

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA, ONLINE REVIEWS, AND INFLUENCERS IN SHAPING CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary times, social media has become an indispensable component of individuals' lives. Research has demonstrated that social media exerts influence over customers' purchasing decisions. In recent years, the rapid growth of social media platforms has presented marketing professionals with the opportunity to quickly connect with their customers. The companies' use of online campaigns and promotion through social media are advantageous persuasive attributes derived from diverse multimedia platforms. The marketing mix has emerged as a crucial element in the realm of social media. Social media has become a potent instrument in the modern era, capable of reaching a wider audience. To effectively target existing and prospective clients. Influencers exert a substantial influence on customer behaviour, especially in the era of social media and digital marketing. They may encompass celebrities, authorities, prominent figures in the industry, providers of material, or even ordinary individuals with a significant internet fan base. The main aim of this research is to examine the role of social media, online reviews, and influencers in shaping consumer perceptions & to determine what aspects of social media, online reviews, and influencers are most important in shaping consumer perceptions.

Keywords: Social Media, Online Reviews, Influencers, Consumer Perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

Social media's presence and progression are perpetually transforming individuals' lives. The influence of technology is all-encompassing and affects society at every swift phase of social transformation. Television was once the foremost groundbreaking technological advancement, profoundly transforming society in ways that were difficult to conceive. Face-to-face encounters in today's internet environment no longer necessitate physical proximity, but rather occur in a digital realm. The proliferation of social media platforms has enabled billions of individuals to disseminate their information, exerting influence and being affected by others.

In contemporary times, firms have employed social media platforms as a means to broaden their business and as a medium to connect with their customers. Social media offers

diverse multimedia platforms and serves as a means of communication with a wide audience or client base. Therefore, firms must acquire knowledge and adjust their utilisation of social media to align with their business strategy. Social media enables customers to articulate and disseminate their ideas, thoughts, and views to others. Social media has the potential to establish robust relationships with retailers, distribution channels, and end customers, among others, in the current trend. Numerous studies have concentrated on comprehending client behaviour in relation to social media and have discovered that social media has a significant influence on the online purchasing environment. This influence greatly affects the majority of customers, leading them to remember the products or services. Companies can ascertain customers' requirements and desires through their reviews and ideas, thereby generating leads and boosting traffic. Implementing a robust social media strategy enhances the progress and expansion of e-commerce business operations. Most advertising initiatives are conducted across multiple social media sites. Social media provides an excellent avenue for companies to get the attention of engaged customers. A significant number of customers utilise social media platforms to get information and frequently engage in comparative analysis, so influencing their ultimate purchasing decision.

This virtual realm provides a fresh viewpoint on modern views regarding the influence of society. In the commercial domain, the advent of social media has opened up new opportunities for businesses to engage with consumers in a direct and organic manner. Businesses must recognise that to stand out in the fast-changing digital environment, it is crucial to participate in careful planning and execute a successful social media strategy. Organisations can gain a strong foothold in social media marketing by employing genuine and natural strategies to communicate with customers on online platforms. In today's corporate environment, organisations face the need of effectively overseeing their brand's digital representation. Social media influencers play a vital role in efficiently conveying the brand's message and shaping the subjects of online discussions. Social media influencers are individuals who have amassed a substantial following on various social media platforms. They have the ability to effectively interact with consumers and establish strong connections between customers and brands in many product areas. Social media influencers are a significant cohort of social media leaders, possessing online authority and reputation that is informative. The social media influencer has created a bond of trust with consumers, who rely on them to produce content that provides essential information and guidance. Currently, the company lacks a direct presence on social media and urgently need active participation in order to catch up with ongoing discussions. The concept of a social media influencer has recently gained prominence in academic and professional discourse. (Siddiqui., et.al., 2021) contended that if your brand is not employing Social media influencer marketing to enhance interaction with your intended audience, it could be prudent to assess your advertising plan. The impact of social media influencers on customer behaviour and the effectiveness of branding strategies has been acknowledged (Srivastava, et al., 2022). According to K., Soebandhi, et al. (2023), being a social media influencer has been identified as a crucial factor in determining buy intention. Social media influencers are currently one of the most prevalent and effective means of promoting consumer brand awareness. A recent study has also proven the substantial impact of social media influencers on shaping brand image and brand equity (Kusumo et al., 2021).

