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Designing a Model to Improve Influencer Marketing Performance and Its Role in Brand Loyalty



Abstract: - The present study aims to design a conceptual model of important factors in better performance of influencer marketing and examine its impact on brand loyalty. This research was conducted using a qualitative method (grounded theory approach) through semi-structured interviews with marketing managers and marketers, employing purposive sampling. To this end, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with these experts. The obtained data were analyzed simultaneously using the grounded theory method based on the approach proposed by Strauss and Corbin (2011) and the paradigm model through three stages of open, axial, and selective coding. The findings showed that in the causal conditions dimension (factors such as consumer attitudes, rapid information transfer, success of influencer marketing, and characteristics of influential individuals), in the contextual conditions dimension (factors such as influencer marketing campaign, perceived motivation, planning and evaluation of influencer marketing, and audience accessibility), in the intervening factors dimension (factors such as key challenges of influencer marketing, advantages of influencer marketing, and disadvantages of influencer marketing), in the consequences dimension (factors such as efficiency and effectiveness of influencer marketing, development of advertising in social networks, campaign development and sustainability, increased trust in influencers, and improvement of customer relationship system), and in the strategies dimension (factors such as recognition, loyalty improvement, perceived credibility improvement, influencer marketing techniques improvement, and cost improvement) were categorized. It can be concluded that if the strategies are implemented successfully, the performance of influencer marketing will improve. Ultimately, this will lead to increased brand loyalty.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Brand loyalty, Marketing, Grounded theory

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, social media platforms are often used by consumers before making purchase decisions. Consumers particularly rely on influencers who have become one of the strongest driving forces for purchasing decisions and are said to have a significant impact on brands (Lu & Seah, 2018). Influencers first emerged in the early 2000s and have since progressed from a hobby to a lucrative, full-time profession. According to Freberg et al. (2011), social media influencers are a new type of independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media. Ge and Gretzel (2018) introduced social media influencers as individuals who have a position in the consumer's social graph as well as a direct influence on that consumer's behavior. In another study, Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) described social media influencers as individuals who, through personal branding, create and maintain relationships with their followers on social media and have the ability to inform, entertain, and influence the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of their followers. Recently, Bastrygina and Lim (2023) stated that social media influencers are increasingly popular and influence consumers' attitudes, perceptions, preferences, choices, and decisions. Social media influencers are ordinary individuals who establish an online presence from the ground up through their social media channel or page, and in this process, create an extensive network of followers.

When these definitions are collectively considered through a marketing lens, social media influencers are essentially individuals who, through posts that combine their personality and lifestyle with products (e.g., goods, services, ideas, places, people) they promote, can positively (e.g., purchase) or negatively (e.g., not purchasing)

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influence how their followers behave (such as attitudes, perceptions, preferences, choices, decisions) (Joshi et al., 2023).

In the collaboration between brands and social influencers, the role of a social media influencer is to act as a brand ambassador by designing sponsored content for the brand to convey and promote the brand image and brand name (Valsesia et al., 2020) and to create brand engagement and brand loyalty (Li & Feng, 2022). According to Lou and Yuan (2019), influencers' posts have two fundamental marketing objectives: first, to increase their followers' purchase intention, and second, to increase followers' attractiveness and product knowledge. Influencers often curate posts with information and descriptions about the features of the product they are advertising, which leads to increased information value and product knowledge (Valsesia et al., 2020). Such content is often managed by social media influencers as independent third-party endorsers by sharing their experiences and lives concerning the brand through images, texts, stories, hashtags, and reviews, among others (De Veirman et al., 2017). Social media influencers are highly sought after by brands because they create credibility with their followers as a result of their expertise, allowing them to influence their followers' decision-making (Khamis et al., 2017).

Influencer marketing is considered a form of social media marketing that helps companies and brands increase awareness and strengthen their image. It is defined as a strategy in which a company selects and motivates online influencers to engage their followers on social media and use these influencers' unique resources to promote the company's offerings with the ultimate goal of improving company performance (Leung et al., 2022). Influencer marketing through social media can provide opportunities for influencers and their followers to participate in creating a brand image on social media (Lin et al., 2018). With the growing importance of influencer marketing and the popularity of social media influencers, various brands have begun to advertise their products with the help of social media influencers to influence consumers to behave in desirable ways (e.g., creating positive attitudes towards the brand and encouraging brand product purchases) (Valsesia et al., 2020). Influencer marketing has gained significant importance as an advertising strategy in social media, as it can reach audiences with personal, credible, and engaging content (De Veirman et al., 2017; Hudders et al., 2021).

