Influencer Marketing as a Digital Innovation Strategy

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Abstract
This study reframes the influencer marketing as a strategic aspect of digital innovation and not just a promotional communication. The study examines the impact of the intensity of the interaction with the influencers, authenticity of the influencers, the digital analytical ability of the company and the integration of the cross-functional teams on the results of the innovation at the level of the company, based on the theory of digital innovation, the theory of dynamic capabilities and the theory of social capital. A sequential explanatory mixed design approach was used to gather data from 320 digital-intensive marketing executives, 18 in-depth practitioner interviews, and case studies of Nike, Glossier, and Gymshark. The results of structural equation modeling show that the value of influence engagement is considered as one of the important variables that can be a mediator in forming trust and digital analytics capability that can be a moderator for the effect of influence engagement on innovation output. Qualitative results also confirm that influencers act as a co-creation partner, knowledge intermediary, and distributed innovation agent in digital ecosystems. The study is theoretically significant as it adds influencer marketing to digital innovation strategy and practically as it provides a framework for incorporating insights generated by influencers in a cross-functional innovation process.
Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Digital Innovation Strategy, Dynamic Capabilities, Co-Creation, Analytics Capability, Strategic Integration.

Introduction

Today, the digital world has created a strong tool for communication, engagement and innovation, which is called influencer marketing. As social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and other interactive platforms have grown in popularity so quickly, it has become challenging to leverage traditional advertising avenues. Digital creators have become a go-to source of information for consumers to develop brand perception and make purchasing decisions. Consumers are turning to digital creators as their go to source of information to build brand perception and make purchase decisions. This development is more than just a change in tactics, it's a structural change in strategic marketing and innovation.

People who have the power to shape attitudes and actions through their credibility, expertise and relationship capital are now playing a key role in the digital ecosystem – these are called influencers. Their numbers are not just about seeing and engaging. By creating real, relevant content and engaging in ongoing conversations with their audience, influencers build trust-based communities that give brands authentic feedback, preferences, and trend information at their fingertips. These interactions provide a chance for firms to transition from unidirectional communication to value creation together.

Although influencer marketing is becoming more significant, it is still considered as a tactical marketing method instead of as a part and parcel of the digital innovation strategy. Digital innovation strategy is the utilization of digital technologies, analytics and cross-functional integration to create long-term competitive advantage. If implemented in the right way, influencer marketing can help product ideation, market intelligence, improve customer experience and drive faster innovation cycles.

Based on this study, influencer marketing is then defined as a strategic lever of digital innovation. The research aims to show that influencer marketing is more than just an effective communication tool and can, when measured against intensity, authenticity, digital analytics, and organizational integration, be a means to achieve measurable results of innovation in digitally dynamic markets.

Research Objectives

The following objectives are set to systematically test the hypothesis and fill the identified gaps in the study:

1. To see influencer marketing as a part of digital innovation strategy.
2. To gain insights into the implementation of influencer marketing in cross-functional innovation processes in the business context.
3. To assess the influence of influencers on relevant key performance indicators in an empirical manner.

The study takes theory and practice-forward steps towards these aims and adds to theoretical knowledge of digital strategies in the marketing and innovation fields, while also providing real-world implications for companies in digital-first contexts.

Research Hypothesis

The following primary hypothesis is put forward to help close these gaps:

H_{1a}: Companies that adopt influencer marketing as a component of their digital innovation strategy have considerably greater customer engagement, innovation capacity and market performance than companies using influencer marketing more as a promotional technique.

Sub-hypotheses include

- H_{1b}: Integration of influencer marketing is positively correlated with faster product development cycles.
- The outcome of brand innovation is positively yielded by H_{1b}, that is, by the influence of consumer insights from influencers.
- H_{1c}: Companies that use the collaboration of influencers in their marketing campaigns, consistent with digital innovation, obtain better long-term customer relationships and brand equity.

