



Women, Social Media and Marketing Communication: A Thematic Review of Empowerment, Entrepreneurship and Consumer Engagement Research

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Abstract

Research on women and social media has developed along three largely separate tracks. One examines social media as an instrument of empowerment, a second treats it as a business tool for women entrepreneurs, and a third studies how social media marketing shapes consumer attitudes and brand outcomes. This paper reviews the literature across all three tracks and asks whether a common mechanism connects them. Following a structured narrative review procedure, studies published between 2010 and 2025 were located, screened and classified by theme, theoretical lens, method and geographic context. The synthesis indicates that the three literatures converge on engagement, understood as the interactive involvement of the user with content, as the point at which social media activity acquires consequence. Empowerment research treats engagement as participation, entrepreneurship research treats it as customer interaction, and consumer research treats it as a driver of brand outcomes, but the underlying construct is the same in each case. The review further finds that the literature is dominated by descriptive and single-relationship designs, that theoretical grounding is uneven, that negative consequences receive limited attention, and that empirical work concentrates on metropolitan populations while tier-two cities remain largely unexamined. Seven research gaps are identified and translated into research questions, and an integrative framework is proposed in which social media usage, exposure, platform preference and content characteristics influence engagement, which in turn influences brand awareness, brand preference and purchase decision. The framework offers a testable structure for future work and a basis on which the three literatures may be read together rather than apart.

Keywords: social media marketing; consumer engagement; women consumers; women entrepreneurship; digital empowerment; literature review; research agenda

1. Introduction

Social media has become the dominant channel through which brands communicate with consumers, and the shift has been especially consequential for women. Women constitute one of the most active segments on major platforms, they participate more heavily in content sharing than other groups, and they exert substantial influence over household and personal consumption decisions. These facts have attracted research attention from several directions at once, and the resulting literature is large but fragmented.

Three strands are visible. The first treats social media as a mechanism of empowerment, examining how digital platforms give women voice, visibility and access to networks that social structures otherwise restrict. The second treats social media as a business instrument,

examining how women entrepreneurs use low-cost digital channels to market products, reach customers and overcome constraints on capital and mobility. The third is a marketing literature proper, examining how social media communication influences consumer attitudes, brand perceptions and purchase behaviour, with women frequently appearing as the population of interest because of their prominence in categories such as beauty, fashion and household goods.

These strands rarely cite one another. Empowerment research seldom draws on brand equity theory, and consumer research seldom engages with the entrepreneurship literature on digital inclusion. Yet a reading across them suggests that they may be describing different aspects of one process. In each case, the benefit attributed to social media depends on whether the user does something with what she encounters rather than merely encountering it. Empowerment scholars describe this as participation, entrepreneurship scholars as customer interaction, and marketing scholars as engagement, but the construct being invoked appears to be the same.

This paper reviews the literature with that possibility in view. Its purposes are threefold. First, it maps the field, classifying studies by theme, theoretical lens, method and context in order to establish what has been examined and how. Second, it synthesises findings across the three strands to determine whether a common mechanism is present. Third, it identifies gaps and translates them into research questions, closing with an integrative framework that specifies the mechanism in a testable form.

The review is therefore not merely descriptive. It advances the argument that engagement is the construct through which the three literatures may be connected, and that treating it as such would allow findings currently held apart to inform one another.

2. Review Method

2.1 Approach

The review follows a structured narrative procedure rather than a fully systematic protocol. Narrative synthesis is appropriate where the objective is to integrate heterogeneous literatures and develop conceptual structure rather than to estimate an effect size, and where included studies differ substantially in design and measurement (Snyder, 2019). The procedure nonetheless borrowed the transparency conventions of systematic review, including explicit inclusion criteria, a documented search strategy and a classification framework applied consistently to every included study (Tranfield et al., 2003). Synthesis proceeded concept-first rather than study-first, so that findings are organised around themes rather than presented as a sequence of summaries (Webster & Watson, 2002).

2.2 Scope and Inclusion Criteria

Table 1 sets out the scope of the review. The period from 2010 to 2025 was selected because it begins with the consolidation of the major platforms and the appearance of the first substantial body of scholarship on social media marketing, and it extends to the present. Studies were included where they addressed social media in relation to women as consumers, entrepreneurs or participants, and where they reported findings rather than

opinion. Purely technical studies of platform architecture and studies of social media use with no marketing, entrepreneurial or empowerment dimension were excluded.

