



# The Role of Influencer Marketing in Brand Growth: Insights from Successful and Failed Campaigns

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**Research Question:** To what extent can influencer marketing effectively drive brand growth and awareness?

## Abstract

This paper examines the pivotal role of influencer marketing in driving brand growth, analyzing its evolution as a key component of social media marketing. Drawing on theoretical frameworks like the Source Credibility Model and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the study explores how the correct application of influencer marketing contributes to brand success. A case study of Gymshark highlights its strategic selection of influencers and their alignment with brand values, demonstrating how authenticity and credibility foster consumer trust and loyalty. In contrast, the Pepsi and Kendall Jenner campaign underscores the risks of misaligned influencer choices, particularly when addressing sensitive social issues. The paper also evaluates the implications of technological advancements, focusing on the emergence of AI influencers and their potential to revolutionize the landscape.

**Key Words:** influencer marketing, brand growth, social media marketing, Source Credibility Model, Elaboration Likelihood Model, AI influencers

## Introduction

Marketing is described as a business's actions to advertise its goods or services to a target market, which often consists of customers or other businesses (Twin, 2021). Marketing can be traditional or digital, whereby the medium through which the product is promoted separates the two approaches. Digital marketing uses digital media like

websites and social media, whereas traditional marketing employs traditional media like magazines and newspapers. Given social media's rapid growth in relevance, social media marketing (SMM)—one of the most prominent digital marketing strategies—now appears to be displacing all other forms of marketing. Within SMM, the concept of influencer and influencer marketing has witnessed significant growth in the last few years. To a certain extent, this form of marketing is a newer extension of celebrity endorsements but perhaps an even more impactful one since influencers can use their powerful presence within social media to advocate for a brand by creating native ads that tend to resonate better with consumers, which, in turn, can enhance advertising performance and improve overall conversion (Topalova, 2021).

However, whilst many brands may find success in influencer marketing, specifically with regard to brand growth, it is vital to curate such strategies with care and ensure the influencers being selected and the messages being delivered through such content are all relevant and in line with the brand's image, values and consumer expectations. If a mismatch occurs between the aforementioned factors, such marketing can damage the brand more than benefit it. Considering this, this research paper aims to answer the question: **"To what extent can influencer marketing effectively drive brand growth and awareness?"**

This paper argues that influencer marketing, through its unique ability to establish authenticity, trust, and engagement, when executed correctly, has the ability to be a transformative tool for brand growth and awareness in the digital era.

## **Literature Review**

Marketing has witnessed a great deal of evolution over the years. Most brands began with traditional marketing, which involves using conventional channels like print and broadcast media to build awareness of the company's goods and services. Even though digital marketing—which will be addressed in more detail soon—seems to have surpassed traditional marketing methods, many firms continue to use channels such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, outdoor advertising, phone calls, direct mail, and networking to promote their goods. There are many reasons for this, and some of them include the ability to reach audiences who do not use digital media frequently and the generation of large eyeball shares as a result of these adverts being predominantly placed in public areas wherein many people are able to view it, even if unintentionally (Bhasin, 2020).

The other branch of marketing is digital. Digital Marketing encompasses four different types of marketing that play a crucial role in any business - there are; content marketing, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Search Engine Marketing (SEM), and the most popular form of digital marketing - Social Media Marketing (SMM) (Selvan, 2019;

Hughes, 2020). Focusing on the latter, social media refers to computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through virtual networks and communities. As per recent data, 5.07 billion people worldwide - more than half of the world (62.6%) - now use social media. 259 million new users have come online within the last year, and the average daily time spent using social media is 2h 20m (Chaffey, 2024). Over the years, marketers have also realized the potential of SMM, which, simply put, is the use of social media and social networks to market the products and services of a company (Hayes, 2021). Businesses around the world are rapidly using SMM in a bid to reach and engage with current and potential customers while promoting the desired culture, mission, and/or tone.

Companies can exploit many different social media platforms as they all offer unique features and take different forms. Some of the most popular are Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Each platform has faced tremendous growth over the years and provides brands with access to many active users (Robinson, 2020). Given that as of 2021, 75% of Gen Zers and 48% of millennials in the US were making purchasing decisions influenced by social media ads, it stands vital for brands to pick a social media platform that will work best for them and help them reach their desired audience (Statista, 2021). This may be based on the type of content the company can create, what channels its audience is most likely to use, and its wider digital marketing strategy. At the end of the day, regardless of the platform chosen, most forms of SMM will essentially encourage users to spread messages about the advertised products and services with their friends and followers and snowball the company's reach.

