

# STRATEGIC VISUAL BRANDING AND CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT ON INSTAGRAM: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF WOMEN LED FASHION STARTUPS

Dr Sobia Usman<sup>\*1</sup>, Dr. Usman Farooq<sup>2</sup>

<sup>\*1</sup>Associate Professor Department of Media Sciences Iqra University Karachi

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor Department of Media Studies & Design Faculty of Communication & Design Indus University

<sup>\*1</sup>sobia.usman@iqra.edu.pk, <sup>2</sup>usman.farooq@indus.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author: \*

Dr Sobia Usman

## Abstract

This paper investigates the visual branding's impact on customer engagement on the Instagram, focusing on the digitally driven fashion startup brands in Pakistan. Using a qualitative method, the study combines semi-structured interviews with brand founders and content analysis of the Instagram profiles led by women. It was revealed by the findings that these startups create and implement strategic visual narratives, cultural blending, and Instagram-specific tools like Reels and Stories to develop deep consumer connections and establish a unique brand identity.

This research is based in Visual Branding Theory and Affordance Theory framework. These theories provide a framework of understanding Instagram as a platform for creative expression, emotional investment and a site of entrepreneurial work. The study enhances our understanding of global media and entrepreneurship scholarship by exploring the impact of cultural and socio-economic contexts on digital branding strategies in the developing regions.

## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital world, social media branding is an important tool for user engagement and personal branding, especially for fashion startups. Instagram, with its visually oriented user interface, is an active ground for emerging brands to project their brand identity and products. In nations such as Pakistan, where establishing traditional brick-and-mortar shops is costly and competitive, Instagram is an accessible, budget-friendly path, especially for women-owned businesses, to have an outlet for visibility and to connect directly with consumers.

Social media, overall, has revolutionized branding, marketing, and dialogue with their

respective audiences. Among social media platforms, Instagram is unique in focusing on visible, aesthetic-based storytelling, thus making it highly suitable for fashion brands that use aesthetics, style, and image-based narratives to communicate their identity (Manovich, 2016). As it has more than one billion active users worldwide and is increasingly gaining ground in Pakistan Instagram has become an essential platform for fashion startups born-digital to communicate with their target markets through visually curated messages.

**1.1.1 Visual branding:** It is used here to describe the deliberate and calculated application of design features like color palettes, typography, photography style, logos, and aesthetics to purposefully communicate a brand's values and personality across channels (Schroeder, 2005).

Anything but superficial decoration, visual branding is crucial to defining brand identity, distinguishing between one brand and another, and creating emotional relationships with consumers. On Instagram, where messaging is highly visual, brands employ curated images as well as profiles to reflect their individual identities and elicit immediate emotional reactions (Marwick, 2015).

**1.1.2 Consumer engagement:** In this study it refers to the intensity of interaction, emotional participation, and active behaviors that customers demonstrate in relation to brand material, expressed in likes, comments, shares, direct messages, or advocacy (Brodie et al., 2011, as cited in Ismat et al., 2023). In image-driven platforms such as Instagram, consumer engagement is determined by aesthetic beauty, storyline cohesiveness, and emotional connectivity in images. In emerging fashion startups that have limited budgets, strong and cohesive image branding can prove to be an incredibly potent attention builder as well as a means to connect with customers.

This research examines how Pakistani digitally-native fashion businesses use Instagram for visual branding purposes and how those tactics shape consumer engagement. Through an investigation of branding techniques alongside reaction from their respective followers, this study attempts to highlight emerging dynamics in brand-consumer relationships in emerging digital economies like that in Pakistan.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Although the exponential growth of Instagram-centered fashion startups in Pakistan, there is limited research & lacks academic understanding of how these businesses use visual identity to encourage consumer's participation and build their reputation in the market.

## 1.3 Research Objectives

1. To investigate the visual branding strategies utilized by online fashion startups in Pakistan.
2. To analyze how these visual branding strategies, impact consumer engagement.
3. To comprehend the entrepreneurial and cultural aspects shaping the use of Instagram amongst fashion startups.

## 1.4 Research Questions

1. What strategies of visual branding are employed by the Instagram-growing fashion startups in Pakistan?
2. How do these strategies affect consumer engagement and interaction?
3. To what extent do the entrepreneurial and cultural contexts impact branding strategies?

