

Research Article

From Influence to Commitment: A Conceptual Framework of Digital Influencer Strategies, Customer Engagement and Brand Commitment

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Abstract: The rapid growth of social media has positioned digital influencers as powerful agents in shaping consumer behaviour and brand relationships. This conceptual study proposes an integrated framework that examines the influence of digital influencer strategies on brand commitment through the mediating role of customer engagement. Drawing upon Source Credibility Theory, Social Influence Theory, Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the framework identifies key dimensions of digital influencer strategies credibility, authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, content quality and influencer-brand fit as critical antecedents of customer engagement. Customer engagement, encompassing cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions, serves as a vital psychological mechanism that transforms influencer-driven interactions into long-term brand commitment. The proposed model advances existing literature by shifting focus from short-term outcomes such as purchase intention to sustainable relational outcomes, particularly in emerging markets like India. The study offers significant managerial implications for strategic influencer selection, authentic content creation, engagement-driven campaigns, long-term partnerships and brand community development. Future research directions include comparative industry studies, investigations of micro- versus macro-influencers, virtual influencer marketing, cross-cultural analyses and longitudinal examinations of brand commitment. This conceptual framework provides both theoretical advancement and practical guidance for leveraging digital influencer strategies to foster enduring consumer-brand relationships in the evolving social media landscape.

Keywords: Digital influencer strategies, customer engagement, brand commitment, influencer marketing.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped the present day marketing landscape, transitioning from traditional one-way communication models to dynamic, interactive ecosystems that empower consumers as active participants in brand narratives. Global social media advertising expenditure reached an estimated USD 247.3 billion in 2025 and is projected to reach USD 266.92 billion by the end of 2025 (Msosa et al., 2025). With billions of active users across the world, social media has become an invaluable and unignorable channel for brand visibility, consumer discovery and direct trade. Brands are steadily shifting budgets toward paid social media sponsorships, with a substantial amount of marketing leaders planning reallocation from traditional advertisements (Statista, 2026).

Within this ever evolving digital environment, influencer marketing has proved to be a cornerstone strategy Kanaveedu et al. (2024). It takes advantage of the trust and relational capital of content creators to bridge the authenticity gap often observed in traditional advertising. Defined as collaborative partnerships between companies and individuals with niche authority and captivated followers, influencer marketing transforms opinion leaders into authentic brand advocates. The global influencer marketing market was valued at around USD 9.7 billion in 2020 and is expected to reach USD 33 billion by 2025 (Do, 2025). This emphasizes the crucial need for a rugged theoretical framework to address the intricate value

exchanges among companies, influencers and social media platforms.(Libai et al., 2025). In spite of this rapid market growth, scholarly discourse remains patchy, often regarding the mechanisms of consumer decision-making and involvement as stand alone phenomena rather than integral components of a holistic marketing ecosystem (Aldlimi et al., 2025; Pradhan et al., 2023). This surge arises from consumers' rising doubt toward overt advertising and their preference for peer-like, relatable endorsements. Influencers assist in targeted reach, higher rates of engagement and a much better return on investment(Lee et al., 2021).

Central to the efficacy of these strategies is customer engagement, which comprises cognitive, emotional and behavioural interactions between consumers and brands(Islam & Rahman, 2016). In the social media era, engagement goes beyond mere exposure to encompass active involvement—such as likes, comments, shares, user-generated content and community building—that promotes deeper psychological connections. Empirical evidence highlights its crucial role: engaged consumers display heightened brand awareness, loyalty, recommendation and purchase intentions, while also giving invaluable real-time insights for product betterment and crisis management(Barari et al., 2020). Platforms' algorithmic prioritization of participatory content further emphasizes this dynamic, making sustained engagement a necessity for visibility and relevance in fragmented attention economies.

Building upon engagement, brand commitment represents a higher-order outcome characterized by lasting emotional attachment, loyalty and behavioural intentions such as repeated patronage and recommendation. In an age of ample choice and low switching costs, commitment serves as a strategic buffer against competitive erosion and a driver of long-term brand equity. It comes about through strong consumer-brand relationships, wherein consumers internalize the brand as part of who they are and defend it against negative information (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020).