SMM also has many subcategories, but influencer marketing is one very popular type that is flooding the markets. Influencer marketing is a hybrid of old and new marketing tools wherein the idea of celebrity endorsements is taken and placed into a more modern-day setting (Geyser, 2018). It essentially uses influencers, who are defined as individuals with a dedicated social following and are viewed as experts within their niche, to endorse products and services. The main reason influencer marketing has grown in the last few years is that social influencers have been able to build a high level of trust with their followers. As a result, any product recommendations from them create purchase intention for the followers and lead to increased sales for brands (Sheikh, 2024). "The global influencer marketing market size has more than tripled since 2019. In 2024, the market was estimated to reach a record of 24 billion US dollars" (Statista, 2024). Therefore, most brands are seeing the potential of this form of SMM and are starting to embrace it (Geyser, 2018).

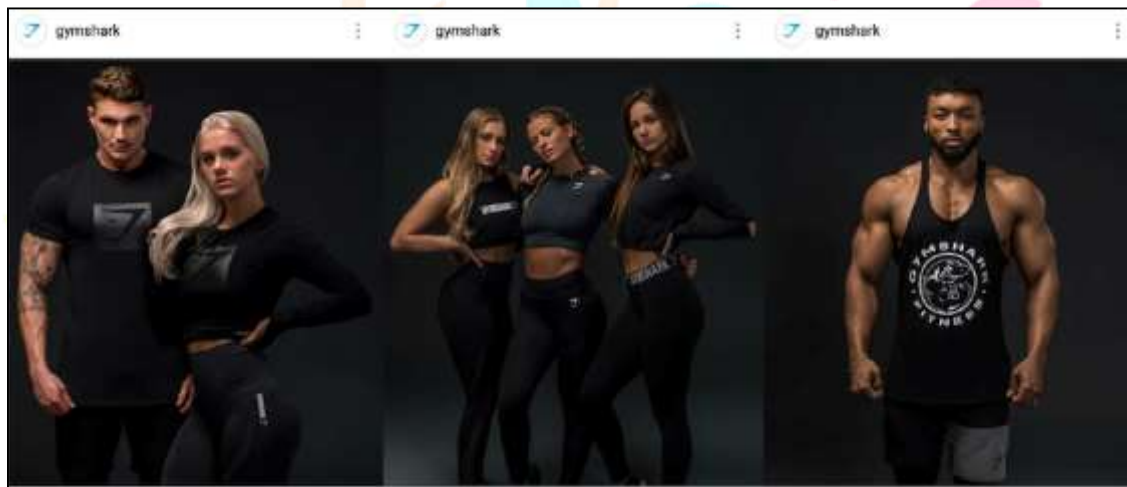
That being said, much thought and strategic planning must go into picking the appropriate influencer to collaborate with. Several theories explain its importance, including the source credibility model and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The source credibility model, for example, states that the effectiveness of a message depends mainly

on the perceived level of expertise and trustworthiness of a celebrity endorser. Hovland defines trustworthiness as ‘the degree of confidence in the communicator's intent to communicate the assertions he/she considers the most valid.’ On the other hand, expertise is derived from one’s subject knowledge and is the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions (Hovland et al., 1953). The source credibility model, therefore, emphasizes how crucial it is to choose influencers who are regarded as trustworthy and knowledgeable to optimize influencer marketing's effectiveness. An influencer with a trustworthy reputation and expertise in a relevant field—such as a fitness instructor endorsing health products—is likelier to connect with the target audience. This raises the promoted goods or service's perceived worth and legitimacy. On the other hand, a poorly selected influencer who doesn't fit the audience's expectations or the brand's values can erode trust and lessen the impact of a campaign. As a result, matching influencer traits to the brand guarantees genuineness and increases customer interaction.

The persuasiveness of celebrity and influencer endorsers in advertising can be further analyzed through the Cognitive Response Model (Greenwald, 1968). This model holds that persuasion occurs when the audience has favorable (the valence) thoughts or cognitions in response to a persuasive message, and the more, the better. Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is the most influential among the various cognitive response models. ELM is based on the assumption that recipients (consumers) respond to an advertising message in various ways depending on situational factors. On this basis, two situations related to an advertising message reception may be distinguished: high and low involvement. Under low involvement conditions, attitude change is processed through the peripheral route (Petty et al., 1986). This is when “consumers’ attitudes are based on a more tangential or superficial analysis of the message, not on an effortful analysis of its true merits” (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007, p. 127). In the second situation, the “consumers are more likely to devote a lot of effort toward and invest considerable personal involvement in forming or changing attitudes and making decisions” (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). Most researchers have considered the use of a celebrity or influencer endorser in an advertisement as a peripheral cue (Petty et al., 1988). The fact that celebrity or influencer endorsers are used as peripheral cues implies that their primary function is not to provide in-depth product information but rather to evoke strong feelings, draw attention, and improve brand awareness. To establish favorable associations in their influencer marketing strategies, brands must emphasize visually appealing and captivating material that fits the influencer's profile. This is especially important when addressing audiences who lack motivation or the ability for in-depth processing.

