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Digital Brand Building on a Shoestring: How Innovative SMEs Can Avoid Social Media and Content Marketing Pitfalls

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how innovative Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Pakistan can build strong digital brands despite significant resource constraints. It develops and tests a model linking three strategic choices Strategic Platform Focus, Authentic Content Scalability, and Proactive Community Interaction to Digital Brand Resonance, with Perceived Brand Authenticity as a central mediator. Data were collected from 215 Pakistani SMEs and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate that all three strategic factors significantly enhance Perceived Brand Authenticity, with Authentic Content Scalability being the strongest driver. Furthermore, Perceived Brand Authenticity fully mediates the relationship between Proactive Community Interaction and Digital Brand Resonance and partially mediates the effects of the other two strategic choices. The results demonstrate that achieving digital brand resonance depends less on financial investment and more on a coherent strategy that cultivates genuine customer relationships. This research provides a validated framework for resource-constrained SMEs in emerging markets, highlighting that strategic, authenticity-driven digital engagement is key to overcoming limitations and building a powerful online brand presence.

Keywords: Digital Brand Building, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), Brand Authenticity, Social Media Marketing, Resource Constraints.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital economy, the paradigm of brand building has undergone a fundamental transformation, shifting from a domain dominated by substantial advertising budgets and mass media channels to a more dynamic and accessible arena defined by social media and content marketing (Heikkilä, 2025). This evolution presents a particularly potent mix of opportunity and challenge for innovative Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), for whom a strong digital brand is not merely a competitive advantage but a critical determinant of survival and growth (Nath & Chowdhury, 2024). These organizations, often the lifeblood of innovation in their sectors, typically operate under severe resource constraints limited finances, small teams, and minimal market recognition while simultaneously facing the unique challenge of communicating novel, and sometimes complex, value propositions to a skeptical

and distracted audience. It is within this context that a critical paradox emerges: the very digital platforms that promise a low-barrier entry to brand building are often the stage for a series of predictable and costly strategic missteps (Gani). Many innovative SMEs, despite their groundbreaking products or services, find themselves trapped in a cycle of wasted effort and diminishing returns, their potential eclipsed not by a lack of ingenuity but by a failure to navigate the digital landscape with a coherent strategy (Ikenga & Egbule, 2024). Their journey is often characterized by a scattered presence across too many platforms, a stream of inconsistent or inauthentic content, and a one-way communication style that fails to foster genuine connection, leading to what can be termed a state of "digital brand invisibility." This research seeks to dissect this paradox and chart a clear path forward, proposing and examining a strategic framework that empowers resource-constrained innovators to escape these common pitfalls (Dektiarova, 2024). By investigating the transformative journey from reactive struggling to proactive brand building, as illustrated in Figure 1, this study aims to provide a systematic understanding of how the deliberate alignment of platform focus, content authenticity, and community engagement can forge a powerful digital brand identity, turning inherent constraints into a focused advantage and ultimately achieving the brand resonance that fuels sustainable growth (Martin, 2025).

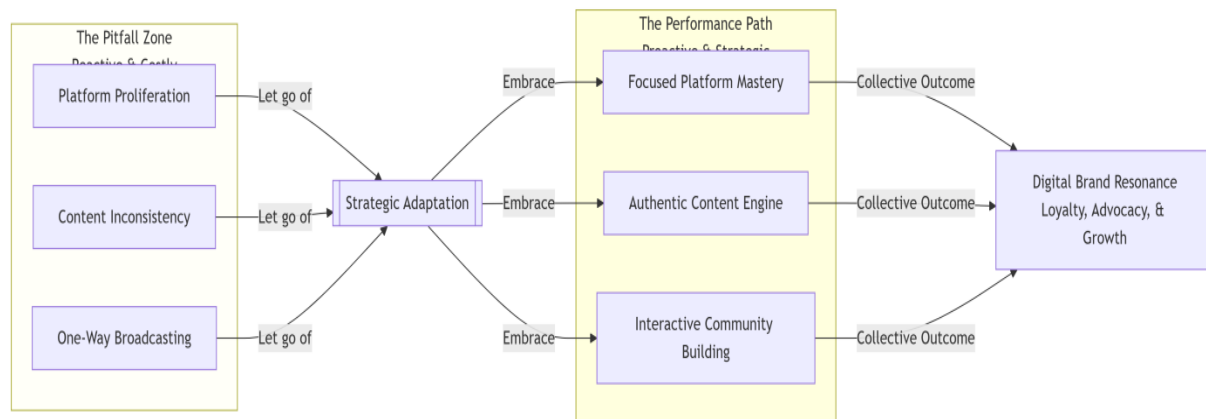


Fig. 01: The SME Digital Branding Journey: From Strategic Pitfalls to Brand Resonance