Despite the rampant growth in influencer practices, academic literature shows persistent fragmentation: many studies focus on short-term metrics (e.g., engagement rates or immediate conversions) while offering little integrative insights into the mechanisms driving sustained brand commitment(Ye et al., 2021)

This conceptual study addresses these imperatives by examining the role of digital influencer strategies in nurturing customer engagement and, as a result, brand commitment within the social media ecosystem. Drawing on established theories—including Source Credibility Theory (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness), Social Influence Theory, Consumer-Brand Relationship Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model—this paper integrates extant literature to describe key dimensions of influencer effectiveness (authenticity, expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, content quality and influencer-brand congruence)(Han & Balabanis, 2024; Liu & Zheng, 2024) It positions customer engagement as a critical mediating mechanism and suggests an integrated conceptual framework to guide both theory and practice. By identifying notable research gaps—such as longitudinal dynamics, micro-influencer efficacy, AI integration and cross-cultural variations—the study advances a forward-looking agenda for empirical inquiry.

The purpose of this research is threefold:

1. To provide a comprehensive theoretical synthesis of digital influencer tactics and their effect on consumer responses
2. To enunciate a robust conceptual model connecting influencer tactics, engagement processes and brand commitment outcomes and
3. To suggest actionable insights for marketers seeking sustainable competitive advantage through genuine, relationship-oriented digital collaborations.

In doing so, this article contributes to the evolving discourse on social media marketing and equips practitioners with theoretically grounded strategies for nurturing enduring consumer loyalty in an increasingly interactive digital marketplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital Influencer Strategies

Digital influencer strategies refer to the planned application of social media influencers by organizations to convey brand messages, build consumer relationships, increase engagement and influence purchasing decisions. Influencers act as middle men between brands and consumers, capitalizing on their credibility, expertise, legitimacy and social capital to affect audience perceptions and behaviours (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Pan et al., 2025). The increasing popularity of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) has changed influencer marketing into a vital part of modern digital marketing strategies.

2.1.1 Influencer Credibility

Influencer credibility is one of the most important factors which determines the effectiveness of influential marketing. The extent to which consumers perceive an influencer as trustworthy, reliable and knowledgeable is known as credibility. According to Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990)(Lou & Kim, 2019) consumers are more likely to accept and act upon messages from credible sources. In the context of influencer marketing, credibility enhances persuasion and has a

positive effect on consumer responses toward both the influencer and the endorsed brand (Sesar et al., 2022; Ilieva et al., 2024)(Kristabel et al., 2024; Reijmersdal et al., 2024)

Research shows that influencer credibility considerably influences purchase intentions, trustworthiness of the brand and customer engagement. Consumers often perceive credible influencers as unbiased and genuine sources of information, which enhances the effectiveness of promotional messages. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that influencer credibility positively affects followers' trust, brand awareness and purchase intention. Similarly, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) reported that credibility has a major contribution in consumer engagement and the influencer endorsements efficacy. Recent studies confirm these effects across contexts, with credibility dimensions (expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness) mediating pathways to brand trust and loyalty (Migkos et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2026).

The credibility of influencers becomes particularly essential in digital environments where consumers are repeatedly shown marketing messages and seek dependable recommendations before making purchase decisions. Therefore, brands put influencer credibility to priority when selecting partners to collaborate with (Ahmad et al., 2024; Zhou, 2026).

2.1.2 Influencer Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the perception that influencers communicate honestly, genuinely and transparently with their audiences. Authentic influencers are perceived as bone fide people who share genuine personal experiences, opinions and recommendations rather than merely promoting products for financial gain (Audrezet et al., 2020).

The growing importance of authenticity rises from increasing consumer skepticism toward conventional advertising. Authentic influencer content fosters stronger emotional connections and bonding on a personal level with followers, resulting in enhanced trust and engagement. Audrezet et al. (2020) saw that authenticity is a vital factor that influences consumer trust and engagement with influencer content. Consumers tend to view authentic influencers as more relatable and trustworthy, which enhances the effectiveness of brand endorsements. Recent open-access research further emphasizes authenticity as a critical driver in both human and virtual influencer contexts, often interacting with cultural factors and transparency practices (Alharthi, 2026; Oliveira, 2026).

Authenticity also gives rise to long-term influencer–follower relationships by fostering transparency and credibility. While being consistent in their personal values, influencers who disclose sponsored content are more likely to maintain audience trust and improve brand outcomes (Ardley et al., 2022).

2.1.3 Influencer Expertise

Expertise refers to the perceived knowledge, competence and experience of an influencer within a specific domain. Influencers who possess specialized knowledge are often perceived as experts and hence their recommendations are more persuasive and influential (Ki & Kim, 2019).