REVIEW LITERATURE

Antunes, (2022) examines the influence of social media influencers on consumer decision-making. This text explores the impact exerted by social media influencers and their involvement in affecting consumer choices. The information encompasses diverse facets of these phenomena, offering valuable perspectives on the influence of influencers on the consumer decision-making process. (Barreda et al. 2020) examine the impact of social media engagement on brand perception and emotional connection, with a specific emphasis on the tourism industry. This study investigates the influence of social media involvement on brand perceptions and the emotional bond formed by consumers. The study, carried out via a case study, provides valuable understanding of the intricate interplay between social media interactions, the development of brand image, and emotional connection within the tourism industry. The study conducted by Booth et al. (2011) examines the deliberate utilisation of influencers in social media to shape the way people perceive corporate brands. The focus of the study is on mapping and using influencers in the online arena to effectively affect how the public views corporate brands and it provides insights into the role of influencers as crucial players in corporate communication and brand management within the framework of social media.

The study conducted by Chen et al. (2021) examines the impact of Internet celebrity traits on the impulsive buying behaviour of their followers. This study investigates the intermediary functions of attachment and parasocial interaction in this association. The study elucidates the influence of distinct characteristics exhibited by internet celebrities on consumers' impulsive purchasing inclinations, underscoring the significance of attachment and parasocial interaction as intermediary elements. In Chakraborty's (2019) study, the focus is on examining how the reliability of online reviews from different sources affects the desire to make a purchase. The research especially examines the intermediary functions of different aspects of brand equity in this association. The findings emphasise how the reliability of online reviews affects consumers' intentions to make a purchase, with brand equity aspects serving as mediators in this process. In his study, titled "The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Consumer Brand Awareness and Perceived Quality: A Focus on Overall Brand Image," S. K. He (2022) examines the effect of social media influencers on consumer brand awareness and perceived quality, with a specific emphasis on their influence on the overall brand image. The study dives at how social media influencers help to moulding consumer impressions of a brand, particularly in terms of awareness and perceived quality. The dissertation examines the complex interplay between social media influencers and consumer attitudes, elucidating their impact on the construction and formation of brand image.

The study conducted by Kwiatek et al. (2021) investigates the impact of influencer credibility on consumer behaviour towards brands in social media recommendations. The study investigates the impact of influencers' perceived trustworthiness on consumers' behaviours and attitudes towards businesses. This research provides valuable insights into the dynamic correlation between influencer endorsements and customer behaviour, highlighting the significance of trustworthiness in influencing consumer perceptions and actions. The study conducted by Khalid et al. (2018) investigates the impact of social media influencers on the formation of consumption culture among young people in Malaysia. This study examines the influence of social media influencers on the consumption habits and cultural trends of the younger population in Malaysia. The document, discovered in Volume 53, offers valuable insights into the significant impact exerted by social media influencers in changing the preferences and behaviours of Malaysian youth within the domain of consumer culture. The study conducted by Lee et al. (2021) centres on the creation and verification of a scale to assess

the perceived authenticity of social media influencers. The project seeks to develop a technique for evaluating consumers' perception of the genuineness of influencers on social media platforms. This research enhances our comprehension of authenticity within the realm of influencer marketing by providing a validated scale that can be used to measure customer impressions.

The study conducted by Liu et al. (2020) examines the effects of self-congruity and virtual interactivity on online celebrity brand equity, as well as its subsequent effect on fans' purchase intention. The study investigates the impact of the congruence between fans' self-perception and the online celebrity's portrayal, as well as virtual engagement, on brand value and the likelihood of making a purchase. The study offers valuable insights into the intricate interplay among consumer perceptions, online celebrity branding, and purchasing behaviour. (Semerádová., et.al., 2021) and Weinlich, published by IGI Global, examine diverse strategies and techniques for utilising social media as a service and instrument in the corporate domain. The anthology is expected to encompass many subjects concerning the strategic utilisation of social media. It will provide valuable perspectives, approaches, and real-life examples to assist organisations in efficiently leveraging social media for service delivery and as a valuable tool in their entire operations. In his 2022 study, Yang examines consumers' intents to purchase within the realm of social commerce. The study examines how social psychological distance, perceived value, and perceived cognitive effort influence customers' intentions to make purchases on social commerce platforms. The findings are anticipated to provide insights into the psychological and cognitive variables that influence customer behaviour in the field of social commerce.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the role of social media, online reviews, and influencers in shaping consumer perceptions
- To determine what aspects of social media, online reviews, and influencers are most important in shaping consumer perceptions.