Influencer marketing is a rapidly growing field that has become an important tool for brands seeking to build brand loyalty. By partnering with individuals who have many followers, brands can reach a wider audience and establish a stronger connection with their target market. This, in turn, can lead to increased brand loyalty, as consumers are more likely to trust a brand endorsed by someone they follow and admire. Loyal customers in influencer marketing are not easily obtained. Communication is an important factor that greatly affects customer experience and creates loyal customers. Companies, regardless of which distribution channel they choose, should always be accessible to customers. Otherwise, they may miss many valuable opportunities to engage with them. Therefore, companies need to know which channels customers use more and ensure that their brand is available on that channel.

In a study, Dogra (2019) showed the impact of influencer marketing on brand loyalty. In another study, Ismail (2017) concluded that the amount of budget spent on advertising is positively related to brand loyalty in social media. Another study conducted by Audi et al. (2015) examined influencers and their effects on loyalty, and they also obtained results similar to previous research.

To understand and evaluate the audiences of social media users, researchers have studied various criteria for assessing audience quality, especially in the field of marketing (Martínez-López et al., 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Audience quality can be evaluated from two main perspectives, loyalty, and authenticity, which respectively represent the level of interest in brands and the genuineness of audience interactions (Lewis & Bridger, 2011). Brand loyalty has been extensively studied in various research, as the level of loyalty is closely related to the success of marketing campaigns. Loyal customers tend to show positive interactions and strong trust in specific brands, while other relatively disloyal customers likely have short-term interactions (Bergel & Brock, 2019). Some previous studies focus on the correlation between brand loyalty and other factors such as online advertising (Balakrishnan et al., 2014), frequency of interactions (Neti, 2011), and characteristics of published content (Erdoğan & Cicek, 2012).

Audience loyalty is an indicator that shows the extent to which a social media user engages with a particular brand or influential celebrity to express interest or create interaction (Erdoğan & Cicek, 2012). Marketers seek loyal audiences for their marketing campaigns because loyal audiences have more trust, positive engagement, and

repeat purchases compared to other users (Bergel & Brock, 2019). Audience loyalty can be created, strengthened, and maintained by having consistent interactions and providing enjoyable content on social media (Jun & Yi, 2020). The loyalty of each audience can be measured based on their engagement, hence the loyalty of a brand or influencer's audience can be expressed as a retention rate, which shows how many audiences create recurring engagement over time (Kim et al., 2021). Since following an influencer is an active choice, positive attitudes and loyalty are likely to be created for the influencer after a longer period (Hsu et al., 2013).

Previous research indicates that there are several key factors determining brand loyalty. These include attitude towards the brand, trust in the brand, value for money, and customer satisfaction (Pappu & Quester, 2016). Today, companies and influencers collaborate with various goals, including strengthening the organization's brand value as well as the influencer's brand, increasing product sales and profits to reach different audiences; therefore, to achieve these goals, the involved brands must be relatively similar in terms of identity and image to prevent confusion among consumers (Xiao et al., 2014). This type of branding is also observable in terms of collaboration on Instagram and is seen as monetary participation. It is clear that this strategy affects consumer attitudes, and therefore, factors of attitude change should be understood before creating brand collaborations with influencers.

On the other hand, people who intend to purchase a product usually trust the recommendations and suggestions of their friends and acquaintances, or the bloggers and Instagrammers they follow more than the advertisements that the brand itself makes about the product. In this context, the influencer acts as an intermediary and friend, connecting the brand to target customers. Influencers can increase website traffic and brand exposure on social media by influencing their direct and loyal followers.

This research aims to improve the understanding of factors affecting influencer marketing strategies for small and medium-sized enterprises, as understanding this issue in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector in most economies can lead to better utilization of the benefits of social media marketing techniques and help choose the best social media method to increase consumer trust and brand loyalty.

Given the provided explanations and based on previous research and models that have been reviewed, no comprehensive study has been conducted in the field of designing a conceptual model of important factors in better performance of influencer marketing and examining its effect on brand loyalty. As such, there is a significant research gap in this direction in previous articles and theses.