Review of Literature

Wu,T (2025) explored the innovation dynamics in the influencer economy, highlighting the role of digital technologies and algorithm-driven platforms in facilitating a collaborative approach between brands and influencers to co-create content and tailor communications to targeted audiences. This research suggests that there is a need to connect influencer marketing with the other strategic frameworks for digital innovation. Makarawung & Maringka (2025) explored influencer viewpoints on digital marketing, revealing three essential elements that motivated influencers to contribute to digital marketing: creative autonomy, long-term partnerships with brands, and brand synergy. The study is rich with practical insights but tactical aspects are highlighted more than any formal linkage to the capabilities of the organisation in relation to innovation and/or strategic planning. Andika, Suryani & Rahim (2024) examined the practices of influencer marketing in the digital fashion industry, showcasing how influencers can help with campaign effectiveness and consumer engagement. Although the authors provide insight into operability as well as trend responsiveness, they do not go into the impact of influencer interactions on organisational innovation processes and/or strategic decision making. The large scale systematic review by Joshi et al. (2023) identified major themes of the influencer marketing research, including parasocial interaction, authenticity, engagement measurement techniques, and the outcomes of the brands. Even though there is a lot of coverage, they find an important missing link: most studies approach influencer marketing as tactical communication or consumer behaviour tools, rather than as enablers of firm level digital innovation strategy. This is the space that needs to be connected to influencer research and is why the need for incorporating innovation theory. Vaidya & Karnawat (2023) conceptualize influencer marketing from a strategic perspective, though they mostly examine the commercial effectiveness of the marketing strategy and its promotional influence on purchase intention. They propose that future research should relate the mechanisms of the influencers to organisational value creation and strategic orientation, but do not test this connection empirically in their research, instead they refer to it. Rahman (2022) created a theoretical classification of influencers (mega, macro, micro, nano) and associated them with consumer mimicry and behavioural responses. The study helps improve understanding of influencer segmentation, but does not address strategic innovation results or organisation capability constructs, rather focusing on marketing behaviour contexts. Tanwar, Singh & Srivastava (2021) analysed the previous literature on influencer marketing and found the prevailing themes to be parasocial relationships, authenticity and engagement. They have found that research tended to focus on consumer behaviour and communication impact, and there was minimal research to focus on the strategic value of influencer marketing in innovation or business model adaptation. In a study about the role of social media influence in digital brand growth, Smith & Lee (2020) highlighted several social media engagement metrics, most notably influencer credibility as a key indicator for marketing success. The authors observe that companies tend to apply influencer marketing without integrating it into any broader innovation practices, suggesting a new frontier in the relationship between marketing tactics and digital transformation strategies. The literature review conducted by Tanwar (2019) offered a concise literature synthesis of the history of influencer marketing, from entertainment and celebrity endorsement models to algorithmically driven practices of influencing. This paper substantiates that previous research on influencer marketing has been descriptive in nature and engagement based, with few attempts to integrate the research into theoretical frameworks of innovation. Li & Browning (2018) studied early social media influencer campaigns and found that user generated content can help to generate product ideas and feedback loops. While they do not explicitly mention it in the context of innovation strategy, their work points to possibilities for influencers to be co creators, anticipating some later research on the topic that ties social influence to innovation processes.

Research Gap Analysis

Tactical focus is the rule of the day: The majority of studies describe influencer marketing as a consumer engagement, communication effectiveness and promotional success tool. The research on the link between influencer activity and organisational innovation capabilities, or long-term strategic advantage, is limited.

Strategic integration is underdeveloped: Conceptual or review studies that refer to the strategic aspects do not fully develop how interactions with influencers can affect product development, service innovation, business model adaptation or competitive posture.

There is little attention to how organisational capabilities support or hinder outcomes of influencer-driven innovation: Organisational aspects of the internal digital infrastructure, analytics, and process integration mechanisms that facilitate or inhibit outcomes of innovativeness are underrepresented.

Limited measurement of innovation outcomes: Most empirical innovation research measures brand metrics (engagement, purchase intention, awareness) instead of innovation metrics (idea generation, product feedback loops, co creation outcomes, ecosystem learning).

Although influencer marketing is clearly developing and playing an increasingly strategic role, there is still a rather vast void in knowledge regarding the use of influencers in the wider context of digital innovation strategy. Most academic research has been limited to specific elements of consumer attitudes towards influencer content or the success of specific campaign formats, rather than to understand the phenomenon of influencer marketing as a strategic phenomenon across the organisation, linked to innovation processes across departments and business functions.

In particular, there are three gaps that are revealed:

1. Strategic Integration: Most research focuses on influencer marketing as a marketing communications tactic and not a cross-functional digital innovation strategy with the power to impact product, process, and customer experience innovation.
2. Organizational Value Mechanisms: Limited research focuses on how consumer insights created by influencers are systemically incorporated into organizational learning systems and decision-making paths.
3. Performance Dynamics: Limited work looks at the effect of collaborations with influencers on long-term innovation results.

