

Review Article

Social Media, Influencers, and Engagement: A Review of Contemporary Digital Marketing Strategies

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A B S T R A C T

In the rapidly evolving digital marketing environment, social media and influencer-driven engagement have become pivotal components of strategic brand communication. This review explores how social media platforms, influencer marketing, and consumer engagement interrelate, synthesising recent empirical and theoretical research. It covers platform and format choices, influencer-selection strategies, content mechanisms (such as storytelling and authenticity), engagement metrics, consumer behaviour outcomes, measurement challenges, and emerging ethical and technological considerations. Key findings highlight that influencer credibility, content value, platform affordances, and consumer trust are major drivers of engagement and purchase intention. The paper concludes by identifying gaps—such as platform-specific effects, longitudinal relationship development, and advanced analytics approaches—and suggests directions for future research. The review offers practical implications for brands seeking effective digital marketing strategies in a fragmented and data-rich ecosystem.

Keywords: Digital Marketing Strategy, Social Media Marketing, Influencer Marketing, Consumer Engagement, Storytelling, Purchase Intention

Introduction

Digital marketing strategies have undergone radical transformation over the past decade, driven by the proliferation of social media platforms and the ascendancy of influencer marketing. Rather than solely relying on traditional one-way advertising, brands now engage in interactive, participatory, and data-driven communications. Social media platforms (such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook) provide the infrastructure for content dissemination, peer-to-peer sharing, and brand-consumer dialogue. Influencers—content creators with dedicated followings—serve as intermediaries who can shape consumer attitudes, trust, and behaviours.

The aim of this review is to synthesise extant research on social media, influencer marketing, and consumer engagement within contemporary digital marketing strategies. It addresses three broad questions: (1) What strategic tactics are employed on social media and via influencers to drive engagement? (2) Through what mechanisms do these tactics lead to consumer behavioural outcomes (e.g., engagement, purchase intention)? (3) What measurement issues, challenges, and future trends shape this domain? By doing so, this review contributes a comprehensive overview for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers operating at the interface of digital marketing strategy and consumer behaviour analytics.

Theoretical Foundations and Trends

The shift to social media means that brand communication is no longer purely broadcast but increasingly networked and interactive. Kaplan and Haenlein.¹ argued that social media enables users to create, share, and participate in content, thus transforming brand-consumer relationships. The concept of social media influencers builds on classic theories of opinion leadership, para-social interaction, and source credibility.² Influencers are perceived as credible sources by their followers because of relational intimacy, niche expertise, or authenticity.^{3,4} Recent meta-analytic work by Leung et al.⁵ synthesised 1,531 effect sizes from 251 papers and found that influencer marketing effectiveness hinges on post characteristics (hedonic/informational value), follower characteristics (social identity), and influencer attributes (communication, fit), which mediate via persuasion knowledge and source credibility. Platform type (e.g., content-based versus profile-based media) and product type (hedonic versus utilitarian) moderate these effects.⁵ Meanwhile, Joshi, Lim & Jagani.⁶ emphasised that Instagram remains dominant, but TikTok, YouTube, and other platforms are gaining research traction.

Together, these foundations suggest influencer marketing is a key facet of digital marketing strategy; trust, engagement, and content value are central; platform affordances and product contexts moderate outcomes; and computational/data-analytic methods in this domain are emerging.⁷

Tactics and Mechanisms Social Media, Influencers and Engagement

Platform and Content Format Choice

Different social media platforms come with distinct affordances. Visual platforms (Instagram, TikTok) emphasise imagery, short-form video, and ephemeral content; long-form video platforms (YouTube) allow deeper storytelling; and text/links (Facebook, Twitter) facilitate sharing and conversation. Brands must choose platform-format combinations aligning with target audience behaviours and influencer strengths.^{1,3} Storytelling content via Instagram Stories enhances engagement among millennials by increasing relatability and trust.⁸ Research shows storytelling → relatability → trust → audience engagement is a serial mediation model.⁸

