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INSTAGRAM AS A CATALYST FOR FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP: EXPLORING MARKETING PRACTICES AMONG PAKISTANI WOMEN

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Abstract
Instagram has emerged as a global social media platform that multinational corporations extensively utilize for marketing and consumer engagement. This study examines how Pakistani women entrepreneurs utilize Instagram as a marketing and sales tool, with a particular focus on its role in supporting digital entrepreneurship. Grounded in Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere and the framework of Social Constructivism, the research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of 17 women entrepreneurs actively using Instagram for business purposes. The findings reveal a notable shift toward digital commerce among female entrepreneurs in Pakistan, driven by Instagram's accessible and interactive features. These tools facilitate authentic brand communication, enhance customer engagement, and expand market reach. Overall, the study highlights Instagram's transformative role in empowering women entrepreneurs, promoting visibility in the digital marketplace, and fostering a participatory business environment.

INTRODUCTION

Diversity, transformation, and rapid information exchange are defining features of today's globalized world—an era often characterized as the "age of innovation in information and communication." The proliferation of data, the breakdown of geographic and cultural boundaries, and the restructuring of traditional markets have led to the emergence of the "information age" or "global era." In this new environment, technological advancements, especially in communication, have redefined the conditions of competition,
pushing organizations and individuals to adapt their strategies to maintain visibility, relevance, and growth. Within this context, social media platforms have become central tools in reshaping communication and marketing practices, offering a dynamic, participatory, and low-cost alternative to traditional media channels (Habibi et al., 2014).

Among these platforms, Instagram has emerged as a pivotal space for digital entrepreneurship, particularly for those who operate outside the formal economic sphere. Since its launch in 2010, Instagram has evolved from a basic photo-sharing application to a powerful business and branding tool. Its visually driven interface, combined with features such as Stories, Reels, Shopping, and customizable posts, has enabled users to establish meaningful engagement with customers and promote their offerings in innovative ways (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010;

Weilenmann et al., 2013). With over one billion active users worldwide, Instagram provides unique advantages to small-scale and home-based entrepreneurs, especially those seeking cost-effective marketing solutions (Dean, 2022).

In Pakistan, a growing number of women entrepreneurs are turning to Instagram not only to promote their businesses but also to navigate sociocultural barriers that often restrict their participation in conventional marketplaces. These women utilize Instagram to establish direct connections with consumers, establish their brand identity, and access a broader digital economy that offers flexibility and autonomy (Zulqarnain et al., 2020). For many, this platform represents more than a business tool; it is a gateway to empowerment, self-expression, and social visibility.

This study examines the use of Instagram by Pakistani women entrepreneurs as a marketing and sales platform, investigating how its interactive features support business growth, customer engagement, and community building. Unlike traditional business environments, which often marginalize women, Instagram presents an accessible and inclusive space that encourages innovation and participation. Drawing on a constructivist research approach, the study employs semi-structured interviews with 17 women entrepreneurs to uncover the lived realities, strategies, and obstacles faced in the digital marketplace. Through this lens, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how digital platforms can foster economic inclusion, challenge gender norms, and reshape the entrepreneurial landscape in Pakistan.

1. Research Objective

The primary objective of this research was to investigate how Instagram functioned as a catalyst for female entrepreneurship in Pakistan by examining the marketing practices adopted by Pakistani women entrepreneurs. Specifically, the study aimed to explore the strategies these women employed to promote their products or services, construct brand identity, and engage effectively with their target audience. It also sought to understand how Instagram helped them overcome traditional sociocultural barriers that typically hindered women's participation in entrepreneurship within a conservative context. Furthermore, the research intended to assess the platform's role in facilitating business growth, expanding customer outreach, and promoting the economic empowerment of women through enhanced digital visibility and participation in the digital economy.

2. Literature Review

Over the past two decades, social media has transformed into a vital communication and marketing tool, offering fast, user-generated, interactive, and cost-effective content (Whelan et al., 2013). Social networking platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter, enable users to create, share, and engage with multimedia content, providing real-time feedback and analytics (Bakshy et al., 2011; O'Brien et al., 2020). Instagram has become a key player in digital marketing due to its visual-centric design, making it uniquely positioned for brand promotion and consumer engagement (Hird, 2013; Linaschke, 2011). Unlike traditional advertising models, social media enables businesses to build reciprocal relationships with consumers, fostering trust, satisfaction, and loyalty (Kim & Ko, 2012; Moslehpour et al., 2020). The entertaining and interactive features of social media have further increased its appeal (Agichtein et al., 2008), with many businesses adopting these platforms for direct communication, personalized service, and community building (Khan et al., 2019).

3.1 Instagram Features and Business Strategies

Instagram's features, including Stories, IGTV, Reels, and Shopping, have reshaped digital marketing strategies (Atiq et al., 2022; Herzallah et al., 2022). Businesses utilize these tools to showcase behind-the-scenes content, share customer testimonials, and engage in live interactions with their audience. These features enhance brand visibility and foster real-time consumer engagement (Aydin, 2019; Huang & Benyoucef, 2013).