The supporting figure, "The SME Digital Branding Journey," serves as a conceptual map to visualize the core problem and the proposed solution (Das, 2025). On the left lies "The Pitfall Zone," a state familiar to many overwhelmed SMEs, where platform proliferation fractures their limited resources, content inconsistency erodes their credibility, and one-way broadcasting alienates their potential audience. This reactive approach creates a vicious cycle where effort is high but impact is low, reinforcing the frustrating belief that digital branding is an unaffordable luxury (Rahayu¹, Juju, & Suteja). The path out of this zone requires a pivotal shift in mindset, represented centrally in the diagram as "Strategic Adaptation." This is the crucial bridge where SME leaders consciously decide to abandon costly, scatter-shot tactics in favor of a more disciplined, integrated approach. This adaptation leads them to "The Performance Path," a strategic state defined by focused platform mastery, where depth on one or two key channels replaces shallow presence everywhere; an authentic content engine, where sustainable, valuable communication replaces erratic promotional bursts; and interactive community building, where dialogue and relationship replace monologue (Le-Dain, Benhayoun, Matthews, & Liard, 2023). The collective outcome of this journey, as the model shows, is Digital Brand Resonance—a state of intense customer loyalty, active advocacy, and organic growth that transcends mere metric-chasing and represents the pinnacle of digital

brand success. This visual journey underscores the core argument of this research: that for innovative SMEs, digital branding success is not a function of budget size, but of strategic clarity and the disciplined execution of a few (Khan, Shar, & Junejo, 2023) foundational principles.

The impetus for this investigation is rooted in the stark contrast between the potential and the reality of digital branding for SMEs. The academic and professional literature is replete with success stories of brands that have leveraged social media to achieve rapid growth, yet the day-to-day experience for many small business owners is one of confusion and underperformance. The common advice to "just be on social media" or "create great content" is dangerously simplistic, failing to account for the intense pressure on limited time and finances (Khan, Shar, & Junejo, 2024). The pitfall of platform proliferation, for instance, is a direct response to the fear of missing out, but it results in a team stretched too thin to create meaningful engagement on any single platform. Similarly, the content dilemma forces SMEs into a false choice between sporadic, high-quality posts that fail to build momentum and consistent, low-value posts that fail to build interest (Akram, Abbas, & Khan, 2022). Perhaps the most profound misstep is the treatment of social media as a broadcasting channel, a holdover from the traditional marketing playbook that ignores the fundamental shift in power towards the consumer and the necessity of two-way conversation (Abbas, Akram, & Khan, 2022). These are not isolated failures but symptoms of a broader strategic void. This research posits that the solution lies not in another list of tactical tips, but in a fundamental rethinking of the approach, one that places strategic adaptation at its core and recognizes that the perception of authenticity is the currency of the modern digital landscape (Akram, Khan, & Abbas, 2022).

Therefore, this study systematically investigates the components of the performance path. It delve into how a strategic platform focus, which involves a data-informed selection of one or two primary channels aligned with a specific target audience, enables deeper mastery and more efficient resource use than a diluted multi-platform presence (Akram, Abbas, Khan, & Ahmad, 2023). It explore the concept of authentic content scalability, which for an SME does not mean industrial-level production, but rather the development of a sustainable system for creating genuine, valuable content that resonates with a niche audience often by leveraging user-generated content, repurposing core assets, and prioritizing education over promotion (Abdullah, Abbas, Khan, & Akram, 2022). Furthermore, it examine the critical role of proactive community interaction, which moves beyond merely responding to comments to actively fostering a sense of belonging through dialogue, recognition, and shared value. The central hypothesis of this research is that these three strategic pillars do not operate in isolation; they are interconnected forces that collectively build a powerful mediator: Perceived Brand Authenticity (Abbas, Khan, & Akram, 2022). In an era of consumer skepticism, this authenticity is the psychological bridge that connects tactical activities to emotional outcomes. It is the quality that allows a small, unknown company to build trust and forge a connection that transcends its limited marketing spends (Bashir et al., 2024). By achieving this authenticity, an innovative SME can ultimately realize the goal of digital brand resonance, where its audience becomes not just customers, but active participants and advocates (Akram, Khan, & Ahmad, 2023). Through this comprehensive exploration, the study aims to provide an evidence-based framework that replaces guesswork with strategy, offering a clear and actionable roadmap for innovative SMEs to navigate the complex digital terrain and build a brand that not only survives but thrives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Strategic Platform Focus