Hypotheses of the Study

H₁: Social media, online reviews, and influencers is not a factor in the criteria examined.

H₂: Factors examined had no variation in relation to respondents' frequency of social media, online reviews, and influencers in shaping consumer perceptions

Research Methodology

To achieve the specified objectives of the research, a convenience sample of 123 employed individuals was selected using the snowball sampling technique. The research effort consistently employed the social platform e-commerce business paradigm as a conceptual framework. The primary data for the study was obtained through a questionnaire that asked respondents for their demographic information, social media usage, and awareness of potential risks associated with online reviews and influencers.

Role of Social Media, Online Reviews, and Influencers

Social media, online reviews, and influencers play a crucial role in shaping customer impressions in the current era of digital technology. Each of these factors has a unique yet interrelated function in shaping consumers' perception of brands, products, and services Figure 1.

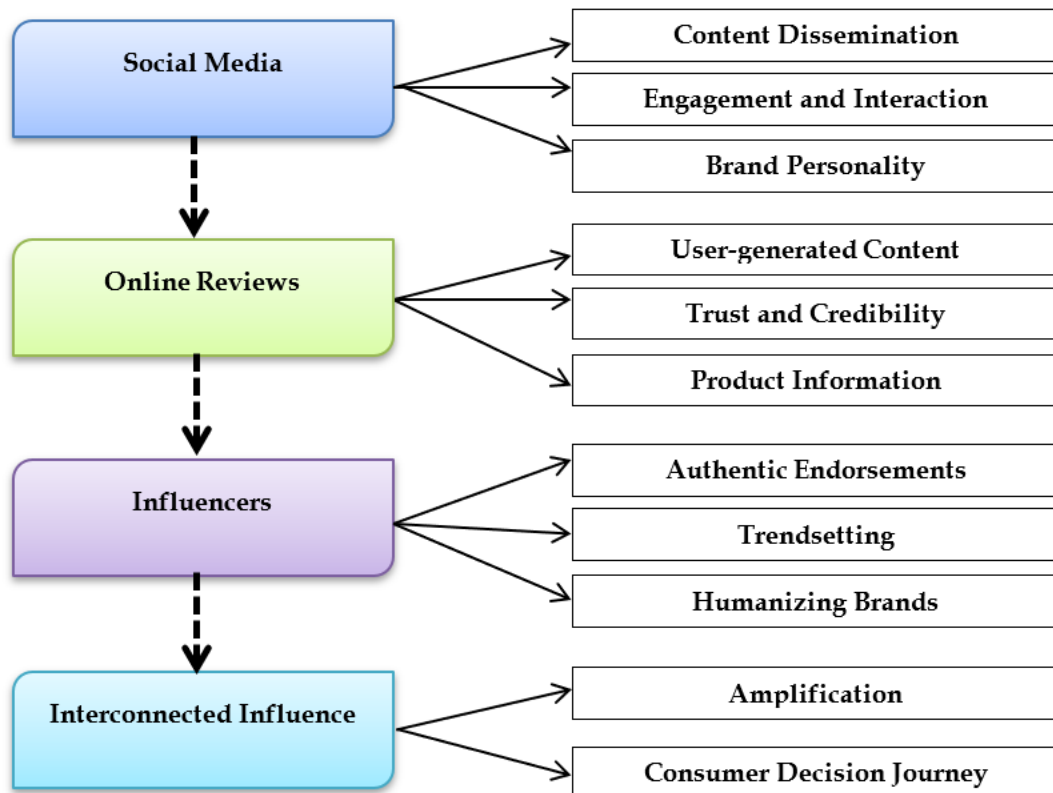


FIGURE 1
FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL MEDIA, ONLINE REVIEWS, AND INFLUENCERS

Social Media

- Social media platforms provide marketers with potent means to directly disseminate content to consumers. Businesses have the ability to produce and select information in order to influence their reputation, principles, and communication.
- Social media enables direct engagement between brands and consumers. This interaction has the potential to exert a significant impact on the establishment of relationships, the resolution of concerns, and the reinforcement of good attitudes.
- Employing a uniform application of language, graphics, and tone across social media platforms aids in the establishment of a brand's distinct personality. Consumers frequently develop perceptions based on these factors.