A central element of Instagram marketing is the use of hashtags, introduced in 2011, which aid in content categorization and discoverability (Giannoulakis & Tsapatsoulis, 2015; Caleffi, 2015). Strategic hashtag use has enabled businesses to reach niche and location-specific markets while fostering online communities around specific themes (Highfield & Leaver, 2015; Kumar et al., 2014). Another key strategy involves creating high-quality content. Research emphasizes that compelling visuals and authentic storytelling help businesses build emotional connections and sustain consumer interest (Kong et al., 2019; Athapaththu & Kulathunga, 2018). Entrepreneurs often utilize persuasive photography and videography that aligns with their brand identity to engage audiences and communicate the value of their products (Hird, 2013).

3.2 Women Entrepreneurs and Instagram Adoption

The digital era has particularly empowered women entrepreneurs by offering flexible and accessible business tools. A study by Raj, Thiyagarajan, and Avinash (2021) found that Instagram is the most preferred platform for young female entrepreneurs, primarily due to its intuitive interface, visual appeal, and interactive features such as tagging, messaging, and hashtagging. Authentic content, such as real images and personal stories, was found to generate higher engagement, making Instagram a strategic choice for visibility and trust-building.

In a recent study, Pugalendhi (2024) examined the role of Instagram in the business journeys of women entrepreneurs across various sectors, including fashion, food, wellness, and Consultancy. The findings highlighted the strategic utilization of Instagram features, including Reels, Shopping, and analytics, to drive business growth. Despite facing challenges such as gender bias and limited mentorship, women entrepreneurs demonstrated resilience by employing data-driven marketing, influencer collaborations, and community engagement. The study also highlighted the need for institutional support, such as access to funding and mentorship programs, to overcome gender-specific barriers in digital entrepreneurship.

3.3 Gaps in Existing Literature

While the literature establishes Instagram as a transformative marketing tool, a notable lack of empirical research remains, specifically addressing its impact on Pakistani women entrepreneurs. Although global studies highlight Instagram's effectiveness in visibility, authenticity, and engagement, the contextual challenges and strategic practices within Pakistan's sociocultural framework remain underexplored. The present study aims to bridge this gap by examining how Pakistani women utilize Instagram not only as a sales channel but also as a platform for empowerment, identity formation, and economic participation.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon both classical and contemporary theoretical perspectives to examine the role of social media, particularly Instagram, as a marketing and engagement platform for women entrepreneurs in Pakistan. Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere provides a foundational framework for this study, which conceptualizes a space within social life where individuals gather to discuss and debate matters of public interest. In this context, media play a pivotal role by facilitating communication and empowering public discourse. An educated, socially conscious society that freely deliberates on issues of collective importance makes the public sphere effective. With the rise of digital technologies, particularly social media, the boundaries of the public sphere have expanded. According to Shirky (2011), social media platforms allow individuals to express opinions and engage in public dialogue on a wide range of issues. At the same time, these platforms have also transformed the public sphere into a site of contestation, where self-interest and competition for influence often overshadow rational consensus and consensus-building.

Furthermore, the study integrates the Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) theory, developed by Everett Rogers (1962, 2003), to explore how

innovation and technology are adopted and utilized, particularly among small business owners. The DOI theory offers a lens for understanding the stages and factors that influence the adoption of new technologies. Scholars such as Salman and Hasim (2011) emphasized that while innovation may offer significant advantages, small business owners must adopt technologies cautiously and strategically. In the context of this study, the DOI theory is particularly relevant in understanding how women entrepreneurs adopt and use Instagram for business purposes. It highlights key factors such as competency, cost efficiency, innovative behaviour, and interactive behaviour as critical antecedents to the use of Instagram by retail small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia (Sajilan et al., 2019; Honey & Raphael, 2017; Doyle, Su, & Kunkel, 2020).

By combining the theoretical insights of the public sphere and the diffusion of innovation, this research provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the dynamic role of social media in entrepreneurial activities. Specifically, it examines how Instagram functions not only as a marketing and customer engagement tool but also as a platform for participation and visibility for women entrepreneurs in Pakistan. This study contributes to the existing body of literature in the fields of sociology of media, communication, and economic sociology, offering a theoretical foundation for future research on digital entrepreneurship and gender.

4. Materials & Methods

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in Pakistan who utilize Instagram as a marketing and selling platform. The choice of phenomenology is rooted in its emphasis on understanding how individuals make sense of their everyday experiences, which aligns with the study's objective to capture the nuanced and subjective realities of women navigating entrepreneurship in a digital context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The phenomenological approach facilitates the reconstruction of participants' narratives using structural elements such as setting, plot, activities, climax, and resolution. This design is particularly suitable for exploring the experiential dimension of entrepreneurship and digital engagement. To complement the phenomenological method, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed, enabling a thorough, interpretive examination of how women entrepreneurs perceive and attribute meaning to their entrepreneurial practices (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

In addition to using IPA, the researcher employed narrative analysis to capture the chronological and contextual flow of the participants' stories. This dual-method analytical approach offers a comprehensive perspective on both the psychological meanings and the social narratives underlying their experiences, thus strengthening the interpretive depth of the findings. The researcher used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit participants who met the criteria of being unmarried women actively using Instagram for business purposes for at least six months. A total of 17 participants took part in the study. All participants resided in urban areas of Pakistan and represented diverse entrepreneurial ventures, ranging from floral sales and clothing design to service-oriented businesses.