Expertise plays a critical role in many industries like technology, healthcare, fitness, beauty and finance, where customers look for accurate and trustworthy information before making decisions(Hu et al., 2024). According to Ki and Kim (2019), influencers who demonstrate expertise through educational content, product reviews and professional experience are trusted more by consumers. Expertise enhances information quality and reinforces consumer confidence in recommendations of influencers. Empirical studies verify that expertise has a positive influence on brand attitudes, purchase intentions and engagement, often operating through central-route persuasion and para social relationships (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Migkos et al., 2025).

2.1.4 Influencer Attractiveness

Influencer attractiveness encompasses physical appearance, personality traits, communication style and overall appeal. Attractive influencers are found to generate stronger audience attention, emotional responses and audience engagement (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

The attractiveness dimension is derived from Source Attractiveness Theory, which suggests that consumers are more likely to be persuaded by influencers who are viewed as attractive, likeable and relatable. Research demonstrates that attractive influencers can have a positive influence on consumer attitudes toward brands and increase purchase intentions. Furthermore, attractiveness extends beyond physical appearance. It also includes social attractiveness, lifestyle appeal, personality traits and admirable qualities. Influencers who bring about admiration and identification among followers can effectively shape consumer preferences and the way they perceive brands (Ohanian, 1990; Wu et al., 2026; Zeng et al., 2025).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Theoretical foundations provide the conceptual basis for comprehending how digital influencer strategies affect customer

involvement and brand commitment. Multiple theories from communication, psychology, marketing and consumer behaviour help us understand the mechanisms through which influencers affect consumer perceptions and behaviours. The current study is based on four key theories: Source Credibility Theory, Social Influence Theory, Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). These theories together explain how influencer characteristics (such as credibility, authenticity, expertise and attractiveness) shape consumer trust, engagement and long-term commitment toward brands.

3.1 Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory is one of the most widely applied frameworks in advertising, communication and influencer marketing research. Originally developed by Hovland and Weiss (1951) and further elaborated by Hovland et al. (1953), the theory suggests that the credibility of the communicator has a direct correlation with the effectiveness of a persuasive message delivered by that person. Consumers are more likely to accept and act upon information provided by sources they consider as trustworthy, knowledgeable, genuine and reliable.

The theory identifies two primary prerequisites for credibility: expertise (the extent to which the communicator is perceived as knowledgeable and competent) and trustworthiness (the honesty, integrity and reliability of the source). In the context of influencer marketing, influencers who display expertise through specialized knowledge, consistent content and professional experience are more likely to persuade followers. Similarly, influencers who are seen as honest and transparent are found to be more persuasive as consumers perceive them as trustworthy (Ohanian, 1990; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Digital influencers often establish credibility through authentic storytelling, product reviews and sustained audience interaction. Naturally, consumers are more likely to develop favourable attitudes toward the endorsed products and brands when they perceive the influencers promoting the brand as credible. Empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated that the more credible the influencer is, the more the consumer trusts the brand and makes favourable purchase decisions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Ilieva et al., 2024; Migkos et al., 2025).

The relevance of Source Credibility Theory to this study lies in explaining how digital influencer strategies specifically credibility, authenticity, expertise and attractiveness impact customer engagement and thereafter contribute to brand commitment. Consumers are prone to engage more actively with brands recommended by credible influencers because they view their recommendations as reliable and valuable (Gu & Duan, 2024).

3.2 Social Influence Theory

Social Influence Theory explains how individuals alter their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours because of real or imagined interactions with others. The theory, advanced by Kelman (1958), suggests that social influence operates through three primary processes: compliance (adopting behaviour to gain rewards or avoid disapproval), identification (adopting attitudes to maintain relationships with valued others) and internalization (genuinely accepting beliefs because they align with one's values).

In the digital ecosystem, influencers act as modern opinion leaders who affect consumer perceptions. Through regular interactions, storytelling, visual content and product recommendations, influencers foster strong social connections with their followers which gives them power to enforce ideas into them. Consumers often try to replicate influencer behaviours, lifestyles and consumption patterns as they idealize them (Cialdini, 2009).

Research indicates that social influence considerably affects customer engagement and purchasing behaviour. Influencers generate social proof and hence consumers begin to desire the advertised products because others appear to approve of or use them. Social Influence Theory therefore explains why influencer recommendations often have a stronger impact than traditional advertising messages (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Within this study, Social Influence Theory provides a basis for understanding how digital influencer strategies shape customer engagement and influence the formation of positive attitudes toward brands. Influencers foster trust, encourage participation and reinforce consumer-brand relationships through social interactions.