## 1.5 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to media research and entrepreneurship by giving insights on how Instagram acts as a mean of branding, engagement, and storytelling purpose for Contemporary fashion brands in Pakistan.

## Literature Review

The rise of digital entrepreneurship has made social media platforms central to new ventures. Instagram, through its visually-focused interface, has become a go-to for fashion related businesses to connect with consumers in new ways. This review examines Instagram's role as a medium for visual branding and consumer interaction with a focus on digitally-native fashion startups and situating the Pakistani experience within international trends.

### 2.1 Instagram as a Visual Branding Platform

Current research highlights Instagram's ability to increase brand awareness through image coherence. As an example, studies have shown that brands that have an image uniformity on Instagram can elicit emotional ties and trust in consumers (Phua et al., 2020). This is in keeping with other research that highlighted Instagram's ability to create image-based brand language.

Marwick (2015) places Instagram branding within the context of an attention economy in which aesthetically curated images represent cultural capital. This is consonant with tactics used by startups that, without having mainstream ad budgets, use authenticity and style to hook their constituent base.

### **2.2 Consumer Engagement on Instagram**

Features such as Reels, Stories, and Lives have also changed consumer-brand relationships. User-generated content on Instagram is highlighted to play an important role in encouraging brand loyalty and community creation, which is crucial for small brands to achieve organically grown growth (Sanam et al., 2025). This is in line with previous research by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), who concluded that endorsements from influencers have positive effects on purchasing intentions, in particular among younger generations.

In digital-native contexts, engagement goes beyond transactional relationships, developing into participatory relationships by which consumers co-construct brand stories. Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016) highlight such social construction of brand identity in pointing to Instagram's potential as an environment for co-creation.

### **2.3 Instagram Startups in Fashion in South Asia**

Although most writings focus on Western contexts, local research is now illuminating South Asia's distinctive dynamics. Alam and Mahmud (2022) mention that fashion entrepreneurs in South Asia use Instagram to sidestep classic retail hierarchies to access diasporic and urban youth markets. In Pakistan, digital spaces are increasingly democratizing entrepreneurship, but particularly for women with systemically imposed offline limitations.

Additionally, research shows that Pakistani fashion startups use Instagram to impact purchasing choices effectively, highlighting Instagram's role in influencing both attitudes and behaviors (Ismat et al., 2023; Liu & Qureshi, 2023).

### **2.4 The Role of Digital Engagement in Buying Behavior**

Sanam et al. (2025) underscore the transformative effect that digital marketing has on consumer participation in Pakistan's fashion business. In their study, they stress that consumer behavior on social media such as Instagram is influenced by high-quality content, aesthetic value, as well as consumer interactions. Social media builds brand awareness, but aesthetic value is more compelling in determining intent to buy.

### **2.5 Social Media Brand Communities and Brand Loyalty**

Kirana et al. (2023) examine ways in which social media brand community participation enhances branding performance for fashion brands. The authors find that such participation positively affects brand experience, image, trust, and brand loyalty. Interestingly, fashion product type moderates the association between community participation and brand experience, indicating product-specific strategies.

### **2.6 Effect of Instagram Advertising on Buying Behavior**

Shahzad and Fatima (2023) discuss the influence of ad frequency, purchasing motivation, as well as behavior on Instagram. Through their study, they prove that more frequency in brand advertisements, especially through influencer marketing, greatly impacts consumers' motivation to buy. Placing influencer marketing at the forefront on Instagram can effectively increase sales in the fashion industry.

### **2.7 The Influence on Purchase Intent on Social Media**

Younas et al. (2023) examine the impact on purchase intentions and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) by Instagram influencer marketing, using celebrity endorsement as an intermediary. The study reveals that influencer marketing has positive effects on purchase intention and eWOM, indicating that celebrity endorsements play an important part in boosting marketing performance.

### 2.8 The Influence of Fashion Bloggers on Consumers

Kausar et al. (2024) explore how fashion bloggers impact consumer behavior in Lahore, Pakistan. Through their study, they measure credibility, engagement, and homophily dimensions to find that all these variables were correlated with purchasing intentions among consumers. This study highlights that fashion brands need to develop real relationships with consumers by partnering with credible, relatable bloggers.