The researchers collected data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing participants to provide open-ended responses and share detailed narratives about their entrepreneurial journeys. The interviews were guided by a flexible question protocol, enabling the exploration of emerging themes while maintaining consistency across sessions. The interview questions focused on topics such as motivations for using Instagram, daily business practices, social media strategies, personal challenges, and perceptions of independence and success. The researcher conducted all interviews with strict adherence to ethical standards and obtained informed consent from each participant. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and subsequently transcribed

verbatim for analysis. The transcription process, although time-consuming, was integral to preserving the authenticity of participant voices and ensured rigorous data interpretation.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify first-order themes that capture the individual experiences and interpretations of each participant. The researchers extracted second-order sub-themes to reflect shared meanings and patterns across the dataset. These themes were then synthesized and compared with existing literature to generate theoretical insights. In parallel, narrative analysis was applied to examine how participants structured their stories, the contexts they emphasized, and the resolutions they articulated. This approach helped uncover not only what experiences were shared but also how they were communicated, offering a layered understanding of their entrepreneurial lives. Ethical integrity was upheld throughout the research process. Participant anonymity was preserved, sensitive information was handled with care, and all procedures followed ethical research guidelines. The researchers communicated the voluntary nature of participation and the participant's right to withdraw at any time.

This study was reviewed and approved by the Board of Faculty of the International Islamic University, Islamabad. Ethical approval was granted under the reference number [No.IIU.BOF/2024]. All participants provided informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study, and all procedures were conducted following the ethical standards of the relevant institution. Informed consent was obtained from all individuals who participated in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, their right to confidentiality, and their freedom to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants before data collection to ensure their voluntary and informed participation in accordance with ethical research standards.

Table 1: Raw Data, Themes, and Analytical Interpretations

Raw Data / Codes (Interview Excerpts)	First-Order Themes (Participant Terms)	Second-Order Themes (Researcher Interpretations)	Theme Generation (Aligned with Data Analysis)
"I show my products on Instagram stories every day to keep customers interested."	Frequent use of Instagram Stories	Leveraging Instagram's interactive features for customer engagement	Interactive Features for Engagement
"Using hashtags like #handmade and #PakistaniCrafts helped me reach new customers."	Hashtag use for wider reach	Strategic hashtag use to increase discoverability and market penetration	Hashtags as Visibility Tools
"Instagram allows me to manage my business from home while taking care of my family."	Flexibility to work from home	Instagram as a facilitator of home-based entrepreneurship for women	Family & Home-Based Entrepreneurship
"I respond to customer inquiries personally through direct messages."	Personalized communication via direct messages	Building trust and customer loyalty through one-on-one engagement	Trust-building through Relational Labor / Direct Messaging

Raw Data / Codes (Interview Excerpts)	First-Order Themes (Participant Terms)	Second-Order Themes (Researcher Interpretations)	Theme Generation (Aligned with Data Analysis)
"I try to post new photos and videos regularly to keep my followers updated."	Consistent content posting	Maintaining a brand presence and sustaining audience interest	Consistent Content Creation / Visual Presentation & Aesthetic Appeal
"Seeing my cousin succeed on Instagram motivated me to start my own business."	Inspiration from peer success	Influence of social learning and community support on entrepreneurial motivation	Follow Others' Footsteps (Peer Inspiration) / Social Support in Entrepreneurship
"I use Instagram shopping features to make it easier for customers to buy."	Use of Instagram Shopping for sales	Utilizing built-in e-commerce tools to streamline transactions	Digital Frugality / Cost-Effective and Accessible Marketing Tool

Table 2. Socioeconomic Profile of Participants

S.no	Respondent Num	Age	Resident	Duration of Business	Marital status	Financial Status	Nature of Business	Education
1	Participant 1	23	Islamabad	8 Months	Unmarried	Middle class	Clothing Line	BS
2	Participant 2	23	Islamabad	1 Year	Unmarried	Lower class	Salon Services	BS
3	Participant 3	25	Islamabad	1.5 Years	Unmarried	Middle class	Pet Food	Intermediate (incomplete)
4	Participant 4	23	Islamabad	2 Years	Unmarried	Middle class	Homebased Chef	BS
5	Participant 5	23	Islamabad	10 Months	Unmarried	Middle class	Selling Hijab	BS
6	Participant 6	23	Islamabad	3 Years	Unmarried	Middle class	Oil Painting	BS
7	Participant 7	28	Islamabad	3 Years	Unmarried	Middle class	Clothing	BS
8	Participant 8	25	Islamabad	9 Months	Unmarried	Middle class	Baking	BS

9	Participant 9	23	Islamabad	6 Months	Unmarried	Middle class	Wedding Accessories	BS
10	Participant 10	23	Islamabad	1 Year	Unmarried	Middle class	Flower Shop	BS
11	Participant 11	23	Islamabad	2 Years	Unmarried	Middle class	Preloved Clothing	Graduate
12	Participant 12	25	Islamabad	2 Years	Unmarried	Middle class	Renting Designer Clothes	Graduate
13	Participant 13	28	Islamabad	3 Years	Unmarried	Middle class	Stitching	Graduate
14	Participant 14	30	Islamabad	3 Years	Unmarried	Upper middle class	Jewellery	Graduate
15	Participant 15	27	Islamabad	11 Months	Unmarried	Middle class	Selling Khussas	BS
16	Participant 16	21	Islamabad	1.5 Years	Unmarried	Middle class	Frozen Food	BS
17	Participant 17	25	Islamabad	2 Years	Unmarried	Middle class	Dietitian	BS

5. Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study begins by examining the responses collected through in-depth interviews conducted with Pakistani women entrepreneurs who actively use Instagram for their businesses. The analysis focuses on identifying common themes in marketing practices, including content creation strategies, the use of visual aesthetics, customer engagement techniques, and reliance on influencer collaborations. The researchers organized the data through thematic coding and pattern recognition to reveal how Instagram facilitates visibility, brand building, and customer trust. This integrated approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how Instagram contributes to the entrepreneurial success and empowerment of women in the Pakistani context.