Online Reviews

- Reviews offer genuine perspectives and firsthand accounts from fellow buyers, enhancing the overall authenticity. Favourable evaluations might bolster favourable impressions, but unfavourable evaluations can elicit apprehension.

- Consumers frequently place more credence in the viewpoints of their peers as opposed to conventional advertising. Favourable reviews have the potential to enhance confidence in a brand, whereas unfavourable ones can undermine it.
- Reviews provide significant insights into the characteristics, excellence, and effectiveness of a product, thereby shaping consumer opinions regarding its worth and advantages.

Influencers

1. Influencers have the ability to offer genuine and relatable endorsements of products or services. Their suggestions have the potential to deeply influence their followers, so affecting their perceptions.
2. Influencers frequently establish trends and introduce novel products. Collaborating with influencers can bolster a brand's reputation and present it as forward-thinking and aligned with contemporary trends.
3. Influencers enhance the human aspect of brands by associating them with a personal and relatable persona. The establishment of a personal connection has the potential to significantly impact consumers' perception of a brand in a good manner.

Interconnected Influence

- Social media serves as a forum where influencers flourish, and reviews can be extensively disseminated. The impact of positive reviews and influencer endorsements on social media can be significantly magnified.
- Consumers frequently transition effortlessly between social media platforms, reviews, and influencers as they navigate through their decision-making process. Initially, individuals may come upon a product by means of an influencer, subsequently seeking evaluations to confirm its worth, and finally interacting with the brand on social media.

Determining the aspects of social media, online reviews, and influencers are most important in shaping consumer perceptions.

The significance of social media, online reviews, and influencers in influencing consumer opinions might differ depending on the environment, industry, and target demographic. Nevertheless, certain fundamental features emerge as pivotal:

Social Media: Evaluating the Calibre and Pertinence of Content

- Compelling and pertinent information on social media enhances a favourable perception of a brand. Compelling imagery, educational articles, and enjoyable material have the ability to influence customer perspectives.
- Ensuring a uniform brand image on various social media platforms strengthens essential messages and values, thereby fostering a cohesive and easily identifiable brand perception.
- Brands that proactively interact with their audience by responding to comments, messages, and participating in debates foster a feeling of connection. Interactivity promotes a favourable perception of being attentive and attentive to consumer needs.

Credibility and Authenticity of Online Reviews

- The importance of authenticity in internet reviews cannot be overstated. Consumers highly appreciate truthful and authentic viewpoints from other customers. An seeming absence of genuineness can undermine trust and have a detrimental effect on perceptions.
- An increased quantity of favourable reviews, particularly from a variety of sources, might enhance the overall good perception. It signifies a prevalent sense of contentment and approval.
- The manner in which a brand addresses both favourable and unfavourable evaluations has great importance. A brand that acknowledges and values positive comments while addressing problems exhibits a strong dedication to ensuring client pleasure.

Influencers: Genuine and Consistent Representation

- The genuineness of influencers and the congruence between their personal brand and the endorsed product or service are essential. Consumers are more inclined to have faith in influencers who authentically connect with the brand they endorse.
- Influencers who have a significant reach and high engagement rates have the ability to enhance the effectiveness of their recommendations. The size of the influencer's audience directly correlates with the extent of their reach and the possible influence they can have on customer views.

Significance to the Intended Audience:

- It is crucial to select influencers that are pertinent to the target demographic of the brand. Influencers whose following align with the target audience of the company are more inclined to have a favourable impact on consumer views.

Integration Across Several Channels: Creating a Smooth and Uninterrupted Experience for Customers

- Creating a smooth and uniform experience for customers on social media, review platforms, and interactions with influencers helps to establish a cohesive and favourable brand image.
- Developing an engaging and coherent brand story that encompasses social media, customer evaluations, and partnerships with influencers is crucial for establishing a unified and memorable brand identity.

Clarity and Genuineness:

- Ensuring honesty in all forms of communication, including social media, reviews, and influencer marketing, is of utmost importance. Consumers value genuineness, and any discrepancies can result in doubt.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1				
RELIABILITY TEST				
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	No. of Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
0.894	0.816	10	112.986	.236

Table 1 examined the internal consistency test of Reliability statistics and reported that the estimated value of Cronbach Alpha is .894 (N=10), which above the threshold of .60. Therefore, there is internal consistency among the variables, allowing for the possibility of conducting additional statistical tests. Similarly mean value is 112.986 & standard deviation value is .236.

