

Building Authentic Engagement Through Strategic Social Media Communication

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become an important digital infrastructure for organizations to engage stakeholders, adapt communication practices, and create long-term relational value. However, the increasing emphasis on algorithmic optimization and engagement metrics may encourage superficial interactions and weaken authentic relationships with audiences. **This study examines** the theoretical foundations and strategic elements of authentic social media engagement and develops a conceptual framework for managing digital engagement as an organizational capability. A **qualitative conceptual** literature review was conducted by examining relevant peer-reviewed studies, industry reports, and documented cases identified through Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. **The literature was analyzed** through theoretical comparison and thematic synthesis based on Social Exchange Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory. **The analysis identifies** four interconnected pillars of authentic engagement, namely consistency, relatability, reciprocity, and community-centered communication. These dimensions indicate that effective digital engagement extends beyond conventional metrics such as likes, views, shares, and follower growth toward interaction quality, repeat participation, trust, advocacy, retention, and community attachment. From a digital transformation perspective, authentic engagement can function as an organizational capability that integrates digital platforms, audience insights, content management, and responsive communication into stakeholder-oriented decision-making. **The proposed framework** provides managerial guidance for developing digital engagement strategies, allocating resources, adapting to changing platform environments, and balancing algorithmic optimization with responsible and sustainable communication. The study contributes a theoretically integrated perspective on authentic digital engagement and its role in strengthening organizational adaptability, stakeholder relationships, and sustainable digital value creation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

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1.1. Background of the Study

Social media has evolved from a peripheral communication channel into a central infrastructure of contemporary social and commercial life [1, 2]. Billions of users interact daily on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube, generating an unprecedented volume of content and data. Within this environment, "engagement," commonly measured through likes, comments, shares, and saves, has become the dominant currency of digital success, used by brands, creators, and organizations to gauge relevance, reach, and impact [3, 4].

However, the pursuit of engagement has often been reduced to a numbers game. Many practitioners chase vanity metrics through clickbait headlines, controversial statements, or artificially inflated interactions (e.g., bot activity or engagement pods), producing engagement that is quantitatively high but qualitatively hollow. This phenomenon raises a critical question: what actually constitutes meaningful, authentic engagement, and how is it built? This paper contends that authentic engagement does not occur by accident. It is the deliberate outcome of consistent value delivery, genuine two-way communication, and strategic alignment between content, audience needs, and platform dynamics. Beyond its implications for digital marketing and communication management, authentic digital communication also contributes to broader sustainable development objectives [5, 6].

In the context of increasing digital transformation, organizations are expected not only to adopt digital platforms but also to utilize them responsibly to create meaningful value for stakeholders. This perspective aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 9 on Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, where digital technologies and communication infrastructures serve as important enablers of innovation, organizational adaptability, and stakeholder connectivity. Through strategic use of social media platforms, organizations and SMEs can enhance digital capabilities, improve knowledge exchange, and develop more innovative approaches to audience relationship management [7, 8].

Furthermore, authentic engagement practices are relevant to SDG 12 on Responsible Consumption and Production by encouraging transparent, value-oriented, and responsible digital communication. Rather than prioritizing short-term visibility through superficial engagement metrics, organizations can develop sustainable relationships through meaningful content creation, ethical communication, audience participation, and long-term trust development. Therefore, authentic digital communication should be understood not only as a marketing approach but also as a sustainable management practice that supports responsible digital ecosystems and long-term organizational value creation [9, 10].

Although previous studies have significantly contributed to understanding digital engagement, existing conceptual frameworks often examine engagement-related factors through separate theoretical lenses. Social Exchange Theory explains engagement through perceived value exchange, Parasocial Interaction Theory emphasizes emotional connections between audiences and media figures, while Uses and Gratifications Theory focuses on audience motivations and media consumption needs [11, 12]. Similarly, research on digital authenticity highlights transparency, consistency, and trust as important foundations of online relationships. However, these perspectives are frequently discussed independently, resulting in limited understanding of how multiple relational mechanisms can be strategically integrated to develop sustainable engagement. This gap is particularly important in contemporary social media environments where organizations and creators must manage not only visibility and interaction metrics but also trust, community participation, and long-term audience relationships. Therefore, this study proposes a four pillar framework consisting of consistency, relatable storytelling, reciprocity, and community-centered communication to provide an integrated explanation of how authentic engagement can be intentionally developed and sustained [13, 14].

