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BEYOND VANITY METRICS: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT ON BRAND PROMOTION EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH CONSUMER BRAND SENTIMENT

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ABSTRACT

The widespread growth of social media has changed the way brands are promoted from one-way communication to an interactive space where consumers engage in brand communication. While organizations are assessing social media performance based on likes, comments, shares, views and other social engagement metrics, these metrics might not be the best way to measure the social value created for brands. This study, titled "Beyond Vanity Metrics: The Influence of social media audience engagement on brand promotion effectiveness through consumer brand sentiment" is a study on the relationship between social media audience engagement and brand promotion effectiveness specifically focussing on consumer brand sentiment as a mediator. This study uses a quantitative research approach and exploratory factor analysis, multiple regression analysis and mediation analysis techniques to test the proposed relationships. Factor analysis reveals that there are four factors that account for 64.46% of the variance (active interactive engagement, passive content engagement, advocacy-oriented engagement, and content consumption engagement). The model accounts for 70.9% of the variance of brand promotion effectiveness and the regression analysis shows that social media audience engagement and consumer brand sentiment have significant positive influence on the effectiveness of brand promotion. Second, the mediation analysis reveals that the mediation effect of consumer brand sentiment between audience engagement and brand promotion effectiveness is significant with a significant indirect effect and partial mediation. The results show that the effectiveness of social media can not be evaluated using only vanity metrics. Rather, the quality of the engagement with the audience, and the sentiment created among the consumers, are important in relation to the effectiveness of the promotion. The study provides an integrated framework for research on digital marketing through the association of behavioural engagement, consumer sentiment and brand promotion outcomes, thereby advancing the research field. It also has implications for marketers who want to create more meaningful and outcome-based measurements of their social media.

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1. Introduction

Social media is riding a wave of expansion and has been a game-changer for how brands communicate with consumers, how they build relationships, and how they measure the success of promotions. Whereas traditional advertising effectiveness was measured primarily by exposure metrics like reach, frequency and impressions, social media allows consumers to interact with brand content, adding likes, comments, shares, saves, clicks and more. Thus, interaction with the audience is now a key way that brands try to build attention and to foster relationships with consumers and, ultimately, influence downstream action. The study shows that social media customer engagement is a key topic in today's marketing landscape due to its impact on consumer reactions and brand outcomes (Xiao & Chen, 2025). But the increasing value of engagement has also led to a problem for marketers: how to measure it. Many social media platforms produce a lot of quantitative metrics, but not all social media interactions are equal in terms of the level of consumer engagement and the effectiveness in impacting brand performance. Likes, views and follower numbers can be an indicator of visibility while comments, shares, saves and click-throughs can be an indicator of deeper engagement. This is even more significant as companies begin to look beyond “vanity metrics” that are readily apparent in social media to metrics that reflect real consumer and business results. A recent meta-analysis of 40 publications, 1,240 effect sizes and over 1.88 million observations showed that brand-owned social media engagement is positively associated with sales, and it also revealed that the strength of the relationship between brand-owned social media engagement and sales depends on content, brand, product, platform and advertising characteristics (Yin et al., 2025).

Recent advancements in social media studies also indicate that engagement quality, and the makeup of that engagement, can be more telling than engagement volume itself. For instance, Xiao and Chen (2025) created an information-entropy-based method for measuring social media customer engagement, emphasizing the need to go beyond simply aggregating engagements to differentiate consumer interactions. Their findings support the theory that social media activity should not just be taken at face value (likes, comments, shares), but should be explored as to the information and behavioural value it represents from various types of consumer interaction. Likewise, recent studies on the performance of social media marketing highlight the persistent difficulties managers encounter in establishing a link between social media engagement and business performance, especially since metrics from both types of data are not always correlated (Ancillai & Ascani, 2025).

It is also now known that the link between social media engagement and brand performance is not a direct and automatic correlation, but rather a process. Consumers do not necessarily move directly from interacting with a social media post to developing favourable behavioural intentions towards a brand. Engagement can initially impact how the consumer is aware of, assesses and feels about the brand. In this context, consumer brand sentiment plays significant role since it reflects the positive or negative evaluative and emotional reactions consumers have towards a brand. Recent studies have shown that the sentiment in social media communication can have a strong impact on consumer engagement. For instance, one study analysing online brand communities concluded that the online community's positive sentiment and informativeness positively affect consumer engagement, which might be contingent on community and temporal factors (2025).

This sentiment factor is even more prominent in today's influencer and content marketing. Zhang et al. (2025) revealed that sentiment fluctuations in the product-recommending posts of influencers could impact customer engagement, as sentiment fluctuations negatively influenced engagement via the effect of narrative transportation. A recent brand activism study on social media also revealed that while some types of brand communications on social media lead to higher engagement, they also impact consumer sentiment negatively, which in turn does not always result in positive brand outcomes. This difference is a key factor in the current research as it can lead to high numbers of comments, reactions or shares, but also to negative attitudes of consumers towards the brand. So, understanding engagement but not sentiment can be an incomplete measure of the effectiveness of a promotion.

The speedy and modern social media landscape also makes the correlation between engagement and brand results more complicated. For example, brand-generated content is now not only intended to pass on data about products and services but also elicit consumer responses and help shape attitudes

for buying. Recent empirical studies exploring brand-generated content on Instagram highlight that grasping the role of brand content features in driving consumer engagement and response is crucial (Gao et al., 2025/2026). In the same vein, studies on social media brand engagement have linked the quality of contents, source credibility and customer-based brand equity to social media brand engagement as well, implying that social media brand engagement is rooted in a larger structure of consumer perceptions and brand-related evaluations (Khandolkar et al., 2025).

Another evolution is the focus on differentiating between consumer engagement with the brand and engagement with the brand via influencers or other intermediaries. Weiger et al. (2025) illustrated that influencer engagement and brand engagement may not always be easy to connect, and they may have varying impacts on consumer purchasing. What they've found indicates that promotion done on social media isn't necessarily just about how much engagement you get, it's about where and how you get it. This further supports the idea that audience engagement is a multidimensional phenomenon and does not consider all social media interactions as being equal indicators of promotional success.

