The Relationship between Influencer Marketing and Lifestyle Branding: The Mediating Role of Brand Loyalty

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Abstract: Background and Aim: This article explores the interplay between influencer marketing and lifestyle branding, with a focus on the mediating role of brand loyalty.
Methods: The present study utilized a descriptive-correlation methodology, incorporating structural equation modeling. The population for this research comprised all social media users and online shoppers in Tehran, Iran, in 2022. The sample included 384 shoppers, of whom 259 were women, with ages ranging from 19 to 47 years, and an average age of 32.57±5.47 years. Participants were chosen through a convenience sampling technique. Standard questionnaires were used to collect data. Pearson correlation test and the structural equation modeling were used for data analysis.
Results: The results indicate that influencer marketing has a significant impact on lifestyle branding, with a T-value of 5.328. Additionally, influencer marketing also significantly influences brand loyalty, as evidenced by a T-value of 4.476. Furthermore, brand loyalty demonstrates a significant effect on lifestyle branding, with a T-value of 4.697. Notably, brand loyalty serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between influencer marketing and lifestyle branding, with a p-value of less than 0.001. The model fit results suggest that the research model exhibits a good fit.
Conclusion: Consequently, both influencer marketing and lifestyle branding exemplify the continuous evolution of digital marketing, highlighting the critical role of trust-building, emotional engagement, and personal resonance with consumers. To thrive in this dynamic digital era, businesses must embrace these shifts, leveraging these strategies to bolster brand awareness and foster customer loyalty.

Keywords: Influencer, marketing, lifestyle branding, social media, brand loyalty

Introduction

The Internet and virtual environments have increasingly become integral to individuals' daily routines, facilitating communication with friends and acquaintances. While the Internet and social media offer numerous benefits to users, they also serve a significant role in marketing. The widespread adoption of social networks and their considerable influence on the public underscore the necessity of utilizing these platforms effectively (Godey et al. 2016; Jin et al. 2019). Furthermore, as businesses establish their presence on social media, the demand for a robust strategy to maximize consumer engagement is well recognized. However, the methods of

interacting and negotiating with online consumers are undergoing rapid transformation. Influencers are pivotal in bridging these gaps in online communication (Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Chu et al. 2022).

A cohort of notable individuals, who do not fit into conventional categories, has gained prominence primarily through their engagement on social media platforms, particularly Instagram. These individuals are often referred to as influencers or micro-celebrities. Social media influencers have cultivated a substantial following by consistently sharing valuable content related to their areas of expertise. Their motivations for content sharing can be categorized into five primary areas: self-expression, life documentation, commentary, participation in communities, and information seeking (De Veirman et al., 2017; Esch et al. 2018). Additionally, financial motivations have become increasingly relevant in contemporary contexts. Consumers now rely on social media to gather product information, often influenced by recommendations from these prominent figures. Such endorsements can be descriptive (e.g., expressing enjoyment of a restaurant), prescriptive (e.g., suggesting a travel destination), or persuasive (e.g., featuring in a hotel advertisement). Influencers often provide comprehensive accounts of their experiences with products to sway their followers' purchasing decisions (Hudders & Lou, 2022).

Influencers can generally be classified into four distinct categories: celebrities, experts, bloggers, and micro-influencers. The first category, celebrities, is often utilized by large corporations for their advertising initiatives (Ki et al., 2020). These individuals, recognized for their artistic or athletic achievements, can significantly enhance brand visibility and promote products or services effectively. The second category comprises specialists, who possess expertise in specific fields and serve as valuable channels for executing targeted influencer marketing campaigns. Bloggers, who create content on their personal platforms, fall into the third category alongside content creators. Lastly, micro-influencers represent the final group of influencers (Li et al. 2021). These individuals may not have the widespread recognition of celebrities, nor do they necessarily possess specialized knowledge, yet they maintain a notable presence on social media and play a crucial role in the influencer marketing landscape (Burton et al. 2020; Enke & Borchers, 2021).

