

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK LINKING INFLUENCER MARKETING, EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND ONLINE IMPULSIVE BUYING BEHAVIOUR

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Article History:

Received : 30 October 2025

Revised : 1 November 2025

Published : 4 November 2025

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To cite this article:

D.S, Zaid, & Zaid, D.S. (2025). A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK LINKING INFLUENCER MARKETING, EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND ONLINE IMPULSIVE BUYING BEHAVIOUR, *Journal of Business Innovation*, 10(1), 72-80.

ABSTRACT

The accelerating rise of influencer marketing has significantly reshaped the digital commerce landscape, altering how consumers interpret, interact with, and respond to persuasive messages. Social media influencers—functioning as human brands—extend beyond conventional advertising by combining authenticity, relatability, and emotional narratives that cultivate deep consumer connections. Yet, the emotional processes explaining how influencer-generated content stimulates spontaneous and unplanned purchases remain underexplored. Drawing upon the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, this conceptual paper proposes a model connecting influencer marketing stimuli, emotional engagement, and online impulsive buying behaviour. Emotional engagement, defined as an affective state encompassing excitement, empathy, and identification, is conceptualised as the mediating mechanism that transforms persuasive cues into behavioural outcomes. The model further includes persuasion knowledge and algorithmic exposure as moderating variables influencing the strength of this emotional pathway. By integrating affective, behavioural, and ethical dimensions, this framework advances theoretical insight into emotion-driven digital persuasion while acknowledging emotional engagement as both a strategic marketing tool and an ethical concern. Implications for theory development, responsible influencer practices, and directions for empirical validation are also discussed.

Keywords: *influencer marketing, emotional engagement, impulsive buying, social media, S-O-R model*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of social media technologies has transformed how brands communicate with consumers, shifting from broad persuasive messages to highly personalised and emotionally charged interactions. Social media influencers—individuals who build trust and credibility through consistent engagement with their followers—now play a vital role in shaping consumer decisions. Their influence lies in their ability to merge authenticity, relatability, and aspirational imagery, producing content that feels more credible than conventional advertising (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2023).

Globally, the influencer marketing sector is expected to surpass £20 billion by 2025, highlighting consumers' increasing preference for peer-generated recommendations over corporate messaging. Influencers often serve as “para-social companions,” with audiences perceiving them as friends rather than paid endorsers (Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020). This parasocial bond intensifies emotional receptivity, leading to spontaneous and impulsive purchasing behaviour. The convergence of social media's immediacy, interactivity, and emotional richness provides a fertile environment for impulsive consumption.

However, the persuasive success of influencer marketing also raises ethical and psychological questions. While emotional storytelling strengthens connections, it can blur the line between genuine advice and subtle persuasion. Many consumers experience post-purchase regret following emotionally charged buying episodes, particularly when influencer promotions emphasise aspirational appeal rather than product utility (Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah, & Wong, 2022). This underscores the need to understand how emotional engagement functions as a psychological bridge linking influencer marketing stimuli and impulsive purchasing tendencies.

Although considerable research has examined influencer credibility and trust, relatively little attention has been devoted to the emotional mechanisms that shape consumer reactions. This paper aims to address that gap by integrating concepts from emotional psychology and persuasion theory through the lens of the S-O-R model. Specifically, it argues that emotional engagement mediates the relationship between influencer marketing cues and online impulsive buying behaviour. By framing emotional engagement not merely as an outcome but as a process, this paper establishes a theoretical foundation for future empirical inquiry.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Influencer Marketing and Consumer Persuasion

Influencer marketing can be described as a deliberate partnership between brands and social media personalities who possess credibility, authenticity, and influence within specific niche communities. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, influencers are regarded as approachable and trustworthy figures, which enhances their persuasive capacity (Ki et al., 2020). The perceived authenticity embedded in influencer-generated content plays a central role in shaping follower attitudes and building trust (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Three fundamental elements—credibility, authenticity, and content appeal—constitute the main persuasive drivers of influencer marketing. *Credibility* refers to the influencer's expertise and trustworthiness, *authenticity* reflects the consistency between the influencer's personal brand and the sponsored message, while *content appeal* concerns the emotional and aesthetic quality of the communication (Casaló et al., 2023). When these dimensions align, followers tend to experience higher emotional engagement and develop parasocial bonds that strengthen behavioural intentions.

