

THE INFLUENCE OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP CONTENT ON ORGANIZATIONAL CREDIBILITY AND CONSUMER TRUST IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Thought leadership, organizational credibility, consumer trust, digital platforms, perceived expertise.

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zunairarahim@hotmail.com**Abstract**

In today's digital age, thought leadership content is becoming a vital digital communication vehicle for building trust and credibility for the organization. The study investigated how thought leadership content affects consumers' perceptions of expertise, organizational credibility, and consumer trust, as well as the mediating effect of organizational credibility and the moderating effect of digital platform engagement. The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design conducted in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan. A structured questionnaire was used to gather data, and content analysis of thought leadership communications was used to supplement. Data were analyzed using SPSS and SmartPLS, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), mediation analysis, moderation analysis, reliability analysis, and validity analysis were performed. The results showed that, in general, thought leadership content has a positive effect on the perception of expertise, which in turn improves the credibility of the organization and trust of consumers. The study revealed that organizational credibility was one of the significant mediating variables for the increase in consumer trust as a consequence of thought leadership content. Also, digital platform engagement helped to enhance the trust-building component of thought leadership communication. The study findings demonstrate the positive impact that well-designed, knowledgeable, and well-timed thought leadership marketing can be on the development of credibility and the maintenance of consumer trust in today's digital landscape.

Introduction

Digital technologies have rapidly evolved and profoundly reshaped the communication landscape, providing new opportunities and challenges for organizations seeking to engage with consumers and stakeholders (Brunetti et al., 2020). In today's highly connected world, organizations are expected not only to offer products and services but also to provide valuable information to help audiences understand the increasing industry trends and issues (Omol, 2024). Therefore, content-focused communication strategies have become increasingly important in influencing public perception and building the continuity of communication with target groups (Thelen et al., 2021). Among these strategies, thought leadership has emerged as a highly visible approach for establishing organizations and their executives as credible industry experts (Anderson & Marshall, 2025). Thought leadership involves generating and sharing insightful, evidence-based, and forward-thinking content that addresses relevant industry concerns, provides innovative perspectives and contributes to professional discourse (Strömfors, 2025). Thought leadership is not like traditional promotional communication; rather, the goal is to provide value by disseminating knowledge to build perception of expertise and credibility (Harvey et al., 2021).

Thought leadership content has gained considerable momentum through digital platforms, significantly increasing its reach and impact (Thelen et al., 2021). Social media platforms, corporate websites, blogs, podcasts, webinars, and professional networking sites provide a way for companies to connect with a variety of audiences, beyond geographical barriers (Arora, 2025; Thelen et al., 2021). These tools enable the rapid dissemination of information, facilitate audience engagement, and promote interactive dialogue, helping organisations develop better relationships with their stakeholders. In addition, the digital media channels offer management and industry professionals a means to become more visible and

influential through steady and honest communication (Aakhus & Bzdak, 2015). Organizational credibility and consumer trust have become critical determinants of success in the digital era. Today, consumers are exposed to a vast amount of information and frequently turning to reliable sources to assess an organization and to make a decision (Croitoru et al., 2023). When expertise, transparency, and thought leadership are communicated effectively, organizations are more likely to gain stakeholder trust and improve their brand (Bourne, 2015). The impact thought leadership content has on credibility and trust, however, can vary based on the quality, relevance, authenticity, communication style, and dissemination channels, among others (Jenkins et al., 2020). In today's digital age and the increasing significance of thought leadership communication and knowledge-based engagement approaches, the impact of thought leadership content, organizational credibility and consumer trust is a pertinent research agenda in marketing and organizational communication.

Research Objectives

- To examine the relationship between thought leadership content and perceived expertise.
- To assess the impact of executive thought leadership on consumer trust.
- To identify the characteristics of effective thought leadership communication.
- To evaluate the role of digital platforms in amplifying thought leadership influence.

Research Questions

- How does thought leadership content affect organizational credibility?
- What factors make thought leadership content persuasive and trustworthy?
- Does executive visibility contribute to stakeholder confidence?
- Which digital channels are most effective for thought leadership dissemination?