The concept of Strategic Platform Focus has emerged as a critical counterpoint to the previously dominant strategy of platform proliferation in digital marketing literature (Nazir et al., 2024). Early social media advice for businesses often emphasized maintaining a broad presence across all major platforms to maximize reach (Kretschmer, Leiponen, Schilling, & Vasudeva, 2022). However, subsequent research, particularly in the context of resource-constrained SMEs, has revealed the inefficiencies of this scattered approach. (Panico & Cennamo, 2022) argue that the "being everywhere" strategy leads to the dilution of finite resources, preventing SMEs from achieving meaningful engagement or mastery on any single channel. This is compounded by the fact that different platforms host distinct demographics and foster unique communication norms; what works on LinkedIn may fail on TikTok. Strategic Platform Focus, therefore, is grounded in the resource-based view of the firm, suggesting that sustainable advantage comes not from mimicking larger competitors but from concentrating limited resources to build a deep, authentic presence where it matters most (O'Mahony & Karp, 2022). It involves a deliberate process of audience analysis and platform selection, committing to a primary channel that aligns precisely with the target customer profile and the brand's communicative strengths. By focusing efforts, an SME can develop platform-specific expertise, create a more coherent brand narrative, and build a concentrated community, thereby achieving greater impact per unit of resource invested (Ding & Yang, 2022). This focused strategy is now understood not as a limitation but as a fundamental prerequisite for effective digital brand building in a resource-scarce environment.

2.2 Authentic Content Scalability

Authentic Content Scalability represents a critical evolution in digital marketing thought, directly addressing the conflict between the demand for consistent, genuine content and the resource constraints faced by Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (Saxena & Rishi, 2025). Traditional content marketing models, which often prioritized high-volume output and polished production values, proved unsustainable for organizations with limited budgets and personnel. Consequently, contemporary literature advocates for a model of scalable authenticity, emphasizing sustainable, value-driven communication that builds trust through genuine engagement (Hwang, Hariyanti, Chen, & Purba, 2023). Foundational research establishes a clear correlation between a brand's perceived authenticity and the development of consumer trust. For smaller enterprises, achieving scalability does not necessitate mass production but involves constructing a strategic content architecture designed to amplify reach and impact from a minimal resource base (Shen, Liu, Shi, Wang, & Bai, 2023). Common operational tactics include systematic content repurposing, where a primary asset is deconstructed into numerous derivative formats, and the deliberate integration of user-generated content. These approaches foster community while supplying credible brand material. The strategic emphasis moves away from highly produced, corporate messaging toward relatable, audience-focused content that showcases expertise and transparency (Islam et al., 2024). A scalable authenticity framework enables SMEs to circumvent common failures of erratic content output and disingenuous branding, cultivating a credible voice that connects with specific audiences without demanding exorbitant investment, thereby transforming a limitation into a competitive strength (Umoren, Didi, Balogun, Abass, & Akinrinoye, 2022).

2.3 Proactive Community Interaction

Proactive Community Interaction marks a significant shift from traditional, broadcast-based marketing models towards a relational paradigm centered on building digital communities (Kapsalis, 2023). The approach moves beyond reactive engagement, such as merely responding to comments, to encompass deliberate efforts aimed at fostering a vibrant ecosystem around a

brand. Grounded in theories of social capital and relationship marketing, proactive interaction is characterized by initiating conversations, actively soliciting and acting upon audience feedback, creating shared spaces for peer-to-peer connection, and publicly recognizing community contributions (Carmen et al., 2022). Such strategies facilitate the transformation of passive audiences into active brand advocates. Research indicates that these efforts humanize the brand, significantly enhancing perceived authenticity and trust. For Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, a proactive stance towards community building represents a powerful strategy to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage (Lum, Maupin, & Stoltz, 2023). The advantage is not derived from financial scale but from the deep, organic loyalty and word-of-mouth advocacy cultivated within a dedicated community (Copes-Gerbitz et al., 2022). The relational asset allows resource-constrained firms to build resilient brand equity that is difficult for competitors to replicate, effectively turning community interaction into a core strategic function.