### 2.9 Gaps in Existing Literature

In spite of increased knowledge about Instagram's branding potential, very little is known about how Pakistani fashion startups manage to navigate digital aesthetics, visual culture, and consumer interaction simultaneously. This research seeks to address this shortcoming by embracing a humanistic, context-sensitive approach to understand the dynamics between consumer interaction and visual branding in Pakistan's peculiar socio-cultural context.

Instagram is more than a platform for simply showcasing products; it is used as a tool to create identity, community, and trust. Through analyzing fashion startups from digitally-native backgrounds in Pakistan, this research adds value to international discourse on digital branding, reflecting on local practices and challenges.

## Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 Visual Branding Theory

Theory of Visual Branding is very essential in understanding the role of visual content including imagery design, and colour in forming a brand's image and buyer perception about it. In Schroeder (2005) view, visual branding prioritizes the significance of the symbolic value in brand's communication, rather than solely focusing on functional features. Visual Branding theory suggests that the development of a unique visual identity cultivates brand awareness and emotional resonance with the consumers.

Within the framework of Instagram, where visuals take center stage, brands depend on visuals to promote their brand narratives and stories. This theory is crucial to create an

understanding of fashion startups utilizing Instagram's visual aspect to design an individual brand image. Fashion startups in Pakistan can create an impactful brand image that speaks to domestic consumers yet is also appealing to international trends through thoughtfully curated Instagram feed.

### 3.2 Affordance Theory

Affordance Theory, formulated by Evans et al. (2017), describes users' relationships with technological tools based on affordances provided by such tools. In Instagram's context, affordances are features that Instagram provides for interactions by users, including Instagram Stories, Reels, likes, comments, and direct messages. Such features offer certain possibilities for brands to connect with consumers in ways that cannot be done on conventional media.

Affordance is an important concept in this research because it explains why Instagram is such an attractive tool for fashion startups. The affordances of the platform enable startups not just to present products but to create richer consumer-brand interactions in terms of direct messages, surveys, and user-generated content. Instagram's feedback mechanisms in real-time assist brands to evolve and improve their visual branding tactics on an ongoing basis.

### 3.3 Relevance with the Study

Both Visual Branding Theory and Affordance Theory offer crucial insights for examining Instagram's role in fashion startup branding initiatives. Visual Branding Theory informs our knowledge on aesthetic aspect of brand identity, while Affordance Theory explains ways in which Instagram features offer unique means of consumer interaction. These two theories combined offer an in-depth approach to examining branding-consumer interaction on Instagram, especially for startups in an online-first environment such as in Pakistan

### Research Methodology

This chapter describes the research design, methodology, sampling design, data collection methods, and data analysis approach used to

examine digitally-native fashion startups in Pakistan's use of Instagram for visual branding and consumer interaction. A qualitative design was adopted to achieve an in-depth and context-rich examination of branding practice in an evolving digital context.

#### 4.1 Research Paradigm

The research is built on an interpretivist philosophy, focusing on entrepreneurs' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes in digital contexts. From an interpretivist approach, an investigation is possible on how social media affordances and visual material are utilized to create brand identity and involve consumers in particular cultural as well as economic contexts.

#### 4.2 Study Design

A qualitative exploratory design was utilized to obtain rich descriptions and detailed insights. The research synthesized two qualitative approaches:

- Visual content analysis of Instagram accounts of selected fashion startups.
- Semi-structured interviews with digital content producers, brand managers, or brand founders.

This blend enabled triangulation, providing observational as well as experiential data.

#### 4.3 Sampling

##### 4.3.1 Sampling Method

Purposive sampling was employed in order to select digitally-native fashion startups in Pakistan that depend mainly on Instagram for marketing, branding, and customer interaction.