3.3 Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory

Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory, pioneered by Fournier (1998), is one of the most influential frameworks in relationship marketing. The theory proposes that consumers form relationships with brands analogous to interpersonal relationships. These relationships are characterized by dimensions such as emotional attachment, trust, commitment, intimacy and interdependence.

Brands are viewed not merely as functional offerings but as active relationship partners that contribute to consumers' self-concept, identity and emotional well-being. Strong consumer-brand relationships yield positive outcomes including satisfaction, loyalty, advocacy and long-term commitment (Fournier, 1998; Pulh et al., 2019)

Digital influencers play a pivotal role in facilitating these relationships by acting as intermediaries. Through authentic storytelling, personal experiences and interactive communication, influencers help consumers develop emotional connections with brands. Customer engagement serves as a critical mediating mechanism: engaged consumers interact more frequently, participate in communities, share content and develop deeper loyalty, ultimately strengthening brand commitment.

This theory helps explain how digital influencer strategies foster emotional attachment and sustained engagement, leading to stronger brand commitment among consumers.

3.4 Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986)(Saini et al., 2022), is a dual-process theory of persuasion that explains how individuals process persuasive messages through two routes: the central route (high elaboration, involving careful scrutiny of message arguments) and the peripheral route (low elaboration, relying on superficial cues such as source attractiveness, credibility, or popularity).

Attitudes formed via the central route tend to be stronger, more persistent and more resistant to counter-persuasion, while peripheral-route attitudes are more temporary(Ragab, 2022). In influencer marketing, influencer expertise and high-quality content often trigger central-route processing, whereas attractiveness, popularity and social proof activate the peripheral route(Jamil et al., 2023).

Both routes are relevant to digital influencer strategies. For instance, consumers may purchase a product after deeply evaluating an influencer's detailed review (central) or because they admire the influencer's lifestyle and image (peripheral). The ELM provides marketers with insights for designing campaigns that effectively appeal to both cognitive and affective consumer responses.

In this study, the ELM complements the other theories by explaining the cognitive processes through which influencer characteristics influence customer engagement and brand commitment.

Research Gap

The rapid growth of social media platforms has transformed influencer marketing into one of the most effective digital marketing strategies employed by organizations worldwide(Rajesh & Velmurugan, 2024). Consequently, a substantial body of literature has emerged examining the role of social media influencers in shaping consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, brand awareness and online engagement (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Pan et al., 2025). Existing studies have largely focused on understanding how influencer characteristics such as credibility, attractiveness, expertise, authenticity and trustworthiness influence consumer decision-making processes and purchasing behaviour. While these studies have contributed significantly to the influencer marketing literature, several theoretical and empirical gaps remain unresolved.

First, the majority of existing influencer marketing studies have concentrated on short-term marketing outcomes, including purchase intention, product adoption, brand awareness and immediate consumer attitudes toward advertisements Turku, N. (2023). Although these outcomes are important indicators of marketing effectiveness, they fail to capture the long-term relational outcomes that organizations increasingly seek in highly competitive digital environments. Specifically, limited attention has been given to understanding how digital influencer strategies contribute to the development of enduring customer–brand relationships and long-term brand commitment. As a result, the relationship between influencer marketing activities and sustained consumer commitment toward brands remains insufficiently explored (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020).

Second, existing research has generally examined influencer characteristics independently rather than adopting an integrated perspective. Studies frequently investigate individual dimensions such as influencer credibility, authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, content quality, or influencer-brand congruence in isolation (Pradhan et al., 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021) . However, consumers evaluate influencers through a combination of these characteristics simultaneously. The absence of a comprehensive framework integrating multiple digital influencer strategies limits the understanding of how these dimensions collectively influence consumer engagement and brand outcomes. Therefore, there is a need for a holistic examination of digital influencer strategies as a multidimensional construct rather than a collection of isolated attributes.

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examination of digital influencer strategies as a multidimensional construct rather than a collection of isolated attributes.

Third, customer engagement has emerged as a central concept in contemporary marketing literature because engaged customers actively interact with brands, participate in brand communities, share experiences and contribute to value co-creation (Delbaere et al., 2020). Despite its recognized importance, relatively few studies have examined customer engagement as a mediating mechanism linking influencer marketing strategies and brand-related outcomes. Most previous research has focused on direct relationships between influencer characteristics and purchase intentions, overlooking the psychological and behavioural processes through which influencer activities affect consumer responses. Consequently, the mediating role of customer engagement in transforming influencer-driven interactions into long-term brand commitment remains underexplored (Pan et al., 2025).