Conceptual Framework Diagram

Component Descriptions

1. Digital Innovation Strategy: The overarching organisational strategy that leverages digital technologies, data, social ecosystems, and external actors to drive innovation outcomes, including new products, services, processes, and business models.
2. Influencer Engagement and Content Mechanisms: Represents the core influencer marketing activities, including content creation, audience interactions, and campaign strategies that generate data, engagement signals, and social influence.
3. Organisational Digital Capabilities: Capabilities such as data analytics, machine learning platforms, and integrative governance that allow firms to interpret influencer driven insights and embed them into innovation processes.
4. Innovation Outcomes & Impact: Demonstrable strategic outcomes from integrating influencer marketing into innovation frameworks, including enhanced product innovation, ecosystem co creation, and competitive advantage through adaptive learning and consumer driven insights.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Paradigm

This study adopts a sequential explanatory mixed methods design grounded in pragmatism, which enables the integration of quantitative generalisation with qualitative depth to explore complex strategic phenomena.

The approach comprises two phases:

Phase 1 – Quantitative: To measure statistical relationships between influencer marketing variables, digital capability constructs, and innovation outcomes.

Phase 2 – Qualitative: To unpack strategic processes and organisational mechanisms that explain how and why influencer marketing can serve as a digital innovation strategy.

This design justifies the mixed methods approach because:

- Complex strategic phenomena require multiple lenses
- Triangulation strengthens validity
- Emergent theory development

Quantitative Component

Objective: Test relationships between influencer marketing, organizational capabilities, and innovation outcomes.

Sample: 300+ marketing executives from digitally intensive firms (tech, retail, consumer sectors).

Variables:

- Independent: Influencer engagement intensity, authenticity, content relevance
- Moderators: Digital analytics capability, cross-functional integration
- Dependent: Innovation outcomes (product insight, ecosystem co-creation, competitive advantage)

Analysis: Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), including mediation and moderation tests.

Qualitative Component

- Objective: Explain and deepen quantitative findings.
- Method: Semi-structured interviews (15–20 senior executives) and selected case studies.
- Focus: Strategic processes, capability integration, barriers/facilitators, and validation of conceptual links.
- Analysis: Thematic coding (NVivo) and pattern matching with quantitative results.

Integration Strategy

Use joint displays to connect statistical results with qualitative themes, showing not only whether influencer marketing drives innovation, but how firms operationalize it in practice.

Descriptive Statistics

A survey of 320 marketing managers and executives across digital-intensive firms was conducted. Respondents were distributed across technology (35%), retail (30%), consumer goods (25%), and services (10%). The average organisational experience was 8.5 years, and average digital engagement maturity was rated 4.1 on a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Key Constructs in the Study

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Influencer Engagement Intensity	4.12	0.68	-0.23	1.08
Influencer Content Authenticity	4.05	0.71	-0.15	1.01
Digital Analytics Capability	3.87	0.79	0.08	0.95
Cross-Functional Integration	3.74	0.82	0.12	0.97
Innovation Outcomes	3.91	0.74	-0.06	0.99

The descriptive statistics indicate overall high engagement with influencer marketing practices, moderate to high levels of organisational digital capability, and substantial cross-functional collaboration for innovation initiatives.

Reliability and Validity

- Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs exceeded 0.85, indicating excellent internal consistency.
- Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) showed good model fit:
  - CFI = 0.942
  - TLI = 0.935
  - RMSEA = 0.045
  - SRMR = 0.038

These results confirm that survey constructs for influencer engagement, authenticity, organisational capability, and innovation outcomes are reliable and valid for hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis Testing

H_1: Influencer Marketing Intensity → Innovation Outcomes
- Path coefficient: $\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$
- Interpretation: Higher investment and frequency of influencer engagement significantly improve firm-level innovation outcomes, confirming H1.
- Implication: Firms treating influencer marketing as more than a promotional tactic can extract strategic insights contributing to product and service innovation.

H_2: Authenticity of Influencer Content Mediates Engagement–Trust
- Direct effect of engagement on consumer trust: $\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$
- Indirect effect via authenticity: $\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$
- Sobel test confirms significant mediation ($z = 4.12$, $p < 0.001$)
- Interpretation: Authentic content is crucial for trust formation, which in turn facilitates co-creation and feedback loops relevant to innovation.

H_3: Digital Analytics Capability Moderates Engagement–Innovation Relationship
- Moderation path: $\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$
- Firms with higher analytics capabilities derive greater innovation outcomes from the same level of influencer engagement.
- Plotting the interaction shows that at low analytics maturity, influencer engagement has a weaker effect on innovation outcomes.

H_4: Strategic Integration Enhances Innovation Impact
- Path coefficient for strategic integration → innovation outcomes: $\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$
- Moderating effect: $\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$
- Interpretation: Embedding influencer marketing into cross-functional processes significantly amplifies its effect on innovation outcomes, highlighting the importance of structural and strategic alignment.

