

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The impact of congruence on consumer engagement with brands on social media

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the mechanisms behind the effectiveness of influencer marketing on social media and its role in shaping consumer engagement. Therefore, the study surveyed 703 Tunisian consumers on Instagram, analyzing different forms of congruence (brand-influencer, brand-consumer, and influencer-consumer) and their impact on consumer engagement with brands on social media. The study's findings reveal that consumer engagement significantly influences brand image and visit intention. However, while influencer-consumer congruence and brand-influencer congruence strongly affect engagement indicators, brand-consumer congruence does not show a significant effect on consumer engagement. Consumer engagement acts as a key mediator, positively influencing brand image and visit intention. These results offer valuable insights for marketing professionals seeking to optimize their social media influence strategies, particularly regarding influencer selection and the importance of fostering authentic connections with target audiences.

Keywords: Marketing influence; congruence of perception; engagement with consumers; brand marketing; visit intention; social media; Instagram; tourism marketing

1. Introduction

This paper explores how social media is transforming digital marketing promotional strategies. With over 3.7 billion active users on social media platforms in 2021^[1], these platforms represent both an opportunity and a challenge for brands that interact closely with their consumers. In this context, social media marketing represents a strategic approach that enables businesses to reach audiences through personal content shared on social networks.

A recent meta-analysis of 62 studies involving more than 22,000 participants confirmed a consistent trend: influencers' credibility, expertise, and alignment with the promoted product significantly impact consumer engagement and attention^[2].

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 3 June 2025 | Accepted: 25 July 2025 | Available online: 31 July 2025

CITATION

Zouari EA, Sobaih AEE, Nouicer H, et al.. The impact of congruence on consumer engagement with brands on social media. *Environment and Social Psychology* 2025; 10(7): 3779. doi:10.59429/esp.v10i7.3779

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Thus, the effectiveness of influencer marketing raises several important questions. One of the main concerns is the authenticity and credibility of the brand message when relayed by an influencer. The strategy relies on mechanisms that foster engagement with sponsored content. Findings suggest that the source and the strength of the connection between influencers and their followers are key factors driving this engagement^[3]. The central issue remains the long-term effect of this strategy on the consumer-brand relationship.

To address this question, this study's literature review has focused on the concept of congruence from multiple perspectives. First, the congruence between the brand image and the influencer's image^[4,5]. Second, the demographic alignment between influencers and their followers, which positively impacts consumers' decisions and strengthens the brand's influence^[6]. Third, the match between the brand and the consumer's self-image^[7,8].

Recent studies show that consumer-product congruence and consumer-influencer congruence follow distinct dynamics when it comes to influencing impulsive buying intentions online ^[9]. These findings highlight the importance of combining various content formats in the specific context of influencer marketing on social media.

Consumer engagement on social media has seen significant developments^[10,11], yet the implications for marketing professionals still warrant deeper investigation. In particular, the relationship between influencer-generated engagement and constructs like brand attachment or purchase intention remains a topic of interest.

To address these gaps, this study proposes an integrative model that examines the impact of different forms of congruence (influencer-brand, consumer-brand, and consumer-influencer) on consumer engagement across social media platforms. In addition, it examines the influence of consumer engagement on brand attachment and purchase intention. To test this model, we conducted a quantitative study among Tunisian Instagram users who follow influencers. The study offers several contributions. It provides a comparative analysis of the underlying mechanisms that drive influencer marketing effectiveness and evaluates the relative impact of different types of congruence. Moreover, it adds to the literature on consumer engagement by examining both its antecedents and consequences within this specific context. From a managerial perspective, we propose four practical recommendations for companies to optimize their influencer strategies on social media-particularly concerning influencer selection and alignment with brand image.