Fourth, existing literature has predominantly focused on consumer purchase behaviour while giving limited attention to post-purchase relationship-building outcomes. Contemporary marketing emphasizes the importance of cultivating customer loyalty, emotional attachment, advocacy and long-term commitment rather than merely generating transactions. However, empirical evidence regarding the influence of digital influencer strategies on these relationship-oriented outcomes is scarce. The lack of studies examining how influencer marketing contributes to affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment creates a significant theoretical gap in relationship marketing literature (Fournier, 1998).

Fifth, many influencer marketing studies have been conducted in developed economies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, China and various European countries (De Veirman et al., 2017; Schouten et al., 2020). Consumer behaviour in these regions may differ substantially from that in emerging markets due to variations in cultural values, technological adoption, social norms and digital consumption patterns. India represents one of the world's largest and fastest-growing social media markets, with millions of consumers actively engaging with digital influencers across multiple platforms. Despite this growth, empirical studies examining the influence of digital influencer strategies on customer engagement and brand commitment within the Indian context remain limited (Ahmad et al., 2024; Alharthi, 2026). This geographical imbalance highlights the need for research focusing on emerging markets where influencer marketing continues to evolve rapidly.

Sixth, the dynamic nature of social media platforms has introduced new forms of influencer engagement, including micro-influencers, nano-influencers, video-based content, live-streaming and artificial intelligence-driven influencer strategies. Existing theoretical models have not adequately incorporated these developments into comprehensive frameworks capable of explaining contemporary influencer-consumer interactions. Consequently, there is a need for updated conceptual models that reflect current digital marketing realities and account for changing consumer behaviours (Oliveira et al., 2026; Zhou, 2026).

Furthermore, a review of the literature reveals limited integration of established theoretical perspectives such as Source Credibility Theory, Social Influence Theory, Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model within a single conceptual framework (Vrontis et al., 2021). Most studies rely on one or two theoretical perspectives, resulting in fragmented explanations of influencer effectiveness. Integrating these theories may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how influencer characteristics influence customer engagement and subsequently foster brand commitment.

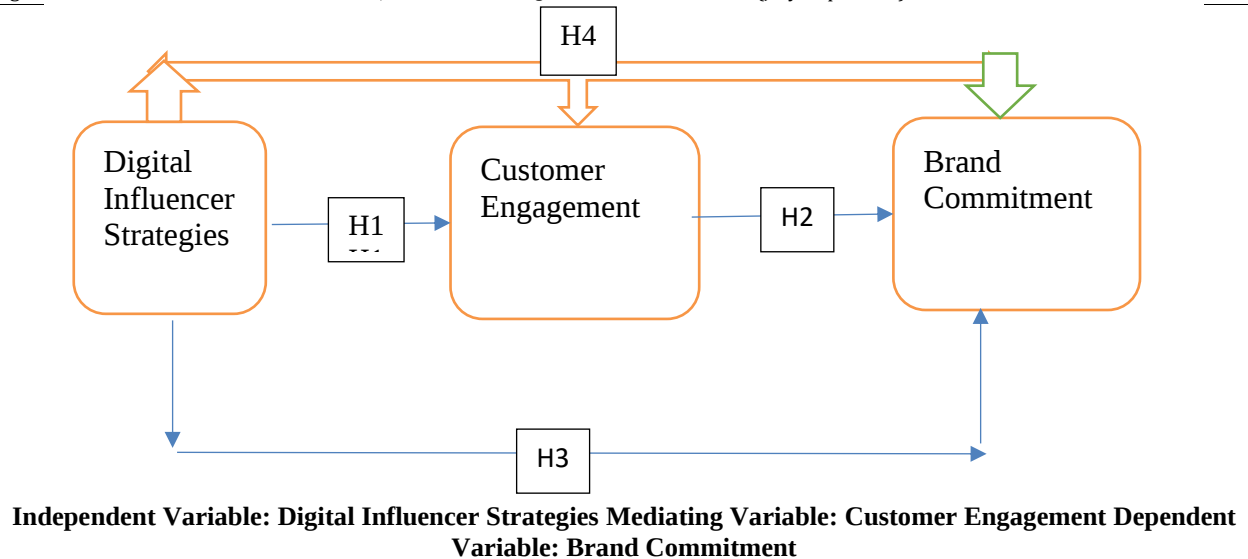
Based on these identified gaps, the present study proposes a comprehensive conceptual framework that examines the influence of digital influencer strategies on brand commitment through the mediating role of customer engagement. By integrating multiple dimensions of influencer strategies and focusing on long-term relational outcomes within the context of emerging markets, particularly India, the study seeks to contribute to both influencer marketing literature and relationship marketing theory. The proposed research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how organizations can leverage digital influencers not only to increase immediate consumer responses but also to develop lasting consumer–brand relationships and sustainable brand commitment.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