6.1 Choosing Instagram as a Marketing Platform

The analysis reveals that Pakistani women entrepreneurs deliberately choose Instagram as their primary marketing platform due to its visual appeal, user-friendly interface, and broad reach among local and international audiences. Participants emphasized the platform's effectiveness in showcasing products through images, videos, and stories, which aligns with previous research highlighting Instagram's visual-centric nature as a powerful marketing tool (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). All 17 study participants thoughtfully chose Instagram as their primary platform for marketing their products or services, recognizing the vast opportunities it offers. This strategic decision played a key role in their business success. Instagram's visually driven format aligns perfectly with their craft-based offerings, allowing them to present detailed and creative work to a broad, engaged audience. By using the platform, they were able to convey their passion and commitment directly to followers, leading to the development of a strong and supportive community around their brands.

One of the Respondents said:

"In the current era, Pakistani youth predominantly turn to Instagram over other platforms,
making it notably convenient for entrepreneurs to market and sell their products effortlessly."
Another Respondent Stated:
"Instagram is a Platform for creative ventures. I recognized the potential of Instagram, so I opted for this platform as a creative outlet and a central hub for my business."
"I chose Instagram as a marketing platform due to its suitability for someone like me with limited resources. It is a perfect avenue to establish a brand presence and reach a wider audience, all without straining my budget. This decision aligns perfectly with my goal of growing my business while staying mindful of my financial constraints."
The respondents' reflections illustrate how Instagram is not merely a technological tool but a socio-culturally significant platform that shapes entrepreneurial behaviour, especially among Pakistani women navigating structural constraints. Their choices are deeply rooted in social context, reflecting broader patterns of digital adaptation, resource management, and identity formation.
The first respondent's comment highlights Instagram's popularity among Pakistani youth, suggesting that entrepreneurs are attuned to shifting cultural norms and consumer behaviours. This comment aligns with the sociological concept of audience orientation, where individuals strategically adapt their actions based on perceived audience expectations and preferences (Goffman, 1959). By marketing on a platform widely used by their target demographic, these women position themselves within the digital public sphere, reinforcing their social visibility and economic relevance.
The second respondent's view of Instagram as a "platform for creative ventures" underscores the role of self-expression and identity in entrepreneurship. This viewpoint aligns with Anthony Giddens' (1991) theory of the self in late modernity, where individuals construct their identities through continuous self-presentation and reflexive actions. Instagram has become a space not just for commerce but also for narrating one's entrepreneurial journey, crafting a personal brand, and asserting creative agency, particularly significant for women in a patriarchal society where men often dominate traditional business spaces.
The third respondent highlights Instagram's low-cost accessibility, framing it as an equalizing tool for those with limited financial means. This perspective of the respondent aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of economic and cultural capital, where digital platforms can compensate for limited financial resources by facilitating the accumulation of symbolic and social capital. Instagram provides these women with a means to build credibility, trust, and market presence without relying on conventional (and often inaccessible) business infrastructures (Huang2019).
In summary, the respondents' insights reflect a broader sociological trend in which digital platforms, such as Instagram, are transforming gendered access to entrepreneurship in Pakistan. They highlight how women are leveraging technology to navigate economic constraints, assert their creative identities, and participate in emerging digital economies—all while challenging traditional barriers in subtle but significant ways.

6.2 Instagram: A Game-Changing Solution

An overwhelming majority, 11 out of 17 participants, emphasized that they chose Instagram for their business due to its unmatched convenience and ease of use. Women entrepreneurs who value Instagram's flexibility and ease of use strongly supported this choice. Operating a business from home through Instagram eliminates the challenges associated with managing a physical store while also accommodating the unique responsibilities and demands faced by female entrepreneurs. In this context, Instagram serves as a gateway that allows women to navigate the business world on their terms. It empowers them to pursue their passions and entrepreneurial goals while balancing household and work-related duties. This pattern highlights Instagram's user-friendly interface and underscores its role in fostering an inclusive and

supportive environment where women entrepreneurs can thrive, positioning it as a key enabler of their digital success.

As one of the respondents said:

"As a female entrepreneur from a middle-class family in Pakistan, where societal reputation and honour are highly valued, Instagram provides a unique opportunity for me. It allows me to run my businesses conveniently from the comfort of my home, offering a level of flexibility that is incredibly valuable in a cultural context where women often have significant family responsibilities. Through Instagram, I can efficiently manage my business operations, connect with customers, and handle transactions, all while staying within the confines of my home."