Nevertheless, excessive commercialisation can erode authenticity, prompting audience scepticism and diminishing engagement (De Veirman & Hudders, 2023). Moreover, the algorithmic nature of social media amplifies emotionally charged content, which intensifies affective persuasion (Leung, Zhang, & Liu, 2023). Consequently, influencer marketing operates largely on emotional appeal rather than logical argumentation—its persuasive strength arises from resonance rather than rationality (Aggarwal, Dey, & Yalcinkaya, 2023).

2.2 Emotional Engagement as an Affective Mechanism

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding this phenomenon. In this framework, influencer marketing serves as the *stimulus* (*S*) that activates the consumer's internal *organism* (*O*)—namely, emotional engagement—which subsequently generates a behavioural *response* (*R*) such as impulsive purchasing. Thus, emotional engagement functions as the mediating process that translates persuasive messages into observable consumer actions.

Empirical studies indicate that emotions characterised by high arousal—such as excitement, joy, or empathy—can heighten impulsivity by bypassing deliberate reasoning (Lim et al., 2022). Conversely, persuasion knowledge, or consumers' awareness of marketing intent, may mitigate these effects by activating cognitive resistance (van der Bend, Vermeulen, & Buder, 2024). Understanding how these emotional and cognitive processes interact is essential for constructing both ethical and effective influencer marketing strategies.

2.3 Online Impulsive Buying Behaviour

Online impulsive buying refers to spontaneous, emotion-driven purchasing behaviour that occurs without premeditated intention (Chan, Cheung, & Lee, 2022). The social media environment amplifies impulsivity by continuously exposing users to visually rich and emotionally evocative stimuli. Interactive features—such as live-stream shopping, “buy now” buttons, and real-time comment threads—shorten decision-making cycles and foster immediate reactions.

While these mechanisms enhance convenience, they also encourage affective rather than rational decision-making. Emotional arousal often precedes product evaluation, leading consumers to make purchases that satisfy psychological needs for excitement, belonging, or self-expression. Furthermore, algorithmic targeting tailors exposure to individual preferences, creating repeated micro-moments of temptation. As such, online impulsive buying represents a complex emotional response to persuasive digital stimuli, rather than a purely behavioural act.

3.0 CONCEPTUAL MODEL DEVELOPMENT

This conceptual paper introduces a model that integrates influencer marketing stimuli, emotional engagement, and online impulsive buying behaviour within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework. In this model, influencer marketing operates as the stimulus (S) that triggers consumers’ internal emotional states (organism, O), which subsequently lead to responses (R) in the form of impulsive online purchases

3.1 Linking Influencer Marketing Stimuli to Emotional Engagement

Stimuli from influencer marketing—such as credibility, authenticity, and content appeal—play a crucial role in generating emotional engagement by eliciting empathy, admiration, and excitement among followers. For instance, credible influencers who consistently demonstrate value alignment and expertise foster stronger identification and trust, while authentic narratives evoke empathy and emotional closeness (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The storytelling dimension of influencer content enhances emotional arousal and can prompt followers to respond immediately through reactions such as likes, comments, or direct purchases.

3.2 Emotional Engagement and Impulsive Buying

Emotional engagement transforms passive media exposure into active consumer behaviour. When followers emotionally resonate with influencer-generated content, they experience elevated affective states that weaken cognitive resistance (Hollebeek et al., 2014). This emotional stimulation often leads to impulsive purchases, particularly in hedonic product categories, where emotions outweigh functional considerations in shaping buying decisions (Lim et al., 2022). Thus, emotional engagement acts as the psychological mechanism that converts influencer-driven persuasion into impulsive consumption.

