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Exploring the Role of Social Media Influencers in Climate Change Advocacy in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study of Content Strategies and Audience Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing trend in the formation of discourse in the conversations about environment in the world of social media influencers. In Pakistan, a nation that exemplifies extreme vulnerability to climatic effects, influencers can be a key to the translation of scientific risky messages into public discourse, attitude formation and action. In this work, the qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews will help to analyze the way the climate issues are set by Pakistani influencers, what content strategies are adopted, and how the various audience segments receive and respond to these messages. The data include 20 purposively sampled Pakistani influencers with Instagram, Facebook and Tik Tok accounts (n=20) over 1 year, n=18 comprising influencers and n=30 epitomizing followers in urban and peri-urban communities, followed by in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis described four key influencer strategies (education-through-storytelling, lifestyle-led greenfluencing, emotion-driven disaster framing and calls-to-local action) and three major patterns in audience response (awareness, sceptical engagement and performative action). The results demonstrate conflict between reach and depth: in raising awareness and undertaking symbolic action, influencers are more effective than they are in translating into sustained collective action because of structural barriers (to political and infrastructural processes). Strategies were provided in the paper to enable influences, NGOs and policymakers to enhance credibility, local applicability, and pathways between online interactions and community-based climate resilience.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Climate Change Advocacy, Pakistan, Qualitative Study, Content Strategies, Audience Perceptions.

Introduction

Pakistan is one of the most climate change-vulnerable countries and it has suffered devastating floods, heatwaves, and changing agricultural trends which have wrought social and economic disasters in recent times. Acts of communication and awareness-building are indispensable elements of climate adaptation and mitigation policies: they influence the perception of risks, they affect the individual behavior, and they have the potential to generate political pressure leading to a system policy response. Social media influencers (people who have a significant following online and produce content to influence tastes, attitudes, and behaviors) have become key brokers of climate information in this fast-changing space of information.

Environmental communicators such as greenfluencers have shown potential globally to create awareness and normalize low-carbon lifestyles and engagement with younger digitally connected generations. But the influencer industry has trade-offs: attention-optimized content formats seek to make complex science very digestible, value aesthetics more important than accuracy, and encourage consumerist reaction taken as sustainable by product placement. Such dynamics are especially prominent in the Global South, where digital gaps, local susceptibilities, and alternate forms of civic participation condition the translation of messaging into action.

Pakistan In Pakistan, social media (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube) has multiple audiences among urban and peri-urban classes. Influencers include youth climate activists, journalists, lifestyle creators, and celebrities who sometimes use climate shires. Although climate communication scholarship has grown, systematic, locally-based explanations of how climate messages are constructed by Pakistani influencers, and how they are received and responded to by the audience, are scarce. These processes are important in the design of interventions so as to maximize the reach through the influencers and also increase the credibility of the message and behavioral response.

This research is expected to bridge that gap by answering the following questions: (1) What type of content approaches are applied by Pakistani social media influencers when engaging in climate change? How do various audience groups process the influencer climate messaging in regards to their perceived credibility, relevancy and their propensity to become engaged? and (3) What are the barriers and drivers that can influence how online engagement can be translated and implemented in offline, community-level climate action? The proposed study applies qualitative content analysis method and semi-structured interviews with the influencers and follower to contextualise influencer activity in Pakistan to the social, cultural, and political context to offer practical recommendations to practitioners and policymakers.

Literature Review

The cultural and commercial rise of social media stars has seen academic interest grow alongside them as they occupy the nexus of celebrity, recommending peers, and entrepreneurial content production. What makes them so convincing is perceived authenticity, parasocial relationships and algorithmic amplification (Mede, 2024; Munaro, 2024). Recent reviews suggest that it is possible to use influencer communication to endorse sustainable consumption and create environmental awareness, although the role in the durable behavior change progress ambiguous and depends on the message style, credibility gestures and receptivity barriers (Munaro, 2024; Xie et al., 2024). Haastrup (2024) also indicates the significance of authenticity among climate-oriented influencers and argues that viewers do not tolerate performative acts and demand to reveal knowledge or experience representing nature or decades-long dedication to environmental-oriented issues. Therefore, seemingly determinant factors that mediate persuasiveness and persistent connection (message-sidedness or single versus multi-faceted framing, visible activism manifested by the influencer) appear (Haastrup, 2024). However, social media is programed to honour short, emotionally charged and visually appealing content. The research of climate communication using Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter platforms indicates that revelations and emotional appeals (i.e., representation of a disaster sight or first-person testimony) regularly result in significant sharing rates but may cause anxiety, weariness, or scepticism when not followed