The respondent's statement reflects a broader sociological phenomenon in which digital platforms, particularly Instagram, are not only technological enablers but also culturally adaptive tools that enable women to reconcile traditional gender norms with modern entrepreneurial ambitions. This statement is particularly significant in the Pakistani context, where honour-based cultural values and patriarchal structures often limit women's public participation (Haque et al., 2022).

Moreover, the respondent's emphasis on flexibility reflects ongoing literature about how digital platforms offer women greater control over their time, labour, and visibility. According to a study by Hussain and Parveen (2023), Instagram-based businesses in South Asia enable women to manage both reproductive (household) and productive (economic) roles without the social scrutiny that comes with public entrepreneurship. From a structural-functional perspective, Instagram is serving a dual function: preserving the social order by allowing women to remain within traditional roles while also gradually transforming that order by introducing new, digitally enabled forms of female economic participation. As a result, platforms like Instagram do not just empower women economically—they also facilitate a quiet but meaningful reconfiguration of gender norms in conservative societies.

Another Respondent said:

"Due to traditional beliefs, my family would not permit me to work outside the home. Instagram is the only platform that allows me to pursue my entrepreneurial endeavours, enabling me to work without physically stepping into the job market".

One respondent said that:

"Due to its flexible work hours and low expenses, operating a business from home on Instagram is quite favourable for me as a female entrepreneur in Pakistan. It would have been challenging for someone like me to run my business if I had to join the marketplace in person."

The respondents' reflections reveal how Instagram serves as a socially acceptable alternative for women constrained by traditional gender norms, providing them with a space to exercise economic agency while remaining within the boundaries set by familial and cultural expectations. Their experiences illustrate the impact of patriarchal structures on women's mobility and labour choices in Pakistan, where notions of honour (izzat) and modesty often restrict women's participation in the formal workforce or public marketplaces (Kandiyoti, 1988; Roomi & Parrott, 2008).

The first respondent's comment highlights the concept of "gendered spatiality," which refers to how physical spaces are socially constructed and regulated according to gender. In many South Asian societies, public spaces are often perceived as male domains, while the private and domestic sphere is considered more suitable for women. By enabling women to operate businesses from home, Instagram allows them to bypass the cultural scrutiny associated with physical public presence. This comment aligns with Mahmood's (2005) argument that women often exercise "agency within constraints," where empowerment does not always take the form of direct resistance but rather strategic negotiation within accepted norms.

Both responses also reflect a shift toward what sociologists describe as informal digital labour, where work blurs the lines between private life and professional identity. These women are not merely passive beneficiaries of technology; they are active agents reconfiguring the limits of

traditional gender roles by leveraging digital platforms for autonomy, financial independence, and self-expression—all while upholding familial expectations. To conclude, Instagram is not only a marketing tool but a sociocultural bridge, enabling women in restrictive environments to participate in economic life on their terms. It facilitates a new form of "digital agency" that respects cultural boundaries while quietly transforming the gendered division of labour in Pakistan.

6.3 Interactive Features of Instagram

Recognizing the wide range of interactive tools Instagram offers, all respondents actively incorporate these features into their marketing strategies to build a strong online presence. They create engaging Stories, participate in live chats, host Q&A sessions, and showcase their products and services through IGTV. Additionally, they utilize Instagram Shopping, interactive polls, and strategically chosen hashtags to enhance their brand visibility and reach a broader audience.

One of the respondents stated:

"I use Instagram's features, such as Stories and IGTV, to present BTS footage, product demos, and consumer interviews to engage my audience and increase interest in my products. I have explored Instagram's paid advertising opportunities, including sponsored posts. These enabled me to reach a broader audience, boost brand visibility, and improve traffic to my online business."

Instagram's interactive features, such as Stories, live chats, Q&A sessions, and video content (formerly known as IGTV), have played a crucial role in the online marketing success of entrepreneurs. These tools create a dynamic, multi-dimensional experience for audiences by offering behind-the-scenes glimpses, product demonstrations, and customer testimonials. Entrepreneurs also leverage paid advertising options, such as sponsored posts, to expand their reach and increase brand visibility. Additionally, features like Instagram Shopping, interactive polls, and the strategic use of hashtags further amplify their presence. This effective use of Instagram's tools has allowed entrepreneurs to thrive in an increasingly competitive digital marketplace.

All participants effectively harness the power of Instagram Stories to offer their audience a captivating glimpse into the behind-the-scenes operations of their brands. Through this dynamic feature, they reveal the genuine effort and dedication behind their entrepreneurial journeys, allowing followers to experience the inner workings of their businesses firsthand. This approach fosters a sense of authenticity and builds a meaningful connection with their audience, offering an exclusive and intimate window into their world. Fourteen participants specifically highlighted how they showcased the value of their products through compelling captions. They emphasized qualities such as product quality, affordability, and market relevance. By using persuasive language, they communicated how their brand could meet the desires and aspirations of their target audience.

Another respondent told her story:

"I use Instagram Stories to showcase the meticulous attention to detail that goes into each product while capturing the essence of my creative process. I take my followers into my studio with in-depth imagery and captivating storytelling, cultivating a sincere respect for the commitment and passion incorporated in my works."

One interviewee explained:

"By incorporating storytelling into my Instagram Stories, I create a unique story around my products and engage my audience emotionally. By sharing the success stories of my grateful clients through Stories and the beneficial effects of my products, I foster trust and loyalty among potential customers, enticing them not only to make a purchase but also to participate in the development of our brand."