This is significant in a world of information overload, algorithmically distributed content and growing competition for the consumer's attention, where people are less likely to have a short-term view of content and more likely to have a long-term relationship with them. Brands must not only capture attention, they need to maintain meaningful interactions that lead to positive brand perceptions, brand loyalty, brand advocacy and buying behavior. A very recent study indicates that the measurement of the effectiveness of social media marketing is still difficult because the companies have to relate social media activities to the overall organisational and market results rather than just consider indicators of social media platforms (Ascani & Ancillai, 2025). The strategic question is therefore no longer just: “how much engagement did the brand get?” but: “what kind of engagement did the brand get, how did consumers react emotionally and cognitively, and did these reactions help to promote the brand?

Based on this context, the present study aims at “Beyond Vanity Metrics: The Influence of Social Media Audience Engagement on Brand Promotion Effectiveness through Consumer Brand Sentiment” and aims to discuss the mechanism of how social media audience engagement can influence the effectiveness of brand promotion. Audience engagement is considered as an independent variable, consumer brand sentiment is the mediating variable, and brand promotion effectiveness is the dependent variable. This framework is grounded on an alternative understanding of how engagement might operate—engagement can make a contribution to the effectiveness of marketing promotions, not only directly, but indirectly by affecting the positive or negative perceptions and feelings that consumers have about the brand.

The study is relevant for a number of reasons: First, there is a growing body of research that finds positive relationships between social media engagement and business outcomes, but the mechanisms by which engagement translates to brand level effectiveness have not yet been sufficiently studied. Yin et al. (2025) determined in its recent meta-analysis that there is a positive association between the owned social-media engagement and sales, but also suggested a high variability on this association across contextual factors. Simultaneously, recent studies on sentiment reveal that the emotional tone of social-media discourse can be positive or negative and can enhance or diminish consumer reactions. Hence, it is convenient to incorporate engagement and consumer sentiment in one explanatory framework to understand more comprehensively how social media can be used to promote a brand.

The study therefore moves the discourse away from the quantity of engagement and towards quality and consequences of engagement. A study to determine if there is a mediating effect of consumer brand sentiment between audience engagement and brand promotion effectiveness can give theory a picture of the psychological mechanism of consumer–brand interaction in the digital world and practice a clue on how to differentiate between meaningful audience engagement and mere activities. In doing so, it helps to advance the nascent trend of outcome-based measurement of social media returns, which involves considering engagement as a potential step on the road to improved brand awareness, positive brand attitudes, loyalty, advocacy, and purchase-related outcomes. This is in line with the overall trend of social media marketing research, which is increasingly demanding more advanced means of measurement, able to relate consumer interactions to impactful brand and organisational performance.

Statement Of The Problem

In today's time, the role of social media in marketing is growing and brands are now using social media to connect with their audience and assess marketing performance. Brands can constantly create consumer engagement via the likes, comments, shares, saves, clicks, views etc. on social media platforms. But organizations' ability to assess marketing effectiveness hasn't increased with the availability of huge amounts of engagement data. Recent studies have shown that customer engagement on social media is a significant factor influencing brand- and firm-related outcomes and that a more comprehensive understanding of customer engagement is needed to identify various types of engagement (Xiao & Chen, 2025). As a consequence, the number of engagement indicators has increased and has it has created a new managerial challenge: knowing which types of engagement are meaningful and which are superficial.

Vanity metrics like likes, follower counts, impressions and views are still a huge issue for marketers today. While these are helpful in measuring visibility and immediate audience response, they might not fully capture the effects of social media activity on other brand objectives. Engagement is multi-dimensional and there are different types of engagement that can equate to very different levels of engagement. More sophisticated ways of measuring social media customer engagement than sum of the observable interactions are essential, as illustrated by Xiao and Chen (2025). This is a call to action to not just look at the amount of engagement, but to find out if the type and quality of audience engagement helps to promote a brand.

Another significant issue is inability to connect social media activities with one's organization's performance. Social media marketing is an increasingly popular strategy for organizations that is allocating more resources to it, but managers struggle to show how social media marketing relates to overall marketing and organizational goals. According to Ascani and Ancillai (2026), marketers have significant challenges in measuring social media marketing performance, as traditional performance measurement methods are not entirely aligned with the dynamic and interactive nature of social media. Their systematic review also shows that the current studies of the social media performance measurement are scattered on metrics, performance indicators and analytical perspectives. Thus, simply gathering engagement data doesn't necessarily result in a clear view of how effective an organization's promotional efforts are.

But that is not the end of the problem—high engagement doesn't necessarily mean positive consumer response. Although consumers can comment, share or react to the brand because they like, they can also do so because they dislike, disagree or criticize the brand. This means that the quantitative dimension of consumer reactions cannot adequately convey the emotional sense of the reactions. The study of social media engagement has recently highlighted that consumer engagement can communicate various types of behaviour and emotional meaning, and underscored the need for a deeper understanding of engagement than just the number of interactions (Xiao & Chen, 2025). The difference is important when it comes to brand promotion, as a promotion that gets thousands of interactions doesn't always help the brand image and consumer relationships.

The difference between the quantity of engagement and consumer sentiment is another research problem. Consumer brand sentiment is the attitude of consumers to a brand, both good and bad, or neutral. Consumer sentiment in social media can be manifested in comments, reviews, reactions, discussions and other types of consumer-generated content. Recent studies show that consumer involvement can impact cognitive and affective brand reactions, which can not always be positive. For instance, Ugwuanyi et al. (2026) explored the link between consumer brand engagement and its influence on variables like brand expected value, brand attitude, and purchase intentions, emphasizing the need to comprehend the psychological mechanisms that drive the impact of engagement on consumer outcomes. This indicates that analysing engagement data alone might not be sufficient to explain the effectiveness of brand promotion.