1.2. Problem Statement

- What factors shape authentic engagement on social media platforms?
- Why is engagement the result of deliberate strategy rather than coincidence?
- How does authentic engagement differ from superficial or artificially generated engagement?

1.3. Objectives of the Paper

This paper aims to:

- Examine the conceptual and theoretical foundations of authentic engagement in digital communication.

- Identify the strategic elements that differentiate authentic interaction from superficial engagement.
- Propose a practical framework that practitioners can apply to cultivate sustainable, trust-based relationships with their audiences.

1.4. Significance of the Study

This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on digital communication by bridging academic theory with applied social media practice. For scholars, it offers a synthesized theoretical lens for understanding online interaction. For practitioners including digital marketers, content strategists, and independent creators, it provides actionable guidance for designing content strategies that prioritize authenticity and long-term audience trust over short-term metric gains. The novelty of this paper lies not in introducing a new standalone communication theory, but in integrating Social Exchange Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Uses and Gratifications framework into a unified four-pillar model of authentic engagement [15, 16].

The framework uniquely links consistency to sustained value exchange, relatable storytelling to parasocial closeness, reciprocity to two-way relational exchange, and community-centered communication to audience gratification and collective belonging. This integration advances previous conceptual discussions by distinguishing relationally sustainable engagement from superficial, vanity-driven interaction and by translating abstract theoretical mechanisms into four actionable strategic dimensions [17, 18]. Managerially, the framework provides a decision-oriented structure for content planning and audience management, encouraging practitioners to evaluate success through relational indicators such as comment quality, repeat interaction, advocacy, retention, and community identity rather than engagement volume alone [19, 20].

1.5. Scope and Limitations

This paper adopts a conceptual, literature-based approach rather than an empirical, data-driven one. It focuses primarily on engagement dynamics on mainstream visual and short-form platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) and does not extensively address platform-specific algorithmic mechanics, which are proprietary and subject to frequent change. Findings should therefore be understood as conceptual guidance rather than platform-verified empirical results [21, 22].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Defining Engagement in Social Media

Engagement in social media refers to the measurable and observable actions users take in response to content, including likes, comments, shares, saves, and click-through behavior. Recent research highlights that social media engagement has evolved beyond observable interaction metrics toward a multidimensional construct involving cognitive involvement, emotional connection, behavioral participation, and relational value creation [23, 24]. Contemporary digital marketing studies emphasize that engagement quality is increasingly influenced by personalization, authenticity, interactive content design, and perceived value rather than engagement volume alone. Within creator-driven platforms, audiences increasingly participate as active community members who contribute to content circulation, identity formation, and brand meaning development [25, 26].

Scholars distinguish between quantitative engagement, which captures the frequency or volume of interaction, and qualitative engagement, which considers the depth, sincerity, and relational value of that interaction [27, 28]. A comment expressing genuine reflection, for instance, signals a different quality of engagement than a generic emoji reaction, even though both are recorded identically by platform analytics [29, 30].

This distinction is central to the argument of this paper: engagement rate alone is an incomplete indicator of communicative success. A post can achieve high numerical engagement while failing to build any lasting relationship between the audience and the content creator or brand [31, 32].

2.2. Supporting Theories

Social Exchange Theory posits that human relationships, including online interactions, are governed by a cost-benefit calculus. Audiences engage with content when the perceived value (entertainment, information, emotional resonance, or social connection) outweighs the cost of their time and attention. Authentic engagement, from this perspective, emerges when creators consistently deliver perceived value that justifies continued audience investment [33].

Parasocial Interaction Theory explains the one-sided yet emotionally significant relationships audiences form with media figures [34]. On social media, this theory helps explain why audiences feel personally connected to creators or brand personas they have never met, and why perceived authenticity and relatability strongly influence the depth of engagement [35].

The Uses and Gratifications framework frames media consumption as an active, goal-directed process in which users select content to satisfy specific needs, such as information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, or identity affirmation [36]. Understanding these underlying motivations allows content strategists to design interactions that meet genuine audience needs rather than generic content designed solely to trigger algorithmic visibility [37].