Literature Review

Concept of Thought Leadership

Thought leadership has evolved into a strategy for organizations and individuals to establish authority by sharing new ideas, industry knowledge, and expert opinion. However, there is no unanimous agreement among scholars regarding its definition. It was redefined by Harvey et al (2021) as knowledge from a trusted and authoritative source that offers solutions to perform, as opposed to the previous definition that was limited to a branding and differentiation tool. As outlined by Bourne et al. (2026), more recent literature has extended it to become a multidimensional concept, consisting of expertise, legitimacy, communication effectiveness and social influence. While it is still regarded as an expert quality, there is still an ongoing debate about whether thought leadership is a personal quality, an organisational capability or a communication strategy, given its transformation into a powerful tool to influence perceptions and industry discourse among stakeholders. However, there is a concern that everything could be considered "thought leadership" and not "innovation," which can pose issues when it comes to people believing the speaker's expertise. The ambiguity regarding this, and the fact that we lack much research on thought leadership in digitally overloaded environments, suggests that more research needs to be done empirically examining the effects of thought leadership on organizational outcomes.

Thought Leadership Content and Perceived Expertise

In recent times, scholars have explored the link between thought leadership content and perceived expertise in the context of communication and marketing. Studies show that it is the content, and not the credentials, but the quality, originality and relevance of the content that the audience values. Thought leadership can establish perceived authority when it provides clear, actionable solutions and industry-specific knowledge (Harvey et al., 2021). Similarly, it has been noted that

credible and trustworthy information in the digital environment has been improved due to evidence-based transparency and good quality information (Pooja and Upadhyaya, 2024). To sum up, thought leadership content is a stamp of approval that showcases an organization's capabilities and knowledge, building trust and credibility among stakeholders and standing out in the digital sphere. But the power of this connection is not universally present, it relies on the knowledge of the audience, context of the industry and quality of the content, which requires ongoing work and isn't handed down: it must be gained through ongoing value-based communication.

Executive Thought Leadership and Consumer Trust

Executive thought leadership is a growing phenomenon, given that stakeholders have a thirst for genuine and informed voices in organizational brands. Previous studies indicate that consumers often perceive executive visibility as a sign of transparency, accountability and expertise – executives that are regularly providing informed opinions can foster consumer confidence and emotional connections. Kim et al. (2023) add that the most effective way to provide thought leadership is to do so in a solution-centric and authentic manner rather than promotional. Self-promotion, when done by the executive's voice, can enhance the value of an organization and its perception, but overpromotion can have the opposite effect. Therefore, it is important to strike a balance between the expert, authentic and relevant. Literature suggests that in general, executive communication is more likely to boost consumer trust in the case of consistency, transparency and value orientation, especially within digital communication. In the same way that "seeing is believing" is no longer sufficient, communicators now need to be authentic with their organizations, congruent in their leadership style with organizational behavior, and long-term and not just short-term.

Organizational Credibility in the Digital Era

Organizational credibility is defined as how much stakeholders believe an organization is trustworthy, competent and reliable. With information spreading quickly and readily on the Web, credibility is extremely fragile in the digital age, and organizations are constantly under public review. The study revealed that transparency, consistency, expertise, ethical behavior and information provided via digital channels were all factors that influence credibility. Koochang et al., (2017) pointed out that trust is now an important strategic value that impacts customer loyalty, credibility and business performance. But in the case of traditional media environment, the credibility can be quickly marred if the message is not delivered in a right manner or is not consistent. As misinformation and AI-generated content are prevalent, stakeholders are increasingly relying on trusted organizations and expert-driven communication to assess information quality. This means that organizations with a good reputation for their honest communication and thought leadership can acquire more competitive advantage in attracting and retaining stakeholders.

Role of Digital Platforms in Thought Leadership

Digital platforms have revolutionized thought leadership, allowing organizations to reach a worldwide audience and amplify the voice of their key influencers. Social media, professional networking sites, blogs, podcasts, and webinars can help facilitate Knowledge sharing in real time and also engagement, feedback and connection building. Heavey et al. (2020) stated that the key to successful thought leadership is to choose the right channels for sharing knowledge. Digital platforms give organizations the ability to measure engagement and adapt their approach as per the audience feedback – not so with the traditional media. It's also found that platform type can affect credibility perceptions – that professional networks can often deliver a higher perceived level of expertise than purely promotional channels. But how effective the digital platforms are is

dependent on the platform, with LinkedIn and other professional networks helping to build authority and trust, and platforms that are highly commercial can create skepticism. With that said, it is crucial to have an understanding of the characteristics of the platform, so that you can maximize the impact of your thought leadership communication.