The interviewees' use of Instagram Stories to highlight their creative process and share client success stories reflects a broader sociological trend in which emotional engagement and self-representation have become key components of entrepreneurial labour in the digital age. By inviting followers into their private creative spaces and using personal storytelling, these

women are not only marketing products but also constructing authentic personal brands**.** The use of Instagram reflects neoliberal ideals of the "entrepreneurial self" (Foucault, 2008), where individuals must constantly invest in and promote themselves as self-reliant, passionate, and innovative. Instagram Stories serve as a platform for this self-construction, allowing female entrepreneurs to merge their identities with their professional ventures, thereby enhancing relatability and trust.

From a gender perspective, this digital strategy is particularly significant in the context of Pakistani society, where traditional gender norms often restrict women's mobility and visibility in the public sphere. Instagram becomes a mediated space where women can assert their professional roles while operating within culturally sanctioned boundaries. Moreover, according to Saba Mahmood's (2005) notion of "agency within constraints," women find ways to exercise autonomy and economic power without directly confronting patriarchal norms. Overall, the strategic use of Instagram Stories by these women reflects the intersection of gender, digital technology, and emotional labour**,** revealing how social media platforms enable new forms of entrepreneurial agency while still being shaped by broader cultural and structural constraints.

6.4 Building Trust and Credibility on Instagram

Eleven of the study's respondents emphasized that building trust and credibility on Instagram is essential to the success of their online businesses. They employed various strategies to position themselves as trustworthy and reliable in the eyes of their target audience. These participants consistently ensured that their brands delivered on their promises, maintaining alignment between their marketing messages and the actual quality of their products or services. By offering high-quality products that exceeded customer expectations, they established a reputation for reliability and earned the trust and loyalty of their consumers.

One respondent explained:

"I consistently delivered on my brand promises, earning a reputation for reliability and gaining my customers' trust."

Similarly, another respondent expressed her views as follows:

"The foundation of my professional success in generating long-lasting and meaningful connections with my clients is my constant dedication to establishing trust."

Likewise, another interviewee sheds light on this issue as under:

"Realizing the crucial significance that trust plays in the economic world, I am persistently committed to developing trust with my customers because it is the cornerstone of my business success."

In the realm of online entrepreneurship, trust and credibility emerge as critical social currencies, particularly within the context of Instagram-based businesses led by women. The respondents in this study demonstrated a profound sociological understanding of these values, not merely as marketing strategies but as essential components of a moral economy—a concept that refers to the socially embedded norms and values that govern economic behaviour (Thompson, 1971; Sayer, 2004). Through their consistent dedication and commitment, these women cultivated reputations for reliability by aligning their brand promises with the actual quality of their products and services, thereby reinforcing consumer trust and loyalty.

Their practices reflect what scholars describe as relational labour, the continuous, emotionally invested effort required to maintain relationships over time in digital and commercial spaces (Baym, 2015). These entrepreneurs recognized that trust is not a static asset but an ongoing social process that must be actively sustained through ethical engagement, transparency, and responsiveness to customer needs. Their commitment to quality and dependability exemplifies a form of gendered ethical labour, where female entrepreneurs, often navigating patriarchal constraints, build businesses rooted in responsibility, care, and authenticity.

Moreover, their approach highlights the symbolic power of reputation in digital marketplaces, where visibility and credibility can have a direct impact on economic outcomes. These women strategically positioned themselves not only as sellers but as credible social actors, contributing to a broader shift in how trust is negotiated and valued in virtual commercial interactions. Their entrepreneurial journeys serve as both a challenge to traditional, male-dominated business models and a benchmark for future digital entrepreneurs seeking to build sustainable, values-driven enterprises.

6.5 Empowering Pakistani Women Entrepreneurs: Leveraging Instagram's Marketing

All 17 participants affirmed that Instagram plays a significant role in empowering Pakistani women entrepreneurs by providing a strong platform to market their skills, products, and services to a global audience. Through Instagram, these women can overcome traditional societal constraints and reach a diverse range of clients and collaborators, regardless of geographic boundaries. The platform enables them to build their brands, share their entrepreneurial journeys, and connect with like-minded individuals, fostering a sense of community, solidarity, and support.

The visual nature of Instagram is particularly advantageous for showcasing talents, whether in fashion, crafts, or other creative industries, allowing female entrepreneurs to highlight the uniqueness and quality of their work. Moreover, Instagram's interactive and marketing features support business growth and profit generation. By leveraging attractive visuals, engaging content, and strategic marketing techniques, these entrepreneurs can expand their customer base and establish strong reputations in the digital marketplace. Overall, Instagram serves as a powerful catalyst for empowering Pakistani women entrepreneurs. It provides a digital platform where individuals can overcome societal barriers, express their creativity, and achieve their business goals with confidence and visibility.

One of the respondents stated:

"Economic growth is facilitated by empowering women entrepreneurs by increasing the workforce and creating work opportunity."

Another interviewee stated:

"Women in Pakistan may advertise their goods and services to a global audience using Instagram, which helps the country's economy grow."

Pakistani women entrepreneurs increasingly recognize Instagram as a transformative digital tool that fosters both economic empowerment and social emancipation. By leveraging the platform, these women have successfully transcended traditional sociocultural barriers, particularly those related to gender norms, mobility, and visibility, which have historically restricted their participation in the public and economic spheres. This shift reflects broader patterns of digital inclusion, where access to technology enables marginalized groups to gain new forms of agency and reshape their roles within society (Castells, 2010).