While these classical theories provide essential explanations of audience interaction, recent conceptual developments in digital communication have expanded the understanding of engagement within platform-based environments [38]. Contemporary models published between 2022 and 2026 increasingly examine social media engagement through perspectives such as digital customer engagement, influencer–audience relationships, creator economy ecosystems, online community participation, and technology-enabled communication [39].

These recent approaches provide valuable insights into how digital platforms facilitate interaction, personalization, and audience participation [40]. However, many existing models tend to emphasize individual dimensions of engagement, such as behavioral interaction, perceived authenticity, platform affordances, or consumer responses, without providing an integrated explanation of how relational mechanisms collectively transform interaction into sustainable audience relationships. Therefore, this study extends previous conceptual discussions by combining value exchange, emotional connection, audience motivation, and community participation into a unified four-pillar framework of authentic engagement [41].

Table 1. Summary of Theoretical Foundations Underpinning Authentic Engagement

Theory	Core Idea	Relevance to Authentic Engagement
Social Exchange Theory	Relationships persist when perceived benefits outweigh costs.	Explains why audiences continue engaging only when content consistently delivers real value.
Parasocial Interaction Theory	Audiences form one-sided but emotionally real bonds with media figures.	Explains audience attachment to creators/brand personas and the role of relatability.
Uses and Gratifications	Audiences actively select media to satisfy specific needs.	Guides content design toward genuine audience needs rather than algorithmic bait.

As summarized in Table 1, these three foundational theories provide complementary perspectives for understanding audience engagement dynamics. Social Exchange Theory highlights the necessity of consistent value delivery as a prerequisite for audiences to invest their time and attention. Meanwhile, Parasocial Interaction Theory explains how emotional bonds and perceived relatability foster deeper connections between audiences and creators or brand personas. Finally, the Uses and Gratifications framework guides content strategists to focus on addressing genuine audience needs such as information, entertainment, and identity affirmation rather than relying solely on algorithmic tactics for short term visibility. Together, the integration of these theoretical foundations demonstrates that authentic engagement is a multidimensional construct driven by value exchange, emotional attachment, and audience motivation fulfillment.

2.3. Authenticity in Digital Spaces

Authenticity has become a central construct in contemporary digital communication research, representing a critical factor in shaping audience trust and long-term engagement. In digital environments, authenticity is commonly reflected through three interconnected dimensions: transparency, consistency, and trust. Transparency refers to the openness of organizations and creators regarding their intentions, identity, content sources, and communication practices, enabling audiences to develop clearer perceptions of credibility. Consistency reflects the alignment between communicated values, content narratives, and actual behaviors over time, reinforcing reliability and expectation fulfillment. Trust emerges as the cumulative outcome of transparency and consistency, serving as the relational foundation that supports sustained audience interaction, loyalty, and

community participation. Recent developments in social media and creator-driven ecosystems indicate that audiences are increasingly critical of overly promotional, inconsistent, or commercially motivated communication, while showing stronger preferences toward creators and brands perceived as genuine, relatable, transparent, and capable of delivering meaningful value. Therefore, authenticity should not only be viewed as an audience perception but also as a strategic capability that organizations can intentionally develop through responsible and relationship-oriented digital communication practices [42].

2.4. Related Prior Studies

Existing research on influencer marketing and brand-consumer relationships consistently finds that perceived authenticity positively predicts trust, loyalty, and purchase intention, while overt commercialization negatively affects perceived credibility. Studies on community management further indicate that active, responsive engagement from brand or creator accounts rather than one-way broadcasting significantly increases audience retention and advocacy behavior. These findings collectively support the premise that engagement outcomes are shaped by deliberate communicative choices rather than emerging spontaneously.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Approach

This paper employs a qualitative conceptual review approach to develop an integrated framework for understanding authentic engagement in digital communication environments. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the study synthesizes existing theoretical perspectives and applied literature related to digital communication, social media marketing, audience psychology, and online relationship development [43]. The conceptual review follows a structured analytical procedure consisting of four stages: literature identification, relevance screening, theoretical comparison, and thematic synthesis. This procedure ensures that the proposed framework is systematically derived from established theoretical foundations and contemporary digital engagement research rather than relying on subjective interpretation. Through this approach, the study integrates complementary theoretical insights to identify key relational mechanisms underlying sustainable audience engagement [44].