Characteristics of Effective Thought Leadership Communication

Thought leadership communication is original, relevant, credible, clear, and valuable to an audience. Don't be overwhelmed by the amount of content, it's about providing valuable analysis and insights that meet the needs of stakeholders. Brady et al (2025) and Harvey et al (2021) identified two key factors for successful thought leadership as actionable knowledge and authoritative expertise. It is also found that clarity, coherence and originality helps to engage the audience with the content and makes them feel it is valuable, while authenticity is still a critical aspect of audience evaluation of content for exaggeration and self-promotion. Some research focuses on storytelling as a method to enhance access and influence, while others focus on case-based and workable information. In conclusion, effective thought leadership is a balance between, and a synthesis of, both having the expertise, and having the ability to communicate it to the right audience. Also, maintaining continuity with time is critical, because continuous knowledge sharing is more effective than content in building long-term thought leadership.

Theoretical Foundation

This study was based on four complementary theories: Source Credibility Theory, Signaling Theory, Relationship Marketing Theory and Social Influence Theory, all of which explain how thought leadership content affects organizational credibility and consumer trust in the digital world. Executive or organizational thought leadership can improve the credibility of a message according to Source Credibility Theory, as it conveys

information about expertise and trustworthiness. Signaling Theory also indicates that, in an environment of information asymmetry, publishing thought leadership content is a public sign of expertise. Relationship Marketing Theory focuses on the importance of ongoing communication that is based on value creation and which fosters trust and enhances relationships with stakeholders. According to the Social Influence Theory, opinion leaders and executive visibility influence the attitudes and behaviors of the audience in digital networks. Together, these theories offer a coherent set of explanations for the influence of thought leadership on consumer perceived expertise, organizational credibility, and consumer trust, via cognitive, relational, and social pathways.

Research Gap

While there are studies that have explored thought leadership and organizational credibility individually, there is a dearth of studies that have drawn together these concepts within a single explanatory framework and examined them in relation to consumer trust. The vast body of existing literature largely focuses on thought leadership as a branding and reputation management strategy with little attention paid to how thought leadership can affect perceived expertise, credibility and trust at the same time. Furthermore, although the proliferation of digital communication platforms has been swift, there has been little empirical evidence on the part played by these platforms as enablers or moderators of thought leadership effectiveness. The majority of studies are also focused on the western context and knowledge-based environments; thus, there is a lack of understanding across various cultural and organizational contexts. This study fills these gaps in literature by proposing and testing an integrated model where thought leadership content affects organizational credibility and consumer trust and how digital platforms moderate the influence of thought leadership content in the digital age.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study shows that the relationship between thought leadership content and the credibility and trust of organizations in the digital era is revealed in figure 1 below. The perceived and behavioral outcomes are influenced by thought leadership content in multiple ways and viewed as the main independent variable. The model proposes that it improves the perceived expertise and thus organizational credibility. Moreover, executive thought leadership should have a direct impact on consumer trust as a result of visibility of leadership being tied to authenticity, authority and transparency. Furthermore, online platforms serve as a catalyst that extends the impact and reach of thought leadership messaging. Additionally, organizational credibility is presented as a mediating variable that further strengthens the relationship between thought leadership content and consumer trust. Overall, the framework emphasizes the role of content quality, leadership visibility, and digital platforms in shaping trust and credibility perception of organizations in the digital environment.