Influencer marketing primarily involves collaborating with individuals who possess significant influence. In contemporary contexts, this concept is predominantly associated with the digital realm, focusing on individuals who have cultivated their influence and social presence through various online platforms (Hu et al. 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019). In essence, influencer marketing entails the identification, engagement, and support of individuals capable of making a substantial impact on your target audience by presenting your brand in a more relatable and compelling manner. The decline of traditional advertising methods has contributed to the rise of social media strategies, including influencer marketing (Backaler, 2018; Bu et al. 2022). This approach centers on recognizing individuals who sway potential consumers and tailoring marketing efforts around these influencers, moving away from conventional tactics such as print advertisements and celebrity endorsements. This distinctive marketing strategy emphasizes the importance of engaging with opinion leaders rather than relying solely on direct outreach to the target demographic, as these influencers often possess a robust personal brand. Ultimately, influencer marketing revolves around creating content and promoting products through the endorsement of inspiring figures, thereby fostering trust within the influencer's audience and facilitating the conversion of that audience into customers (Booth & Matic, 2011).

Prominent marketers have asserted that in order to thrive in a constantly evolving marketplace, it is essential for lifestyle brands to offer more than mere products or services. Experts have indicated that surpassing consumer expectations is a reliable strategy for securing a competitive position in the market. While some individuals may acknowledge this concept mentally, others actively implement it (Jin & Muqaddam, 2021). This understanding has led to the emergence of lifestyle brands. Academically, a lifestyle brand is defined as a producer that markets itself—and its offerings—as a reflection of the interests and beliefs of a particular group or subculture. Instead of focusing solely on the products or services, these brands promote the notion of enhancing consumers' lifestyles (Li & Peng, 2021). In recent years, this approach has been termed lifestyle branding. For instance, Marks and Spencer has successfully persuaded its customers to improve their quality of life through the purchase of its products, as the brand embodies a luxurious lifestyle. Similarly, Adidas has developed marketing strategies for its sporting goods that emphasize the connection between athletes and the general public. As previously noted, today's consumers seek experiences that manufacturers can provide. Effective lifestyle brands position themselves to resonate with their consumers' identities and ideologies, fostering deeper connections with each individual. Although the rise of successful lifestyle brands is evident, the leading brands serve as exemplary models of the ideal brand lifestyle, demonstrating how a company can cultivate an empire centered around identity and ideology (Rahman, 2022).

Marketers are reviving lifestyle brands reminiscent of the 1980s, a period when activities such as surfing and skateboarding inspired innovative styles and products. These brands fostered communities and a sense of belonging that individual sought. The pioneers of these lifestyle brands diligently worked to instill a sense of significance in the lifestyles of their consumers (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). With the advent of the internet facilitating seamless communication, cultural trends can now disseminate rapidly, allowing lifestyle brands to generate desire and demand with greater ease. These brands transcend mere product offerings; they embody the

cultures they endorse and the identities they shape. This article explores the interplay between influencer marketing and lifestyle branding, with a focus on the mediating role of brand loyalty.

Methods

The present study utilized a descriptive-correlation methodology, incorporating structural equation modeling. The population for this research comprised all social media users and online shoppers in Tehran, Iran, in 2022. The sample included 384 shoppers, of whom 259 were women, with ages ranging from 19 to 47 years, and an average age of 32.57±5.47 years. Participants were chosen through a convenience sampling technique.

The methodology employed for data collection in this study involved the use of structured questionnaires tailored to each research question. This approach facilitated the quantification of respondents within defined parameters and scales. The questionnaires were systematically organized into sections corresponding to the research questions, with additional subsections as necessary, thereby enhancing the methodical and efficient gathering of data. Given the structured nature of the questionnaire, scaling techniques were predominantly applied to the majority of the questions posed to respondents. Two distinct scaling methods were utilized where applicable. The first was a rating scale based on the Likert scale, which provided categories such as strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. In instances where the rating scale did not yield sufficiently precise responses, a ranking scale was employed as needed. This was particularly beneficial when examining preferences for social media platforms among various organizations in relation to their social media marketing strategies. To maximize response rates, the questionnaire was distributed to respondents via social media such as WhatsApp and Telegram, ensuring ease and convenience in the data collection process.

We utilized SPSS-26 and Lisrel software to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were employed to characterize the variables. Pearson correlation test was conducted to assess the relationships between the variables. The structural equation method was applied to investigate the impact of influencer marketing and lifestyle branding, with a focus on the mediating role of brand loyalty. The significance level was set at $P < 0.05$.

Results

The demographic analysis revealed that among the 384 respondents, 56.5% identified as students. The remaining employment statuses included 29.6% of respondents in various occupations, 7.8% as homemakers, and 6.1% as unemployed individuals. A significant portion, 61.7%, reported monthly incomes of 300 USD or less. Additionally, 28.7% of respondents earned between 300 and 500 USD monthly, while only a small fraction, 3.5%, had incomes exceeding 500 USD per month. Furthermore, 98.3% of the respondents were literate, with a mere 1.7% classified as uneducated. In terms of geographic distribution, 57.4% resided in urban areas, 39% in metropolitan regions, and the remaining 3.5% in semi-urban locales.