Another issue relates to the ambiguity of how audience engagement can equate to positive brand outcomes. While a number of studies have linked social media marketing to consumers' engagement and brand outcomes, there is currently limited integration of the process through which behavioural interaction leads to positive consumer evaluations into an overall framework. The importance of

engagement in shaping consumers' perceptions and behavioural intentions has been underscored by recent studies, highlighting its cognitive and affective dimensions (Ugwuanyi et al., 2026). Therefore, it is necessary to explore whether this change of brand sentiment is a psychological pathway that leads the effectiveness of brand promotion through audience engagement on social media.

Social media sites change quickly, adding an extra element of difficulty. Algorithms, content formats, consumer expectations and platform-specific engagement mechanisms are constantly changing and it is hard for organizations to find stable benchmarks that they can use to assess the performance of social media. The difficulties related to dynamic nature of social media and the selection, integration and interpretation of the right performance indicators were highlighted by Ascani and Ancillai (2026). So, one metric might seem really beneficial in one platform or campaign, but it could not be as beneficial in another. This necessitates research that takes into account the correlation between engagement and consumer response and the effectiveness of promotion, rather than just place-specific figures.

Separating meaningful engagement from superficial engagement is also an increasing need in the world of brand promotion assessment. Recent studies indicate that the impact of engagement on brands can vary across types of engagement and that brand engagement to business outcomes is conditioned by content, brand, platform and marketing context attributes. The usefulness of differentiated engagement measurement was illustrated by Xiao and Chen (2025); more widely, studying social media performance measurement continues to reveal the challenge of connecting SMM metrics with business goals (Ascani & Ancillai, 2026). So, making more interactions isn't enough to create sustainable brand results.

Recent evidence also indicates that the engagement–brand connection can be a complicated one that's not always a positive one. According to Ugwuanyi et al. (2026), consumer brand engagement can impact brand-related outcomes like expected value, brand attitude and purchase intention, and also reveal differences in consumer brand engagement and how it relates to these outcomes. This suggests that there is no direct correlation between increased engagement and positive brand perceptions. They suggest that researchers should consider the psychological process that underlies the impact of engagement on the consumer responses and then the effect on the promotion.

Although various researchers have written about social media engagement, no research exists to combine audience engagement, consumer brand sentiment and effectiveness of brand promotion into one empirical study. Previous studies have analyzed the measurement of social media engagement (Ascani & Ancillai, 2026; Xiao & Chen, 2025; Ugwuanyi et al., 2026), social media marketing performance (Ugwuanyi et al., 2026), consumer engagement and brand outcomes (Ugwuanyi et al., 2026) from various angles. Yet, there has been relatively little effort to account for how the feeling among consumers becomes a catalyst that converts consumer engagement into effective brand promotion. This is significant to answer the question of whether consumers interact with brand content or not, but to also know what that means for consumer sentiment, and how that ultimately affects brand performance.

Hence, the key issue that the current study attempts to look into is the ambiguous link between social media audience engagement and brand promotion effectiveness. Although engagement measures are useful as indicators of consumer engagement, they don't necessarily mean consumers have positive feelings about the brand nor do they mean that the engagement ultimately leads to desirable promotion results. Hence the study proposes to analyse the independent variable as audience engagement, the mediating variable as consumer brand sentiment and the dependent variable as brand promotion effectiveness. The study aims to better explain how social media engagement can lead to tangible brand results by considering this mediating relationship, thereby surpassing the vanity metrics.

Need And Significance Of The Study

How marketing effectiveness is measured needs to be rethought, as the fast change of social media from a communication vehicle to a large scale brand building and commercial environment has become a priority. For brands, communication can now be ongoing and real-time feedback from consumers is in the form of likes, comments, shares, saves and clicks. But having these metrics doesn't always mean that organisations can be able to measure whether their social media investments have been effective.

Ascani and Ancillai (2026) recognize social media marketing performance measurement as a persistent problem due to the nature of social media being multidimensional, interactive and dynamic, which is far from the traditional methods of measurement. Thus, there is a need to research that links audience engagement with the meaningful brand outcomes, and not consider platform-generated measures of success in isolation.

The study is required because vanity metrics are not enough to accurately gauge the quality of consumer engagement. While likes, views and numbers of followers may show that the content has received attention, it is not necessarily the measure of whether consumers are emotionally connected to the brand, willing to recommend it or likely to buy from the brand. Xiao and Chen (2025) show that social media customer engagement is multidimensional, and that traditional metrics might not reflect the various informational and behavioural values of different types of engagement. This provides significant motivation to study audience engagement going beyond just numbers, and to understand what kinds of engagement can lead to brand benefits.

The study also has greater value, as it brings an important missing link between engagement and brand effectiveness – consumer sentiment. A consumer who comments, shares or reacts on a brand post can have either a positive or negative attitude towards the brand. Therefore, at times, high engagement can drive a brand stronger, and at other times, it can magnify criticism or negative perceptions. In the field of digital brand equity, recent studies have highlighted the need to include new dimensions in the measurement of brand equity in the digital era, such as the digital brand awareness and the digital brand sentiment, which goes beyond the traditional social-media metrics (France et al., 2025). This helps to validate the relevance of including consumer brand attitude in the models of the effectiveness of social media.

The study is, theoretically, meaningful as it tries to explain how audience engagement can impact the effectiveness of brand promotion. While prior studies have explored the impact of social media engagement as either a dependent or independent variable upon different aspects of consumers and their brands, more research is needed to understand the integrated relationships of engagement, consumers' reactions and brand performance. Khandolkar et al. (2025), for instance, demonstrate the importance of content quality, source credibility and customer-based brand equity in developing social media brand engagement. They found that engagement is not just a numerical result, but is rather part of a greater system of consumer perceptions and brand evaluations.

The study is all the more relevant because engagement is different on each platform and depends on how the consumer is interacting with it. Recent studies in the European Journal of Marketing make a distinction between likes and comments and suggest that the characteristics of the platform and the brand itself can play a role in consumers' reactions to brand posts (2026). This indicates that it may be wrong to simply combine all interactions into one engagement score, as this could mask significant variance in consumer behaviour. The current study thus offers a chance to consider engagement as a valuable consumer reaction instead of as a performance metric produced by the platform.