Figure 1
Proposed Conceptual Model

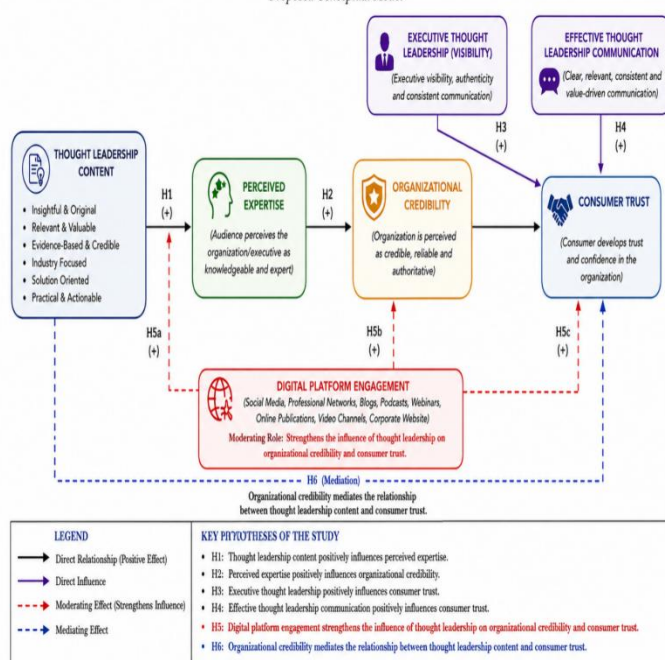


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model

Research Hypotheses

- H1: Thought leadership content positively influences perceived expertise.
- H2: Perceived expertise positively influences organizational credibility.
- H3: Executive thought leadership positively influences consumer trust.
- H4: Effective thought leadership communication positively influences consumer trust.
- H5: Digital platform engagement strengthens the influence of thought leadership on organizational credibility and consumer trust.
- H6: Organizational credibility mediates the relationship between thought leadership content and consumer trust.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, the effect of thought leadership content on the credibility and trust of an organization in the digital era was studied. The design of the study was suitable for testing of relationships between constructs of the Source

Credibility Theory, Signaling Theory, Relationship Marketing Theory and Social Influence Theory. Further, a text analysis of selected LinkedIn posts and articles from the organizations was undertaken, using a structured analysis approach, to aid in the interpretation of communication patterns. This study was explanatory in nature, with the goal of testing causal relationships among thought leadership content, perceptions of expertise, perceptions of organizational credibility, and consumers' trust.

Study Population

The audience consisted of consumers and professionals who regularly consume thought leadership content in the digital environment, especially on LinkedIn, Facebook, and corporate websites, as well as professionals involved in marketing, management and communication careers. The study was conducted in Islamabad and Rawalpindi because of their close digital connectivity and educated and professional population.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed because a complete sampling frame was unavailable. The sample size for this study was calculated using Cochran's formula, and the number of valid responses obtained was 410, which was at least the recommended minimum number of responses for SEM, and also provided sufficient statistical power and reliability.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed through online platforms (Google Forms, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and email) and offline (University and corporate offices). Respondents were screened to ensure that they had previously engaged with thought leadership content. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select 80 thought leadership communication units for content analysis. Data were gathered for six months (January–June 2025).

Research Instrument

The questionnaire was a structured scale that consisted of five-point Likert items, addressing demographic information, the constructs of thought leadership content, perceived expertise, organizational credibility, consumer trust, and digital platform engagement. The items were all piloted on a small scale and modified from previously validated scales to ensure clarity and reliability.

Measurement of Variables

All constructs were treated as latent variables: each was measured by multiple indicators. Relevance, originality, informativeness and quality are considered to be part of thought leadership content. The perceived expertise was assessed in terms of competence and authority, while organizational credibility was assessed as the combination of trustworthiness, transparency, consistency and reliability. Consumer trust indicated trust in the communication and adoption of organizational communication, while digital engagement indicated frequency and intensity of engagement, across platforms.

Reliability and Validity Analysis

The measurement model's reliability and validity were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, CFA, AVE, Fornell-Larcker criterion, and HTMT ratio. Results showed that all values were within acceptable parameters, indicating good internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminant validity.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 and SmartPLS version 4. In order to test the direct, mediating and moderating effects descriptive statistics, correlation and structural equation modeling (SEM) with bootstrapping were used. Model fit and explanatory power were assessed by the R^2 , SRMR, and NFI.

Ethical Considerations

Voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and secure data handling were strictly adhered in accordance with ethical standards. Ethical approval from the

relevant institutional review committee was secured before data collection was started.

Results

The study included 410 respondents, with 56.59% males ($n=232$) and 43.41% females ($n=178$), shown in table 1. The majority were aged 26–35 years (39.51%), followed by 18–25 years (28.78%), 36–45 years (21.22%), and above 45 years (10.49%). Most participants held a Master's degree (45.85%), followed by Bachelor's (36.83%) and MPhil/PhD (17.32%). In terms of occupation, business professionals constituted the largest group (45.37%), followed by corporate employees (25.37%), students (16.34%), and entrepreneurs (12.93%). LinkedIn was the most commonly used platform for thought leadership exposure (47.80%), followed by Facebook (26.34%), corporate websites (14.15%), and other platforms (11.71%).

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 410 respondents included in the study.

