p*<.01, \*\*\**p*<0.001

The table presents the Pearson Product-Moment correlation among social Influence, perceived brand authenticity, and preferences for local fast-food. Social influence shows a significant positive relationship with both perceived brand authenticity and preferences for local fast-food. Additionally, perceived brand authenticity is positively associated with preferences for local fast-food, suggesting that as young adults perceive greater authenticity in brands, they are more likely to prefer local fast-food options.

**Table 3**

*Multiple Regression Analysis of Social Influence and Perceived Brand Authenticity in Transition from International to Local Food Brands among Young Adults*

| Variable                     | $\beta$ | R <sup>2</sup> |
|------------------------------|---------|----------------|
| <b>Step-I</b>                |         |                |
| Social Influence             | .57**   | .24            |
| <b>Step-II</b>               |         |                |
| Social Influence             | .55**   | .25            |
| Perceived Brand Authenticity | .50**   |                |

Note: \*\*= $p < .01$

The table summarizes a multiple regression analysis assessing the influence of Social Influence and Perceived Brand Authenticity on young adults' transition from international to local food brands. In Step I, Social Influence alone explains a notable portion of the variance in brand transition. In Step II, adding Perceived Brand Authenticity further enhances the model, with both factors showing significant positive contributions. This suggests that both Social Influence and Perceived Brand Authenticity play key roles in influencing young adults' preference shift towards local food brands.

### DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the role of social influence and perceived brand authenticity in the transition from international to local food brands among young adults. The analysis reveals influences among the variables, with results suggesting that social influence and perceived brand authenticity significantly contribute to the preference for local brands. The correlation analysis shows a positive relationship between social influence and perceived brand authenticity, as well as between social influence and preferences for local fast-food. This finding indicates that as social influence increases, young adults are more likely to view brands as authentic and to favor local options. These correlations are consistent with prior research highlighting the effect of social dynamics on brand perceptions. Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) and other scholars in consumer behavior have emphasized that social influence, particularly from peers, is instrumental in shaping young adults' preferences, as they often seek social validation in their choices (Wang et al., 2012). This social validation appears to extend to local brands, suggesting that the acceptance and promotion of these brands within social networks drive increased preference among young consumers.

Through multiple regression analysis, the findings indicate that both social influence and perceived brand authenticity significantly impact young adults' preferences for local fast-food brands over international options. These results contribute to the understanding of consumer behavior, particularly in the realm of brand perception and social dynamics, by affirming that external influences and the perceived authenticity of brands substantially guide purchasing decisions. These findings are aligned with previous studies highlighting the role of peer and societal pressures on consumer choices. For instance, Ozuem et al. (2021) and more recent studies in consumer psychology confirm that social influence exerts a strong effect on individuals' brand perceptions and can shape their brand loyalty, especially among young adults, who are more receptive to peer opinions and group dynamics (Gass & Seiter, 2022). Young adults, as a demographic, are particularly responsive to trends and group norms, suggesting that as local brands gain acceptance within social groups, individuals are more likely to adopt these brands to align with their social environment (Lam et al., 2010).

The findings showed that perceived brand authenticity enhanced the prediction of preference for local brands, underscoring the value placed on brand authenticity by young adults. This finding supports previous research demonstrating that authenticity plays a crucial role in



consumer decision-making (Lee et al., 2010). Brand authenticity encompasses aspects such as transparency, consistency, and cultural relevance, which resonate particularly well with young adults who often seek brands that reflect their identity and values (Guèvremont, 2018). As consumers perceive local brands to be more authentic, they may feel a stronger connection to these brands, viewing them as reflections of local culture and heritage, thus enhancing their preference for them over international brands.

The results also support a shift in consumer loyalty that is particularly relevant in emerging markets where local brands are increasingly competing with established international brands. Past studies (Heinberg et al., 2016; Guo, 2013) have documented similar patterns in emerging economies where consumers favor local brands that reflect their cultural identity and authenticity.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study highlights the critical roles of social influence and perceived brand authenticity in shaping young adults' transition from international to local food brands. These findings not only underscore the importance of social factors and authenticity perceptions in consumer behavior but also offer valuable guidance for brand strategists in fostering local brand loyalty. By aligning brand messages with the social and cultural values of young consumers, local brands can create enduring connections and enhance their competitive positioning in the market.

### **LIMITATION AND FUTURE SUGGESTIONS**

This study has few limitations that future research should address. First, the reliance on a cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationship between social influence, perceived brand authenticity, and brand preference. Longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into how these variables interact over time. Additionally, examining other demographic factors, such as socioeconomic status or cultural background, could provide a more nuanced understanding of the predictors of local brand preference.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Moreover, these results have practical implications for local brands seeking to compete with international brands in young consumer segments. By leveraging social influence through targeted marketing that engages peer networks and highlighting elements of brand authenticity, local brands can enhance their appeal and foster stronger loyalty among young adults. Strategies that emphasize cultural resonance, community involvement, and transparency may be particularly effective in enhancing perceived brand authenticity and encouraging local brand adoption.

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