## Gymshark: Successful Use of Influencer Marketing for Brand Growth

Gymshark is a prime example of a brand that has witnessed significant growth due to the strategic use of influencer marketing. In 2012, Ben Francis built Gymshark as an athletic apparel retailer in his parent's garage. In 2020, the company was valued at \$1.45 billion when Francis sold a 21% stake to General Atlantic, a private equity firm. In 2021, net income more than doubled to \$68 million, while revenue grew by 78% to \$608 million (Tognini, 2023). Today, Gymshark is recognized as an athleisure powerhouse. According to the company website, “The Gymshark family of employees, athletes, and followers is now over 10 million strong, with a total social media following of over 18 million and customers in over 230 countries across 14 online stores. The company’s employee family is growing too, with over 900 employees across offices in five regions, including Solihull, UK, and Denver, Colorado” (Gymshark, 2024).



As one of the first companies to use influencer marketing, Gymshark has partnered with well-known YouTubers like Nikki Blacketter and Steve Cook in the US and Lex Griffin and Grace Beverly in the UK. While this was back in 2014, Gymshark has continuously invested in this strategy and built their influencer ecosystem to include Instagram influencers such as James Beardwell, Nathaniel Massiah, and Alli Jo and athletes like Irish professional boxer Katie Taylor and Ross Edgley, the first person to swim 1,780 miles around Great Britain, and successfully leveraged their following and reputation to grow their brand (Cook, 2020). Gymshark's ability to strategically choose whom to collaborate with is the cornerstone of its success with influencer marketing. Gymshark places a higher value on an influencer's authenticity and connection with its ethos than followers, which might otherwise seem like the obvious criterion for partnerships. Gymshark’s Head of PR, Stephanie O’Neill, explains, “It’s all about the vision and what they stand for. We are more interested in how social influencers engage their followers rather than how many they have” (Parfremment, 2021).

Creating anticipation for new launches and restocks is a key component of Gymshark's strategy. Influencers generate hype and a sense of urgency by actively promoting and counting down new releases on their social media platforms. Developing emotional bonds between Gymshark's ambassadors, products, and customers is another essential component of its approach. Within their niches, influencers are seen as celebrities, interacting with fans through meet-ups where fans may shop Gymshark's products and chat with their idols. Influencers build anticipation for these occasions by stating how excited they are to meet followers and forge stronger emotional ties. Stephanie explains that this strategy isn't purely financial: "We see all our meet-ups as an investment in our brand ethos rather than the ROI it brings financially" (Parfremment, 2021).

Overall, applying the Source Credibility Model and the ELM demonstrates how Gymshark's growth, ongoing brand awareness, and positive reinforcement have been facilitated by its reliance on influencers as peripheral cues, combined with the trustworthiness and expertise of the influencers it chooses to collaborate with.

### **Pepsi and Kendall Jenner Ad Campaign: A Case of Influencer Marketing Gone Wrong**



In 2017, Pepsi and Kendall Jenner partnered for a marketing campaign. "The idea was to stage a Black Lives Matter protest for Pepsi's global diversity campaign in collaboration with the supermodel. In the ad, we see Kendall Jenner abandon her ongoing photoshoot to join the protest with people of all races promoting 'unity in diversity'" (Kubbernus, 2024). As can be seen in the image to the left, taken from Victor (2017), once she joins the protest, she is seen handing one of the officers a can of Pepsi Cola, which, in this instance, is meant to symbolize peace. This campaign received immediate backlash, with many people labeling it tone-deaf on the part of both the brand as well as the influencer involved i.e., Jenner.

The failure of the collaboration can be further understood through the lens of the theories discussed in the literature review. Firstly, when the source credibility model is applied here, it becomes evident that Jenner, a popular model belonging to the Kardashian family who has witnessed growth in her career and gained popularity as an influencer in association with a life linked with luxury and privilege, was an incorrect choice to include in a campaign which was intended to address a serious social issue. Furthermore, with regard to the ELM, it can be proven that the campaign failed to persuade the audiences on both routes, i.e., the central route and the peripheral route. For instance, by trivializing activism, the campaign failed to resonate with audiences on both an intellectual and

emotional level, with many perceiving it as disingenuous. Moreover, negative associations were triggered by relying heavily on peripheral cues such as Jenner's star power and visual aesthetics. The polished and staged nature of the ad provided a direct contrast to the raw and real struggles of social movements. This, combined with the mismatch between the message and the messenger, made the campaign seem more exploitative than empowering and rubbed the public the wrong way, resulting in both parties being “accused of appropriating Black Lives Matter” (BBC, 2017).