The present study was conducted to design a conceptual model of important factors in better performance of influencer marketing and examine its effect on brand loyalty, to serve as a step towards greater use of influencer marketing by companies and to help company managers, marketing managers, and marketers implement activities on social media in the best way. Therefore, this research seeks to design a conceptual model of important factors in better performance of influencer marketing and examine its effect on brand loyalty based on the most important factors that will have the greatest impact on brand loyalty among small and medium-sized brands in Isfahan City.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers can be envisioned as individuals who have gathered significant followers on one or more social media platforms and possess the power to shape the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of their audiences through their online content (Freberg et al., 2011). The term "influencer" has its roots in the concept of "opinion leaders," first introduced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1964). These opinion leaders dominated others' choices and behaviors through personal influence. As social media emerged, the concept of opinion leaders evolved and gave rise to "social media influencers." Hudders et al. (2021) argue that social media influencers, often referred to as "micro-celebrities," play an important role in contemporary marketing, and their appeal stems from their ability to endorse brands rather than traditional fame. According to Hudders et al. (2021), the important characteristics of a social media influencer are reach and impact. They refer to the influencer's direct and secondary connection with followers, while their influence is shown in their audience's decision-making. Influencers achieve this influence through expertise, authenticity, and intimacy, which helps attract more audiences. Social media influencers are individuals who have many fans on social media and can influence the attitudes and behaviors of their audience. They have been the subject of much scientific research due to their powerful influence on consumer behavior, from influencing purchasing decisions to changing social norms (Hudders et al., 2021).

Influencer Marketing

Social media influencer marketing is similar to classic celebrity endorsement in traditional mass media, with the difference that interactions are more content-driven (Lou & Kim, 2019). The level of audience engagement is slightly higher than traditional celebrity endorsements (Arora et al., 2019). The traditional approach is essentially based on one-way broadcast communications where followers are usually unable to respond to celebrities' messages. In contrast, social media influencers create personal connections with their followers through limited two-way communications, such as comments and responses (Belanche et al., 2020). Leung et al. (2022) define online influencer marketing as a strategy in which a company selects and encourages online influencers to engage with their followers on social media and use these influencers' unique resources to promote the company's offerings with the ultimate goal of improving company performance. Each influencer has a specific audience and can establish close relationships through social media. Today, many large companies like Adidas, Pepsi, and Dunkin' Donuts use influencers. The talents of these well-known individuals expand stock credibility and provide recognition for product brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019).

Influencer marketing is one of the low-cost and highly effective marketing strategies for organizations. The costs a company must incur are determined by the number of influencer's followers, range of influence, level of engagement, their previous work and experience, and other factors that help achieve the goal of reaching more potential customers (Charlesworth, 2018). Social media influencers are those who have been recognized through social networks in a community of users (Farivar & Wang, 2022). They are recognized and classified by their followers as experts in their field. From a brand perspective, these influencers are highly sought after because they have successfully nurtured and maintained a community, reinforced loyalty among their followers through their communication style, and are considered a form of credible advertising. They are highly respected for their impartiality, meaning they do not align themselves with any brand. As a result, their recommendations are considered honest and genuine. To be classified in this category, an individual must have at least fifty thousand followers on Instagram, twenty thousand on Twitter, or one hundred thousand followers on Facebook (Iglesias, 2017). Influencers cultivate trust and credibility among general users through their relevant approach and authentic behavior (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Brand Loyalty

Today, the brand is considered a strategic need for organizations that establishes them in providing greater value to customers and creating competitive advantages. The concept of brand is defined as a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors. For consumers, brands are used to determine manufacturers, products, product value, and company image, and become a tool for purchase decision-making (Eckert et al., 2012; Quayson et al., 2024). Although it is difficult to define, some researchers (Pourdehghan, 2015; Quayson et al., 2024) have defined brand loyalty as a deep commitment to consistently repurchase a preferred service or product in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts to change behavior. Quayson et al. (2024) stated that brand loyalty is customers' priority and first choice for selecting the company providing products and services. Therefore, it causes customers to reuse products and services and be committed to recommending them to others. Brand loyalty indicates the motivation for loyalty to a brand and is reflected when consumers choose the brand as their first choice (Quayson et al., 2024). Brand loyalty is often used as the ultimate goal in consumer research due to its strategic and marketing importance and its tendency to provide a significant basis for developing a sustainable competitive advantage (Homburg et al., 2017; Troiville, 2024). To increase brand loyalty, many strategic marketing communication tools including advertising, public relations, sales promotion, personal selling, and direct marketing have evolved and are used by companies to strengthen loyalty (Zephaniah et al., 2020).

III. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In the field of influencer marketing factors and brand loyalty, extensive studies have not been conducted, but an effort was made to present a summary of some of the most important studies that have been carried out in this area.

Table 1 - Previous research in the field of influencer marketing and brand loyalty

Researchers	Title	Findings
Gökerik (2024)	Consumer cynicism in influencer marketing: Analysis of the impact on purchase intention and brand loyalty	Findings showed that the authenticity and realism of influencer content can increase consumer trust in businesses and significantly reduce consumer cynicism. This reduction leads to increased brand loyalty and purchase intention.
Dewi and Hidayat (2024)	The impact of influencer marketing on brand equity: Analysis of the mediating role of brand awareness and customer brand engagement	Results confirm the mediating role of brand awareness and customer engagement on the relationship between influencer marketing and brand equity. In this context, influencer marketing can affect brand equity both directly and through mediating variables.
Neehal (2023)	Examining the impact of influencer marketing on brand loyalty: A study on the role of brand communications	Based on the results, it was determined that content, social media platforms, and sponsors play a vital role in influencer marketing. These create brand communications that replace advertising for brand promotion. Additionally, this study demonstrates the importance of campaigns and creating unique content to increase branding for a specific product.
Agustian et al. (2023)	The impact of influencer marketing in increasing brand awareness and sales for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)	The results of this study indicate that influencer marketing has a high potential to provide significant benefits for SMEs in their efforts to reach their target market, expand brand awareness, and increase sales. In the ever-changing digital world, influencers have a unique appeal as a source of influence that can connect brands with relevant audiences.
Çelik (2022)	The moderating role of influencer attractiveness in the impact of brand love, brand trust, brand awareness, and brand image on brand loyalty	Findings showed that brand love, brand trust, brand awareness, and brand image are important antecedents that have a direct impact on brand loyalty. The mediating role of brand love, brand awareness, brand image, and brand trust has an indirect effect on brand loyalty. Brand awareness, brand image, and brand trust are important antecedents that directly affect brand love. Influencer attractiveness plays an important moderating role in the impact of brand awareness, brand trust, brand love, and brand image on brand loyalty. Furthermore, brand love, brand awareness, brand trust, and brand image have a significant conditional effect on brand loyalty at low, medium, and high levels of influencer attractiveness.

IV. RESEARCH METHOD

The methodology of the present research is qualitative, conducted using the grounded theory method. The statistical population of the study included experts active in the field of influencer marketing and university professors specializing in e-business and marketing familiar with the research topic. Using purposive sampling and based on the principle of theoretical saturation, 15 of them were selected as sample members. Researchers such as Singh and Kant (2024) and Malone (2014) have predicted the selection of sample size in the range of 15 to 30 people and stated the basis for selecting the sample population as a purposive sampling method considering filters aligned with the nature of the research. It should be noted that interviews with 12 people led to theoretical saturation, after which almost all information and data were repeated, but to maintain greater confidence and the possibility of accessing new data, the interviews continued up to 15 people.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format and began with questions about factors influencing better performance of influencer marketing and examining its effect on brand loyalty. Subsequent questions were designed based on interviewees' responses during the interview. The duration of the interviews was approximately 35 minutes to one hour. The sampling method in this research is judgmental, with individuals being selected for interviews gradually throughout the study.

In the present research, to find answers to the stated questions, the researchers analyzed and examined the information and data after collection and formed them into tables based on coding principles. In these tables, efforts were first made to extract items of high importance and assign a specific code to each. In subsequent stages, the researcher compared the obtained codes, examined the commonalities and similarities between phenomena, and finally grouped these codes into broader categories. The characteristics of the interviewees are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 - Profiles of the interviewees