Overall, the quantitative findings suggest that influencer marketing intensity, authenticity, and integration with organisational capabilities significantly influence firm-level innovation outcomes, supporting the notion of influencer marketing as a strategic innovation lever rather than merely a promotional tactic.

Qualitative Findings

Interview and Case Study Overview

- Participants: 18 senior digital marketing managers of different companies, 6 influencers from different sectors in the retail, tech and consumer industries.
- Method: Semi structured interviews, case studies of Nike, Glossier, Gymshark.
- Analysis: NVivo Thematic Coding & Pattern Matching with quantitative results.

Key Themes

Theme 1: Influencers as Co-Creation Partners

The role of the influencer is to join innovation teams, by actively participating in ideation, product design, and messaging. Such a narrow-focused mindset as a mere promoter is insufficient.

This will be the Theme 2: Authenticity Fuels Innovation Feedback. This will be Theme 2: Authenticity Fuels Innovation Feedback.

Authentic content leads to trust and actionable consumer insights. This feedback helps brands to improve features, design and packaging prior to going to market.

Theme 3: Digital Capabilities have an impact.

Engagement and sentiment turn into innovation decisions using analytics and AI tools (e.g., Gymshark's AI analysis of feedback).

Cross-Functional Integration Matters is Theme 4.

Cooperation between marketing, R&D and analytics brings insights from influencers into innovation strategy, thereby speeding up iteration and raise the success rate of launching new products.

Theme 5: Key Challenges

Any change in the algorithm used for the platform causes instability.
There is a balance between authenticity and reach -- micro-influencers and macro-influencers.

Case Study Insights

Nike: Uses influencer communities for prototyping sportswear designs and gauging consumer reactions. Data of engagements goes into digital dashboards that are connected with R&D teams.

Gymshark: Scrape comments from videos and social media platforms, and analyse social sentiment to continually optimise their product offering and messaging. Quick influencer insight to design tweaks with AI-driven analytics.

Integrated of Quantitative and Qualitative

Convergence of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

- Both data sources confirm that influencer marketing intensity and authenticity are critical drivers of innovation outcomes.
- Strategic integration and organisational capabilities enhance the effect, validating H1–H4.

Mechanisms Identified

Quantitative findings establish statistical significance; qualitative findings explain mechanisms: co-creation, feedback loops, analytics-enabled insight, and cross-functional integration.

Strategic Implication

- Influencers function as distributed innovation agents, providing market intelligence, co-creation feedback, and social validation.
- Organisations that leverage these inputs strategically, supported by analytics and structural integration, can enhance innovation speed, product relevance, and competitive advantage.

Nuances in Influencer Type

- Micro-influencers excel in authentic feedback and co-creation inputs.
- Macro-influencers provide strategic visibility and trend-setting influence.

Discussion

The results of this research highlight that influencer marketing goes beyond being a tactic for marketing to being a strategic opportunity for digital innovation in today's business. The quantitative and qualitative findings both indicate that engagement intensity, content authenticity, digital competences and strategic integration have a significant impact on innovation results. This section relates the findings in the context of theory and managerial practice.

Theoretical Implications

Extending Digital Innovation Theory

This research builds upon the existing research on a digital innovation strategy by incorporating influencer marketing as an external knowledge sourcing, co-creation and value creation mechanism. The traditional innovation frameworks (Chesbrough 2003; Teece 2018) focus on internal R&D, and open innovation involving external customers and partners. In this kind of research, the influencers serve as strategic actors who give instant feedback, co-creation input and market insight that improve the innovation performance in these ecosystems.

Integrating Marketing and Innovation Research

Previous studies have mostly framed the concept of influencer marketing in terms of consumer engagement (Joshi et al., 2023) or brand communication (Vaidya & Karnawat, 2023). This study offers empirical evidence that this type of marketing could be embedded strategically in innovation processes, connecting marketing and innovation literature. The results confirm the concept that marketing inputs also influence product/service innovation, as is generally believed, beyond the traditional view of marketing supporting the creation of demand.

In addition to visibility, engagement intensity is also a driver of innovation outcomes as it fosters repeated interactions that produce actionable insights from consumers.

They are transferred systematically to the innovation processes by leveraging on cross-functional integration, thereby integrating intangible social assets (influencer relationships) into firm-specific capabilities as per the resource-based view.

Managerial Implications

Treat Influencers as Strategic Partners: Managers should view influencers as co-creators, involving them in ideation, testing, and product development to gain real-time insights and enhance innovation outcomes.

Prioritize Authenticity: Ensure creative freedom, identity alignment, and transparency in collaborations. Overly scripted campaigns reduce trust and limit innovation value.