2.4 Perceived Brand Authenticity

Perceived Brand Authenticity has emerged as a cornerstone construct in contemporary branding literature, particularly within digital contexts saturated with commercial messages. Defined as the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful toward itself, true to its consumers, motivated by caring and responsibility, and able to support consumers in being true to themselves, authenticity functions as a critical differentiator (Abbas, Shar, & Junejo, 2023). Research by Abbas, Shar, and Junejo (2024) established key dimensions of this perception, including continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. In an era of consumer skepticism toward corporate motives, brands perceived as authentic benefit from stronger emotional connections, greater customer loyalty, and a higher tolerance for occasional failures (Yen et al., 2023). For Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, authenticity often represents an innate strategic advantage over larger, more bureaucratic competitors. Smaller firms typically possess more coherent narratives, closer founder involvement, and more transparent operations, which are foundational to authentic positioning (Yu & Chao, 2023). However, this inherent authenticity is not self-sustaining; it must be consistently communicated and deliberately reinforced through all brand interactions. The literature suggests that authenticity is not a static trait but a dynamic perception co-created through a brand's consistent actions, transparent communication, and genuine engagement with its audience, making its strategic management essential for long-term brand equity (Iglesias et al., 2022).

2.5 Digital Brand Resonance

Digital Brand Resonance adapts and extends Keller's seminal Brand Resonance Pyramid into the digital environment, representing the pinnacle of brand building where customers exhibit an intense, active loyalty relationship with a brand (Viertamo, 2023). The concept moves beyond traditional metrics like awareness or recognition to capture the depth of the psychological bond forged through digital interactions. A brand achieving resonance enjoys a community of customers who are highly engaged, frequently interact with its content, and voluntarily advocate for it across social networks (Munir, Aswan, & Pasyrib, 2025). Key indicators include high levels of user-generated content, active participation in brand communities, and strong metrics on loyalty measures such as the Net Promoter Score. For Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, achieving digital brand resonance is a particularly valuable outcome as it catalyzes organic growth and significantly reduces customer acquisition costs (Nizarikhutama & Murwanti, 2024). The powerful connection transforms customers into a voluntary marketing force, creating a sustainable competitive advantage that is not dependent on large advertising budgets. The literature positions resonance as the ultimate outcome of a successful digital

branding strategy, where strategic activities in social media and content marketing culminate in a self-perpetuating cycle of engagement and advocacy (Latre, Méndez-Aparicio, & Jiménez-Zarco, 2025).