5.1 Proposed Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed in this study integrates digital influencer strategies, customer engagement and brand commitment into a coherent model. Grounded in Source Credibility Theory, Social Influence Theory, Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the framework posits that digital influencer strategies influence brand commitment both directly and indirectly through customer engagement.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study



5.2 Description of Constructs

Independent Variable: Digital Influencer Strategies Digital Influencer Strategies refer to the multidimensional approaches brands employ when collaborating with social media influencers. This construct is frequently conceptualized using dimensions such as credibility, authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, content quality and influencer-brand fit, which collectively determine the effectiveness of influencer campaigns in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviours (Gomes et al., 2022; Han & Balabanis, 2023)

Mediating Variable: Customer Engagement Customer Engagement is positioned as the mediating variable. It represents the cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment consumers make in their interactions with a brand (Brodie et al., 2011; de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). In the influencer context, engagement manifests through likes, comments, shares, discussions and community participation. It serves as the critical psychological mechanism that transforms influencer-driven interactions into deeper brand relationships (Kulikovskaja et al., 2023).

Dependent Variable: Brand Commitment Brand Commitment is the dependent variable and the ultimate outcome of the model. It reflects a consumer's psychological attachment, dedication and intention to maintain a long-term relationship with a brand (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Fournier, 1998). Committed consumers exhibit loyalty, repeat purchase behaviour, advocacy and resistance to competitive offerings.

5.3 Justification and Theoretical Contribution

The proposed model addresses key gaps identified in the literature by moving beyond short-term outcomes (e.g., purchase intention) to long-term relational outcomes (Pan et al., 2025; de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). It positions customer engagement as a vital mediator, consistent with contemporary relationship marketing perspectives (Brodie et al., 2011; Kulikovskaja et al., 2023).

This framework contributes to theory by integrating multiple established perspectives into a single model suitable for emerging markets such as India. It also offers practical value for marketers aiming to design influencer campaigns that foster sustainable brand commitment.

Research Hypotheses

Based on the comprehensive literature review and the theoretical foundations discussed earlier, the present study proposes four hypotheses to examine the relationships among Digital Influencer Strategies, Customer Engagement and Brand Commitment. These hypotheses are grounded in Source Credibility Theory, Social Influence Theory, Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

- **H1: Digital Influencer Strategies have a significant positive influence on Customer Engagement.**

Digital influencer strategies encompass multiple dimensions such as credibility, authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, content quality and influencer-brand fit (Bahar & Hasan, 2024; Torres et al., 2019). These characteristics enable influencers to function as credible opinion leaders who attract consumer attention and stimulate meaningful interactions with brands.

According to Source Credibility Theory (Onobrakpeya & Otutuadum, 2024), consumers are more likely to engage with content from sources they perceive as trustworthy and competent. Social Influence Theory further explains that individuals

tend to adopt behaviours and attitudes aligned with those of admired or influential figures(Han & Balabanis, 2023). In the digital environment, influencers who deliver authentic, high-quality and relevant content significantly enhance cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement among followers(Omeish et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence supports that influencer credibility and authenticity positively influence engagement metrics such as likes, comments, shares and community participation(Omeish et al., 2024). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- **H1: Digital Influencer Strategies have a significant positive influence on Customer Engagement.**
- **H2: Customer Engagement has a significant positive influence on Brand Commitment.**

Customer engagement reflects the cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment consumers make in their interactions with a brand (Gu & Duan, 2024). Engaged consumers demonstrate higher levels of brand involvement, emotional attachment and loyalty.

Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory (Fournier, 1998) posits that repeated positive interactions foster strong relational bonds. Higher customer engagement leads to increased trust, satisfaction, advocacy and psychological commitment toward the brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Kulikovskaja et al., 2023). Engaged consumers are more likely to develop affective commitment (emotional attachment), continuance commitment (perceived costs of switching) and normative commitment (sense of obligation).

Thus, the study proposes:

- H2: Customer Engagement has a significant positive influence on Brand Commitment.
- H3: Digital Influencer Strategies have a significant positive influence on Brand Commitment.

Digital influencers play a vital role in shaping long-term consumer-brand relationships. Through credible endorsements, authentic storytelling and consistent value creation, influencers help build trust and emotional connections that extend beyond immediate purchase intentions (Ki & Kim, 2019; Pan et al., 2025).