##### 4.3.2 Inclusion Criteria

- Do business mainly on Instagram or online platforms
- Based in Pakistan
- Established in the past 5 years
- Should have at least 5,000 followers
- Actively post on social media (at least once per week)

##### 4.3.3 Sample Size

- 5 to 7 Instagram profiles were chosen for image analysis
- 6 to 8 in-depth interviews were done with founders, marketing leads, or content creators at these startups

#### 4.4 Data Collection Methods

##### 4.4.1 Visual Content Analysis

Selected Instagram account screenshots and screen recordings were gathered over 4 weeks. Posts were examined for:

- Visual themes (colour palette, design consistency)
- Captivating tone and storyline
- Frequency & format (Posts, Reels, Stories)
- Engagement metrics (shares, likes, comments)

##### 4.4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were held over Zoom/Google Meet for 30–45 minutes. An interview guide provided consistency between interviews but facilitated flexibility to pursue distinctive insights.

Each interview was audio-recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed verbatim.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

##### 4.5.1 Thematic Analysis

Analysis was carried out on data from interviews and visual content using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Creating initial codes
3. Looking for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and labelling themes
6. Preparing the report

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) manual approach to thematic analysis to allow for recurring patterns and themes in terms of visual branding and consumer participation on Instagram to be identified.

#### 4.5.2 Coding Categories

Both deductive (literature-based) themes and inductive (data-based) themes were generated. These were centered on the following key areas:

- Visual Branding Strategies
- Consumer Interaction
- Entrepreneurial Motivations
- Cultural Influences
- Platform Challenges

#### 4.5.3 Coding Tools:

The analysis was organized using the following basic tools:

- **Microsoft Word:** Utilize comment bubbles or highlight codes in margins.
- **Microsoft Excel:** Organize an Excel table using columns for data clips, codes, and themes.
- **Hand Color-Coding:** Print transcripts and highlight data with highlighters or color pens.
- **Index Cards:** Place codes or quotations on cards and organize them by hand in groups related by theme.

#### 4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was secured from the hosting institution. Participants were informed about the study purpose and assured confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, and their names were not included in transcripts. Visual data were examined only for public accounts.

The chapter outlined the qualitative approach and ethical processes carried out to examine fashion startup use of Instagram for branding and engagement in Pakistan. The next chapter will discuss the data analysis and interpretation conducted.

#### Results and Discussion

This chapter discusses the results from visual content analysis and semi-structured interviews with digitally born fashion startups in Pakistan. Five emergent themes, including

- (1) Visual Storytelling and Brand Aesthetic,
- (2) Strategic Consumer Engagement
- (3) Entrepreneurial Perception of Instagram
- (4) Cultural Localization in Branding, and

(5) Platform-Related Challenges, organize the analysis.

These themes were generated following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

Instead of using software, this study applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) manual thematic analysis, enabling deeper engagement with the data and uncovering patterns relevant to Instagram-based fashion branding.

#### 5.1 Participant Overview

7 participants were interviewed, including Instagram-first fashion startups' digital content leads and founders. All were female-led or co-led brands, ranging in followers from 5,000 to 45,000. A total of seven participants were interviewed as part of this study. They included founders, co-founders, and digital content leads of Instagram-first fashion startups in Pakistan. All participating brands were female-led or co-led, and each met the inclusion criteria of being established within the past five years, primarily operating on Instagram, and having a follower base ranging from 5,000 to 45,000. The participants were selected from the following brands:

1. Zain Ahmad, Creative Director and Co-founder of @rastahofficial
2. Team at HEF Clothing, Digital team behind @hefclimbing
3. Zohra Rahman; Founder and designer of @zohra\_rahman
4. Marketing Team at Generation, Leads social media for @generation\_pk
5. Zara Shahjahan, Founder of @zarashahjahanofficial
6. Hira Ali; Founder and Creative Head of @hiraalistudios
7. Rehmat Jamal; Founder of Rehstore, featured via @rehmatajmal

These interviews provided in-depth insights into the strategic decisions behind visual branding, content planning, and audience engagement on Instagram.

## 5.1 Emergent Themes and Subthemes

### Theme 1: Visual Storytelling and Brand Aesthetic

#### Subtheme 1.1: Colour Palettes & Mood Boards

Most brands indicated that they applied thoughtfully designed visual themes in line with their identity. As an illustration, Brand A had an earthy tone to represent sustainability, while pastel tones were applied by Brand C to represent femininity and serenity. “We have a monthly mood board that we use to inform our photoshoots. We're all about visually being cohesive, people know our aesthetic immediately.” (Participant 3)

#### Subtheme 1.2: Incorporation within Lifestyle

Posts tended to not simply showcase the product, but an idealized lifestyle e.g., coffee shop scenes, creative flat-lays, and photos submitted by users illustrating aspirational values.