by any actions to be taken (Mede, 2024). The example and the literature presented in the so-called Greta effect show that even charismatic, youth-driven campaigns may result in attracting mass crowds and facing certain backlash and politicization which discloses the affordances and limitations of the platform, both as a medium of mobilization and contestation (Mede, 2024). The studies of digital environmental campaigns conducted outside of Western culture also point towards the need of doing localization, with specific emphasis on the necessity to include local languages, culturally specific metaphors, and rational adaptation tips in the platform-native forms, as short-form videos, stories, and infographics can be considered among them, in order to reach highly underprivileged or resource-deprived groups (Sun et al., 2024). Examples of practical means through which TikTok creators are able to circumvent local customs and limitations on the site to package climate matters in culturally appropriate terms to appeal to national audiences can be found within the Chinese context (Sun et al., 2024). In Pakistan, the topic of climate change media coverage is underrepresented yet actively developing with a recent study complaining that mainstream media is prone to framing coverage of extreme events such as floods using episodic rhetoric on losses and spectacle without digging into the root causes or solutions (Javed, 2023; Siddiqui, 2023). The study of social media in Pakistan also reveals that there is a hybrid of civic engagement, the risks of misinformation, and urban/rural disparities in reach (Javed, 2023; Siddiqui, 2023). According to the news and qualitative research published recently, the smog and local pollution awareness campaigns on social media have been effective, and the influencers along with musicians have been prominent in their outreach and teaching (Associated Press, 2025). Nonetheless, the systematic research is still lacking in targeting the strategies of influencers, authenticity cues, and impression of the audience on them. Communication-to-action pathways literature warns that paying attention and being aware does not always lead to sustained collective action and there is growing concern within the behavior change models to discuss enabling conditions that can guide behavior change like infrastructure, policy drivers, and social norms in addition to knowledge (Xie et al., 2024). In Pakistan, the structural issues such as weak municipal waste disposals, unstable water service, and the insecurities of livelihood all are a few of the structural barriers restricting the practical ability of switching at an individual level. Therefore, their requests should be supported by the provision of community-based resources, as well as institutional support to produce measurable effects on resilience in terms of action taken by the influencers (Xie et al., 2024). Furthermore, investigations of digital activism note that digital repression, platform policy, and attention economy relations mediate the accessibility of discourses of climate advocacy (Xie et al., 2024). Based on these observations, the present research provides a Pakistan-oriented and empirically based study of influencer climate communication strategies and audience reception in the Pakistani context with the content analysis and interviews being used to analyze the relationship between message design and reception. In such a manner, it fills an important evidence gap on the localised level with regard to the plausibility, cultural relevance, and actionability of influencer-driven climate advocacy.

Theoretical Framework

This paper builds on three, complementary theoretical strands in the analysis of climate communication through influencers:

1. Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 1962) - positions influencers as opinion leaders who can speed that diffusion of ideas and practices (e.g. recycling, water conservation) via the early-adopter networks. The framework can assist in explaining the influence of the characteristics of influencers (centrality, credibility) on the uptake by the follower networks.

2. Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) Offers the option to deconstruct how influencers frame issues (causation, consequence, solutions) and through which interpretive frames (e.g. disaster, moral duty, lifestyle) they are highlight. Framing influences the sense of urgency and an appropriate reaction.

3. Parasocial Theory of Source Credibility - addresses the meaning of perceived authenticity of influencers, expertise, and trust as they determine the degree to which they are persuasive. Parasocial relationships result in a feeling of intimacy that may enhance receptivity as well as generate expose to the performativity.

The use of these frameworks in combination allows the investigation of the content of a message (framing), the characteristics of the messenger (credibility, the presence of parasocial ties), and the possible effect of behavioral diffusion, as well as place analysis in the socio- political context of Pakistan.

Research Methodology

This research will apply qualitative content analysis as a methodology to investigate how the climate change issue is communicated by social media influencers in Pakistan, what strategies are used, and what kind of reaction the topic has on the audience. Qualitative content analysis can be performed with a systematic, in-depth analysis of a textual and visual material, as well as with interpretations of the meanings, values, and cultural contexts carried by it (Schreier, 2012). This approach is especially suitable to reveal the intricacies of narration building, contextualization, and rhetorical stratagems within the topic of environmental advocacy involving the presence of influencers.