2.Theoretical framework and hypothesis development

2.1.The marketing influence on social media

Influencer marketing can be defined as "the process of identification and activation of individuals who have influence over a target audience or media, to be part of a brand campaign to increase reach, sales, or engagement"^[12]. With the help of social media, this practice has seen significant development, leading to the emergence of a new category of influencers: the "Social Media Influencers" (SMIs). These SMIs are defined by Freberg et al. ^[13] as "*a new type of independent endorser who influences audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media*" (p. 1). Unlike traditional celebrities, these influencers establish their presence online and have the capacity to create content that engages their followers. A recent meta-analysis demonstrates that the entertainment value of influencer content and its association with consumer engagement are key factors, as influencer credibility significantly impacts audience attention^[2].

The effectiveness of influencer marketing is based on psychological mechanisms. These influencers, who function as opinion leaders, have created a model for building consumer affiliation. Influencer

marketing stems from the concept of word-of-mouth (WOM) but operates within a digital and professionalized context^[12]. As noted by Sudha and Sheena^[12], "Influencer marketing is an extension of traditional word-of-mouth marketing, adapted to a social media environment with a more professionalized approach.

Influencers act as credible and authentic voices, much like trusted figures in traditional advertisement, shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors. This authenticity is key to their impact, fostering strong connections between influencers and their followers across diverse demographics ^[6]. However, the effectiveness of influencer marketing depends on several factors, including the credibility of the influencer and the alignment (congruence) between the influencer, the brand, and the target audience. Prior research emphasizes the importance of congruence ensuring a natural fit between the influencer's persona, the brand's identity, and consumer expectations.

2.2. Leave contact information and engagement with consumers

Congruence plays a crucial role in the engagement of consumers on social media. There are distinct mechanisms that explain this relationship. The Meaning Transfer Theory ^[14] explains how the meanings associated with an influencer can be transferred to a brand. When there is a strong connection between the brand and the influencer, the credibility of the message increases, leading to a more favorable attitude toward the brand ^[15]. Recent research suggests that the source credibility and the visibility of the brand are key factors influencing consumer engagement with sponsored content ^[3]. In addition, the self-congruence theory ^[7] proposes that consumers are naturally drawn to brands whose image aligns with their own self-concept. De Vries and Carlson ^[16] showed that this congruence enhances engagement with brand pages on social media. The coherence between the consumer's self-image and the brand's image creates a favorable environment for interaction and engagement. Furthermore, the attraction-similarity theory ^[17] suggests that individuals are more receptive to messages from people who resemble or relate to them. Recent studies have confirmed that demographic similarity and alignment between influencers and their followers significantly impact consumers' willingness to adopt or spread the brand's message ^[6]. This similarity also enhances the influencer's credibility and encourages greater engagement with shared content ^[18]. Based upon the above theories and discussion, it could be suggested that:

H1: Congruence has a positive effect on consumer engagement with brands on social media.

This main hypothesis is divided into three sub-hypotheses, each corresponding to a different identification mechanism:

H1a: Brand-influencer congruence has a positive effect on consumer engagement.

H1b: Brand-consumer congruence (self-congruence) positively influences consumer engagement.

H1c: Similarity between the influencer and consumers positively affects consumer engagement.

2.3. Brand love and its role in social engagement

Brand love is a well-established concept in marketing literature, situated within the broader framework of consumer-brand relationships. Carroll and Ahuvia ^[19] define brand love as “the degree of emotional passion that satisfies a part of the self through the brand” (p. 81). Albert and Merunka ^[20] demonstrated that brand love is distinct from related constructs such as trust and brand identification, although it is significantly influenced by them. Literature provides substantial evidence of the positive effects of brand love. These include greater customer loyalty, a willingness to pay premium prices, and increased engagement with the brand ^[20]. Such findings underscore the importance of marketers to develop strategies that foster strong emotional connections with consumers. In the context of social media, brand love can be seen as a natural

outcome of consumer engagement with brand-related content. This connection plays a crucial role in influencer marketing, where factors such as trust and brand identification—core elements of consumer-brand relationships ^[20] are further strengthened through demographic similarity and affinity between the influencer and their followers ^[6].