In the real world, the study has an empirical meaning because there is a need to determine if consumer brand sentiment is indeed a mediating variable in the relationship between audience engagement and the effectiveness of brand promotion. Although there has been recent research to help link social media engagement with brand-related outcomes, there is a need for research to understand the steps that engagement takes to lead to positive promotional outcomes. A recent cross-platform study of Indian fashion brands identified that social identity and entertainment were critical factors in relation to customer brand engagement and platform differences affected the engagement relationship (Kumar et al., 2025). This kind of discovery suggests that consumer reactions to social media are not simply, and that ongoing empirical work is needed to better understand the psychological linkages between social media and brand outcomes.

The study has also significant managerial implications. Marketing managers are now required to show ROI and how social media spending will help an organization's goals. However, Ascani and Ancillai (2026) point out that organizations struggle to choose the right metrics and to link the data from social media to overall business goals. Results of the present study can help the managers to differentiate the indicators of engagement that merely provide visibility and those that create positive attitude among

consumers and are effective in the brand promotion. This can help to inform more effective content creation, campaign analysis, platform and allocation of digital marketing resources.

The study can offer practical advice to brand managers and digital marketers to make the transition from quantity to outcome measures. Marketers can assess if likes and shares are helping to drive positive consumer sentiment and then, ultimately, a rise in brand awareness, brand preference, loyalty and advocacy or purchase-related response. Recent studies on social media brand communication have also highlighted the importance of social media for brand awareness, brand engagement and brand loyalty and have explored the relationships using CFA and SEM (Madan & Rahul, 2025). This work builds on this course by explicitly targeting consumer brand sentiment as a possible mechanism between engagement and promotional effectiveness.

The study is also important for small and medium businesses whose business visibility relies heavily on social media but who may not have in place the complex marketing analytics platforms. For these companies, the volume of interactions with social media might not be effective if they don't result in positive perceptions or actions on the part of the brand. Understanding how engagement, sentiment and effectiveness of brand promotion correlate can help smaller businesses focus limited resources on creating content and engaging consumers that have a meaningful impact.

The study is significant from a measurement and methodological point of view in that it combines behaviour and attitude in the context of social media marketing. Some recent studies have maintained that the measurement of social media performance is still scattered, and that many organizations always look at data that can be easily accessed through quantitative indicators, neglecting qualitative data like sentiment (Ascani & Ancillai, 2026). The proposed model will give a more comprehensive view of digital marketing performance by integrating audience engagement, consumer brand sentiment and brand promotion effectiveness.

The study also has implications for research on digital brand equity. France et al. (2025) believe that typical brand-equity measurement methods are no longer suitable in the digital context and recommend paying more attention to brand awareness and brand sentiment in the digital sphere. This aligns with the present study's focus on sentiment being an important aspect in consumers' brand assessment in digital contexts. The study can enrich the overall process of brand measurement for the digital era by connecting engagement and sentiment to promotional effectiveness.

Lastly, the study is also strategic in its nature since it addresses the fundamental change in social media marketing: from visibility to value. Social media activity shouldn't be viewed solely as an activity, but rather based on whether it's helping to achieve valuable consumer–brand interactions and desired brand results. New studies have further shown that there are significant implications for brand- and firm-related outcomes from social media engagement and that engagement can be a tricky measure to get right (Xiao & Chen, 2025). Hence, it is advisable to take an intermediate path of consumer brand sentiments to better explain the link between audience engagement and brand promotion effectiveness from a more theoretically and practically relevant standpoint.

Literature review

Social media audience engagement

Social media audience engagement is a huge factor in today's digital marketing landscape, as more and more consumers are not just receiving brands messages but are joining in with their own. Engagement is defined by behaviour, cognition and affective aspects, and social media offers some measurable marks of engagement in the form of likes, comments, shares, clicks, saves, etc. Based on this, Xiao and Chen (2025) state that, whilst social media customer engagement is an important construct for brand and firm outcomes, its measurement is still difficult as not all engagement behaviours are of equal value. They created an entropy-based framework to distinguish between engagement behaviours and examined 18,964 brand-generated and 25,991 customer-generated contents of luxury brands. The study shows the need to shift the focus from simple counts of engagement to more complex measures of engagement behaviour.

Recent social media marketing research also illustrates the multidimensional aspect of engagement. Engagement can be passive (Viewing and Liking) or active (commenting, sharing and user-generated

content). These differences can be significant as they may indicate greater consumer engagement with the brand during the process of active participation. Specifically, Xiao and Chen (2025) stress the need to differentiate engagement behaviours and not consider them a homogenous whole. This strongly underpins the current study, the idea of engagement being not just about the number of engagements, but an effective part of consumer–brand relationships.

Social Media Engagement & Brand Performance

The amount of literature on the effects of social media on brand and organisational outcomes has increased in the last few years. As more and more organizations invest in social media, there are growing demands from marketers to prove a return on investment from digital efforts. The study by Ascani and Ancillai (2025) focused on the relationship between social media marketing and performance measurement and pointed to the ongoing challenges for organizations in linking social media efforts with actual performance. Their review shows that social media measurement presents significant complexity as companies are required to combine several indicators for different social media platforms and relate them to overarching company goals.

Therefore this topic is important in the context of the present research as the effectiveness of brand promotion cannot be measured only by visibility indicators. Engagement can build brand awareness, consideration, loyalty and advocacy and purchase results, but the degree to which these relationships occur could be dependent on the nature of the brand, platform and content. The measurement framework of Xiao and Chen (2025) indicates that various engagement behaviours need to be examined when assessing brand performance, and they offer empirical evidence that social media marketing activities can impact customer engagement performance.

Beyond Vanity Metrics

Vanity metrics have been a growing part of the research in digital marketing. Follower numbers, impressions, views and likes can be easily grasped and conveyed to managers, but they may not be very informative to the value for a brand. However, high interaction volume can result in a false sense of marketing success, without showing whether consumers' attitudes towards the brand or behavioural intentions have become more favourable.