Row	Gender	Age	Degree	Field of Activity
1	Male	30 years	Bachelor's	Brand and advertising agency
2	Female	22 years	Bachelor's	Building content production
3	Female	25 years	Bachelor's	Tourism
4	Male	29 years	Bachelor's	Online carpet sales
5	Male	40 years	Bachelor's	Bachelor's Food products
6	Male	28 years	Master's	Project control
7	Female	28 years	Master's	Advertising and content
8	Male	37 years	Bachelor's	Investment
9	Male	28 years	PhD	Oil and gas
10	Female	-	PhD	Marketing
11	Male	33 years	PhD	Management consulting
12	Male	33 years	Master's	Marketing management
13	Male	-	PhD	Marketing management
14	Male	41	Master's	Sales manager
15	Male	38	Master's	Marketing

Additionally, strategies for validating the results were carried out with members (digital marketing experts or specialists). Then, researchers analyzed and reviewed the obtained results with 3 expert individuals, and ultimately 3 specialists accepted and confirmed these results and interpretations. To analyze the interview data, individuals' conversations were recorded on audio files and then transcribed on paper. The analysis was conducted using the three-stage process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In this manner, after coding the data obtained from each interview, as weaknesses or ambiguities in the used model and emerging concepts were identified, the next interviewee was selected considering necessary factors and addressing weaknesses and ambiguities. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved in the categories. Data analysis was

performed using ATLAS.ti software, employing the coding method based on the grounded theory approach following Strauss and Corbin's (2011) method. In the process of implementing grounded theory, three types of coding were used, which are described as follows:

First Step: Open Coding: In open coding, phenomena are named, as concepts are the units of analysis in grounded theory. This part of data processing focuses on identifying concepts.

Second Step: Axial Coding: In axial coding, the researcher selects one of the categories as the central category and then places it as the central phenomenon at the center of the process under investigation and exploration. Finally, the relationships of other categories to it are determined. Therefore, in the axial coding section, concepts with similar characteristics are used around an axis to determine components.

Third Step: Selective Coding: Selective coding is the main stage of theorizing, which, based on the results of the two previous stages, proceeds to generate theory. In the final stage of qualitative data analysis in this research, using selective coding, the relationship between the selected central category and other categories and axes was interpreted, and the categories were improved and integrated into a coherent and unified model. Hence, this stage serves as the process of integrating and refining concepts and components to present a conceptual model.

V. RESEARCH FINDINGS

To find themes, first, materials related to the research topic and interview texts were coded and then categorized. In the next stage, themes were determined and named. In the present study, ATLAS.ti software was used to categorize codes and determine themes. After identifying and extracting initial codes, in the next stage, the initial data were categorized and converted into secondary and then selective codes. In this way, the initial codes were transformed into conceptual codes. It can be said that categories are created from the combination of conceptual codes, and then using selective coding, the relationship between the selected central category and other categories and axes was interpreted, and finally, the improved and coherent categories were integrated.

This study, based on interviews to extract themes in the field of influencer marketing, initially extracted 193 primary codes. After several rounds of review, similar raw codes were consolidated using open coding and the grounded theory method. According to expert opinion, 139 secondary codes were approved. To extract themes, open codes were compared with each other, and secondary codes with close semantic relationships were grouped. Finally, 21 main categories and 5 dimensions were examined based on the paradigm model. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 - Components and indicators affecting the better performance of influencer marketing

Dimensions	Categories	Indicators	
Causal	Consumer attitudes	Celebrity endorser credibility	
		Brand awareness	
		Advertisement credibility	
		Celebrity endorsements	
		Celebrity endorser's physical attractiveness	
		Celebrity endorser's appearance and attractiveness	
	Rapid information transfer		Quality of produced content
			Competitive differentiation strategy
			Content sharing, Creating a desirable image
			Customer experience
			Perceived differentiation
			Perceived support
			Perceived accessibility
			Brand reputation
			Competitive differentiation strategy