### Theme 2: Strategic Consumer Engagement

#### Subtheme 2.1: Utilizing Stories and Reels for In-the-Moment Engagement

Participants referred to Stories and Reels as important means for establishing “intimacy” with their followers. “Stories allow us to display the 'making of' of our product or have some fun with a meme. It is more relaxed, and everyone enjoys responding to that.” (Participant 6)

#### Subtheme 2.2: Influencer Collaborations & Tagging

Brands worked with micro-influencers and used tagged posts extensively for more visibility and social proof.

### Theme 3: Entrepreneurial Perceptions of Instagram

#### Subtheme 3.1: Instagram as an Affordable Launchpad

The participants all concurred that Instagram had lowered their reliance on physical retailers. “We did not require a store. Instagram was our store, billboard, and public relations agency.” (Participant 2)

#### Subtheme 3.2: Use of Data-Driven Decision-Making

Some brands carefully monitored their engagement metrics, leveraging insights to inform post timing, hashtag usage, and product launches.

### Theme 4: Cultural Localization in Branding

#### Subtheme 4.1: Merging Global Trends with Local Practices

Start-ups designed curated designs that blended contemporary style with cultural themes, such as Sindhi embroidery or Eid lines. “We use Western trends but we incorporate our own unique South Asian spin. Our fans like it when we base our visuals on something that is recognizable.” (Participant 5)

#### Subtheme 4.2: Involving the Diaspora and Urban Millennials

Participants highlighted that their content appeals to urban Pakistani publics as well as diaspora communities, who find value in both modernity and tradition.

### Theme 5: Platform-Related Challenges

#### Subtheme 5.1: Fear of Algorithms and Visibility Concerns

Members complained about organic reach diminishing as a result of algorithm updates. “The best stuff we have some weeks is not visible. We're at the mercy of the algorithm.” (Participant 1)

#### Subtheme 5.2: Time, Consistency, and Emotional Labor

Having a professional Instagram profile was portrayed as being demanding on energy levels. “It's like running a mini magazine every day. Sometimes it feels overwhelming.” (Participant 4)

### 5.3 Visual Content Analysis Key Points

The visual content analysis of the selected Instagram profiles @rastahofficial, @hefclothing, @zohra\_rahman, @generation pk, @zarashahjahanofficial, @hiraalistudios, and @rehmatajmal revealed several common themes and strategies in their digital presentation. An

examination of the chosen Instagram accounts yielded the following common trends:

Category	Public Practice
Visual Consistency	Each brand employed 2 to 3 prominent color tones for every season or collection.
Content Mix	Average mix was 70% product pictures, 20% inspo/lifestyle posts, 10% user-generated.
Use of Reels/Stories	All brands posted Reels weekly and used Stories daily for polls, updates, and BTS.
Caption Style	Conversational tone interspersed with sporadic poetic or simple language.
Hashtag Use	Mixture of trending and branded fashion hashtags, 10 per post on average.

**5.3 Findings from Interviews**

The data from interviews showed that fashion startup founders tend to depend on visually appealing aspects that address both international trends as well as local cultural tastes. They employ tools such as Reels and Stories to connect with their followers, making their brand more personal and relatable.

**5.4 Instagram Feed Content Analysis**

The Instagram-streams were found to contain repeating themes in terms of cultural hybridity and aspirational lifestyle branding. The posts included combinations of conventional and modern fashion aesthetics, along with an emphasis on showcasing personal anecdotes of the startup's creators.

**5.5 Summary of Findings**

This chapter showed that Instagram facilitates fashion startups in Pakistan to create interesting brand stories, connect directly to consumers, as well as localize their messaging towards local as well as diaspora populations. Challenges related to platform volatility as well as production needs for content, however, surfaced. This chapter will discuss these results in relation to existing research.

**5.6 Discussion**

This chapter explains the results presented in Chapter 4 within the context of existing literature and theoretical models articulated in Chapter 3. The discussion covers the impact of visual branding habits on Instagram on consumer

interaction for fashion startups born digital in Pakistan. The chapter also discusses wider implications for entrepreneurs, presents practical suggestions, and recognizes limitations and avenues for future research.