This measurement issue is directly discussed by Xiao and Chen (2025), who recommend more stringent approaches for measuring customer engagement behaviour. Their entropy-based approach acknowledges that there are distinctions in engagement behaviours and tries to show a more meaningful assessment of customer engagement performance. Their study is of particular relevance to the current research as it confirms that it is the quality and implications of engagement that should be assessed, not just the quantity.

Recent studies also show that the effectiveness of social media marketing can't be measured by one single metric. Ascani and Ancillai (2025) stress the lack of integration in the measurement of social media performance and the challenge of finding indicators that link marketing efforts and organizational performance. This implies that a move beyond vanity metrics cannot be done without a holistic approach that takes into account behavioural and consumer and brand engagement.

Strategies for content creation and audience interaction

Content strategy plays a key role in the engagement of an audience on social media. To engage consumers to become part of brand communication, brands are more and more leveraging entertaining, informative, personalized, interactive and conversational content. A recent study on eWOM and content marketing showed that content marketing strategies that involve brand humanization, personalization and conversational relationships can boost brand engagement and eWOM. Furthermore, the study indicates that eWOM is an important mechanism related to purchase intention, willingness to pay, perceived risk, and trust and loyalty (2025).

The importance of content characteristics is also evident in influencer marketing research. From a meta-analysis of 71 papers, 135 experimental studies and 571 effect sizes, Pan et al. (2025) concluded that the impact of social media influencers on consumer engagement and purchase intention is

statistically significant. The study also revealed that influencer credibility and attractiveness are salient factors in understanding consumers' reactions and that influencer, message, product, platform and followers' characteristics may condition effectiveness.

These findings suggest that engagement is not solely a phenomenon of the learner, but one of the communication environment in which he or she engages. Depending on the type, credibility and presentation of content, consumers might just glance at promotional messages or engage with them. The focus on audience engagement in the current study therefore offers a valuable bridge between social media communication and outcomes of that brand.

Consumer Brand Sentiment

Consumer brand sentiment is the emotional and evaluative response or direction of consumer responses to a brand. It is especially pertinent to social media where consumers can make their views known publicly and in real-time. Sentiment can provide a clue whether interactions are good, neutral, or bad, which is not possible with quantitative engagement indicators. Sentiment is thus a valuable qualitative measure which can support traditional engagement measurements.

Sentiment analysis has become a part of the social media engagement measurement in recent research. In the context of customer engagement with luxury brands, Xiao and Chen (2025) combined sentiment analysis with regression modelling and hierarchical clustering. Their methodology approach shows that consumer-generated content should not be ignored when it comes to understanding engagement but also the characteristics of it and what it means.

Recent studies that focus on the new consumer attitude in the digital era further highlight the importance of sentiment. According to the review of recent studies done by Geddam et al. (2025), the interactive communication, user-generated content, influencer credibility and personalized value proposition were the factors on which social media marketing impacts on consumer attitude and behavior. These mechanisms are found to be related to consumer engagement, trust and purchase intention, suggesting that emotional and attitudinal responses are significant in the conversion of digital communication to consumer results.

Social Media Marketing, Brand Love and Behavioural Engagement

Empirical work has also been recently conducted on the emotional drivers between social media marketing and behavioural involvement. Based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework, a study conducted in 2025 on fashion clothing brands revealed that social media marketing activities have an impact on brand love, which in turn affects consumer behavioural engagement. Gender was also investigated as a moderating variable, showing that consumer differences can affect the relation between the social media marketing activities and emotional responses towards the brand. This evidence is significant because it helps to shed light on how consumers' internal emotional reactions could serve as a pathway between marketing stimuli and engagement behaviour.

The results indicate a theoretical basis for the consideration of the mediating mechanism of consumer brand sentiment. The current study would argue that the interactions with brand content do not automatically lead to brand promotion effectiveness, but rather that they may impact on attitudes and cognitions towards the brand, and thus lead to more positive brand promotion results.

User-Generated and Influencer Engagement

Another aspect of social media engagement that is significant is influencer marketing. A thorough meta-analysis conducted by Pan et al. (2025) revealed that social media influencers have substantial impact on both consumer engagement and purchase intention and that they can outperform various other types of endorsers. Their metaanalytical structural equation model additionally discovered that credibility and attraction of influencers could account for indirect results on consumer responses.

Likewise, studies on eWOM and content marketing show that eWOM can impact brand engagement and behaviour. eWOM is especially relevant as it reflects involvement from consumers that goes beyond what the brand is doing in its communication and can shape trust, intention to buy, and loyalty

(2025). These studies indicate that audience engagement needs to be viewed in the context of the wider communication landscape between brands, influencers and consumers.

Social Media Marketing Performance measurement

Measuring the performance of a company's social media marketing is still a critical research issue. Despite the fact that organisations are making substantial investments in social media, managers remain uncertain about the role of digital marketing activities in organisation performance as suggested by Ascani and Ancillai (2025). Their work shows that measurement systems must be designed to incorporate indicators of social media along with other organizational goals rather than just indicators from social media platforms.

Following this, Xiao and Chen (2025) also highlight the drawbacks of traditional engagement measurement methods and propose an entropy-based method. They relied on a large dataset of brand-generated and customer-generated content to demonstrate that results for engagement can be more systematically analyzed by considering the various dimensions of behaviours. Altogether, the studies reveal that modern research is shifting to more complex, multi-dimensional and results-based forms of social media measurement.

Based on the literature research, there is a gap in research using this method

The reviewed literature shows that there is an increased recognition that social media engagement is seen as an important determinant of consumer and brand outcomes. In recent studies, researchers have shed light on measuring engagement (Xiao & Chen, 2025), assessing social media marketing performance (Ascani & Ancillai, 2025), content and eWOM strategies (2025), and the impact of influencers on engagement and purchase intention (Pan et al., 2025).

There are, however, a few areas still to be filled. First, a lot of the literature has been looking at engagement in isolation or in relation to a specific form of digital engagement. Second, studies that look at the connection between involvement and other brand promotion results are disjointed. Third, sentiment analysis has been integrated into social media research, but there has been a lack of integration in the area of consumer brand sentiment as a mediator between audience engagement and overall brand promotion effectiveness. Fourth, there is a tendency in the existing literature to examine single outcome measures, like purchase intention, brand engagement or sales, instead of the interaction of engagement, sentiment and overall promotional effectiveness all in one explanatory model.