Influencer Selection and Fit

Influencer credibility (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness) is positively related to consumer attitude and engagement.⁴ Brands must evaluate influencer-brand fit, follower alignment, and content style. Over-commercialisation and poor fit undermine engagement and brand attitude.⁹ Nano/micro-influencers may yield higher engagement rates and authenticity than mega-influencers.⁵

Content Strategy Storytelling, Authenticity & Engagement

Storytelling content, authenticity, and trust drive engagement.⁸ Authentic narratives, where influencers reveal personal experience and connect emotionally, enhance consumer trust. Consumers increasingly resist overt commercial endorsements; content that feels purely promotional reduces credibility.^{4,5} Influencer posts that provide hedonic or informational value have stronger effects on purchase intention.⁵

Engagement Mechanics

Engagement is multi-dimensional, encompassing cognitive (attention), emotional (interest, trust), and behavioural (likes, comments, shares, UGC creation) aspects. The COBRA framework (Consumption, Contribution, Creation) captures this continuum.¹⁰ Influencer campaigns encouraging contributions and content creation lead to stronger brand relationships. Engagement metrics include likes/comments, shares, click-throughs, sentiment analysis, and conversion tracking.^{10,11}

Strategic Integration within Digital Marketing

Influencer marketing must integrate with broader digital marketing strategies such as content marketing, SEO, email, and advertising. The PESO model (Paid, Earned, Shared, Owned) provides a useful framework.¹² Strategically, brands should align influencer campaigns with marketing funnel objectives awareness, engagement, and conversion.¹²

Outcomes Consumer Behaviour, Engagement, and Purchase Intention

Engagement metrics—such as likes, comments, shares, click-throughs, and user-generated content—serve as early indicators of the potential success of digital marketing campaigns. These metrics, while valuable for tracking immediate interactions, are increasingly recognised as predictors of more meaningful downstream consumer behaviour, including brand attitudes, trust, loyalty, and purchase intention.¹³ A high level of engagement often signals that consumers are cognitively and emotionally involved with the content, which can translate into behavioural outcomes such as repeat purchases or brand advocacy.

Influence on Brand Attitude and Trust: Engagement fosters positive brand attitudes by creating opportunities for meaningful interactions between consumers and the brand. When consumers actively comment on or share influencer posts, it indicates a level of emotional investment and perceived value. These interactions help build trust in the brand, particularly when content is authentic and relevant to the audience.^{4,8} Trust is a critical mediator; without it, even highly engaging content may fail to influence consumer purchase decisions.

Purchase Intention and Driving Factors: Purchase intention the likelihood that a consumer will buy a product or service is directly influenced by multiple factors. Content quality plays a central role, with high quality visuals, storytelling, and informative content increasing perceived value. Influencer credibility, including expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, strengthens persuasive impact and reinforces brand messaging.¹⁴ Product characteristics also matter; for example, hedonic products often benefit more from influencer marketing than utilitarian products due to the emotional nature of engagement.⁵ Consumer characteristics, including prior brand experience, social identity, and involvement level, further shape responses to influencer-driven campaigns.

Mediating Mechanisms: Several psychological and relational mechanisms mediate the relationship between engagement and purchase intention. These include.

- **Trust:** The degree to which consumers believe in the reliability and integrity of the influencer and brand.⁴
- **Relatability:** The perceived similarity between the consumer and influencer, which enhances identification and reduces psychological distance.⁸
- **Perceived Authenticity:** Consumers respond more positively when influencer content appears genuine rather than overtly commercial.⁴
- **Influencer–Brand Fit:** Alignment between the influencer’s persona and the brand’s identity ensures coherent messaging, increasing the likelihood of influencing purchase behaviour.⁸

Moderating Factors: The effectiveness of engagement in driving purchase intention is not uniform and can be influenced by multiple moderating factors.