3.2. Data Sources and Literature Search Strategy

The analysis draws on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles on communication theory and digital marketing, industry reports on social media trends, and publicly documented case examples of brand and creator practice. Sources were selected based on relevance to engagement, authenticity, and audience-brand relationship constructs [45].

This conceptual review adopted a structured literature identification approach to ensure transparency in selecting relevant theoretical and empirical sources. The literature search focused on studies related to social media engagement, authenticity, digital communication, audience relationship, trust formation, and community-building practices [46]. Relevant literature was identified through academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect, using combinations of keywords such as “social media engagement,” “authentic engagement,” “digital communication,” “parasocial interaction,” “audience relationship,” “social media authenticity,” and “community building.” Foundational theoretical works were retained regardless of publication year due to their essential contribution to the development of Social Exchange Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory, while contemporary studies were considered to capture recent developments in digital engagement practices.

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The literature selection process followed predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included when they discussed social media engagement, authenticity, trust, reciprocity, audience–brand or audience–creator relationships, and digital communication strategies [47]. Peer-reviewed journal articles, relevant conceptual studies, and theoretical publications were prioritized. Studies were excluded when they focused solely on technical platform algorithms, advertising performance without relational engagement dimensions, unrelated digital communication contexts, or sources without sufficient theoretical relevance. This selection process ensured that the reviewed literature directly contributed to understanding how authentic engagement is developed and sustained in digital environments [48].

The screening process consisted of several stages. First, identified records were reviewed based on titles and abstracts to remove studies that were outside the research scope [49]. Second, potentially relevant studies were assessed through full-text examination based on the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Third, selected studies were organized according to their theoretical contribution, research focus, and relevance to authentic engagement development. This screening process ensured that only literature directly contributing to the conceptual development of the framework was retained for further synthesis [50].

3.4. Analytical Technique

The selected literature was analyzed using thematic synthesis. The analysis was conducted through four sequential stages. First, relevant concepts related to value exchange, authenticity, trust, emotional connection, audience motivation, reciprocity, and community participation were extracted from the selected studies. Second, these concepts were coded and grouped into broader thematic categories based on their conceptual similarities [51]. Third, the identified themes were compared across Social Exchange Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory to identify complementary mechanisms and theoretical limitations. Finally, recurring themes were synthesized into four higher-order dimensions: consistency, relatable storytelling, reciprocity, and community-centered communication. These dimensions were integrated into the proposed authentic engagement framework, providing a transparent connection between literature evidence, theoretical interpretation, and conceptual model development.

3.5. Object of Discussion

The discussion focuses primarily on mainstream content-driven platforms Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, given their dominant role in shaping contemporary engagement norms through visual, short-form, and creator-led content formats.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Core Elements of Authentic Engagement

Synthesis of the literature reveals four recurring pillars that consistently underlie authentic engagement across platforms and content types.

- **Consistency:** Regular posting schedules and stable content themes signal reliability, reinforcing audience expectations and reducing relational uncertainty.
- **Relatable Storytelling:** Content grounded in genuine narrative rather than purely promotional messaging fosters emotional resonance and encourages audiences to see themselves reflected in the content.
- **Reciprocity:** Two-way interaction, including responding to comments, incorporating audience feedback, and acknowledging community contributions, transforms passive viewers into active participants.
- **Community-Centered Communication:** Prioritizing the collective identity and shared interests of an audience rather than treating followers merely as a broadcast target cultivates a sense of belonging that sustains long-term engagement.

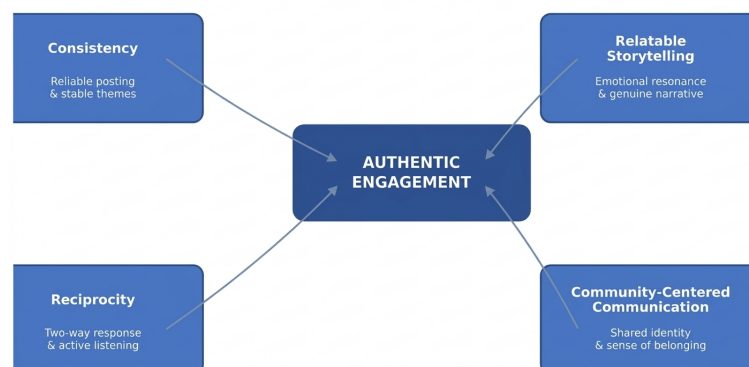


Figure 1. The Four Pillars of Authentic Engagement (Author's synthesis)