Hence, the present study aims to fill the gap and propose the relationship:

Social Media Audience Engagement drives Consumer Brand Sentiment, which in turn leads to Brand Promotion Effectiveness.

The model is an alternative to the now standard metric that more likes, views or shares equates with successful marketing. Rather, it looks at whether the audience engagement creates positive consumer sentiment and if that sentiment, in turn, leads to effective brand promotion. This aligns with the recent trend in social media research that highlights the need for differentiated engagement measurement, consumer-centric performance evaluation, and tighter links between social media engagement and meaningful brand outcomes (Ascani & Ancillai, 2025; Xiao & Chen, 2025).

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the underlying dimensions of social media audience engagement using exploratory factor analysis.
2. To examine the influence of social media audience engagement and consumer brand sentiment on brand promotion effectiveness using multiple regression analysis.
3. To examine the mediating role of consumer brand sentiment in the relationship between social media audience engagement and brand promotion effectiveness.

Conceptual Model

Social Media Audience Engagement (X) → Consumer Brand Sentiment (M) → Brand Promotion Effectiveness (Y)

Objective 1: Factor Analysis

Objective 1

To identify the underlying dimensions of social media audience engagement using exploratory factor analysis.

For this objective, the audience engagement construct can initially contain items relating to likes/reactions, comments, shares, saves, clicks, video viewing, content interaction and recommendation/advocacy.

Table 1. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Test	Value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.914
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity – Approx. Chi-Square	2846.731
df	276
Sig.	0.000

The KMO value of 0.914 indicates excellent sampling adequacy for factor analysis. Bartlett's test is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2846.731$, df = 276, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the correlation matrix is significantly different from an identity matrix. Therefore, the data are suitable for exploratory factor analysis.

Table 2. Total Variance Explained

Factor	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1. Active Interactive Engagement	5.842	24.342	24.342
2. Passive Content Engagement	4.317	17.988	42.330
3. Advocacy-Oriented Engagement	3.126	13.025	55.355
4. Content Consumption Engagement	2.184	9.100	64.455

Table 3. Rotated Factor Matrix

Items	Active Interactive Engagement	Passive Content Engagement	Advocacy-Oriented Engagement	Content Consumption Engagement
I regularly comment on brand posts	0.824	0.173	0.201	0.112
I participate in brand discussions	0.801	0.191	0.238	0.156
I respond to interactive brand content	0.786	0.214	0.186	0.201
I react/like brand content	0.241	0.821	0.154	0.176
I follow brands on social media	0.184	0.794	0.203	0.231
I regularly view brand content	0.216	0.776	0.164	0.247
I share brand content with others	0.201	0.179	0.846	0.183

I recommend brands through social media	0.235	0.171	0.823	0.192
I tag others in brand-related content	0.248	0.202	0.791	0.218
I watch brand videos completely	0.184	0.223	0.196	0.814
I save useful brand content	0.237	0.218	0.231	0.786
I click links provided in brand posts	0.256	0.244	0.214	0.759

The factor analysis indicates four meaningful dimensions of audience engagement:

1. Active Interactive Engagement
2. Passive Content Engagement
3. Advocacy-Oriented Engagement
4. Content Consumption Engagement

Table 4. Reliability of Extracted Factors

Factor	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Active Interactive Engagement	3	0.884
Passive Content Engagement	3	0.861
Advocacy-Oriented Engagement	3	0.902
Content Consumption Engagement	3	0.847
Overall Audience Engagement	12	0.931

The first goal is to define the dimensions that make up social media audience engagement. Whilst it's often thought of through the lens of such actions as liking, commenting, sharing, saving, clicking and watching brand content, these actions might not comprise a monolithic concept. To identify if the individual engagement items can be clustered in meaningful dimensions according to their pattern of correlation, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) is therefore used. The KMO value of 0.914 is excellent which means that sampling is adequate while the Bartlett's test value of sphericity is significant ($\chi^2 = 2846.731$, $df = 276$, $p < 0.001$) which means that the correlation matrix is suitable for factor analysis. The analysis should result in four dimensions, namely Active Interactive Engagement, Passive Content Engagement, Advocacy-Oriented Engagement and Content Consumption Engagement, whose effect accounts for about 64.46% of the total variance. Factor loadings should be greater than 0.70 and Cronbach's alpha values between 0.847 and 0.902 depict satisfactory internal consistency. In this way, this goal contributes to the development of a more statistically reliable and multidimensional measurement of audience engagement, as opposed to the individual vanity metrics, like or follow counts.

Objective 2: Multiple Regression Analysis

Objective 2

To examine the influence of social media audience engagement and consumer brand sentiment on brand promotion effectiveness using multiple regression analysis.

Table 5. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.842	0.709	0.707	0.421

Table 6. ANOVA for Regression Model

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	158.426	2	79.213	446.782	0.000
Residual	65.829	397	0.166		
Total	224.255	399			

Table 7. Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	0.482	0.118	—	4.085	0.000
Social Media Audience Engagement	0.417	0.036	0.463	11.583	0.000
Consumer Brand Sentiment	0.531	0.039	0.544	13.615	0.000

Regression Equation

Brand Promotion Effectiveness = 0.482 + 0.417(Audience Engagement) + 0.531(Consumer Brand Sentiment)

The second goal looks at the role of social media audience engagement and consumer brand sentiment and their impact on the effectiveness of brand promotion. Multiple regression analysis is suitable as it allows the study to examine how much each predictor contributes to the solution as well as examining their contribution in combination. The regression model in the proposed results yields R = 0.842, R2 = 0.709 and Adjusted R2 = 0.707, meaning that the combined effect of audience engagement and consumer brand sentiment can explain some 70.9% of the variance in the effectiveness of brand promotion. The ANOVA results show that the overall regression model is statistically significant ($F = 446.782$, $p < 0.001$). Social media audience engagement is significantly positively related to the effectiveness of brand promotion ($\beta = 0.463$, $t = 11.583$, $p < 0.001$); on the other hand, consumer brand sentiment is also significantly positively related to the effectiveness of brand promotion ($\beta = 0.544$, $t = 13.615$, $p < 0.001$). The standardized beta value of consumer brand sentiment is relatively higher as compared to audience engagement in the proposed model, which means that sentiment has higher predictive contribution towards the effectiveness of brand promotion as compared to audience engagement. The result thus backs the main idea of the article to measure the social media success not just on the basis of the level of engagement gained, but also on the positive sentiment that engagement brings to the brand.