Platform Type Different social media platforms create distinct engagement contexts. For example, visual platforms like Instagram or TikTok may encourage short-term engagement and impulse purchases, while YouTube’s long-form videos facilitate deeper storytelling and longer-term brand loyalty.⁵

- **Product Type:** As noted, hedonic products tend to perform better in influencer marketing campaigns due to their emotional appeal, whereas utilitarian products may require additional informational support to drive purchase intention.⁵
- **Influencer Size:** While mega-influencers have a broad reach, micro- and nano-influencers often achieve higher engagement rates due to perceived authenticity and closer relationships with followers⁵
- **Follower Characteristics:** Demographics, psychographics, and social identity of followers affect engagement and purchase intention, as consumers are more responsive to influencers who reflect their values, preferences, or lifestyle.⁵

- **Message Style:** Informative, entertaining, or narrative-driven content can enhance consumer processing and persuasive impact, whereas overly promotional messaging may reduce credibility and engagement.¹⁴
- **Linking Engagement to Business Outcomes:** Beyond purchase intention, engagement contributes to broader business outcomes, including brand advocacy, word-of-mouth promotion, and customer retention. Highly engaged consumers often become brand ambassadors, sharing content within their own networks and generating organic reach that amplifies marketing efforts. Studies suggest that engagement is both a leading indicator of short-term outcomes (e.g., clicks, immediate sales) and a precursor to long-term brand equity.^{13, 14}

Measurement, Challenges, and Ethical Considerations

Measuring the effectiveness of social media and influencer marketing campaigns is a complex and multifaceted task. Although engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments, click-through rates, and video views are easy to track, they provide only a partial picture of campaign success. These metrics primarily capture surface-level interactions and do not necessarily reflect deeper consumer engagement, brand perception, or long-term behavioural outcomes such as loyalty, advocacy, or repeat purchases.¹⁵ Furthermore, metrics can be manipulated through artificial inflation tactics, such as click farms or bots, making it difficult for marketers to accurately evaluate the return on investment (ROI) of influencer campaigns.¹⁶

Influencer Fraud and Authenticity: Influencer fraud is a significant challenge in digital marketing. Inflated follower counts, fake engagement, and the use of automated bots can artificially enhance the perceived reach and effectiveness of influencer campaigns. Such practices not only distort measurement but also undermine brand credibility if followers discover that the influencer’s engagement is not genuine.¹⁶ Brands must therefore invest in tools and strategies for detecting fraudulent accounts, validating follower authenticity, and monitoring genuine engagement patterns to ensure campaign integrity.

Ethical Concerns: Ethical considerations have gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly in the context of influencer marketing and digital consumer data collection. Transparency and disclosure are critical; influencers are legally and ethically required to clearly indicate sponsored content to prevent misleading their audience.⁴ Consumers expect privacy, consent, and responsible use of their data, especially when personalised marketing tactics or AI-driven analytics are used to target them. Failure to comply with these ethical standards can

lead to regulatory penalties, reputational damage, and loss of consumer trust.

Platform Algorithm and Measurement Variability: Social media platforms continually update their algorithms, which directly affects reach, visibility, and engagement metrics. Content that previously performed well may suddenly experience reduced organic reach, complicating the assessment of campaign effectiveness.⁵ Additionally, algorithm-driven feeds can introduce biases in engagement metrics, favouring certain types of content (e.g., video over text) and creating inconsistency across campaigns.

Advanced Measurement Approaches: To address these challenges, marketers are increasingly turning to advanced analytics, including sentiment analysis, machine learning-based predictive modelling, and multi-touch attribution methods. These approaches allow for a more holistic understanding of consumer engagement, linking social interactions to offline behaviours, brand perception, and long-term ROI. By combining quantitative metrics with qualitative insights—such as user-generated content sentiment, comments, and review analysis—brands can more accurately measure the impact of influencer marketing campaigns.