### **Impact of Technology on the Future of Influencer Marketing**

Undoubtedly, influencer marketing, now a multi-million dollar industry reshaping brand strategies worldwide, is here to stay. However, there is some speculation regarding how it may evolve in the future. One of the biggest triggers of such change could be technologies such as artificial intelligence. More specifically, the implications of this technology have raised a question regarding whether influencers will continue to be human a few years later. A study by Twicsy.com (2024) shows that “human influencers earn 46 times more than their AI counterparts”. However, virtual influencers are gaining ground fast, with KBV Research (2024) projecting the market could reach \$37.8 billion by 2030, underscoring the key role this technology will play in the future of marketing. For instance, one of the leading virtual influencers is Lil Miquela, a 20-year-old Brazilian-American AI influencer residing in Los Angeles. Created in 2016 by Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou, Miquela now has over 2.5 million followers on Instagram. She has collaborated with several brands, including Dior, Prada, and Calvin Klein. Time Magazine also named Lil Miquela one of the top 25 most influential individuals on the internet (Singh, 2024).

While AI influencers completely replacing human influencers may be many years away, there is definitely a lot of potential for these virtual influencers that brands are already and can be expected to continue leveraging. Firstly, AI influencers provide brands with a practical way to address the issues of consistency and scale. Unlike humans, they work around the clock, communicate with audiences at any time, and are available on all platforms and languages. As per a report by HypeAuditor, “Virtual influencers have almost three times more engagement than real influencers. That means that followers are more engaged with virtual influencers' content” (Baklanov, 2019). The report also presented some interesting demographic findings suggesting that 18-24-year-old female users are the age group that is significantly more likely to engage with content from these influencers. Secondly, virtual influencers are also cost-effective. As per Gartner, switching from human to AI influencers could lower campaign costs by as much as 30% as fees, eliminating travel and logistics expenses (Lopez, 2024). This could make AI a viable solution for larger companies that require round-the-clock audience engagement.

All things considered, AI influencers do have certain risks, especially those associated with authenticity. Edelman said that 58% of consumers rank authenticity as a top criterion when they follow influencers (Lopez, 2024). While human influencers can forge emotional connections by sharing relatable and real stories and experiences, AI influencers still lack this depth of emotion. This could hinder the creation of long-term relationships and connections with consumers - a threat to brand growth. So, whilst AI is taking the influencer marketing industry into a new era where the technology is no longer deemed a threat but a medium that can facilitate the expansion of creative and strategic possibilities, the future of it hinges on the ability of brands to embrace the technology without sacrificing the authenticity which consumers demand.

## **Conclusion**

Influencer marketing has witnessed tremendous growth over the last few years as a sub-section of SMM. This has been greatly attributed to the increasing use of social media platforms and the ability of content on such platforms to influence consumer purchasing decisions. Consequently, several brands have begun embracing this form of marketing in the hopes of reaping the benefits of brand growth and awareness. However, it is not as simple as selecting an influencer and having them promote a product or service to an audience. Instead, much thought must go into creating and executing this strategy as collaborations with mismatched influencers or those perceived to lack credibility and trustworthiness in association with the brands' values and the promoted product will likely backfire.

The case studies analyzed in this paper witnessed successful and unsuccessful influencer marketing strategies. The ELM and the Source Credibility Model are effectively applied in Gymshark's influencer marketing strategy, which explains why the company's growth and awareness have been greatly facilitated by its approach. Gymshark ensures that its advertisements connect with viewers on an emotional and aspirational level by carefully choosing influencers who share their brand values and are credible and genuine. On the other hand, in the case of Pepsi and their collaboration with Kendall Jenner, the failure is evidently attributed to the mismatch and lack of credibility of the chosen influencer, as well as the trivialization of the serious social issue that the campaign intended to address. Therefore, the findings of this paper suggest that influencer marketing can effectively drive brand growth and awareness to a significant extent when implemented effectively.

Given that influencer marketing is here to stay and is likely to evolve significantly over the coming years, especially through the application of technologies such as AI, as discussed in the paper, it would be valuable for brands to prioritize this marketing strategy as they move forward.

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