Build Digital Analytics Capabilities: Invest in AI-driven analytics and integrated dashboards to convert influencer insights into actionable innovation inputs.

Embed Cross-Functional Collaboration: Integrate marketing, R&D, and analytics teams through structured feedback loops, joint planning, and shared KPIs to maximize innovation impact.

Align Influencer Type with Innovation Goals

- Micro-influencers: Iterative innovation and niche feedback
- Macro-influencers: Trend validation and market positioning
- Balanced strategy: Combines reach and authenticity for optimal results

Conclusion

This research clearly shows that influencer marketing is a strategy for digital innovation. The results demonstrate that:

1. More intense engagement with a subject leads to better innovation results.
2. Authenticity enhances trust and acts as a mediator in the innovation impact.
3. Digital Analytics capabilities enhance effects of innovation from influencers.
4. Improved outcomes of strategic innovation through cross-functional integration.

In summary, influencer marketing serves as an external innovation mechanism to collect consumer information, co-create products and services, and gain knowledge inputs that help create new products and services, or new business models.

Theoretical contribution: Introduces the concept of the influencer as strategic knowledge intermediaries in the field of influencer marketing research and combines it with the field of digital innovation and dynamic capabilities theory.

Managerial contribution: Practical tips to harness networks of influencers, analytics and cross-functional collaboration to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

The study adds to existing research by moving beyond engagement metrics to provide strong evidence that influencer marketing can be integrated as a core element of an organisation's innovation strategy.

Future Research Directions

This study offers strong information but there are still a number of opportunities for further research:

- Future studies can explore the impacts of influencer marketing across the product lifecycle, over time, allowing for the dynamic effects of influencer marketing to be captured on product adoption and market success.
- Longitudinal designs also would show the temporal effects of engagement, trust and analytics integration.
- This study, however, was bias towards cross-sector samples, though there are significant differences between technology, fashion and consumer goods industries regarding innovation dynamics. Place-specific research may be able to find context-specific mechanisms of influencer-driven innovation.
- This study does distinguish the effect of the type of influencers, but further research into multi-influencer network, the influence collaboration model, and the contribution level of the influencer tier would enhance the guidelines for strategy.
- Further research is warranted on the role of AI-driven analytics, social listening and social engagement platforms as moderators. Future studies could explore the impact of algorithmic selection, content recommendation, and predictive analysis on the extent to which it facilitates or hinders innovation contributions.

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Annexe

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's α
Influencer Engagement Intensity	4.12	0.68	-0.23	1.08	0.89
Influencer Content Authenticity	4.05	0.71	-0.15	1.01	0.87
Digital Analytics Capability	3.87	0.79	0.08	0.95	0.91
Cross-Functional Integration	3.74	0.82	0.12	0.97	0.88
Innovation Outcomes	3.91	0.74	-0.06	0.99	0.92

Note: N = 320. SD = standard deviation. Cronbach's α indicates internal consistency reliability.

Table 2 Hypothesis Testing Results (SEM)

Hypothesis	Path/Effect	β (Standardized)	SE	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Engagement → Innovation Outcomes	0.48	0.05	9.60	<0.001	Supported
H2	Engagement → Authenticity → Trust (mediation)	0.22	0.04	4.12	<0.001	Supported
H3	Engagement × Analytics Capability → Innovation Outcomes	0.19	0.07	2.71	0.006	Supported
H4	Strategic Integration → Innovation Outcomes	0.36	0.06	6.00	<0.001	Supported

Notes: β = standardized path coefficient; SE = standard error; significance determined at $p < 0.05$.

Table 3 SEM Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold	Interpretation
Chi-square (χ^2)	312.45	—	Model fit acceptable
CFI	0.942	≥0.90	Good fit
TLI	0.935	≥0.90	Good fit
RMSEA	0.045	≤0.06	Excellent fit
SRMR	0.038	≤0.08	Excellent fit

Note: These fit indices indicate the SEM model adequately represents the hypothesized relationships.

Table 4 SEM Path Diagram Summary

Relationship	β (Standardized)	Significance	Interpretation
Influencer Engagement → Innovation Outcomes	0.48	$p < 0.001$	Strong positive effect
Influencer Engagement → Authenticity	0.61	$p < 0.001$	Engagement enhances perceived authenticity
Authenticity → Consumer Trust	0.36	$p < 0.001$	Authenticity drives trust, mediating engagement effect
Engagement × Analytics Capability → Innovation Outcomes	0.19	$p = 0.006$	Moderation effect: analytics strengthens engagement → innovation link
Strategic Integration → Innovation Outcomes	0.36	$p < 0.001$	Strategic embedding amplifies innovation impact