Table 1 Scope and Inclusion Criteria of the Review

Criterion	Specification
Period covered	2010 to 2025
Thematic scope	Social media in relation to women as consumers, entrepreneurs or participants
Study types included	Empirical (quantitative, qualitative, mixed), conceptual and review papers
Study types excluded	Technical platform studies; opinion pieces without evidence; studies with no marketing, entrepreneurial or empowerment dimension
Geographic scope	Unrestricted, with attention to representation across regions
Language	English
Classification applied	Theme, theoretical lens, method, sample, region, principal finding

Note. The review follows structured narrative conventions rather than a full systematic protocol.

2.3 Classification Framework

Each included study was classified on six dimensions: the theme it addressed, the theoretical lens it applied if any, the research method employed, the sample and its size, the geographic context, and the principal finding reported. Classification by theme produced the seven categories used in Section 4. Classification by theoretical lens produced the four perspectives discussed in Section 3. Classification by method and context supported the assessment of methodological patterns presented in Section 5 and informed the identification of gaps in Section 6.

3. Theoretical Perspectives in the Reviewed Literature

A notable feature of the field is that a substantial share of studies proceed without explicit theory. Where theory is invoked, four perspectives account for most of the literature. These are summarised in Table 2 and discussed below.

Table 2 Theoretical Perspectives Applied in the Reviewed Literature

Perspective	Principal sources	Explanatory role
Uses and gratifications	Katz et al. (1973); Muntinga et al. (2011); Dolan et al. (2016)	Explains why users select and engage with content; treats the audience as active
Technology acceptance and	Davis (1989); Ajzen (1991)	Explains adoption and continued use in terms of usefulness, ease of

Perspective	Principal sources	Explanatory role
behavioural intention		use and intention
Consumer engagement theory	Brodie et al. (2011); Vivek et al. (2012); Hollebeek et al. (2014)	Conceptualises engagement as a cognitive, emotional and behavioural state
Elaboration and persuasion	Petty and Cacioppo (1986); Keller (1993)	Explains how depth of processing shapes attitude and memory outcomes

Note. A substantial proportion of reviewed studies apply no explicit theoretical framework.

3.1 Uses and Gratifications

The uses and gratifications tradition holds that audiences select media actively in pursuit of specific gratifications rather than absorbing content passively (Katz et al., 1973). Applied to social platforms, the perspective yields the expectation that users will attend to content satisfying functional, emotional or social needs and disregard content that does not, however frequently it appears. Muntinga et al. (2011) developed this position into the COBRA typology, distinguishing consuming, contributing and creating as ascending levels of brand-related activity. Dolan et al. (2016) applied the framework directly to engagement behaviour and found that interactive and emotionally resonant content raised participation while heavily promotional material depressed it. The perspective is well suited to the study of women's social media use, since it accommodates the informational, social and aspirational motives that the literature repeatedly identifies.

3.2 Technology Acceptance and Behavioural Intention

Adoption studies, particularly those concerning women entrepreneurs and first-time users, draw on the technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989) and the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). These frameworks explain platform adoption in terms of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, attitude and social norms. They are appropriate where the research question concerns whether a technology will be taken up, and much of the entrepreneurship literature is concerned with precisely that. Their limitation for marketing purposes is that they explain adoption rather than response, and adoption is a precondition of engagement rather than a substitute for it.

3.3 Consumer Engagement Theory

The most directly relevant perspective conceptualises engagement as a psychological state arising from interactive and co-creative experience with a focal object, comprising cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2012). Hollebeek et al. (2014) demonstrated that engagement so defined can be measured reliably in social media settings and that it relates systematically to brand outcomes. The behavioural dimension is directly observable in digital environments, since liking, sharing, commenting and clicking leave a record. This perspective supplies the vocabulary in which the convergence identified by this review can be expressed.