Dimensions	Categories	Indicators	
	Influencer marketing success	Increasing brand attractiveness	
		Creative freedom	
		Engagement between published content	
		Political-social orientations	
		Rules and regulations governing virtual space	
		Higher conversion and sales rates	
		Monitoring and optimization	
	Influencer characteristics	Perceived usefulness	
		Selecting influencers relevant to the business area	
		Electronic word-of-mouth advertising	
		Number of followers, Product recommendations	
		Relevance of influencer activity to advertisements	
		Increasing engagement rate with influencer	
		Brand alignment	
		Selecting influencers relevant to the business area	
Contextual conditions	Influencer marketing campaign	Increasing market share	
		Budget allocation	
		Perceived influence	
	Perceived motivation	Perceived cost	
		Monetary rewards	
	Influencer marketing program development and evaluation	Perceived commitment	
		Brand equity	
		Organizational strategy and mission	
		Revenue increase	
		Sales increase	
		Key performance indicators	
		Engagement-based influencer marketing strategy	
	Goal-based influencer marketing strategy		
	Audience accessibility	Sales-oriented marketing	
		Converting visitors to buyers	
Brand engagement			
Exclusive influencer discount codes			
Like-comment ratio			
Intervening conditions	Key challenges of influencer marketing	Measuring and improving return on investment	
		Inability to measure electronic word-of-mouth advertising by audiences on social media	
		Untimely responses and unavailability of influencers	
		Difficulty in controlling influencers	
		Encountering fake influencers	
		Accurate evaluation of influencer marketing performance	
		Encountering fraudulent influencers	
		Advantages of influencer marketing	Increased brand accessibility
			Improved brand credibility
	Receiving feedback		
	Reaching more audiences at lower costs		
	Cost-effectiveness		
	Production of credible content		
	Possibility of collaborating with unsuitable influencers		

Dimensions	Categories	Indicators
Strategy	Disadvantages of influencer marketing	Difficulty in selecting appropriate influencers
		High risk
		Difficulty in measuring advertising results
	Recognition	Brand Connection
		Perceived value
		Access to target market
		Information personalization
		Visibility
		Perceived participation
		High return on investment rate
	Loyalty improvement	Customer value proposition
		Increased customer satisfaction
		Perceived friendship
		Product information transparency
		Reduced marketing costs
	Perceived credibility improvement	Characteristics of social media influencers
		Brand image
		Inviting celebrities to events and sharing images and news on networks and websites
		Perceived honesty of influencer
	Improvement of influencer marketing techniques	Reliability
		Discount codes and affiliate links
		Using various social media platforms for advertising
	Cost improvement	Using augmented reality in marketing
Increasing access to potential customers		
Creativity in advertising		
Audience growth rate		
Reduction in transportation costs		
Consequences	Efficiency and effectiveness of influencer marketing	Reduction in advertising campaign costs
		Reduction in content creation and production costs
		Time and cost management
		Influencer's experience using the advertised brand
	Development of advertising on social networks	Alignment of advertisements with the advertised brand
		Brand personality
		Relevance of influencer's activity area to the brand
		Average visit duration and likes
		View-based advertising
	Campaign development and sustainability	Video creation for brand introduction on social networks by influencer marketing
Content production by the influencer and posting it on social networks		
Display of advertisements in influencers' posts		
Collaboration in sales marketing		
Perceived organizational value		
	Branding, Long-term campaign	
	Short-term campaign	
	Advertised product	
	Attitude towards influencer	
		Attitude towards brand

Dimensions	Categories	Indicators
	Increased trust in influencer	Perceived organizational value
		Value and credibility of advertising content
		Influencer authenticity
		Improved product evaluation
		Improved brand image
		Social influence
		Celebrity endorser expertise
	Improvement of customer relationship system	Fit between celebrity and advertised product
		Transparency
		Online customer reviews and ratings
		Influencer's personality traits
		Providing content tailored to followers' needs
		Influencer-content match
		Receiving feedback tailored to the target market
		Content usefulness and relevance for visitors
		Influencer's skill and credibility
		Users' attitudes towards influencer familiarity
		Users' Attitudes Towards Influencer Likeability

Conceptual Model

In this section, the extracted research model based on the coding of interview data using the grounded theory method is shown in Figure 1.