The results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests (Table 1) revealed that all variables were normally distributed (all P>0.05).

Table 1. Normality of Data

	Influencer Marketing	Lifestyle Branding	Brand Loyalty
Statistic	3.57	4.11	2.85
P-Value	0.200	0.200	0.200

The bivariate relationships involving influencer marketing, lifestyle branding, and brand loyalty are illustrated in Table 2. The findings indicate a significant direct correlation between influencer marketing and lifestyle branding (P<0.001). Additionally, influencer marketing showed a direct and significant link to brand loyalty (P<0.001). Lastly, brand loyalty was found to have a direct and significant association with lifestyle branding (P<0.001).

Table 2. Results of Bivariate Relationships between Variables

	1	2	3
1. Influencer Marketing	-		
2. Lifestyle Branding	r=0.527 P<0.001	-	
3. Brand Loyalty	r=0.449 P<0.001	r=0.471 P<0.001	-

Table 3 and Figure 1 present the findings from the structural equation modeling analysis. The results indicate that influencer marketing has a significant impact on lifestyle branding, with a T-value of 5.328. Additionally, influencer marketing also significantly influences brand loyalty, as evidenced by a T-value of 4.476. Furthermore, brand loyalty demonstrates a significant effect on lifestyle branding, with a T-value of 4.697. Notably, brand loyalty serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between influencer marketing and lifestyle branding, with a p-value of less than 0.001. The model fit results, detailed in Table 4, suggest that the research model exhibits a good fit.

Table 3. Results of Structural Equation Modelling

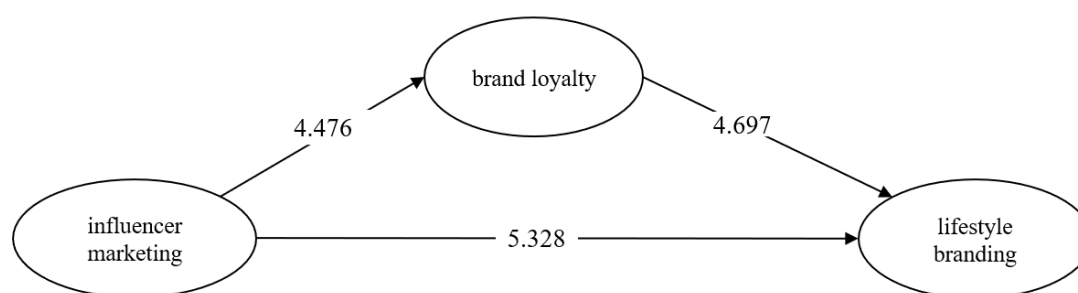|	Path	β	T-value
1	influencer marketing => lifestyle branding	0.524	5.328
2	influencer marketing => brand loyalty	0.453	4.476
3	brand loyalty => lifestyle branding	0.465	4.697
		Z	P-value
4	influencer marketing => brand loyalty => lifestyle branding	6.552	P<0.001

Figure 1. Structural Equation Modelling in the Form of T-Values

Table 4. Results of Model Fit

Index	Optimal Range	Obtained Value	Conclusion
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.06	Good fit
X^2 / df	< 3	2.93	Good fit
RMR	Closer to 0	0.03	Good fit
NFI	> 0.9	0.92	Good fit
CFI	> 0.9	0.92	Good fit

Discussion

This article explores the interplay between influencer marketing and lifestyle branding, with a focus on the mediating role of brand loyalty. The results indicate that influencer marketing has a significant impact on lifestyle branding. Additionally, influencer marketing also significantly influences brand loyalty. Furthermore, brand loyalty demonstrates a significant effect on lifestyle branding. Notably, brand loyalty serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between influencer marketing and lifestyle branding.

As mentioned, influencers include thought leaders and consumer opinions and have the ability to guide consumers' tendencies and preferences towards a specific product or brand, on the other hand, influencer marketing is more effective than other advertising methods. According to the collected findings, influencers, with the credibility they have among their fans, provide brand owners with more effective communication with consumers and play a two-way marketing role as an intermediary link between publishers and audiences. Influencers on social media who advocate for lifestyle brands tend to achieve greater success in engaging with consumers when they exhibit authenticity, confidence, and interactivity in their content. Although this study concentrated on lifestyle branding, it is reasonable to assert that similar principles apply to a wide range of products marketed by public relations firms and marketers, including automobiles, electronics, and household goods (Baltes, 2015; De Veirman et al. 2019; Kim & Kim, 2020; Reinikainen et al. 2020).