3.4 Elaboration and Persuasion

A smaller group of studies draws on persuasion theory to explain why interaction with a message produces stronger outcomes than mere exposure. The elaboration likelihood model holds that attitudes formed through effortful processing are more durable and more predictive of behaviour than those formed peripherally (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Applied to social media, this implies that a consumer who acts on a message elaborates it more fully than one who scrolls past, which is the mechanism by which engagement affects brand memory and preference (Keller, 1993; Hutter et al., 2013).

4. Thematic Synthesis

Classification produced seven themes. The first two belong to the empowerment and entrepreneurship strands, the next four to the marketing strand, and the seventh cuts across all of them. Table 3 summarises the themes and their characteristic findings.

Table 3 Thematic Classification of the Reviewed Literature

Theme	Focus of enquiry	Characteristic finding
Empowerment	Voice, visibility, network access, psychological empowerment	Benefits are conditional on active participation; risks include harassment and unequal access
Entrepreneurship	Low-cost marketing, customer reach, overcoming mobility and capital constraints	Gains depend on sustained customer interaction, not mere presence
Consumer attitudes	Informativeness, entertainment, credibility, irritation	Positive attributes raise attitude; intrusiveness depresses it
Platform differences	Distinct experiential profiles by platform	Engagement is platform-specific, not a uniform property of social media
Content characteristics	Vividness, interactivity, influencer credibility, incentives	Format and source shape interaction more than message volume
Engagement mechanism	Liking, sharing, commenting, clicking, following	Engagement intervenes between communication and outcome
Brand outcomes	Awareness, preference, loyalty, purchase intention	Outcomes follow interaction rather than exposure

4.1 Social Media and Women's Empowerment

A substantial literature treats social media as an instrument through which women acquire voice, visibility and access to resources. Studies in this tradition report that platforms allow women to participate in public discourse from which social structures otherwise exclude them, to build networks beyond immediate geography, and to develop confidence and

independent identity. Beninger et al. (2016), studying Egyptian women, identify empowerment as both an economic and a socio-psychological process, and note that platforms reduce dependence on male-dominated business networks. Melissa et al. (2013) reach parallel conclusions in urban Indonesia, and McAdam et al. (2020) argue from a cyberfeminist position that digital entrepreneurship carries emancipatory potential in emerging economies while cautioning that existing inequalities are reproduced online as well as challenged there.

Two qualifications recur. The first is that benefits accrue to those who participate actively rather than merely hold an account, which is the first appearance of the engagement mechanism in this literature although it is rarely named as such. The second is that harms are distributed unevenly. Harassment, surveillance, privacy risk and unequal access appear consistently, and Steel (2017) shows that digital participation does not free women entirely from the gendered constraints operating offline, since online spaces reproduce them in altered form.

4.2 Social Media and Women's Entrepreneurship

The entrepreneurship literature is the largest of the three strands and the most consistent in its conclusions. Studies across Egypt, Tunisia, Kosovo, Indonesia, Sudan, Nigeria, Malaysia and India report that social media lowers barriers of capital, mobility and market access, functioning as a low-cost channel for marketing, customer communication and brand building. Ukpere et al. (2014) describe the resulting expansion of entrepreneurial possibility, and Genç and Öksüz (2015) examine how effectively women translate platform availability into business results, finding that effectiveness depends on strategic use rather than presence alone.

The most instructive finding in this strand concerns what separates successful from unsuccessful adoption. Olsson and Bernhard (2021) show that women entrepreneurs who invest in digital competence and experiment continuously achieve greater visibility and growth, while those who recognise the value of the tools but lack confidence in applying them do not. Cesaroni et al. (2017) reach a comparable conclusion, noting that digital literacy gaps, time constraints and social expectations continue to limit participation even where access is universal. The pattern is that access is necessary but insufficient, and that the operative variable is sustained interaction with customers.

4.3 Consumer Attitudes towards Social Media Marketing

The marketing strand begins with attitude formation. A consistent set of message attributes predicts favourable response. Informativeness, entertainment value and credibility raise positive attitudes towards social media advertising, whereas irritation, produced by intrusive placement or excessive repetition, depresses them. Alalwan (2018) confirms this pattern in relation to purchase intention, finding that advertising features work through perceived relevance rather than through frequency of appearance. Alalwan et al. (2017), reviewing the field, note that the literature has converged on these attributes with unusual consistency across national contexts.