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	232	56.59
	Female	178	43.41
Age (Years)	18–25	118	28.78
	26–35	162	39.51
	36–45	87	21.22
	Above 45	43	10.49
Education	Bachelor's	151	36.83
	Master's	188	45.85
	MPhil/PhD	71	17.32
Occupation	Business Professional	186	45.37
	Corporate Employee	104	25.37
	Entrepreneur	53	12.93
	Student	67	16.34
Primary Platform Used	LinkedIn	196	47.80
	Facebook	108	26.34
	Corporate Websites	58	14.15
	Other Platforms	48	11.71

Descriptive results show generally high agreement across all constructs (table 2). Thought leadership content recorded the highest mean score (4.02 ± 0.68), followed by perceived expertise (3.96 ± 0.71), consumer trust (3.94 ± 0.69), organizational credibility (3.89 ± 0.73), and digital platform engagement (3.87 ± 0.76). Overall, the results indicate moderately high perceptions of thought leadership effectiveness and related trust outcomes among respondents.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean $\pm$ SD
Thought Leadership Content	4.02 ± 0.68
Perceived Expertise	3.96 ± 0.71
Organizational Credibility	3.89 ± 0.73
Consumer Trust	3.94 ± 0.69
Digital Platform Engagement	3.87 ± 0.76

Note: Descriptive statistics are reported as mean $\pm$ standard deviation (M $\pm$ SD) on a 5-point Likert scale. Higher values indicate stronger agreement with the respective constructs.

Abbreviations: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

Test used: Descriptive statistics.

The measurement model demonstrated strong reliability and validity (table 3). Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.872 to 0.903, and composite reliability values ranged from 0.904 to 0.926, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70. Convergent validity was confirmed with AVE values ranging from 0.652 to 0.714, indicating adequate variance explanation across all constructs. Table 3. Measurement Model Reliability and Convergent Validity Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Thought Leadership Content	0.892	0.917	0.689

Perceived Expertise	0.881	0.911	0.673
Organizational Credibility	0.903	0.926	0.714
Consumer Trust	0.895	0.920	0.698
Digital Platform Engagement	0.872	0.904	0.652

Note: Reliability and convergent validity were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

Test used: Reliability and validity analysis (CFA-based).

Correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among all variables (figure 2). Thought leadership content was strongly correlated with perceived expertise ($r=0.641$) and consumer trust ($r=0.612$). Perceived expertise showed a strong association with organizational credibility ($r=0.716$), while organizational credibility was strongly related to consumer trust ($r=0.748$). Digital platform engagement also showed moderate positive correlations with all variables, ranging from $r=0.493$ to $r=0.582$.

Correlation Matrix Heatmap

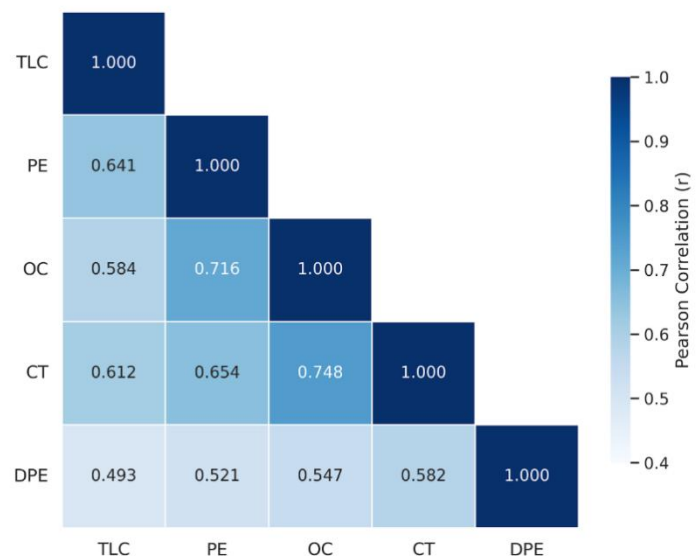


Figure 2. Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables

Note: This figure presents the interrelationships among the study variables as assessed using Pearson's correlation analysis. The coefficients indicate the strength and direction of associations between constructs. **Abbreviations:** TLC = Thought Leadership Content; PE = Perceived Expertise; OC = Organizational Credibility; CT = Consumer Trust; DPE = Digital Platform Engagement.

Structural equation modeling results confirmed all hypotheses as significant (table 4). Thought leadership content significantly influenced perceived expertise ($\beta=0.641$, $t=15.82$, $p<0.001$), and perceived expertise significantly affected organizational credibility ($\beta=0.587$, $t=13.91$, $p<0.001$). Organizational credibility positively influenced consumer trust ($\beta=0.462$, $t=10.73$, $p<0.001$). Executive thought leadership ($\beta=0.312$, $t=6.84$, $p<0.001$) and communication effectiveness ($\beta=0.281$, $t=5.96$, $p<0.001$) also significantly enhanced consumer trust, while digital platform engagement showed a moderating effect ($\beta=0.183$, $t=4.11$, $p<0.001$).