Hollebeek et al. ^[11] argue, however, that consumer engagement does not automatically lead to emotional attachment or love for a brand. This nuance is especially relevant in influencer marketing, where meaningful interactions, authenticity, and human connection are key to fostering emotional bonds. When influencers share content that resonates with their audience, they can cultivate deep emotional ties between consumers and the brand. Based on these theoretical and empirical insights, it could be proposed that:

H2: Consumer engagement with brands on social media has a positive effect on brand love.

2.4. Visit intention in the context of influencer marketing

Visit intention, a concept originally developed in tourism and destination marketing literature, refers to an individual's likelihood or willingness to visit a specific destination in the future ^[21]. In the context of influencer marketing, recent studies suggest that influencers' attractiveness and expertise can significantly shape consumers' desire to visit places featured in shared content ^[22].

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior ^[23], visit intention is a strong predictor of actual behavior. This intention can be seen as a participatory response to influencer-generated content, which often evokes affective responses like inspiration and desire ^[22]. Engagement with such content helps cultivate this intention, particularly when influencers convey authentic and compelling experiences. This perspective aligns with recent findings showing that influencer content plays a major role in driving consumer engagement ^[2], and that source credibility is a critical determinant of that engagement ^[3]. Prior research on consumer engagement ^[10] also suggests that the more consumers interact with brand content on social media, the more likely they are to develop favorable attitudes and intentions toward the brand, including the intention to visit destinations promoted by the brand or influencer. Based on these theoretical foundations, it could be proposed that:

H3: Consumer engagement with brands on social media has a positive effect on visit intention.

These hypotheses are integrated into a conceptual model (Figure 1) that proposes how various forms of congruence influence consumer engagement with brands on social media. This engagement, in turn, affects both brand love and visit intention. The conceptual model is visually represented in the following graphic, outlining the relationships explored in this study.

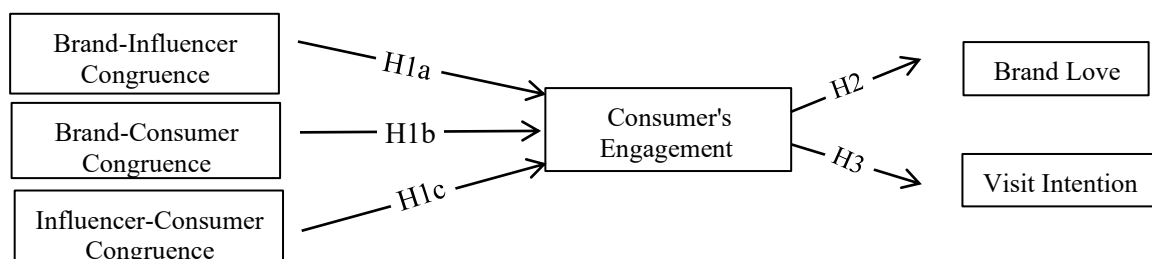


Figure 1. The conceptual model

3. Methodology

3.1. The study design

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a quantitative study with Tunisian consumers who follow influencers on Instagram. The selection of this platform is justified by its central role in influencer marketing, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sectors ^[21]. In Tunisia, Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms, particularly among young adults, making it an effective channel for analyzing the impact of influencers on consumer decisions. Due to its emphasis on visual content and interactive features such as stories and sponsored partnerships, Instagram facilitates rapid interaction between influencers and followers, affecting perceptions and intentions. Additionally, the prevalence of tourism recommendations and destination content makes this platform well-suited to our research context.

3.2. Data collection

The data was collected via a self-administered questionnaire, distributed primarily through social media and Instagram stories of a popular Tunisian social media influencer in the tourism and lifestyle domain. This approach allowed us to access to Tunisian consumers who actively follow influencers on Instagram. It also enables capturing spontaneous responses in the authentic, immersive, and interactive environment of Instagram stories. The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into Tunisian Arabic to ensure better comprehension and response accuracy. It was piloted with bi-lingual experts to ensure accuracy.