The integration of social media influencer marketing within lifestyle public relations strategies has effectively dismantled the barriers that previously existed between consumers, brands, and their followers through engaging social media content. Prior to the emergence of social media influencers, advertising directed at brand consumers was predominantly unidirectional. In the pre-social media era, consumers were limited to experiencing products through traditional channels such as print advertisements, billboards, radio broadcasts,

and television commercials. In contrast, contemporary consumers can now engage with products via social media platforms. Observing a trusted figure utilize a product empowers consumers to feel more confident in their purchasing decisions. Research indicates that social media influencer marketing has significantly transformed the dynamics of brand-consumer interactions in a favorable manner. The anticipated success for brands can be attributed to this interactive public relations approach, which elucidates why social media influencer marketing emerged as a prominent trend in 2017 (Ladhari et al. 2020; Sadiq et al. 2020; Trivedi & Sama, 2020; Zarantonello et al. 2016).

The fundamental principle of influencer marketing is based on the endorsement of products and services by individuals who possess significant influence, utilizing their authenticity and personal rapport with their audience to establish trust. This strategy promotes emotional engagement, fosters community development, and enables targeted advertising within specific niches, resulting in enhanced consumer trust and brand loyalty. It is particularly prominent in lifestyle sectors, where consumers often seek personalized suggestions from figures, they find relatable. Nonetheless, influencer marketing presents certain challenges, particularly in the selection of appropriate influencers and concerns regarding the control and quality of content. The key to successful influencer marketing lies in cultivating lasting and authentic partnerships that consistently provide credible and pertinent content. Conversely, the literature review explores the notion of "lifestyle branding." This marketing approach focuses on creating a brand identity that is fundamentally associated with a specific lifestyle or value system. It sets itself apart from conventional branding by emphasizing aspiration, emotional engagement, shared values, community development, narrative construction, niche market targeting, and customization. Lifestyle brands seek to cultivate a profound emotional bond with consumers, transcending the mere functional characteristics of their offerings (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017; Hsu, 2022).

The integration of various marketing strategies illustrates the transformation of digital advertising within the context of the internet and social media. This evolution emphasizes the necessity for businesses to adjust to these developments, utilizing influencer marketing to enhance brand visibility and engage consumers in more personalized and emotionally impactful manners. In the ever-changing realm of contemporary marketing, where consumers face an overwhelming amount of information, influencer marketing and lifestyle branding emerge as effective approaches that cultivate trust, build community, and connect on a personal level. By comprehending and adeptly applying these strategies, businesses can successfully navigate the digital landscape and forge meaningful relationships with their target audience, thereby improving brand recognition and loyalty in a fiercely competitive environment (Sands et al. 2022; Vrontis et al. 2021).

Finally, the results of this study showed that brand loyalty serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between influencer marketing and lifestyle branding. Brand loyalty refers to the deep-seated commitment a consumer has towards a specific brand, often leading them to overlook competitors, pricing variations, and even personal convenience in favor of their preferred choice. Customers who exhibit brand loyalty are convinced that they will receive superior quality and service, and this conviction remains steadfast until presented with contrary evidence. They are likely to advocate for the brand with the fervor of a missionary. Interestingly, some individuals may develop this loyalty even before making their initial purchase, as the brand successfully cultivates a favorable perception in their minds. Conversely, brand loyalty aims to instill in consumers a particular sentiment or value associated with the brand's image. This segment of customers actively and willingly promotes their favored brand to others. While loyal customers might occasionally shop based on immediate benefits offered by a specific retailer, true brand loyalists engage in thoughtful, intentional purchasing decisions, characterized by a sense of assurance and purpose (Chen et al. 2021; Folkvord et al. 2019; Kim & Kim, 2022; Lin et al. 2018; Tiago et al. 2014).

Conclusion

Consequently, both influencer marketing and lifestyle branding exemplify the continuous evolution of digital marketing, highlighting the critical role of trust-building, emotional engagement, and personal resonance with consumers. To thrive in this dynamic digital era, businesses must embrace these shifts, leveraging these strategies to bolster brand awareness and foster customer loyalty.

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