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual flow of authentic engagement development. Consistency functions as the foundation for reliability by establishing stable expectations between organizations or creators and their audiences. Relatable storytelling strengthens emotional connection by enabling audiences to identify with shared experiences and values. Reciprocity transforms communication from one-way content delivery into mutual interaction, while community-centered communication develops a sense of belonging and collective identity. Together, these dimensions represent interconnected relational mechanisms through which digital interactions may evolve into sustainable audience relationships. Since this framework is derived from theoretical synthesis, future empirical studies are required to validate the proposed relationships.

Table 2. Comparative Indicators of Authentic versus Superficial Engagement

Indicator	Authentic Engagement	Superficial / Vanity Engagement
Comment quality	Reflective, personal, conversational	Generic emojis, one-word reactions
Content driver	Audience needs and shared values	Trend-chasing, clickbait, controversy
Interaction direction	Two-way, responsive dialogue	One-way broadcast
Growth pattern	Gradual, loyalty-based retention	Rapid but volatile spikes
Long-term outcome	Trust, advocacy, community identity	Follower churn, declining credibility

Table 2 demonstrates that the distinction between authentic and superficial engagement extends beyond communication patterns and has direct implications for long-term organizational performance. Each indicator represents a different mechanism through which digital relationships can generate sustainable value. First, comment quality reflects the depth of audience involvement. Meaningful comments, discussions, and personal responses indicate stronger cognitive and emotional investment, which can contribute to trust formation and customer relationship development. In contrast, generic reactions generated through superficial tactics provide limited insight into genuine audience commitment.

Second, content drivers influence how organizations create long-term value. Value-oriented and audience-centered content strengthens credibility because audiences perceive the communication as relevant and meaningful, while trend-driven or click-oriented content may produce temporary attention without establishing durable brand associations. Third, interaction direction represents the quality of communication exchange. Two-way interaction enables organizations and creators to collect feedback, understand audience expectations, and develop stronger relational connections, whereas one-way broadcasting limits opportunities for relationship building and continuous improvement.

Fourth, growth patterns indicate the sustainability of audience development. Although superficial engagement may create rapid increases in visibility, authentic engagement generally produces gradual growth based on trust, repeated interaction, and community participation. This type of growth is more valuable for organizations because it supports retention, advocacy, and long-term customer relationships. Finally, long-term outcomes represent the strategic value of engagement quality. Authentic engagement contributes to community identity, brand loyalty, and stakeholder advocacy, while superficial engagement often results in unstable attention with limited contribution to sustainable business performance. Therefore, engagement should be managed as a relational capability that supports long-term organizational resilience rather than as a short-term performance metric.

4.2. Deliberate Strategy, Not Coincidence

The evidence strongly suggests that high-performing accounts do not achieve authentic engagement passively. Deliberate strategy typically includes data-informed content planning based on audience behavior and preferences, message personalization and audience segmentation to address distinct subgroups within a broader following, and collaboration with micro-communities or niche creators who possess established credibility and trust within specific audience segments. These practices require ongoing analysis, iteration, and intentional resource allocation, characteristics fundamentally incompatible with the notion of "accidental" success.

From a digital transformation perspective, authentic engagement is an organizational capability that leverages digital interaction, analytics, and adaptive content. Social media functions as digital infrastructure for stakeholder interaction and organizational learning. Technology innovation management integrates platform capabilities, data analytics, content, and community management to create sustainable relational value.

4.3. The Role and Limits of Algorithms

Social media algorithms are generally designed to detect and amplify signals associated with genuine interaction, such as comment depth, replay behavior, and time spent on content, rather than raw interaction counts alone. However, over-reliance on algorithmically favored tactics such as engagement bait or artificially provocative content risks generating short-term visibility at the expense of long-term audience trust. Although algorithmic systems may increase content visibility, they cannot replace the underlying relational value required to sustain meaningful audience relationships. The underlying relational value must still be present for engagement to translate into sustained loyalty.