Table 4. Structural Model Results: Direct Effects and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Thought Leadership Content → Perceived Expertise	0.641	15.82	<0.001	Supported
H2	Perceived Expertise → Organizational Credibility	0.587	13.91	<0.001	Supported
H3	Executive Thought Leadership → Consumer Trust	0.312	6.84	<0.001	Supported

	Leadership → Consumer Trust				
H4	Effective Thought Leadership Communication → Consumer Trust	0.281	5.96	<0.001	Supported
H5	Digital Platform Engagement × Thought Leadership → Consumer Trust	0.183	4.11	<0.001	Supported
H6	Organizational Credibility → Consumer Trust	0.462	10.73	<0.001	Supported

Note: Hypotheses were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with bootstrapping. Results include β , t-values, and p-values.

Abbreviations: β = Beta; t = t-value; p = p-value; SEM = Structural Equation Modeling.

Test used: SEM (bootstrapped path analysis).

The structural model demonstrated good explanatory power and fit. R^2 values indicated moderate to substantial predictive power for perceived expertise (0.411), organizational credibility (0.527), and consumer trust (0.618). Model fit indices also confirmed adequacy, with SRMR = 0.062 (below 0.08) and NFI = 0.914 (above 0.90), indicating a well-fitting model (table 5).

Table 5. Model Fit Indices and Explanatory Power of the Structural Model

Indicator	Value	Recommended Threshold
R ² (Perceived Expertise)	0.411	> 0.25
R ² (Organizational Credibility)	0.527	> 0.25
R ² (Consumer Trust)	0.618	> 0.25
SRMR	0.062	< 0.08
NFI	0.914	> 0.90

Note: Model fit and explanatory power were assessed using R², SRMR, and NFI.

Abbreviations: R² = Coefficient of determination; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; NFI = Normed Fit Index.

Test used: PLS-SEM model fit evaluation.

Mediation analysis showed that organizational credibility partially mediated the relationship between thought leadership content and consumer trust, with a significant indirect effect ($\beta=0.271$, $t=6.27$, $p<0.001$), shown in table 6. This indicates that thought leadership enhances consumer trust both directly and indirectly through improved organizational credibility.

Table 6. Mediation Analysis: Role of Organizational Credibility between Thought Leadership Content and Consumer Trust

Relationship	Indirect Effect (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
TLC $\rightarrow$ OC $\rightarrow$ CT	0.271	6.27	<0.001	Partial Mediation

Note: Mediation was tested using bootstrapped indirect effects of Organizational Credibility (OC) between Thought Leadership Content (TLC) and Consumer Trust (CT).

Abbreviations: TLC = Thought Leadership Content; OC = Organizational Credibility; CT = Consumer Trust. **Test used:** Mediation analysis (bootstrapping).

Digital platform engagement significantly moderated the relationships between thought leadership content and outcomes (table 7). The interaction effect was significant for organizational credibility ($\beta=0.165$, $t=3.89$, $p<0.001$) and consumer trust ($\beta=0.183$, $t=4.11$, $p<0.001$), indicating that higher platform engagement strengthens the influence of thought leadership.

Table 7. Moderation Analysis: Effect of Digital Platform Engagement on Structural Relationships

Interaction Effect	β	t-value	p-value
TLC $\times$ DPE $\rightarrow$ OC	0.165	3.89	<0.001
TLC $\times$ DPE $\rightarrow$ CT	0.183	4.11	<0.001

Note: Moderation effects of Digital Platform Engagement (DPE) were tested using interaction terms in SEM.

Abbreviations: TLC = Thought Leadership Content; DPE = Digital Platform Engagement; OC = Organizational Credibility; CT = Consumer Trust.

Test used: Moderation analysis (interaction effects in SEM).

Content analysis of 80 communication units revealed that industry expertise was the most dominant theme (30.00%, $n=24$), followed by innovation and future trends (22.50%, $n=18$), strategic insights (18.75%, $n=15$), leadership perspectives (15.00%, $n=12$), and organizational values and trust (13.75%, $n=11$), shown in figure 3. This suggests that thought leadership content is primarily focused on expertise and forward-looking insights.