3.3. Sample

The final sample consists of 703 valid responses, predominantly from women (98%), with the majority aged between 18 and 30 years (74.7%). This female predominance can be explained by the nature of the influencer and content selected for the study, which appeals primarily to a female audience. This demographic composition accurately reflects the typical follower profile of fashion and lifestyle influencers on Instagram in Tunisia, which is characterized by a predominance of female audiences. The influencer marketing industry in Tunisia, particularly in the fashion and lifestyle sectors, shows a clear female dominance, which our sample reflects in a relevant and representative way ^[24].

While not representative of the general population, this sample composition reflects the typical follower profile of fashion and lifestyle influencers on Instagram in Tunisia. However, the homogeneous composition of our sample limits the generalizability of the results to other audiences or types of influencers. The strong female overrepresentation particularly reduces applicability to male consumers or mixed-gender markets. Future research should seek more balanced samples to better analyze gender-related differences in influencer marketing.

The research adhered to fundamental ethical principles. Participants provided explicit consent and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The influencer who assisted in distributing the questionnaire was fully informed about the research collaboration. Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any point.

3.4. Measures

All variables in the model were measured using multi-item scales adapted from existing literature and translated into French. Responses were collected using 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). The table is one of the current ones, the number of items to choose from, as well as the relevant sources. The measurement scale is presented in Table 1. Full research items are presented in Appendix 1.

Table 1. Measurement scale

Measure	Items	Source
Brand congruence	3 items	[25]
Brand-consumer congruence	6 items	[25]
Influencer-consumer congruence	4 items	[25]
Engagement with consumers on social media brands	15 items	[26]
Love for the brand	8 items	[19]
Intention to visit	3 items	[27]

3.5. Data analysis

We conducted Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using Varimax rotation to verify the factorial structure and reliability of the measurement instruments. Subsequently, we used regression analysis to test our hypotheses. The exploratory factor analyses confirmed the unidimensional structure of most of our constructs, with the exception of brand love, which revealed two dimensions: positive emotions and neutral emotions toward the brand (see Table 2). We would like to clarify that the variance percentages presented in Table 2 represent the variance explained by each factor in the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), while the R^2 values reported in the results section (Tables 3, 4, and 5) indicate the explanatory power of the predictor variables in the regression models.

Table 2. Measurement scale purification

Variables	Percentage of variance explained	Cronbach's alpha	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	Bartlett's sphericity test
Brand congruence	83,847%	0.901	0.742	Significant (p=0,000)
Brand-consumer congruence	64,495%	0.890	0.831	Significant (p=0,000)
Influencer-consumer congruence	84,438%	0.938	0.864	Significant (p=0,000)
Engagement with consumers on social media brands	52,956%	0.931	0.912	Significant (p=0,000)
Love for the brand	75,516%			
Brand love: positive feelings	49,062%	0.925*	0.737	Significant (p=0,000)
Brand love: new feelings	26,454%	0.914*	0.737	Significant (p=0,000)
Intention to visit	68,702%	0.870	0.703	Significant (p=0,000)

These high-quality psychological components include the percentages of variance that show satisfactory results (>50%); Cronbach's satisfactory alphas (>0.8), acceptable KMOs (>0.7) and Bartlett tests all signs.

4. Results

4.1. Impact of congruence on the engagement of consumers

The regression analysis revealed a significant positive effect of congruence on consumer engagement for two dimensions of congruence: congruence influencer-consumer: ($\beta = 0.255$, $p < 0.001$) and congruence brand -influencer: ($\beta = 0.289$, $p < 0.001$). However, there is no significant relationship between brand-consumer congruence and engagement ($\beta = -0.014$, $p = 0.710$). These results confirm the H1 hypothesis. Hypotheses H1a and H1c are accepted, while H1b is rejected.

Table 3. Regression analysis between congruence and consumer engagement with brands on social media

	β	Student (t)	Value P	R ²
Brand Congruence	0.289	7.984	0,000	0.083
Brand-consumer congruence	-0.014	-0.372	0.710	0,000
Influencer-consumer congruence	0.255	6.987	0,000	0.065

The coefficients of determination (R²) offer a reasonable explanation for the impact of congruence variables on engagement, with 8.3% of the variance explained by brand-influencer congruence and 6.5% explained by influencer-consumer congruence.