3.3 Moderating Role of Persuasion Knowledge and Algorithmic Exposure

The proposed framework also incorporates two moderators—Persuasion Knowledge and Algorithmic Exposure—to capture variations in the emotional–behavioural relationship. Persuasion knowledge diminishes the strength of this link by activating consumer awareness and critical evaluation of marketing motives. Conversely, algorithmic exposure intensifies the connection by repeatedly presenting emotionally congruent and personally relevant content, which enhances cognitive fluency and reinforces behavioural intentions (Leung et al., 2023).

Accordingly, this conceptual model proposes that emotional engagement mediates the relationship between influencer marketing stimuli and online impulsive buying, while persuasion knowledge and algorithmic exposure moderate the strength of this mediation.

4.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), the present framework conceptualises *emotional engagement* as the psychological bridge linking external marketing stimuli to behavioural responses. In this context, influencer marketing represents the *stimulus* (*S*), emotional engagement constitutes the *organism* (*O*), and impulsive online purchasing behaviour serves as the *response* (*R*). This progression captures how environmental cues from influencers activate internal emotional processes that subsequently shape observable consumer behaviour.

Complementing this foundation, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) offers additional theoretical support by explaining the mechanisms through which consumers process persuasive messages. According to the ELM, individuals can be influenced through either the central route—which involves careful evaluation of message content—or the peripheral route, which relies on superficial yet emotionally salient cues such as tone, aesthetics, and narrative appeal. In the context of influencer marketing, persuasion often operates through the peripheral route, as audiences are more responsive to emotional storytelling, visual appeal, and perceived authenticity rather than to rational arguments.

Integrating the S–O–R and ELM perspectives clarifies how emotional engagement functions as a critical mediator that channels external influencer stimuli into impulsive buying behaviour. The combination of these theories deepens understanding of how emotional cues drive affective decision-making in digital marketing environments.

5.0 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Building upon the theoretical foundations of the S–O–R and ELM models, this study proposes a conceptual framework in which influencer marketing stimuli influence online impulsive buying behaviour through the mediating role of emotional engagement. The framework also incorporates two moderating factors—Persuasion Knowledge and Algorithmic Exposure—which determine the strength of this mediation.

In this model, influencer marketing stimuli such as credibility, authenticity, and content appeal act as the external triggers (*stimuli*) that evoke emotional responses among consumers (*organism*). These emotional reactions, characterised by empathy, excitement, and identification, subsequently lead to impulsive purchasing decisions (*response*).

The inclusion of Persuasion Knowledge acknowledges consumers' cognitive awareness of marketing intent, which can weaken emotional susceptibility by encouraging critical evaluation. Conversely, Algorithmic Exposure reinforces emotional influence by repeatedly delivering emotionally consistent and personally relevant content, thus amplifying engagement and behavioural intention.

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework, highlighting emotional engagement as the central mediating process connecting influencer marketing stimuli to online impulsive buying, with persuasion knowledge and algorithmic exposure moderating this pathway.

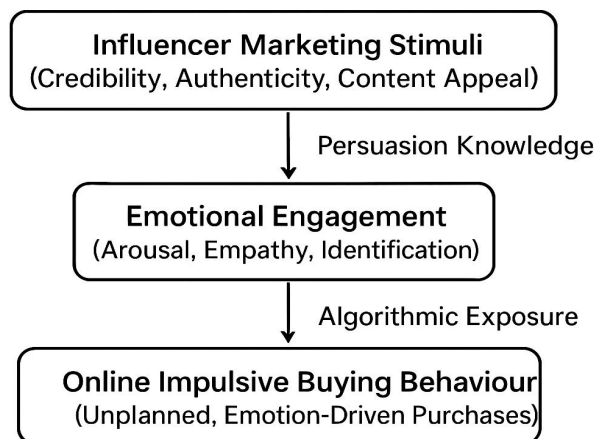


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking Influencer Marketing, Emotional Engagement, and Online Impulsive Buying