Attitude research also documents the role of electronic word of mouth. Chu and Kim (2011) identify tie strength, homophily and trust as determinants of engagement in eWOM within social networking sites, and Erkan and Evans (2016) show that the quality and credibility of information encountered in social media shape purchase intention through its perceived usefulness. This body of work establishes that consumers evaluate social media content rather than absorbing it, which is consistent with the uses and gratifications position and inconsistent with models that treat exposure as sufficient.

4.4 Platform Differences

A distinct line of enquiry demonstrates that platforms are not interchangeable carriers of an identical message. Voorveld et al. (2018), surveying 1,346 users across eight platforms, show that each generates a distinct experiential profile organised around entertainment, social interaction, topicality or practical utility, and that engagement with advertising varies accordingly. Their conclusion that no single uniform concept of social media applies has significant implications for research design, since studies that aggregate platforms may obscure effects that differ in direction across them.

Platform-specific work supports this. Studies of Instagram emphasise visual storytelling, aesthetic coherence and lifestyle alignment, while studies of Facebook emphasise community formation, group discussion and review-based social proof. The practical implication drawn throughout is that platform selection is a strategic decision rather than a distributional one, and the theoretical implication is that platform preference should be modelled as an antecedent of engagement in its own right.

4.5 Content Characteristics and Influencer Communication

Content research identifies the properties that raise interaction. De Vries et al. (2012) find that vividness and interactivity increase the popularity of brand posts, and Ashley and Tuten (2015) report that creative and experiential message strategies outperform purely informational appeals. Kim and Ko (2012) demonstrate that social media marketing activities encompassing entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation and word of mouth enhance customer equity, and Yadav and Rahman (2017) develop and validate a measurement scale for these activities in the e-commerce context.

Influencer communication has become a substantial sub-literature with particular relevance to female audiences. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) find that the credibility of Instagram personalities influences the purchase decisions of young women more strongly than traditional celebrity endorsement, because relatability substitutes for status. De Veirman et al. (2017) show that follower count interacts with perceived divergence, so that very large followings can reduce perceived uniqueness. Lou and Yuan (2019) identify message value and source credibility as the pathways through which influencer content builds trust, and Casaló et al. (2020) specify the antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership on Instagram. Across these studies the consistent finding is that persuasion operates through perceived authenticity rather than through reach.

4.6 Engagement as an Intervening Mechanism

The seventh theme cuts across the others. A growing group of studies treats engagement not as an outcome but as the state through which communication acquires effect. Hutter et al. (2013) show that user interaction on brand pages raises brand awareness and purchase intention, and that the effect operates through the interaction rather than through page visibility. Kumar et al. (2016) demonstrate that firm-generated content translates into measurable sales effects through customer behaviour rather than directly. Chen and Lin (2019) model social identification, perceived value and satisfaction as intervening variables between social media marketing activities and outcomes, and Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016) show that firm-created and user-generated communication affect brand equity and attitude through distinct routes.

Read alongside the empowerment and entrepreneurship strands, this literature makes the convergence visible. Empowerment studies report that benefits require active participation. Entrepreneurship studies report that business gains require sustained customer interaction rather than mere presence. Marketing studies report that brand outcomes follow interaction rather than exposure. The three literatures use different vocabularies, but each identifies the same conditional structure: social media confers advantage on those who engage, and confers comparatively little on those who are merely present.

4.7 Brand-Related Outcomes

The outcomes examined most frequently are brand awareness, brand preference and loyalty, and purchase intention or decision. Godey et al. (2016) show that social media marketing efforts influence brand equity and consumer behaviour in the luxury sector, and Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016) trace effects on brand awareness and attitude. The literature is relatively consistent that awareness responds most readily, that preference and loyalty require sustained interaction, and that purchase is affected but through a longer chain in which price, availability and circumstance intervene. Table 4 lists representative studies across the seven themes.