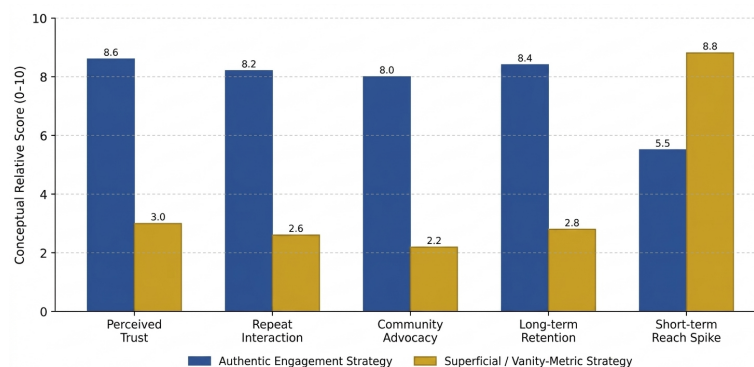


Figure 2. Conceptual comparison of outcomes between authentic and superficial engagement strategies, synthesized from the reviewed literature (illustrative, not empirical data)

As Figure 2 conceptually illustrates, superficial strategies may occasionally outperform authentic strategies in short-term reach, largely due to algorithmic amplification of provocative or bait-driven content. However, authentic strategies consistently outperform on relational outcomes trust, repeat interaction, advocacy, and long-term retention which are the indicators most closely tied to sustainable audience relationships and, ultimately, brand or creator longevity.

4.4. Illustrative Practice Patterns

Across multiple industries, accounts recognized for strong community loyalty tend to share observable practice patterns: transparent behind-the-scenes content that humanizes the brand or creator, prompt and personalized responses to audience comments and messages, and consistent value alignment between stated brand identity and actual content output. These patterns illustrate the practical application of the theoretical pillars discussed above, though they should be understood as illustrative rather than as generalized empirical proof.

These practices also demonstrate the importance of organizational communication in digital environments. Authentic engagement requires organizations to establish transparent communication flows, respond to stakeholder expectations, and maintain consistency between organizational values and digital expressions. Rather than treating audiences as passive recipients of information, sustainable digital communication requires organizations to develop participatory relationships in which feedback, dialogue, and shared identity become strategic resources for continuous improvement.

4.5. Challenges in Building Authentic Engagement

Despite its benefits, cultivating authentic engagement faces several structural challenges. Content saturation across platforms increases competition for audience attention, while frequent algorithmic changes create uncertainty in content strategy planning. Additionally, audience fatigue a decline in responsiveness due to overexposure to similar content formats poses a growing risk, particularly for accounts that prioritize volume over strategic variation and genuine value delivery.

4.6. Implications

Theoretically, this paper contributes an integrated relational explanation of authentic social media engagement by connecting value exchange, parasocial closeness, audience gratification, and community belonging within a single four-pillar framework. Rather than treating engagement as a platform metric or examining

authenticity through an isolated theoretical perspective, the framework explains how consistency, relatable storytelling, reciprocity, and community-centered communication jointly transform audience interaction into sustained relational value. Managerially, the framework provides digital marketers, content creators, and community managers with a practical decision structure for content planning, audience-response management, and resource allocation. Performance should therefore be assessed not only through likes, shares, or short-term reach, but also through comment quality, repeat interaction, audience retention, advocacy, and community identity. This distinction helps practitioners reduce dependence on volatile algorithmic visibility and prioritize communication practices capable of generating sustainable audience relationships.

4.7. Recommendations

- Practitioners should prioritize audience-response mechanisms (comment engagement, community features) as core strategic activities, not secondary tasks.
- Content planning should be grounded in ongoing audience research rather than reactive trend-chasing.
- Future empirical research should test the proposed four-pillar framework using quantitative engagement data across diverse platforms and industries.

5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings provide several managerial implications for organizations seeking to strengthen digital transformation and manage social media as a strategic organizational capability. Rather than treating social media solely as a promotional channel, managers should integrate digital communication into broader organizational strategies for stakeholder engagement, organizational learning, and long-term value creation. This approach is consistent with the role of digital platforms as infrastructure for interaction and adaptive organizational practices identified in this study.