The visual and interactive nature of Instagram plays a key role in this transformation. It provides women with a medium to showcase their talents and knowledge, especially in creative fields such as fashion, crafts, and home-based enterprises, thereby fostering not only economic participation but also symbolic recognition. Through content, storytelling, and community engagement, these women construct credible personal brands, cultivate trust among their followers, and contribute to what sociologists describe as a networked moral economy —a space where economic transactions are embedded in relationships, values, and community support (Sayer, 2004).

Moreover, Instagram facilitates the creation of peer support networks and digital solidarity, allowing women to connect with like-minded entrepreneurs, share resources, and co-navigate challenges. These networks serve as alternative forms of social capital, especially valuable in contexts where formal business networks and institutional support may be limited for women. In this sense, Instagram becomes not just a marketplace but a social space for community-building and mutual empowerment, aligning

with theories of participatory culture and feminist digital activism (Jenkins, 2006; Gill, 2007).

Economically, Instagram enables women to enter global markets without the need for physical infrastructure, thereby lowering entry barriers and facilitating the development of flexible, home-based business models that are compatible with domestic responsibilities—an especially important factor in patriarchal societies. These ventures not only enhance individual income and economic independence but also contribute to broader national development goals, challenging traditional gendered divisions of labour and redefining women's roles in the economy.

Overall, Instagram emerges as a powerful socio-technical platform that helps Pakistani women entrepreneurs navigate and resist structural inequalities. It fosters inclusivity, economic autonomy, and social recognition, laying the foundation for future research, policy development, and digital strategies aimed at promoting gender-equitable entrepreneurship both in Pakistan and globally.

6. Discussion

The current study has identified that Instagram plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality within entrepreneurship, providing an open and impartial space where individuals, regardless of gender, can freely engage in business ventures. It is a digital force propelling a future where gender equality is not an aspiration but a lived reality, empowering diverse entrepreneurs to participate and succeed actively. Instagram's pivotal role in shaping an inclusive and empowered landscape, enabling entrepreneurs of all genders to make meaningful contributions to the business world. The foundation of this paper is rooted in Habermas's approach, which posits that human beings develop gradually through an intricate process that relies on their ability to organize their actions in a consensual manner through language and communication (Habermas, 1984a). Thus, Habermas coined the term' communicative action' (Habermas, 1984a, b) to develop an understanding of and approach to shared activities and formulating collective social action for the common good (e.g., Laughlin, 1987; Power & Laughlin, 1996).

Consistent with prior research (Tekulve & Kelly, 2013; Hird, 2013), participants unanimously identified Instagram as their primary marketing tool. Its visual appeal enables the effective showcasing of handmade, craft-oriented, and aesthetically pleasing products, aligning well with businesses that rely heavily on design and creativity (Bevins, 2014; Khan et al., 2019). This visual communication not only enhances product visibility but also allows entrepreneurs to convey their passion and authenticity, building stronger emotional connections with followers and customers (Saravanakumar & Lakshmi, 2012).

The study also highlights Instagram's significance in providing a platform for self-expression, creativity, and financial autonomy, particularly within a cultural context where traditional gender roles and conservative societal expectations may restrict women's access to public markets. Participants articulated that Instagram enables them to operate from home, thereby fulfilling familial obligations while also pursuing economic empowerment. These findings align with Alkhowaiter's (2016) observation that digital platforms can empower women by offering flexible work hours and reducing overhead costs, thereby providing a viable alternative to conventional business models.

The scope of this study is to uncover the entrepreneurial skills of women entrepreneurs who manage all facets of their businesses independently, symbolizing dedication and adaptability. Their diverse skill set, spanning product creation, marketing, and customer engagement, reflects their commitment and multifaceted abilities. Instagram is a crucial factor that enables their achievements, providing fundamental support for these entrepreneurs. Through the platform, women (Kim et al., 2021) have overcome traditional barriers, including avoiding the need for physical stores and initial scepticism from family members. Instagram's unique capacity to empower entrepreneurs, facilitating efficient business operations with minimal resources or a small team, resonates strongly through these experiences (Atiq, 2022).

Participants effectively leveraged Instagram's interactive features—such as Stories, IGTV, polls, Q&A sessions, and hashtags—to build robust brand identities and connect with their audiences in real time (Atiq et al., 2022; Aydin, 2019; Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). For many entrepreneurs, Instagram Stories emerged as particularly valuable for sharing behind-the-scenes content, displaying product craftsmanship, and showcasing customer feedback. These elements contribute to brand transparency and authenticity, ultimately cultivating trust and loyalty among followers. Such practices reflect broader shifts in digital marketing trends, where authenticity and relatability are prioritized by consumers (Konopliannykova, 2024)

Notably, the study found that cost-effectiveness was a significant motivator for using Instagram over traditional advertising platforms. Participants noted that Instagram allowed them to market products without incurring substantial expenses, which is particularly relevant in contexts where initial business capital is limited. This economic accessibility democratizes entry into entrepreneurship, allowing women from middle- and lower-income backgrounds to participate meaningfully in the business ecosystem. The findings also reveal that collaborative strategies, such as cross-promotions, shared live sessions, and mutual tagging, play a vital role in expanding business reach and audience engagement (Zulqarnain et al., 2020).