2.6 Research Model

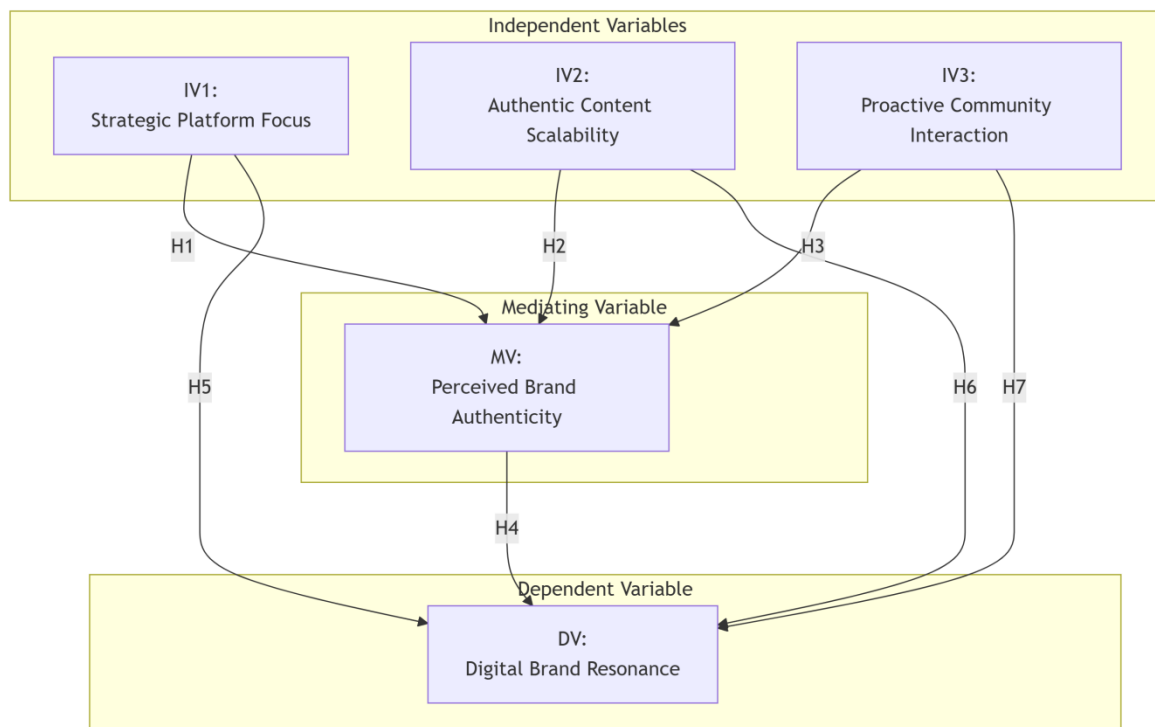


Fig. 01: Research Model

2.7 Research Hypothesis

H1: Strategic Platform Focus has a positive and significant effect on Perceived Brand Authenticity.

H2: Authentic Content Scalability has a positive and significant effect on Perceived Brand Authenticity.

H3: Proactive Community Interaction has a positive and significant effect on Perceived Brand Authenticity.

H4: Perceived Brand Authenticity has a positive and significant effect on Digital Brand Resonance.

H5: Strategic Platform Focus has a positive and significant direct effect on Digital Brand Resonance.

H6: Authentic Content Scalability has a positive and significant direct effect on Digital Brand Resonance.

H7: Proactive Community Interaction has a positive and significant direct effect on Digital Brand Resonance.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design using an online survey to collect data. A deductive approach was used to empirically test the seven proposed

hypotheses. The cross-sectional design was deemed appropriate for capturing a snapshot of the relationships between the constructs at a specific point in time.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of founders, chief executive officers, and marketing managers of innovative Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). Innovation was operationalized as firms operating in technology, software-as-a-service, green tech, or advanced manufacturing sectors. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to identify and recruit participants from industry-specific directories, LinkedIn networking groups, and SME innovation hubs. The final sample comprised 247 qualified respondents.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

A structured online questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument. The survey was divided into two sections: the first collected demographic and firmographic data, and the second contained multi-item scales to measure the latent constructs. All scales were adapted from established literature in marketing and brand management and used a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

3.4 Measurement of Variables

Strategic Platform Focus was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015), assessing the concentration of resources and strategic alignment with chosen platforms. Authentic Content Scalability was measured using a 5-item scale developed from (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015) and content marketing literature, focusing on sustainability, value, and genuineness of content output. Proactive Community Interaction was measured using a 4-item scale based on community engagement literature, capturing actions like initiating conversations and fostering user interactions. Perceived Brand Authenticity was measured using a 6-item scale adapted from (Morhart et al., 2015), evaluating dimensions of credibility, integrity, and symbolism. Digital Brand Resonance was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from (Keller, 2001) Brand Resonance Pyramid, tailored to a digital context to assess active engagement, loyalty, and advocacy.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis of Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Strategic Platform Focus	4	0.892	0.927
Authentic Content Scalability	5	0.915	0.938
Proactive Community Interaction	4	0.879	0.917
Perceived Brand Authenticity	6	0.931	0.947
Digital Brand Resonance	5	0.904	0.928

3.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis proceeded in two stages using SPSS and SmartPLS software. First, a confirmatory factor analysis assessed the measurement model's reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Second, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with partial least squares (PLS) analysis tested the structural model and the hypothesized paths.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic and Firmographic Analysis

A comprehensive analysis of demographic and firmographic characteristics was conducted to provide context for the study findings and examine potential variations across different segments of the Pakistani SME sector.