Table 2 KMO AND BARTLETT'S TEST		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.973
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3876.324
	Df	12
	Sig.	.000

Table 2 evaluates the KMO and Bartlett's test, as well as the appropriateness of the sampling and the study's conclusions. The study reports that the estimated KMO value is .973, which indicates a high level of adequacy. Furthermore, the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity value is .000, which falls below the permissible threshold limit of .005. Hence, the sample size is sufficiently large to conduct factor analysis.

Table 3 TOTAL VARIANCE EXPLAINED									
Comp onent	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulati ve %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulati ve %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulati ve %
1	4.122	32.657	32.657	4.122	32.657	32.657	3.181	27.383	27.383
2	2.193	10.897	43.554	2.193	10.897	43.554	3.012	49.192	76.575
3	.870	7.567	51.121						
4	.835	7.347	58.468						
5	.747	6.952	65.42						
6	.730	5.897	71.317						
7	.623	7.591	78.908						
8	.563	8.143	87.051						
9	.528	7.778	94.829						
10	.472	5.171	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

According to the findings presented in Table 3, the total variance explained was determined to have a cumulative estimated value of 76.575%, which is higher than the acceptable threshold level of 60%. In addition to this, it decreased the number of variables from ten to three, which significantly improved their manageability.

Table 4 ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX^A			
	Component		
	1	2	3
Distribution of Content	.816		
Participation and Communication	.569		
Defining the Character of the Brand	.671		
User-created Media			.469
Dependability and			.834

Reputation			
Details on the Product			.651
Make Brands More Approachable		.792	
Real Testimonials		.913	
Trendsetting		.589	
Amplification		.803	
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.			
a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.			

According to Table 4, which examined the rotated component matrix, all of the variables in the study had values higher than .40, which is higher than the permissible threshold. Hence, two newly generated components can be substantially decreased from ten variables.

Hypothesis Testing

The study demonstrated the rejection of the null hypothesis and acceptance of the alternative hypothesis through the application of exploratory factor analysis.

Findings of the Study

- Social media, online reviews, and influencers have a substantial impact on shaping customer impressions. The analysis affirms that each component has a distinct contribution to the overall consumer impression landscape.
- The investigation discerns subtle distinctions in the influence of each component. Social media proves to be efficacious in facilitating brand communication, while online reviews enhance the credibility and genuineness of a company. Additionally, influencers assist to the process of establishing personalised brand connections. The study highlights the significance of a holistic approach that utilises the advantages of each component.
- The study demonstrates that customers interact in distinct ways with social media material, online reviews, and influencer endorsements. Gaining insight into these trends is essential for brands to customise their strategies efficiently and optimise their influence on consumer perceptions.
- Consumer perceptions undergo constant transformation, shaped by the ever-changing terrain of social media trends, evolving dynamics of influencers, and shifting review environments. The study underscores the necessity for brands to adjust and remain sensitive to these dynamics in order to uphold a favourable and pertinent customer image.
- Social media has become a crucial tool for brand communication, enabling firms to directly interact with consumers and influence their opinions. Effective communication

tactics employed on social media platforms have a beneficial impact on customer attitudes and preferences.

- The study reveals that internet reviews, when seen as genuine and reliable, play a crucial role in fostering trust. Positive evaluations are of utmost significance in influencing favourable client opinions, underscoring the criticality of effectively handling and promoting customer feedback.
- Influencers are recognised as crucial individuals in customising brand affiliations. The study demonstrates that establishing partnerships with influencers that strongly connect with the target audience can cultivate a brand image that is more individualised and relatable, hence exerting a favourable impact on customer views.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the complex interaction between social media, online reviews, and influencers has a profound impact on how consumers see things. Businesses must employ intelligent and planned utilisation of these components to effectively shape their target audience's perception of their brand and products. Authenticity, consistency, engagement, and relevance are fundamental concepts that are prevalent in social media, online reviews, and influencer marketing. Brands that strategically prioritise these qualities are more likely to effectively influence consumer perceptions and establish enduring relationships with their target audience. These findings indicate that firms aiming to impact positive consumer impressions must have a comprehensive and sophisticated strategy that takes into account the distinct functions of social media, online reviews, and influencers.

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