6.0 RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This conceptual framework contributes to the body of knowledge by embedding emotional engagement within the S–O–R paradigm, thereby offering a deeper theoretical understanding of how emotional processes influence impulsive consumer behaviour in digital contexts. It extends the existing literature by positioning emotional engagement not merely as an outcome of persuasive communication but as a psychological mediator that bridges influencer marketing stimuli and impulsive purchasing behaviour. Furthermore, by integrating moderators such as persuasion knowledge and algorithmic exposure, the framework highlights the nuanced interaction between emotional and cognitive factors in digital persuasion. This synthesis provides a valuable foundation for future empirical research exploring emotion-based consumer behaviour.

5.2 Managerial Implications

From a managerial standpoint, the framework offers strategic guidance for marketers aiming to design ethical and emotionally resonant campaigns. Authenticity and emotional integrity are critical to sustaining consumer trust—superficial or manipulative emotional cues may yield short-term engagement but can undermine brand credibility in the long run. Marketers should therefore focus on fostering genuine emotional resonance that strengthens parasocial bonds and long-term loyalty, rather than pursuing purely transactional objectives. Additionally, an understanding of emotional engagement allows firms to optimise content strategies and enhance consumer experience through ethically responsible emotional appeals.

5.3 Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, the growing reliance on emotional persuasion in digital marketing raises regulatory and ethical concerns. Emotional marketing often operates in a grey area where genuine expression overlaps with covert influence. Consequently, regulatory bodies must establish clearer guidelines addressing algorithmic targeting, disclosure transparency, and influencer accountability to ensure socially responsible marketing practices (Lin, Yang, & Huang, 2024). Such policies would protect consumer autonomy and promote fairness within the digital marketplace while supporting sustainable influencer–brand collaborations.

6.0 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As a conceptual study, this paper does not include empirical testing of the proposed relationships but instead provides a theoretical foundation for future investigations. Consequently, forthcoming studies should aim to operationalise emotional engagement using both psychometric and biometric measurement tools—such as facial expression analysis, galvanic skin response, or eye-tracking—to capture the affective and physiological dimensions of consumer reactions.

Cross-cultural research would also be valuable in examining how emotional triggers and engagement mechanisms differ across collectivist and individualist cultural contexts. Understanding these variations could enrich global applications of the model and refine its predictive validity.

Emerging technologies, including AI-generated influencers and personalised recommendation systems, represent promising directions for extending this conceptual framework. Future research could explore how these technologies influence emotional authenticity, consumer trust, and the sustainability of digital persuasion. Additionally, the ethical boundaries of algorithmic targeting and emotional manipulation deserve closer scrutiny, as these elements directly impact consumer autonomy and digital well-being.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This conceptual study advances an integrated framework that links influencer marketing, emotional engagement, and online impulsive buying behaviour. It positions emotional engagement as the key affective mechanism that converts persuasive influencer stimuli

into behavioural outcomes. By anchoring the discussion within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) and Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) paradigms, the paper elucidates how emotional and cognitive processes jointly shape consumer behaviour in digital environments.

The proposed model underscores the dual nature of emotional engagement—as both a powerful strategic asset and a potential ethical challenge. It highlights the importance of designing influencer marketing strategies that balance emotional resonance with transparency and responsibility.

Future research should empirically validate the proposed relationships using quantitative and experimental approaches. Moreover, scholars and practitioners are encouraged to explore emotionally sustainable marketing practices that safeguard consumer autonomy while leveraging emotional connection as a legitimate, ethical form of digital persuasion.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors are equally contributed to the conceptual as well as the design of the study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration by other journals. All authors have approved the review, agree with its submission and declare no conflict of interest on the manuscript.

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