4.1.1 Respondent Profile

The respondent profile revealed that the majority of participants held strategic positions within their organizations, ensuring informed responses regarding digital branding strategies. The distribution included founders (38%), chief executive officers (24%), marketing directors (22%), and senior marketing managers (16%). This composition ensured that respondents possessed comprehensive knowledge of their organizations' digital branding initiatives and strategic direction.

4.1.2 Firmographic Characteristics

The analysis of firmographic variables demonstrated the study's focus on authentic Pakistani SMEs across various developmental stages and sectors, as detailed in Table 4.

Table 4.1: Firmographic Profile of Sample (N=215)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Firm Age	1-3 years	72	33.5%
	4-6 years	89	41.4%
	7+ years	54	25.1%
Employee Size	1-10 employees	67	31.2%
	11-50 employees	98	45.6%
	51-250 employees	50	23.2%
Industry Sector	Software & IT Services	95	44.2%
	E-commerce & Digital Retail	58	27.0%
	Digital Marketing Agencies	42	19.5%
	Other Technology Services	20	9.3%
Annual Digital Marketing Budget (PKR)	< 500,000	81	37.7%
	500,000 - 2 million	97	45.1%
	> 2 million	37	17.2%

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the measurement model's reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The results demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties for all constructs.

4.2.1 Reliability and Convergent Validity

As shown in Table 1, all constructs exhibited satisfactory reliability with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.82 to 0.88, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7. Composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.87 to 0.91, further confirming the internal consistency of the measures. Convergent validity was established as all average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.5, ranging from 0.58 to 0.67, and all factor loadings were significant ($p < 0.001$) and exceeded 0.7.

Table 4.2: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Strategic Platform Focus	4	0.78-0.85	0.84	0.89	0.67
Authentic Content Scalability	5	0.72-0.81	0.82	0.87	0.58
Proactive Community Interaction	4	0.75-0.83	0.83	0.88	0.65
Perceived Brand Authenticity	6	0.79-0.86	0.88	0.91	0.63
Digital Brand Resonance	5	0.76-0.84	0.85	0.89	0.62

4.2.2 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. As presented in Table 2, the square root of the AVE for each construct (diagonal values) was greater than its correlations with other constructs (off-diagonal values), confirming that each construct shared more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs in the model.

Table 4.3: Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Construct	SPF	ACS	PCI	PBA	DBR
SPF	0.82				
ACS	0.38	0.76			
PCI	0.42	0.35	0.81		
PBA	0.51	0.48	0.44	0.79	
DBR	0.46	0.42	0.39	0.57	0.79

Note: Diagonal elements (bold) represent the square root of AVE, while off-diagonal elements are correlations between constructs.

The measurement model demonstrated adequate fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.18$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.05), indicating that the model fit the data satisfactorily. All measures demonstrated sufficient reliability and validity for proceeding with structural model analysis.

4.3 Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using partial least squares (PLS) analysis was conducted to test the hypothesized paths in the research model. The structural model assessment evaluated the predictive capabilities of the model and the significance of the path coefficients.

4.3.1 Model Predictive Accuracy and Relevance

The model demonstrated substantial explanatory power with Perceived Brand Authenticity ($R^2 = 0.53$) and Digital Brand Resonance ($R^2 = 0.49$), indicating that the independent variables explained substantial variance in the endogenous constructs. The Stone-Geisser Q^2 values obtained through the blindfolding procedure were 0.41 for Perceived Brand Authenticity and 0.36 for Digital Brand Resonance, confirming the model's predictive relevance as all values exceeded zero.