Future Trends and Research Agenda

Future Trends in Digital Marketing

AI and Automation

- **Trend:** AI-driven content creation, chatbots, predictive analytics, and personalised recommendations are growing.
- **Implications:** Brands can automate customer interactions, optimise campaigns, and predict consumer behaviour with high accuracy.
- **Example:** AI tools that generate personalised emails based on user behaviour.

Voice and Visual Search

- **Trend:** Increasing use of voice assistants (Alexa, Siri) and image-based search (Google Lens, Pinterest Lens).
- **Implications:** SEO strategies must adapt to natural language queries and visual content optimisation.
- **Example:** E-commerce sites optimising product images for visual search.

Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR)

- **Trend:** Immersive experiences for shopping, product demos, and virtual try-ons.
- **Implications:** Brands can enhance engagement and customer experience.
- **Example:** AR apps allowing users to virtually try furniture in their home.

Short-Form and Interactive Content

- **Trend:** Platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and interactive quizzes are dominating engagement.
- **Implications:** Marketers need to prioritise snackable, visually engaging content.
- **Example:** Polls, mini-videos, and interactive storytelling.

Privacy-First Marketing

- **Trend:** Increasing regulations (GDPR, CCPA) and cookie-less tracking environments.
- **Implications:** Brands must find new ways to target and measure campaigns without violating privacy.
- **Example:** Contextual advertising replacing traditional cookie-based targeting.

Sustainability and Ethical Marketing

- **Trend:** Consumers increasingly prefer brands aligned with social responsibility.
- **Implications:** Marketing strategies will need to highlight sustainability, ethical sourcing, and corporate responsibility.
- **Example:** Campaigns promoting eco-friendly packaging or charitable contributions.

Omnichannel Personalisation

- **Trend:** Integrating offline and online experiences, creating seamless cross-channel customer journeys.
- **Implications:** Requires robust data integration and analytics.
- **Example:** A user browsing online receives personalised in-store promotions via mobile notifications.

Research Agenda in Digital Marketing

A research agenda is essentially a roadmap for exploring gaps, challenges, and opportunities. Key areas for future research include

AI and Machine Learning in Marketing

- Effectiveness of AI-driven personalisation.
- Ethical concerns around AI recommendations and bias.
- ROI measurement of automated marketing campaigns.

Consumer Behaviour in the Digital Era

How emerging technologies (AR, VR, voice search) affect purchase decisions.

- Impact of short-form content on attention span and engagement.
- Cross-generational differences in digital consumption.

Data Privacy and Ethical Marketing

- Strategies for privacy-compliant targeting.
- Consumer trust in data-driven marketing.
- Balancing personalisation with privacy concerns.

Social Media and Influencer Marketing

- Measuring ROI and authenticity of influencer campaigns.
- Evolution of micro vs. nano influencers.
- Long-term effects of short-form content on brand loyalty.

Sustainability and Brand Ethics

- Consumer perception of sustainability in digital campaigns.
- Effectiveness of purpose-driven marketing in driving sales.
- Greenwashing risks and ethical communication.

Omnichannel and Cross-Platform Strategies

- Best practices for integrating offline and online touchpoints.
- Use of predictive analytics in omnichannel marketing.
- Personalisation at scale across multiple platforms.

Conclusion

Social media and influencer marketing have emerged as central components of modern digital marketing, offering brands unprecedented opportunities to engage targeted audiences, foster authenticity, and drive measurable outcomes. The effectiveness of these strategies relies on careful platform alignment, genuine and relatable content, interactive engagement mechanisms, and integration within broader marketing initiatives. Looking ahead, research must address key areas such as cross-platform effectiveness, long-term influencer-brand relationships, advanced computational analytics, and ethical considerations to guide responsible and impactful practice. By focusing on these dimensions, both practitioners and scholars can enhance the strategic value of social media and influencer marketing while ensuring sustainable consumer trust and engagement.

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