4.2. Impact of engagement on the brand

The regression analysis reveals a positive effect and significance of consumer engagement on the "positive sentiments" dimension of brand love ($\beta = 0.382$, $p < 0.001$). However, the significant effect does not appear on the "neutral sentiments" dimension ($\beta = 0.054$, $p = 0.152$).

Table 4. The regression analysis between consumer engagement with brands on social media and brand information

	β	Student (t)	Value P	R ²
Engagement → Positive feelings	0.382	10.941	0.000	0.146
Engagement → Neutral feelings	0.054	1.434	0.152	0.003

These results validate our hypothesized H2, with an R² indicating that engagement explains 14.6% of the variance in positive sentiments toward the brand, while the effect on neutral sentiments is negligible (R² = 0.003).

4.3. Impact of engagement on visit interest

The regression analysis shows a positive and significant effect of consumer engagement on visit intention ($\beta = 0.362$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Regression analysis of consumer engagement on social media and visit intention

	β	Student (t)	Value P	R ²
Engagement	0.362	10.270	0.000	0.131

This result confirms our H3 hypothesis, with an R² indicating that the engagement increases the variance of the visitor's interest by 13.1%.

5. Discussion and implications

Our findings shed new light on the mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of influencer marketing on social media. Primarily, we highlight the crucial role of influencers in stimulating consumer engagement. These results align with recent work by Talha et al. [3] on the importance of source credibility and influencer-follower congruence in driving engagement with sponsored content, as well as Verma et al.'s [6] demonstration that demographic and attitudinal congruence helps transform followers into brand ambassadors. However, unlike previous studies, we found that brand-consumer congruence does not significantly affect engagement—a result that resonates with Koay and Lim's [9] findings on the distinct dynamics of consumer-product congruence versus consumer-influencer congruence in social media contexts. This non-significant effect can be explained by the mediated nature of influencer marketing, where consumers primarily engage with the influencer rather than directly with the brand [18]. In these contexts, parasocial relationships with influencers may carry more weight than traditional brand-consumer congruence mechanisms, as followers prioritize the influencer's authenticity over brand alignment [28].

Secondly, our results confirm the central role of consumer engagement in shaping brand perception and visit intentions. Consistent with Ao et al.'s ^[2] meta-analysis, we emphasize that the entertainment value of influencer content is critical for driving engagement. Similarly, Yusra et al. ^[22] highlight how engagement directly influences visit intention in tourism contexts.

These findings offer important managerial implications. First, strategic influencer selection: brands should carefully select influencers based on their congruence with brand image and ability to foster authentic connections with target audiences. The results suggest that the alignment between influencer and brand values is more important than attempting to match influencers with existing customer profiles. Second, content strategy development: content strategies should balance active engagement with passive consumption. Marketers should design social media campaigns that encourage followers to engage with content beyond mere passive viewing, as engagement serves as a crucial mediator for developing positive brand perceptions. Third, holistic performance measurement: performance measurement should adopt a holistic approach, combining traditional metrics with engagement indicators and long-term brand-consumer relationship effects, as suggested by Albert and Merunka ^[20]. Specifically, brands should track not only immediate engagement metrics but also monitor subsequent impacts on brand love and visit intention. Fourth, long-term relationship building: ultimately, effective influencer marketing not only generates short-term engagement but also builds lasting consumer relationships, strengthening brand equity in the digital landscape. Marketers should view influencer partnerships as strategic investments in developing enduring consumer-brand connections rather than merely tactical promotional activities.

6. Conclusion

This study enhances understanding of the mechanisms driving influencer marketing effectiveness on social media by examining how different forms of congruence impact consumer engagement, brand perception, and visit intentions. Our findings highlight the critical role of influencer-brand and influencer-consumer congruence in stimulating engagement, while brand-consumer congruence showed no significant effect. Consumer engagement emerges as a key mediator in building brand relationships, directly influencing brand attachment and visit intentions.