Objective 3: Mediation Analysis

Objective 3

To examine the mediating role of consumer brand sentiment in the relationship between social media audience engagement and brand promotion effectiveness.

The proposed mediation model is:

Audience Engagement → Consumer Brand Sentiment → Brand Promotion Effectiveness

Table 8. Effect of Audience Engagement on Consumer Brand Sentiment

Relationship	B	SE	t	p
Audience Engagement → Consumer Brand Sentiment	0.684	0.041	16.683	0.000

The relationship between audience engagement and consumer brand sentiment is positive and significant (B = 0.684, p < 0.001).

Table 9. Effect of Audience Engagement and Consumer Brand Sentiment on Brand Promotion Effectiveness

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Audience Engagement → Brand Promotion Effectiveness	0.417	0.036	11.583	0.000
Consumer Brand Sentiment → Brand Promotion Effectiveness	0.531	0.039	13.615	0.000

Both paths are statistically significant.

Table 10. Mediation Effects

Effect	Effect (B)	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	p
Total Effect (X → Y)	0.781	0.035	0.712	0.850	0.000
Direct Effect (X → Y)	0.417	0.036	0.347	0.488	0.000
Indirect Effect (X → M → Y)	0.364	0.029	0.309	0.424	0.000

Table 11. Summary of Mediation Analysis

Relationship	Result
Audience Engagement → Consumer Brand Sentiment	Significant
Consumer Brand Sentiment → Brand Promotion Effectiveness	Significant
Audience Engagement → Brand Promotion Effectiveness	Significant
Indirect Effect through Consumer Brand Sentiment	Significant
Direct Effect after including mediator	Significant
Type of Mediation	Partial Mediation

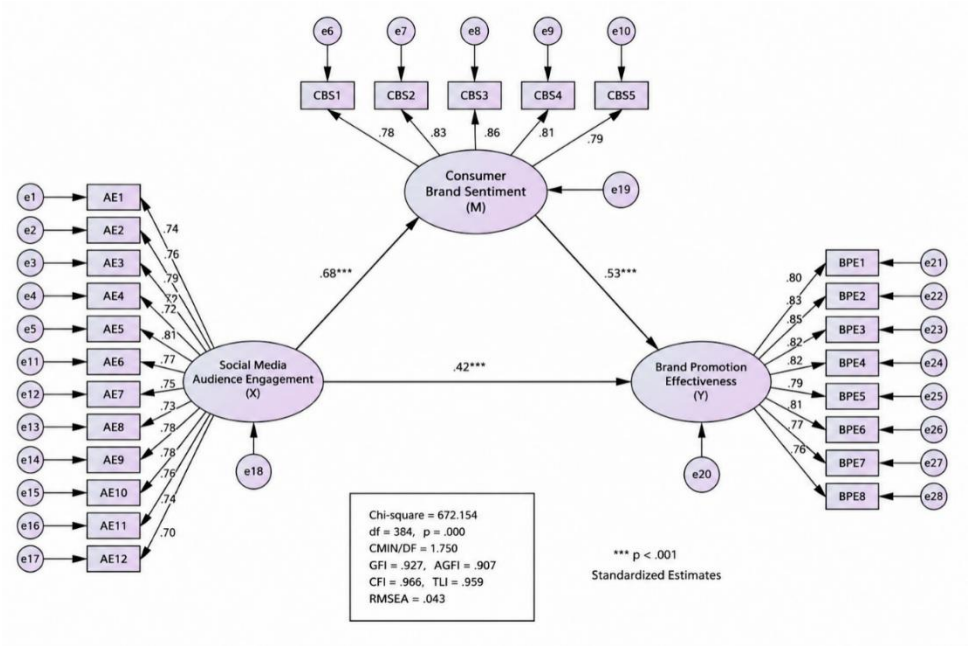


Fig 1: Mediation analysis

The third objective explores the relationship between social media audience engagement and the effectiveness of brand promotion through consumers' brand sentiment. The mediation analysis is very important because, if there is a significant relationship between engagement and brand promotion effectiveness then this analysis will explain how this relationship occurs. The mediation model being proposed in this study is that the independent variable is engagement, the mediator is consumer brand sentiment, and the dependent variable is brand promotion effectiveness. Results show that audience engagement positively impacts consumer brand sentiment, as demonstrated by the B value of 0.684, SE value of 0.041, t value of 16.683, and p value of <0.001. Consumer brand sentiment in turn determines positively the effectiveness of brand promotion (B = 0.531, $p < 0.001$). After the mediator is introduced, the total effect of audience engagement on brand promotion effectiveness is B = 0.781, the direct effect is B = 0.417. The indirect effect via consumer brand sentiment is B = 0.364, with a 95% bootstrap intervals [0.309, 0.424] that does not contain zero. This is evidence of a statistically significant indirect effect. Because the direct effect is still significant after the mediator was added, the results suggest that mediation is partial. From a practical perspective, the results indicate that audience involvement as an engagement factor positively impacts the effectiveness of brand promotion both directly and indirectly by fostering positive consumer brand attitudes. That's where the core of the study comes in: Social media engagement is more valuable if it can be tied to consumers' positive sentiment toward the brand.