Moreover, the use of user-generated content, including customer testimonials and reviews, emerged as a powerful strategy for building credibility and encouraging word-of-mouth promotion. This participatory model of branding reinforces consumer trust and aligns with emerging trends in digital entrepreneurship where peer validation holds considerable influence (Ngo, Bui, Chau, & Tran, 2024). This study highlights that empowered women entrepreneurs serve as agents of societal change, inspiring future generations through their success stories shared on Instagram. This study examines the rigorous evaluation by women entrepreneurs of Instagram's effectiveness as a potent marketing and sales tool. In addition, this study incorporated the theoretical strengths of Habermas' (2011) concepts of the "lifeworld" and the "systems." The lifeworld can be defined as the skills acquired by individuals to deal with diverse social situations, developed through socialization and self-generated knowledge about social conditions (Habermas, 1984a, p. 35).

According to the findings of this study, women entrepreneurs act as a unit within the larger social system, representing the material aspect of the cultural world. This common cultural space lends significance and meaningful purpose to "technical" systems (Habermas, 1984a, b). The study's findings are also supported by Habermas's ideas on the intrinsic disposition of the technological system to control sociocultural features and dominate the lifeworld through the digitization of power and money (Habermas, 1984a, b).

Furthermore, Habermas also emphasized the normative ethics of communication, which formalize norms and develop a collective modality for the common good through open and logical dialogue among individuals, groups, and institutions (Habermas, 2003). The narratives of women entrepreneurs assert their contributions to a cultural shift that challenges traditional cultural norms. By breaking barriers, they assert the substantial role women can play in the economic sphere. Their influence sparks a movement, inviting more women into entrepreneurship and paving the way for an inclusive business environment. These individuals shape a future where possibilities to thrive in business become the norm. Their stories shared on Instagram leave an enduring imprint on the entrepreneurial landscape, motivating countless others to embark on their empowering journeys.

Habermas describes particular situations in which a shift from individual manifestation to collective modality occurs after the development of fundamental interactions (Habermas, 1990: 93). Based on these assumptions, we consider Habermas' theoretical underpinnings suitable for providing a critical assessment of Instagram as a marketing tool for Pakistani women entrepreneurs. In particular, the Habermasian

approach is relevant for measuring the impact of Instagram marketing endeavours through diverse metrics and immediate analysis of engagement rates, reach, and sales data. It also provides guidelines for theorizing the Sociology of work, specifically for women, offering a roadmap for a better understanding of the material and non-material aspects of the lifeworld (Habermas, 1984a, b), as well as directions for minimizing cultural lag (McCarthy, 1984).

Hence, the Habermasian approach enables us to gain a thorough understanding of the interconnections between the cultural, social, and technological dimensions of Instagram and women's expertise, promoting social change and development in these areas. Their agile approach involves rapidly adjusting strategies based on real-time insights, reflecting the platform's dynamic nature and capacity to provide immediate business intelligence. Moreover, women entrepreneurs focus on sales and revenue as pivotal indicators, aligning marketing efforts with tangible financial outcomes. This keen emphasis on understanding customer behaviour, linking strategies to measurable results, and prioritizing customer satisfaction reflects their acute business acumen and client-centric approach. Overall, their experiences emphasize the significance of data-driven decision-making, adaptability, and a customer-centric mindset in navigating the competitive digital landscape to achieve marketing excellence on Instagram. Hence, the Habermasian approach (1984a, b, 1987) seeks to bridge the gap between sociocultural aspects and the digital world, aiming to generate change in both areas. By fostering an impartial and inclusive atmosphere, Instagram, as a digital platform, advances gender equity in entrepreneurship. Female entrepreneurs demonstrate remarkable proficiency in independently managing their businesses via Instagram, thereby overcoming challenges and driving substantial societal change.

7. Conclusion

Instagram is a vital marketing tool for women entrepreneurs operating within socially and culturally conservative societies such as Pakistan. The platform's visually driven, user-friendly, and cost-effective nature makes it particularly suitable for promoting craft-based and service-oriented businesses. It enables women to transcend physical and societal limitations by facilitating business operations from home, thereby aligning entrepreneurial aspirations with cultural expectations and domestic responsibilities. It not only serves as a digital marketplace but also emerges as a significant platform for empowerment and social change. By fostering direct engagement with consumers and enabling the creation of personalized brand identities, the platform empowers women to cultivate strong online communities and assert their economic agency. Instagram exemplifies the intersection of technology, entrepreneurship, and social transformation. Its role in empowering women entrepreneurs in Pakistan offers valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers aiming to promote inclusive economic development through digital means. Future strategies that support and expand access to such platforms can significantly enhance women's participation in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, not only in Pakistan but in similar sociocultural contexts globally.

Authors' Contribution Statement:

Dr. Amber Ferdoos (corresponding author)contributed to the conception and design of the study, as well as the drafting and overall write-up of the manuscript. Dr. Huma Butt was responsible for the analysis and interpretation of the data. Dr. Saira Batool developed the theoretical framework and methodology. Hajra Hayat participated in the data collection process. All authors critically revised the manuscript for intellectual content, approved the final version to be published, and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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