Both Source Credibility Theory and Social Influence Theory suggest that positive perceptions of influencers transfer to the endorsed brands, enhancing brand attitudes and commitment (Lou & Yuan, 2019(Lou & Kim, 2019)). The Elaboration Likelihood Model further explains that strong arguments (expertise and content quality) and peripheral cues (attractiveness and popularity) contribute to more enduring brand evaluations(Jamil et al., 2023).

Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

- H3: Digital Influencer Strategies have a significant positive influence on Brand Commitment.
- H4: Customer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Digital Influencer Strategies and Brand Commitment.

The proposed model suggests that the effect of digital influencer strategies on brand commitment is not only direct but also indirect through customer engagement. Influencer strategies stimulate engagement, which in turn fosters deeper emotional attachment and long-term commitment(Alexander et al., 2018).

Customer engagement acts as a critical psychological mechanism that transforms short-term influencer interactions into sustained brand relationships. This mediation pathway is consistent with relationship marketing perspectives that view engagement as a bridge between marketing stimuli and relational outcomes(Alexander et al., 2018).

Hence, the following mediation hypothesis is proposed:

- H4: Customer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Digital Influencer Strategies and Brand Commitment.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this conceptual study offer several actionable insights for brand managers, marketers and organizations aiming to harness digital influencer strategies for enhancing customer engagement and building long-term brand commitment. In an era where consumers are increasingly skeptical of traditional advertising, strategic influencer collaborations can serve as a powerful tool for fostering authentic relationships and sustainable competitive advantage.

7.1 Strategic Influencer Selection

A key implication is the importance of moving beyond follower count to a more nuanced, value-aligned selection process. Brands should prioritize influencers based on credibility, authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, content quality and influencer-brand fit (Lou & Kim, 2019)(Sorooshian, 2025)).

Influencers whose personal values, niche expertise and audience demographics align closely with the brand are more likely to generate genuine engagement and trust. For instance, a beauty brand may achieve better results by partnering with a dermatologist or skincare enthusiast rather than a general lifestyle influencer. The study also supports the growing effectiveness of micro- and nano-influencers, who often deliver higher engagement rates and stronger audience connections despite smaller followings (Appel et al., 2019).

Marketers should implement systematic evaluation frameworks incorporating audience analytics, past campaign performance and alignment assessments to optimize influencer selection and resource allocation.

7.2 Authentic Content Creation

Authenticity remains a cornerstone of effective influencer marketing. Consumers respond more favourably to genuine, transparent and relatable content than to overtly promotional messages (Zniva et al., 2023). Organizations should grant influencers creative freedom while providing clear brand guidelines, enabling them to integrate products naturally into their storytelling.

Practices such as disclosing sponsorships transparently, sharing real user experiences and maintaining consistency between an influencer's personal brand and the endorsed product help preserve credibility. Authentic content not only boosts immediate engagement but also contributes to stronger emotional connections and long-term brand commitment.

7.3 Designing Engagement-Driven Campaigns

The proposed framework highlights customer engagement as a critical mediator. Therefore, campaigns should shift focus from direct sales to fostering meaningful interactions. Brands should encourage influencers to create interactive content such as polls, Q&A sessions, live demonstrations, challenges and community discussions that stimulate cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020).

Monitoring engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares, sentiment and participation rates) allows marketers to refine strategies in real time. Engagement-driven approaches help transform passive viewers into active brand advocates, laying the foundation for sustained commitment.

7.4 Building Long-Term Influencer Partnerships

Short-term, transactional collaborations often limit impact. The study advocates for long-term partnerships that enable influencers to become genuine brand advocates. Consistent collaborations enhance perceived authenticity, strengthen message consistency and allow for deeper narrative development over time (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020).

Long-term relationships reduce audience scepticism and enable influencers to showcase ongoing brand experiences, product evolution and customer success stories. Such partnerships yield higher returns on investment and contribute significantly to brand commitment (Krsmanović, 2025).