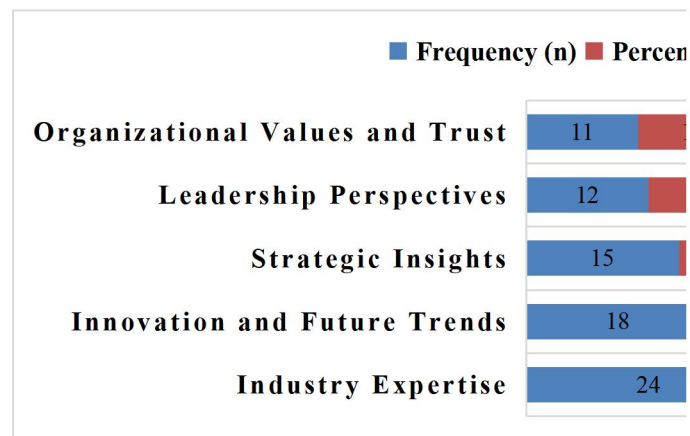


Figure 3. Content Analysis of Selected Thought Leadership Materials (n = 80 communication units)

Discussion

The study found a strong positive relationship between thought leadership content and perceived expertise ($\beta = 0.641$, $t = 15.82$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that good, informative, digital content can greatly improve perceptions of organizational competence. Lou and Yuan (2019) also found that branded content on social media has a significant influence on consumers' sense of credibility and expertise, which will ultimately affect consumer trust, when the content is informative and value-added. Similarly, Harvey et al., (2021) emphasize that perceived authority and knowledge signaling in digital environments is dependent upon content richness and content relevance.

The influence of perceived expertise on the credibility of the organization was also significant ($\beta = 0.587$, $t = 13.91$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the perception of expertise is directly related to the credibility of the organization. This is in line with Hussain et al. (2020) who observed that perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the information source are important variables in advertising and branding credibility. Likewise, Mena et al. (2020) found that trusted endorsements and expert signals can contribute significantly to message credibility in social media contexts, further highlighting the role of perceived competence in organizational reputation.

The results also showed that organizational credibility was significantly related to consumer trust ($\beta = 0.462$, $t = 10.73$, $p < 0.001$), and the results of mediation analysis showed that the relationship between organizational credibility and consumer trust had a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.271$, $p < 0.001$). The results are in line with Verma et al. (2023), who in their meta-analysis established that credibility is a reliable predictor of trust, purchase intent and attitude formation in a context of digital communication. Moreover, Tabar et al., (2025) notes that the credibility of information in online environments is one of the main factors in the trust and uncertainty of consumers in the decision-making process.

Executive thought leadership had a positive direct impact on consumer trust ($\beta = 0.312$, $t = 6.84$, $p < 0.001$), and likewise, communication effectiveness ($\beta = 0.281$, $t = 5.96$, $p < 0.001$). It echoes the findings of Lou and Yuan (2019) that content created by influencers and leaders has a strong positive effect on consumer trust when it is perceived as being authentic and informative. The same applies to Zhang et al. (2017), which showed that the source credibility and perceived similarity in microblogging communication have a significant effect on the brand loyalty and consumer trust results.

Digital platform engagement was found to be a significant moderator of the relationships with outcomes, such as organizational credibility ($\beta = 0.165$, $t = 3.89$, $p < 0.001$) and consumer trust ($\beta = 0.183$, $t = 4.11$, $p < 0.001$) in digital platforms. This is consistent with Wang et al. (2023), who determined that social media cues and engagement metrics help to increase a perceived credibility, which is dependent on the type of social media platforms. Moreover, Damaj & Nofal (2026) maintain that a professional website like LinkedIn is better at conveying credibility signals than entertainment websites, as the latter are not informational.

The thought leadership communication content analysis revealed that thought leadership

messaging is primarily based on expertise (30%), innovation themes (22.5%) and strategic insights (18.75%). This aligns with Lou and Yuan (2019) who explain that compared to promotional messages, informational and value-based content is more effective in influencing consumer responses. Likewise, Hussain et al. (2020) state that credible advertising is better achieved when the message focuses on the information, transparency and expertise aspects, thereby further establishing the superiority of the knowledge-based content in the digital thought leadership domain.