These insights offer several key managerial implications for marketing professionals. Brands should prioritize authentic brand-influencer fit over demographic matching when selecting influencers, as message credibility stems more from perceived authenticity than audience similarity. Additionally, marketers should develop comprehensive engagement metrics that capture both immediate interactions and downstream effects on brand perception and behavioral intentions. Content strategies should emphasize creating emotionally resonant experiences that leverage the influencer's authentic voice while maintaining clear brand alignment. Finally, tourism and hospitality brands can leverage influencer partnerships as strategic assets in destination marketing, given the strong relationship between engagement and visit intention.

The study's limitations include its cross-sectional design, the single-country context, the focus on a single platform, and the absence of demographic control variables due to the homogeneous composition of our sample (98% young females). Moreover, our methodological approach using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to adapt existing scales to the Tunisian cultural context was not complemented by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which constitutes another limitation. Indeed, it would be valuable for future research to use CFA to confirm the stability of the measurement model.

Although this sample reflects the typical follower profile of lifestyle influencers on Instagram in Tunisia, it limits the generalizability of the findings to broader consumer populations. Future research should address

these limitations by adopting longitudinal designs, conducting cross-cultural studies, exploring new social media technologies, implementing multi-influencer sampling strategies across diverse categories, and using more demographically diverse samples to allow for the inclusion of relevant control variables. As digital marketing continues to evolve, understanding the nuanced relationships between congruence, engagement, and consumer outcomes remains important for both theory and practice in influencer marketing.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, E.A.Z., A.E.E.S., H.N., and H.N.E.E.; methodology, E.A.Z. and H.N.; validation, E.A.Z. and A.E.E.S.; formal analysis, E.A.Z., A.E.E.S. and H.N.; investigation, E.A.Z., and H.N.; resources, E.A.Z.; data curation, H.N.; writing—original draft preparation E.A.Z., A.E.E.S., H.N. and H.N.E.E.; writing—review and editing, A.E.E.S.; visualization, E.A.Z., and A.E.E.S.; supervision, A.E.E.S.; project administration, E.A.Z.; funding acquisition, H.N.E.E. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research, Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia [Project No. KFU252038].

Institutional review board statement

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the deanship of scientific research ethical committee, King Faisal University (project number: KFU252038, date of approval: 01/01/2025).

Informed consent statement

“Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.”

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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Appendix 1: The components are removed

1. Congruence ^[25]

Brand-Influencer Congruence

- The brand and influencer are in the ensemble
- The influencer
- The influencer
- Brand-Consumer Congruence
- The mark and it conforms to the image that comes from my name.
- I am similar to the customer type of the brand Y
- The image that comes from the client's brand name is harmonious with the image that comes from my name.
- The mark and it conforms to the image that you want to see in your life.
- I'm looking for something similar to the client's brand name
- The image of the client's brand name is harmonious with the image that you want from your home.
- Influencer-Consumer Congruence
- The influencer person corresponds to the person who called you.
- The influencer person is the one you want
- The influencer person refers to the person you are looking for.
- The influencer's person is called the person who is the identifier

2. Consumer's Engagement with social media ^[26]

Consumption

- I see the posts on the X brand on the social media
- I see the pages of fans linked to the X brand on the social media
- I look at the photos/images attached to the X brand
- I also have blogs linked to the X brand
- I am on the X brand on social media

Contribution

- Please comment on the videos listed on the X brand
- Please comment on the posts listed on the X brand
- Please comment on the photos/images of the X brand
- I share the content attached to the brand X
- I "like" the photos/images of the X brand
- I "like" the posts on the brand X

Creation

- Join the posts on the X brand on the social media
- I post photos/images on the X mark
- I post videos that support the brand X
- They are displayed on the marque X

3. Brand Love ^[29]

- This brand is fantastic.
- This brand is very good.
- I have feelings for new people around this market
- I love this brand
- I am passionate about this brand
- I am also attached to this brand
- This is what makes me feel comfortable
- I don't have any specific feelings for this brand
- This brand makes me happy

4. Intention visit ^[27]

- I visit the destination where I live
- I visit the destination in six places
- I visit the destination in the nearby places