7.5 Fostering Brand Communities

Influencers can play a pivotal role in building vibrant brand communities where consumers interact with each other and the brand. Organizations should leverage influencers to moderate discussions, host events and facilitate user-generated content within dedicated social groups or forums. Strong communities enhance belongingness, trust and emotional attachment, ultimately reinforcing brand commitment (Ozuem et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION OF MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Successful influencer marketing in the social media era requires a strategic, relationship-oriented approach. Organizations should focus on selecting aligned influencers, promoting authentic content, designing engagement-centric campaigns, investing in long-term partnerships and nurturing brand communities. By implementing the insights from this conceptual framework, marketers can move beyond short-term promotional gains to cultivate deep, enduring consumer-brand relationships that drive sustainable loyalty and competitive advantage in the digital marketplace.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The rapid evolution of digital technologies, social media platforms and consumer behaviour continues to reshape influencer marketing, presenting numerous opportunities for future scholarly inquiry. While the present study contributes a conceptual framework linking digital influencer strategies, customer engagement and brand commitment, several theoretical, contextual and methodological gaps remain. The following directions are proposed to advance the field.

8.1 Comparative Studies Across Industries and Contexts

Most existing research has concentrated on high-involvement consumer sectors such as fashion, beauty and lifestyle (Tanwar et al., 2021). Future studies should conduct comparative analyses across diverse industries, including healthcare, financial

services, education, tourism, hospitality and B2B markets. Such research would reveal whether the relative importance of influencer credibility, expertise, authenticity and attractiveness varies by product type, purchase risk and industry characteristics (Han & Balabanis, 2023).

8.2 Effectiveness of Different Influencer Tiers

The shift toward micro- and nano-influencers warrants deeper investigation. Future research should compare the effectiveness of macro-, micro- and nano-influencers in driving customer engagement and brand commitment. Studies could examine differences in trust formation, parasocial relationships, authenticity perception and long-term relational outcomes. Contextual factors such as product category and campaign objectives should also be explored to guide optimal influencer selection strategies.

8.3 Virtual and AI-Generated Influencers

The rise of AI-generated and virtual influencers introduces new research avenues. Future studies should compare consumer responses to human versus virtual influencers in terms of credibility, authenticity, emotional connection and brand commitment (Oliveira et al., 2026; Zhou, 2026). Ethical issues, including transparency, disclosure and potential consumer deception, also require systematic examination as AI technologies advance.

8.4 Cross-Cultural and Emerging Market Perspectives

Consumer responses to influencer marketing are culturally embedded. Most studies have been conducted in Western or developed Asian contexts (Hu, 2025). Future cross-cultural research should investigate how cultural dimensions (e.g., individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance) moderate the relationships proposed in the current framework. Focused studies in emerging markets such as India, Brazil, Indonesia and Africa would be particularly valuable given their rapid digital growth and unique socio-cultural dynamics (Ahmad et al., 2024; Alharthi, 2026).

8.5 Longitudinal and Dynamic Studies

The majority of existing research employs cross-sectional designs (Hudders et al., 2020). Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how customer engagement and brand commitment evolve over time through sustained influencer partnerships. Such research could track changes in consumer attitudes, loyalty behaviours and relationship strength across multiple campaign cycles.

8.6 Integration of Emerging Technologies and Theoretical Advancements

Future research should explore the impact of new technologies such as augmented reality, live streaming and algorithmic personalization on influencer effectiveness. Additionally, integrating the proposed framework with other theories (e.g., Social Capital Theory, parasocial interaction theory) could yield richer explanations of consumer behaviour in the digital ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

The unprecedented growth of social media has fundamentally transformed marketing communication, positioning digital influencers as powerful agents in shaping consumer perceptions, engagement and brand relationships (Thakur & Jain, 2025). This study developed a conceptual framework that integrates Digital Influencer Strategies, Customer Engagement and Brand Commitment, grounded in Source Credibility Theory, Social Influence Theory, Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

The framework highlights that influencer characteristics — credibility, authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, content quality and influencer-brand fit — significantly influence consumer responses. Customer engagement emerges as a critical mediating mechanism that transforms influencer-driven interactions into long-term brand commitment. By emphasizing relational rather than purely transactional outcomes, the study extends existing literature beyond short-term metrics such as purchase intention toward sustainable consumer-brand bonds.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes by synthesizing multiple established theories into a cohesive model suitable for the social media era, particularly in emerging markets. Practically, the findings offer managers a roadmap for strategic influencer selection, authentic content development, engagement-focused campaigns, long-term partnerships and brand community building.

In conclusion, digital influencer strategies represent a vital approach for organizations seeking to thrive in competitive digital landscapes. When executed strategically, influencer marketing can foster genuine consumer engagement and cultivate enduring brand commitment. As social media and consumer expectations continue to evolve, organizations that prioritize authentic, relationship-oriented influencer collaborations will be better positioned to build strong brand equity and achieve sustainable success.

Future research addressing the proposed directions will further enrich theoretical understanding and provide actionable insights for practitioners navigating the dynamic world of digital marketing.

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