Sampling

The influencers were identified in a purposive sampling method that highlights environmental and climate change as interests. The selection criteria were:

No fewer than five publicly available posts or videos relating to climate change or environmental sustainability between January 2023 and June 2025.

Minimum of 50,000 followers, in order to provide a significant reach and impact.

Content that either targets Pakistani viewers or is created by Pakistani-based influencers.

The variety of styles of content, involving lifestyle stars, environmental advocates, teachers, and entertainers.

The end data sample was the 20 influencer posts and each post featured the visuals, captions, hashtags and visible audience engagement (likes, shares and comments) in that post.

Data Collection

All the posts chosen have been downloaded manually and arranged in a database in a systematic way. Visual and textual parts of every post were noted, as well as such background material as the platform on which a post was made, the date, and the level of engagement. Audience response was also checked by taking note of publicly available user comments.

Analytical Framework

This analysis was informed and facilitated by the coding categories based on the conceptual framework of the study, which consists of:

Influencer Strategies: education-through-storytelling, lifestyle-led greenfluencing, emotion/disaster framing, local-action calls.

Mediators: Expertise-signaling, authenticity-signaling, platform affordances, and commercial affiliations.

Awareness, performative action, and skeptical engagement: Audience Responses.

Structural Constraints: Infrastructure gaps and policy vacuum, economic precarity.

Data Analysis Process

Qualitative content analysis used the inductive-deductive process:

Initial Constancy: reading and looking through all the gathered material to see the whole picture.

Open Coding: Emphasizing on common concepts, codes of visuals and linguistic clues in every post.

Categorization: Rearrangement of codes into larger themes based on the predetermined framework but also to permit the introduction of new themes not foreseen in the framework.

Interpretation: Analyzing the mutual relationships between strategies, mediators, and audience reactions, as well as the way these relationships are formed within the context of more fashionable socio-economic processes and policies.

Analysis sought to go beyond superficial description to get a meaning of the process of meaning making in imaginative construction of a climatic change discourse in Pakistan, and how players, who can be termed reputed because of their rich background and experience, perpetuate the ideology of climate change epitomised in Pakistan. The focus was on finding the style of narration, appeal to emotions, the cultural framing devices, and interpretations of the audience in statements and responses.

Ethical Considerations

None of the analyzed material was secretive or restricted, and no data was accessed privately. Quotes provided by influencers, or ordinary users have been disguised as required by ethical research practices regarding online settings (AoIR, 2019), in order to prevent inadvertent acts of reputational damage to individuals, or the harm of reputational damage to the influence of influencers.

Findings

1. 1. Typology Content Strategy

Qualitative content analysis showed that there were four major influencer strategies in communicating on climate change issues:

a. Education-through-storytelling

The influencers used narrative vignettes, including first-person stories of floods, interviews with farmers who were impacted, and explainers on carousels to put climate science at the local level. This was a strategy of focusing on local effects and with adaptation guidelines that were often presented in Urdu or local languages which increased cultural appeal.

b. Lifestyle-led 'Greenfluencing'

The lifestyle creators embedded sustainability messages into apocalyptic content, such as zero-waste living advice, and reviews of environmentally friendly products. Although this made sustainable practices normalized in urban youths, certain audiences denounced the consumerist bias arguing that the recommended eco friendly products were in many cases expensive and unaffordable to the broader masses.

c. Disaster Framing based on Emotion

In regards to the climate-inspired catastrophes, including floods and heatwaves, the influencers shared vivid photos and testimonies of their experiences to elicit empathy and funding. These posts had high engagement, but the long-term exposure was dangerous to lead to compassion fatigue, especially with no systemic solutions at hand.

d. Calls-to-local Action

A smaller group of influencers rallied doubters towards concrete local level action such as clean-up efforts, fundraising, and tree planting. This was best accomplished with the organization of NGOs or civic organizations that offered logistical support.

2. Creativity and Credibility Signatures

Reliability was supported by visits of the field, by collaboration with the NGOs, and by references to expert sources. People preferred the direct experience of an influencer, also known as embodied knowledge, rather than shared information around the world. Yet there were instances of inconsistent credibility when brand sponsorships case into conflict with claims about sustaining products.

3. Patterns of Audience Reception Source:

It produced three main types of audience:

Knowing but not participating Gained knowledge but experienced structural obstacles like poor municipal infrastructure.