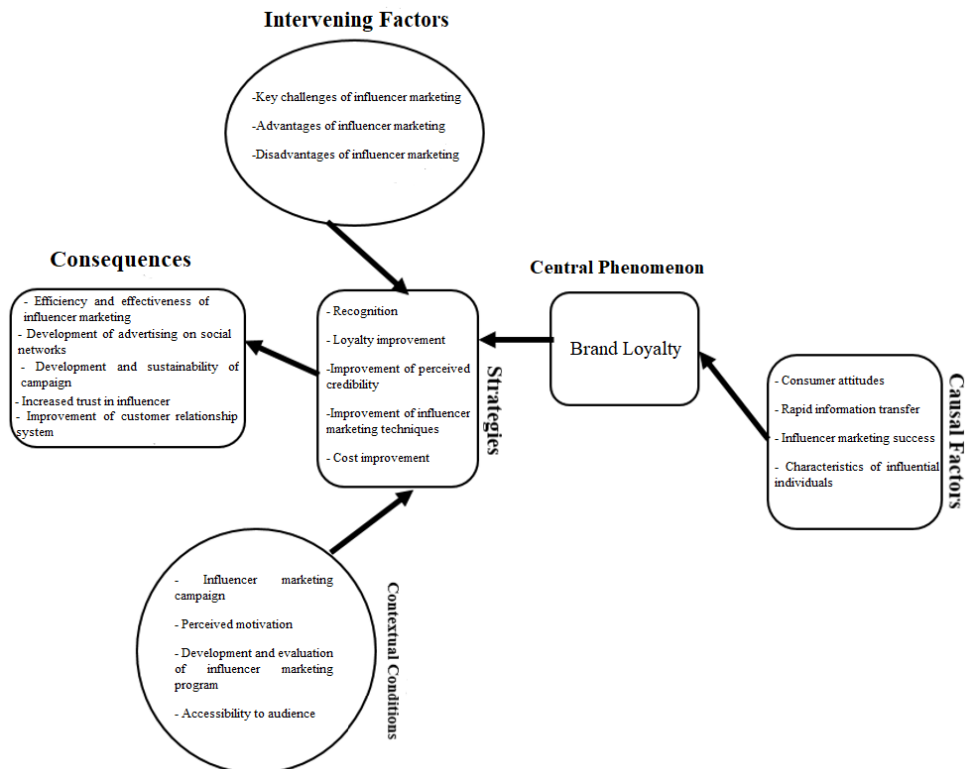


Figure 1 - Influencer Marketing Model for Brand Loyalty Using Grounded Theory Method

Model Validation

Finally, after coding, to ensure research reliability, criteria of acceptability, confirmability, and reliability were used. Initially, to confirm the accuracy of the findings, interviews and coded findings were sent to 5 participants to express their opinions about the interview questions. Based on the feedback received from participants, all questions were reviewed and finalized. Also, to ensure the reliability of findings, efforts were made to clearly explain the processes and decisions related to the research in the text. Additionally, to confirm the results, findings were compared with previous research. Finally, to assess the validity of the research findings, they were presented to participants, who reviewed the text and applied their perspectives and opinions. At the end of coding, this research was also studied and reviewed by professors, and after applying changes, the final theory was stated. Lastly, to calculate the reliability of interviews, two PhD students in statistics were used and asked to participate in the research as research collaborators. Given that the agreement between the researcher and those collaborating with the researcher was over 60 percent, the reliability of the coding was confirmed.

VI. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Influencer marketing is rapidly becoming one of the most effective ways for companies to reach target audiences and create brand loyalty. Today, companies use traditional methods for advertising because consumers are looking for more credible and personal recommendations from people they trust. The world of influencer marketing is where individuals with many followers on social media act as the face of a brand and promote their products or services to their fans. Given the increased use of social media in businesses, the value of marketing through influencers and its impact on brand loyalty for businesses has not been comprehensively examined so far. Therefore, this research aims to design a conceptual model of important factors in better performance of influencer marketing and examine its impact on brand loyalty using the grounded theory method. A purposive sampling method was used. Analysis of interviews led to the identification of six main categories including causal conditions, contextual conditions, central phenomenon, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. Focusing on better performance of influencer marketing and examining its impact on brand loyalty, interviewees described the what and why of the main phenomenon, and in these descriptions, they referred to it when expressing their views, opinions, and experiences, which mainly focused on components and fundamental categories affecting brand loyalty and as one of the most important phenomena that can provide an appropriate response to better understand influencer marketing and its challenges. Therefore, to examine the subject under study, first through interviews with 15 experts in the field of marketing, a comprehensive and complete study was conducted on the better performance of influencer marketing to determine target dimensions and criteria. Influencer marketing criteria were designed. The model obtained in the present study consisted of 5 dimensions, 21 components, and 99 indicators, respectively.