Study Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of this study include a relatively large sample size ($n = 410$), which enhanced the reliability and statistical power of the study findings. Structural equation modeling (SEM) and bootstrapping provided the ability to evaluate the direct, indirect and moderating relationships in a rigorous fashion. Triangulation by method was present in the combination of quantitative survey and content analysis data to deepen and expand the quantitative and qualitative understanding of thought leadership communication. In addition, the measurement scales had high reliability and validity. However, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal inferences and the limited generalizability of the results may be attributed to the convenience sampling of the Islamabad and Rawalpindi population. Furthermore, self-reported data can also be prone to response bias and selected digital platforms might not adequately reflect the range of online communication contexts.

Conclusion

The results of the study confirm the benefits of thought leadership content in enhancing consumer trust, perceived expertise, and organizational credibility in the digital environment. The findings show that high-quality information and content communicated from an expert perspective increase consumer competency perception, boosting the credibility of the organization and consumer trust in the content.

Such partnerships can be strengthened by meaningful and intentional thought leadership and digital engagement, emphasizing the need for purposeful, clear and conspicuous communication. Overall, the results indicate that strategic thought leadership is a valuable approach to developing credibility and maintaining the confidence of stakeholders in today's digital era.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies are recommended to explore the relationships among thought leadership, organizational credibility, and consumer trust over the long-term in longitudinal designs. The results can be evaluated using research from various cultural, geographical and industry contexts. Additionally, it is advised to explore further the potential of new technologies such as AI content creation, personalization algorithms and other emerging technologies. Furthermore, qualitative methods like interviews or digital ethnography could offer greater depth to the understanding of the audiences' perception and as a thought leadership communication assessment in the dynamic digital world.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The Influence of Thought Leadership Content on Organizational Credibility and Consumer Trust in the Digital Era

Instructions

Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used only for academic research purposes.

Scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other

Age: ☐ 18-25 ☐ 26-35 ☐ 36-45 ☐ Above 45

Education: ☐ Bachelor ☐ Master ☐ MPhil/PhD

4. Occupation: ☐ Student ☐ Business Professional
☐ Corporate Employee ☐ Entrepreneur
5. Primary platform used for thought leadership content: ☐ LinkedIn ☐ Facebook ☐ Corporate Websites ☐ Others

SECTION B: THOUGHT LEADERSHIP CONTENT

1. The content shared by organizations is informative.
2. Thought leadership content provides valuable industry insights.
3. The content is original and not repetitive.
4. The information shared is relevant to current industry trends.
5. The content reflects strong subject knowledge.
6. The content is useful for decision-making.
7. The content is based on credible evidence or data.

SECTION C: PERCEIVED EXPERTISE

1. Organizations sharing such content appear knowledgeable.
2. I consider these organizations as experts in their field.
3. The content increases my confidence in organizational competence.
4. These organizations demonstrate strong industry understanding.
5. The content reflects high professional expertise.
6. I view these organizations as leaders in their industry.

SECTION D: ORGANIZATIONAL CREDIBILITY

1. I consider the organization trustworthy.
2. The organization communicates information transparently.
3. The organization is reliable in its communication.
4. The organization acts ethically.
5. The organization is consistent in its messaging.
6. I trust the information provided by the organization.
7. The organization has a credible reputation.

SECTION E: CONSUMER TRUST

1. I trust this organization's information.
2. I feel confident relying on this organization's content.
3. The organization has my best interests in mind.

- . I am willing to follow advice from this organization.
- . I feel secure engaging with this organization online.
- . I would recommend this organization to others.
- . The organization communicates honestly.

SECTION F: EXECUTIVE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

- . Executives share valuable insights online.
- . Executive communication increases my trust in the organization.
- . I perceive executives as credible experts.
- . Executive posts are authentic rather than promotional.
- . Leadership visibility strengthens organizational reputation.
- . I trust organizations more when executives share knowledge publicly.

SECTION G: EFFECTIVE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

- . Thought leadership content is clearly communicated.
- . The content is easy to understand.
- . The messaging is engaging.
- . The content provides actionable insights.
- . Storytelling improves the effectiveness of content.
- . The communication style is professional.
- . The content is authentic rather than promotional.

SECTION H: DIGITAL PLATFORM ENGAGEMENT

- . I frequently engage with thought leadership content online.
- . I like, share, or comment on such content.
- . I regularly consume content on platforms like LinkedIn or Facebook.
- . I trust content more when it appears on professional platforms.
- . Higher engagement increases my perception of credibility.
- . I spend time viewing professional content online.
- . Platform type influences my trust in content.

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