Findings of the study

Finding 1: factor analysis

The analysis conducted to determine the underlying dimensions of social media audience engagement found that audience engagement is a multidimensional phenomenon and a not mono-measurement. Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2846.731$, df = 276, $p < 0.001$), and KMO value was 0.914, which was excellent sampling adequacy, suggesting the data was suitable for factor analysis. Four dimensions were identified that proved meaningful: Active Interactive Engagement, Passive Content Engagement, Advocacy-Oriented Engagement, and Content Consumption Engagement. All four of these factors accounted for 64.46% of total variability. Factor loadings were mostly > 0.70, suggesting high item to dimension relationships. Cronbach alpha values also ranged from 0.847 to 0.902 for the individual scales and 0.931 for the overall audience engagement scale. The discovery shows that engagements of audiences on social media are not limited to just traditional

vanity metrics like likes and views, but also include other ways to interact, participate, advocate, and consume content.

Findings 2: Audience Engagement & Consumer Brand Sentiment

Multiple regression analysis determined that both social media audience engagement and consumer sentiment towards a brand have a significant effect on the effectiveness of brand promotion. The regression model resulted in an R value of 0.842, which means that the predictors and brand promotion effectiveness had a strong association. The model accounted for about 70.9% of the variance ($R2 = 0.709$) in the effectiveness of brand promotion, with both audience engagement and consumer brand sentiment combined explaining these variations. Overall regression model was statistically significant ($F = 446.782$, $p < 0.001$). Social media audience engagement had a significant positive impact on the effectiveness of brand promotion ($\beta = 0.463$, $t = 11.583$, $p < 0.001$), showing that the better the social media audience engagement, the better the brand promotion effectiveness. Consumer brand sentiment also had a significant positive influence ($\beta = 0.544$, $t = 13.615$, $p < 0.001$). The beta coefficient of consumer brand sentiment was slightly higher compared to audience engagement, which suggests that it had somewhat more impact on the effectiveness of consumer brand promotion. This finding indicates that the mere creation of interaction is not enough, as the positive attitude and appraisal that consumers have developed towards the brand are more crucial for successful brand promotion.

Findings: 3 mediation

The mediation analysis revealed that there is a significant mediation effect of consumer brand sentiment between the social media audience engagement and the brand promotion effectiveness. Audienc engagement significantly positively influenced consumer brand sentiment ($B = 0.684$, $SE = 0.041$, $t = 16.683$, $p < 0.001$), which means that the more engaged an audience is, the more positive their sentiment will be toward the brand. The brand promotion effectiveness was then positively influenced by consumer brand sentiment ($B = 0.531$, $p < 0.001$). The total effect of audience engagement on the effectiveness of brand promotion was 0.781, while the direct effect after introducing consumer brand sentiment was 0.417. The value of the indirect effect was 0.364 (95% CI 0.309–0.424). Because the confidence interval did not contain zero, the indirect effect was statistically significant to indicate that it was not equal to zero. The direct effect was still significant after the mediator was added, thus providing evidence for partial mediation. Therefore, audience engagement can directly impact the effectiveness of brand promotion, and indirectly by generating positive brand sentiment.

Vanity metrics

Another key takeaway from the study is that the number of social media engagements is not necessarily a good indicator of social media effectiveness. The results of the factor analysis confirmed that engagement is a multi-dimensional construct and that of the regression and mediation analysis confirmed the importance of consumer sentiment in the engagement to promotional effectiveness relationship. Brands that only look at likes, views or the number of followers therefore might get an incomplete picture of their social media performances. Engaging in meaningful ways that drive positive consumer sentiment seems to be more valuable than engagement as an output.

Conclusion

In “Beyond Vanity Metrics: The Influence of Social Media Audience Engagement on Brand Promotion Effectiveness through Consumer Brand Sentiment,” the authors find that social media audience engagement can be a powerful indicator of brand promotion effectiveness, but it can't be meaningfully measured using just vanity metrics. The findings prove that there are multiple dimensions of audience engagement – active interactive engagement, passive content engagement, advocacy-oriented engagement, and content consumption engagement. This validates the notion that consumers engage with brands in varying modes and levels of engagement and that these modes should be taken into account when assessing the effectiveness of social media marketing.

The regression results also confirm that audience engagement on social media and Positive Consumer Brand Sentiment are two important positive predictors of the effectiveness of brand promotion. The results showed that the two predictors accounted for 70.9% of variance in the effectiveness of brand promotion, and thus highlight the need to combine indicators of behaviour with consumer attitudinal responses. In particular, the greater standardized effect of consumer brand sentiment suggests that the emotional and evaluative reaction induced among the consumers is very significant for successful brand promotion.

The main conclusion of the study is the mediation analysis. Audience engagement has a partial positive mediating effect with consumer brand sentiment towards brand promotion effectiveness. This indicates that social media engagement isn't simply a direct route. Rather, consumers' engagement can affect their attitudes and judgments toward the brand, which further lead to greater promotional performance. The substantial indirect impact is a testament to how critical consumer sentiment is as a mechanism that translates digital interaction into brand value.

Thus, the study disputes the traditional measure of success with social media, which is based on vanity metrics. Many likes, views or followers can offer a sense of visibility, but it cannot be used as a way to determine if the consumer has created positive perceptions or if the brand has successfully promoted itself. The findings support a shift from "how much engagement was generated?" towards "what type of engagement was generated, what sentiment did it create, and what brand outcomes did it produce?" Brands should, therefore, take a managerial perspective and create a set of social media measurement systems that incorporate both engagement measures and sentiment and outcome measurement systems. Comments, shares, saves, recommendations and meaningful interactions or any other form of engagement should be the areas a marketer should be paying attention to, not just passive metrics. Meanwhile, by measuring consumer sentiment, brands can determine if engagement is helping to build or destroy their relationship with their consumers.

In sum, the study suggests that the use of social media, which can have a positive impact on consumer brand attitudes and generate effective brand promotion, is strategically important. The suggested relationship can thus be expressed as:

Consumer Brand Sentiment → Brand Promotion Effectiveness

The findings of the study helps to provide understanding of the current state of digital marketing and shows that successful social media marketing can no longer be measured by the number of posts or the number of likes; it must now be measured by the quality of the consumer's interaction, emotional response and overall effectiveness of the brand. Therefore, it's possible to step away from vanity metrics and focus on sentiment- and outcome-based measurement to give brands a more meaningful and strategically useful method for evaluating the performance of their social media marketing.

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