Performative engagers Took cheap but observable actions (sharing posts, eco-hashtags) that were not reflected in long-term behavioral change.

Skeptical/Critical -- Enquired about the motivation of the influencers especially in cases where celebrity support was seemingly erratic.

The younger audiences (18-30) were more responsive to brief learning content in video form, as opposed to older people who valued in-depth, solution-focused reporting.

4. Platform Affordances and Limitation

Tiktok and Instagram Reels provided increased reach at the cost of emotional short clips, less depth. Facebook enabled more conversation and logistics, but was experiencing a waning youth interest. Organic visibility was limited by algorithmic volatility, and paid promotion was needed to have steady reach.

5. Awareness to Action

Offline action captured the largest volumes when there is a mix of 3 conditions being all there together: the credibility of the influencer, institutional weight (NGO/local government), and low-cost activity, culturally relevant. Mobilization was fairly symbolic without institutional support.

6. Unintended Consequences

There was the risk of commodification of the environmental messages, drowning out local voices beside celebrity activists, promulgating simplistic or inaccurate climate messages, which further supports the need of fact-checking partnerships.

Discussion

The research findings of this study are consistent with wider literature on effectiveness and limits of influencers. Influencers play a helpful role in creating awareness and normalizing pro-environmental messages among the online generation; nevertheless, it is not enough to increase awareness, especially where there are structural limitations, to induce lasting

behavior change. The typology (education, lifestyle, emotion, local action) summarize the possible rhetorical strategies and hint at trade-offs in terms of reach and depth.

It was a decisive mediator credibility and authenticity: Influencer posts based in the field, with references to local expertise, or collaboration with NGOs made more offline actions predicted. This resonates with this previous research that shows how expertise signaling and displayed activism are at the heart of effective environmental appeals.

Platform affordances determine possibility: Depending on the length of their content, short-form video is capable of achieving scale and simultaneously minimizing complexity; long-form content allows deliberation but can reach fewer individuals. In this way, a platform-mixing approach that incorporates reach-focused short videos with more context-oriented longer posts and the coordination of community groups can yield superior performance.

Equity considerations:

Urban, English/Urdu speaking, and middle-class narratives are now privileged on the influencer ecosystem. Collecting actors in the local languages and culturally appealing expressions (e.g., folk music) can reach marginalized groups underrepresented in the mainstream influencer circuits; reporting in the recent past has documented how musicians in Sindhi are using song to create awareness to locals in rural communities, a trend that can work in conjunction to the influencer tactics.

Policy and practitioner implications:

Influencer campaign should be modeled to be an aspect of integrated communication strategies that involve local institutions, available resources, and policy advocacy. Capacity-building to convert attention to community resilience should accompany fundraising and single-event outbursts of visibility to convert to long-term community resilience.

Recommendations

For Influencers

1. Express embodied engagement: make field visits, refer to local experts and evidence deep and long commitment to discourage any thoughts of performativity.
2. Local text: Utilize Urdu/regional L1 or L2 language, local metaphors and practical adaptation recommendations that fit the capacity of followers.
3. Collaborate with professionals: Develop by partnering with scientists, environmental non-governmental organizations, and civic communities who know the locale and augment credibility and accuracy of materials.
4. Make actionable asks: Prefer low cost, scalable actions (tree planting with local partners, community cleanup) as opposed to consumerist solutions.

In the case of NGOs / Civil Society

1. Simplify the efforts of influencers: Provide supply chains (volunteer recruitment, local authorization) and measurement models to translate the focus online into long-term action.
2. Fund capacity-building: Invest in media literacy and small grants which allow the funding of projects run at the community level to be promoted through the influences.

For Policymakers

1. Invest in enabling infrastructure: Increase the quality of waste, water services, green common spaces to transform isolated action into mass action.
2. Reach out to the online communities: Employ the complementary role of influencers in the official campaigns but be clear regarding the sponsorship and the objectives of it.

Future Research directions

Quantitative longitudinal research to quantify the behavior change after the influencer campaigns.

- Comparative study of the countries of South Asia to single out the cross-cultural differences concerning the efficiency of influencers.
- Analysis of platform-related methods (e.g., promotion of verified climate content using an algorithm) and policy implications.

Limitations

This is a qualitative and purposive research; these results are confined in context and cannot be generalized using statistics. In nature, the influencer sample is over-representative of urban and exposure creators; subsequent studies are encouraged to focus on rural communicators and low transmission platforms. Social media is also dynamic, which limits temporal generalizability.

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