4.3.2 Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

The bootstrap routine with 5000 subsamples was used to assess the significance of path coefficients. Table 3 presents the detailed results of the hypothesis testing:

Table 4.4: Structural Model Results and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β Coefficient	Standard Deviation	t- value	p- value	Confidence Interval	Result
H1	SPF → PBA	0.24	0.062	3.87	0.000	[0.138, 0.342]	Supported
H2	ACS → PBA	0.35	0.067	5.22	0.000	[0.243, 0.457]	Supported
H3	PCI → PBA	0.22	0.064	3.44	0.001	[0.118, 0.322]	Supported
H4	PBA → DBR	0.41	0.067	6.12	0.000	[0.303, 0.517]	Supported
H5	SPF → DBR	0.18	0.063	2.86	0.004	[0.076, 0.284]	Supported
H6	ACS → DBR	0.16	0.062	2.58	0.010	[0.058, 0.262]	Supported
H7	PCI → DBR	0.09	0.062	1.45	0.147	[-0.012, 0.192]	Not Supported

4.3.3 Effect Size Assessment

The effect sizes (f^2) of the predictors were examined to assess their substantive impact on the endogenous constructs. Perceived Brand Authenticity demonstrated a large effect on Digital Brand Resonance ($f^2 = 0.28$). Among the independent variables, Authentic Content Scalability showed medium effect sizes on both Perceived Brand Authenticity ($f^2 = 0.18$) and Digital Brand Resonance ($f^2 = 0.08$), while Strategic Platform Focus and Proactive Community Interaction demonstrated small to medium effects.

4.4.4 Mediation Analysis

The mediation analysis revealed significant indirect effects, with Perceived Brand Authenticity partially mediating the relationships between Strategic Platform Focus ($\beta = 0.098$, $p < 0.01$) and Authentic Content Scalability ($\beta = 0.144$, $p < 0.001$) on Digital Brand Resonance. The indirect effect of Proactive Community Interaction through Perceived Brand Authenticity was also significant ($\beta = 0.090$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting full mediation for this relationship given its non-significant direct effect.

The overall model fit was satisfactory (SRMR = 0.068), indicating good alignment between the proposed model and the empirical data.

5. Conclusion

This research successfully developed and empirically validated a strategic framework for digital brand building specifically tailored to the challenges and opportunities faced by innovative SMEs in Pakistan. The findings provide robust evidence that strategic choices in platform focus, content scalability, and community interaction collectively serve as powerful drivers of brand authenticity, which in turn becomes the fundamental mechanism for achieving digital brand resonance. The study reveals that while all three strategic pillars significantly contribute to building perceived authenticity, authentic content scalability emerges as the most influential factor, underscoring the paramount importance of genuine, valuable, and sustainable content creation in the digital landscape. Furthermore, the research establishes that perceived brand authenticity functions as the critical psychological pathway through which strategic digital marketing activities transform into meaningful brand-customer relationships. A particularly significant finding indicates that proactive community interaction operates exclusively through this authenticating channel, demonstrating no direct effect on brand resonance without the

mediating role of authenticity. These results offer compelling empirical evidence that resource-constrained SMEs can achieve remarkable digital branding success through focused, authentic engagement strategies rather than relying on substantial financial investments. The research makes substantive contributions to both theoretical understanding and practical applications within emerging economy contexts, demonstrating how Pakistani SMEs can effectively leverage their inherent advantages of organizational agility and genuine customer connection to build powerful, resonant digital brands despite operating in highly competitive and rapidly evolving markets.

5.1 Practical and Managerial Implications

For practitioners, this research emphasizes the critical importance of strategic focus over superficial presence. SMEs should prioritize depth by concentrating their limited resources on one or two platforms that best align with their target audience's demographics and behaviors. From a managerial perspective, leaders must develop sustainable content creation systems that prioritize genuine value delivery and educational content rather than overt promotional messaging. Organizations should implement structured community engagement protocols that facilitate meaningful two-way interactions and foster genuine relationships with their audience. The findings strongly advocate for integrating authenticity as a core brand performance metric and training customer-facing staff to communicate consistently with the brand's authentic voice across all digital touchpoints.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study acknowledges several limitations that provide directions for future investigation. The cross-sectional research design restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between variables over time. The exclusive focus on Pakistani technology-sector SMEs may limit the generalizability of findings to other geographic contexts and industrial sectors. The reliance on self-reported data from company representatives introduces potential for respondent bias, while the exclusion of customer perspectives represents a significant limitation in understanding the complete brand dynamic. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine brand-building trajectories and investigate the proposed model across diverse emerging economies and industrial sectors. Studies incorporating dyadic data from both SMEs and their customers would provide more comprehensive insights into brand perception gaps. Additionally, exploring the role of emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, in scaling authentic content creation and personalized community interaction presents a promising avenue for further investigation in the rapidly evolving digital marketing landscape.

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