First, managers should develop a structured digital engagement strategy based on the four pillars of authentic engagement: consistency, relatable storytelling, reciprocity, and community-centered communication. Consistency can be managed through clear content planning and stable communication practices, while relatable storytelling can strengthen emotional connections between organizations and their audiences. Reciprocity requires organizations to establish responsive mechanisms for addressing comments, feedback, and audience contributions. Community-centered communication should further encourage participation and shared identity rather than treating audiences solely as passive recipients of promotional content. Together, these practices can help organizations manage digital stakeholder relationships more systematically.

Second, organizations should incorporate audience insights and digital analytics into managerial decision-making. Audience behavior, interaction patterns, and feedback can be used to evaluate whether digital communication is creating meaningful relational value rather than merely generating high engagement volumes. Accordingly, managers should complement conventional indicators such as likes, views, shares, and follower growth with relational indicators including interaction quality, repeat participation, audience trust, advocacy, retention, and community attachment. This broader evaluation approach enables managers to align digital communication activities with organizational objectives and continuously refine their strategies.

Third, managers should allocate organizational resources to support continuous digital adaptation. Authentic engagement requires ongoing content planning, audience analysis, responsiveness, and adjustment to changing platform environments. Therefore, digital engagement should be managed as a continuous organizational capability rather than as an occasional marketing activity. Managers can use the proposed four-pillar framework as a decision structure for coordinating content development, audience-response mechanisms, community management, and resource allocation across digital platforms.

Finally, organizations should balance algorithmic optimization with responsible and sustainable digital communication. Although platform algorithms can support visibility, excessive dependence on short-term algorithmic tactics may weaken audience trust and long-term relationships. Managers should therefore prioritize transparent, value-oriented, reciprocal, and community-focused communication practices. Such an approach positions digital platforms not merely as communication tools but as strategic assets that support organizational adaptability, stakeholder relationships, and sustainable digital value creation.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper argues that authentic engagement on social media is not an incidental outcome of posting frequency, algorithmic exposure, or short-term visibility strategies, but rather the result of deliberate, theory-informed communication practices. By integrating Social Exchange Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Uses and Gratifications framework, this study develops a conceptual understanding of authentic engagement through four interconnected pillars: consistency, relatable storytelling, reciprocity, and community-centered communication. These dimensions explain how digital interactions can evolve beyond transactional exchanges into sustainable audience relationships based on trust, emotional connection, mutual value creation, and community belonging. Therefore, engagement metrics such as likes, views, and follower growth should be interpreted as supporting indicators rather than direct representations of relational quality.

Beyond its contribution to digital communication and marketing strategy, the proposed framework highlights the role of authentic engagement in supporting sustainable digital business practices. By encouraging organizations to adopt consistent, transparent, reciprocal, and community-oriented communication approaches, the framework contributes to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 9 on Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure through the enhancement of digital capabilities, innovation-oriented communication practices, and technology-enabled stakeholder connectivity. Furthermore, the framework supports SDG 12 on Responsible Consumption and Production by promoting responsible digital communication, meaningful value creation, and long-term audience relationships rather than engagement strategies focused solely on short-term visibility and algorithmic optimization. These implications position authentic digital communication not only as a marketing practice but also as a strategic organizational capability that supports responsible and sustainable digital ecosystems.

Although this study provides a conceptual synthesis of authentic engagement mechanisms, the proposed framework has not yet been empirically validated. Future research should therefore examine the relationships among consistency, relatable storytelling, reciprocity, community-centered communication, and engagement outcomes through quantitative, qualitative, experimental, or longitudinal approaches. Empirical studies across different social media platforms, industries, organizational contexts, and audience segments are encouraged to evaluate the framework's applicability and determine how these dimensions influence trust, retention, advocacy, and long-term audience relationship development.

7. DECLARATIONS

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Conceptualization: RL and ES; Methodology: RL; Software: ES and ED; Validation: ES and RL; Formal Analysis: ED and RL; Investigation: ES; Resources: ED; Data Curation: RL; Writing Original Draft Preparation: RL and ES; Writing Review and Editing: ED and ES; Visualization: RL. All authors, RL, ES, and ED, have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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