**5.6.1 Interpretation of Key Findings**

**6.1.1 Visual branding as an identity formation tool**

Adhering to constant color schemes, mood boards, and aestheticized feed curations is an intentional attempt to create an integrated brand identity reiterating ideas from Schroeder (2005), who highlighted visual branding as an act of “strategic aestheticization.” The brands in this research used a lifestyle approach, situating product images in aspirational settings, consonant with Manovich's (2016) “Instagram aesthetic.”

**Theoretical Connection:** The evidence lends credence to the notion that Instagram operates not simply as an advertisement but as an identity platform for expressing, branding, and creating community (Marwick, 2015).

**5.6.2 Platform affordances to engage consumers**

Stories, Reels, and tagging were not simply tools for communication but ways to create parasocial closeness and for two-way dialogue aligned with Affordance Theory (Evans et al., 2017). Features that allowed for real-time interaction in the form of polls, Q&A, and Reels enabled startups to offer an “authentic” and accessible brand tone.

**Literature Connection:** Other studies (e.g., Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) have previously determined that authenticity on Instagram is related to trust and engagement. This study supports that assertion in an entrepreneurial context in Pakistan.

### 5.6.3 Instagram as Cost-Effective, Data-Driven Business Model

Entrepreneurs have labeled Instagram as a launching ground and field test for ideas for their businesses enabling direct-to-consumer accessibility without the overheads associated with conventional retail. This lends credibility to Kaplan & Haenlein's (2010) initial typification of Instagram as an active marketing platform and builds on it by emphasizing data-driven decision-making even for startups at small scales.

### 5.6.4 Cultural Localization and Hybrid Identities

Participants intentionally mixed global imagery with local themes (e.g., Eid designs, traditional embroidery), suggesting a branding practice that is hybrid. This is in keeping with Bhabha's (1994) idea of cultural hybridity and is reflective of how fashion visuals on Instagram are conditioned by both international fashion discourses but also local cultural conventions. **New Insight:** Instagram is not just an agent for globalization but also an arena for cultural articulation, especially on the part of urban Pakistani creatives aiming at diasporic and millennial communities.

### 5.6.5 Algorithmic Uncertainty and Emotional Labor

Although Instagram facilitated expansion, contributors complained about algorithmic disruption and material requirements. This suggests an ongoing tension between entrepreneurial agency and platform reliance a point also argued by Duffy and Poell (2021), who theorize about "platform labor" being emotionally and temporally demanding.

### 5.7 Contributions to Knowledge

This research adds to an emerging body of scholarship on social media entrepreneurship in the Global South by:

- Contextualizing visual branding in Pakistan's fashion startup ecosystem
- Emphasizing Instagram's dual function as a space for creativity and as a working environment
- Showing ways in which small brands negotiate cultural identity through digital aesthetics

### 5.8 Practical Recommendations

- **For Entrepreneurs:** Create season-specific visual plans that incorporate storytelling, and diversification in means of engagement (e.g., user-generated stories, UGC campaigns).
- **For Policy & Support Agencies:** Training in digital marketing for women-owned and home-based businesses can maximize the potential of Instagram.
- **For Designers & Marketing professionals:** Incorporate local symbols in digital designs to promote universal appeal combined with local authenticity.

### 5.9 Suggestions for Future Research

- Comparative platform study (e.g. TikTok, Facebook) to examine cross-platform branding strategies.
- A longitudinal study measuring startup development over time through Instagram analytics.
- A consumer-level study that explores how followers understand and react to fashion branding on Instagram in Pakistan.

### 5.10 Limitations

- The sample is limited in size and is not statistically representative
- The research is limited to Instagram and might not account for cross-platform strategies
- Some visual content may be brief (e.g., Stories), making archival analysis challenging

### Conclusion

This research showed that Instagram is an essential channel for creating fashion startup

visual identities in Pakistan. Utilizing visual branding approaches, combined with Instagram's affordances, greatly improves user engagement, especially in an environment where digital access is rapidly expanding. These approaches can be compared across cultural contexts in future research on how they develop.

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