The results of coding all factors are categorized based on 5 dimensions: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening factors, consequences, and strategies. In the causal conditions dimension, factors (such as consumer attitudes, rapid information transfer, influencer marketing success, and characteristics of influential individuals), in the contextual conditions dimension, factors (such as influencer marketing campaign, perceived motivation, development and evaluation of influencer marketing program, and audience accessibility), in the intervening factors dimension, factors (such as key challenges of influencer marketing, advantages of influencer marketing, and disadvantages of influencer marketing), in the consequences dimension, factors (such as efficiency and effectiveness of influencer marketing, development of advertising on social networks, campaign development and sustainability, increased trust in influencer, and improvement of customer relationship system), and in the strategies dimension, factors (such as recognition, loyalty improvement, perceived credibility improvement, improvement of influencer marketing techniques, and cost improvement) are categorized.

Influencer marketing is a rapidly emerging management approach. There is growing research on influencer marketing that almost exclusively focuses on consumer markets and product-oriented advertising in the social sphere (Hudders et al., 2021; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021). Influencer marketing provides a way for brands to utilize this process and reach audiences that might be difficult to access through other channels. Moreover, influencer marketing often leads to higher engagement and conversion rates compared to traditional advertising methods, making it a more cost-effective way for brands to reach their target audiences. As a result, more companies are incorporating influencer marketing into their overall marketing strategy, leading to its increased popularity. To succeed in creating brand loyalty through influencer marketing, companies need to find the right influencer for their brand. This involves considering factors such as the size of their following, their level

of engagement, and overall fit with the brand and its target audience. Measuring the success of influencer marketing campaigns is also crucial, as it helps companies understand what works and where they need to improve. Consequently, it can be said that influencer marketing is a powerful tool for building brand loyalty, and its impact on the marketing landscape will only grow in the future. As a result, understanding the role that marketing plays in creating brand loyalty is essential for success.

There are several key advantages to using influencer marketing for building brand loyalty, including increased reach and visibility, the ability to target specific audience segments, and creating more authentic and personalized marketing experiences. Additionally, social media plays a crucial role in influencer marketing, as it provides a platform for influencers to reach their followers and for brands to connect with their target audiences. In influencer marketing, brands can leverage the influence and impact of celebrities among their followers to achieve marketing goals and introduce their products and services. The foundation of the effectiveness of this type of advertising is people's greater trust in recommendations from a well-known and trusted person compared to the brand's statements. Even when individuals intend to purchase a product, they pay more attention to the opinions of users who have used that product than to the brand's advertisements. The following suggestions are provided in the field of influencer marketing:

- From a managerial perspective, this study offers several important insights that can help managers better understand, implement, and manage influencer marketing strategies in markets. The findings indicate that influencer marketing in the market has specific characteristics that distinguish it from influencer marketing in various markets such as B2B or B2C. This means that managers cannot simply adopt influencer marketing programs and strategies designed for consumer markets to deliver similar results in their business.
- For influencer marketing to be effective in organizations and companies, it must have appropriate communication with audience behavior, acceptable social capital, regular content production, and a willingness to generate income. Therefore, their effectiveness is mainly based on credibility, attractiveness, parasocial interaction, and congruence. The first two can be considered personality traits, while the latter two refer to customer relationships and engagement. Influencer marketing establishes a long-term parasocial relationship with their followers through their communications, involving their followers in their lives. Therefore, influencer marketing is more relatable and accessible than celebrities. Hence, companies need to pay more attention to these issues.
- Managers of various brands who are interested in using electronic marketing or influencer marketing for their marketing purposes are advised to use individuals in their advertisements who are popular and intimate influencers among users on social media platforms like Instagram. This can create a positive attitude towards the advertisement and brand among the chosen influencer's followers and increase the likelihood of purchase. It is also recommended that influencers try to behave in a way that aligns with their audience's preferences. Influencers can introduce the brand as a suitable one through visual and video content, allowing customers to feel this brand.
- With the increasing importance of influencer marketing, marketing professionals should be able to learn from their experiences to create successful influencer marketing campaigns. Marketing professionals need to understand that even if they want to incorporate their brand message into influential content, they should trust the influencer in content production by providing all relevant information and then release their freedom in creativity. The most important thing before contracting with an influencer is to ensure that the influencer fully aligns with the brand, campaign, and objective. Since credibility and reliability are built more with long-term collaborations, future research could focus on how to establish these long-term partnerships with influencers.

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