Table 4 Representative Studies by Theme

Theme	Study	Design and context	Principal finding
Empowerment	Beninger et al. (2016)	Qualitative interviews, Egypt	Empowerment is economic and psychological
Empowerment	McAdam et al. (2020)	Conceptual, emerging economies	Digital entrepreneurship has emancipatory potential
Entrepreneurship	Olsson & Bernhard (2021)	Qualitative, Sweden	Digital competence separates outcomes
Entrepreneurship	Genç & Öksüz (2015)	Empirical, Turkey	Effectiveness depends on strategic use

Theme	Study	Design and context	Principal finding
Consumer attitudes	Alalwan (2018)	Survey, Jordan	Relevance matters more than frequency
Consumer attitudes	Erkan & Evans (2016)	Survey	eWOM affects intention via usefulness
Platform differences	Voorveld et al. (2018)	Survey, 8 platforms	Engagement is platform-specific
Content and influencers	Djafarova & Rushworth (2017)	Qualitative, young women	Relatability outweighs celebrity status
Content and influencers	De Veirman et al. (2017)	Experimental	Follower count interacts with divergence
Engagement mechanism	Hutter et al. (2013)	Survey, Facebook	Interaction raises awareness and intention
Engagement mechanism	Kumar et al. (2016)	Longitudinal, multi-platform	Content affects sales via behaviour
Brand outcomes	Godey et al. (2016)	Survey, luxury brands	SMM efforts raise brand equity

5. Methodological Patterns and Limitations

Four patterns emerge from the methodological classification. First, cross-sectional survey designs dominate. Longitudinal and experimental work is rare, which limits the strength of causal claims across the field as a whole. Where causal language appears, it typically rests on theoretical justification rather than on design.

Second, analytical sophistication is uneven. A considerable share of studies, particularly regional ones, report frequencies, means and rankings without inferential testing. Where inferential methods are used, correlation and regression are more common than structural equation modelling, with the consequence that mediating and moderating relationships are frequently discussed but seldom tested. This matters given that the substantive convergence identified in Section 4.6 is a mediation claim.

Third, measurement varies widely. Engagement in particular is operationalised inconsistently, sometimes as self-reported behaviour, sometimes as platform metrics, and sometimes as attitude. Validated scales such as that of Hollebeek et al. (2014) are available but are not consistently adopted, which limits comparability across studies.

Fourth, geographic representation is skewed. Studies concentrate on metropolitan populations within each country examined, and within the Indian literature specifically on the largest cities. Tier-two and tier-three urban populations, where digital adoption is now high and consumption is growing quickly, are markedly under-represented. Since the socio-

cultural conditions shaping women's digital behaviour differ across these settings, the generalisability of existing findings is uncertain.

6. Research Gaps and Research Questions

Seven gaps follow from the synthesis and the methodological assessment. Table 5 states each gap alongside a research question that would address it.

Table 5 Research Gaps and Corresponding Research Questions

No.	Research gap	Research question
1	No integrated framework links empowerment, entrepreneurship and marketing outcomes	Does a single engagement mechanism account for the effects reported across the three literatures?
2	Mediation is discussed but rarely tested	Does engagement mediate the relationship between social media antecedents and brand outcomes, and is the mediation full or partial?
3	Descriptive designs predominate over advanced modelling	What is gained when the relationships in this field are estimated simultaneously rather than pairwise?
4	Tier-two and tier-three cities are under-represented	Does the engagement mechanism operate in the same form outside metropolitan populations?
5	Engagement is measured inconsistently	Which operationalisation of engagement best predicts brand outcomes among women consumers?
6	Negative consequences receive limited analysis	How do harassment, privacy concern and advertising fatigue moderate the relationship between exposure and engagement?
7	Longitudinal evidence is largely absent	How do engagement and its outcomes develop over time as platform use matures?

7. An Integrative Framework and Research Agenda

The synthesis supports a framework in which engagement occupies the intervening position. Four antecedents are indicated by the literature. Social media usage represents the intensity and habituality of platform use, which the empowerment and entrepreneurship literatures identify as the precondition for benefit. Exposure to marketing communication represents the frequency of encounter with promotional material, which the attitude literature examines directly. Platform preference represents the concentration of attention on particular platforms, which Voorveld et al. (2018) show to shape engagement independently. Type of marketing content represents the format and source of the message, which the content and influencer literatures identify as determinants of interaction.

These four converge on engagement with marketing content, understood in the behavioural terms established by Hollebeek et al. (2014) as liking, sharing, commenting, clicking and following. Engagement in turn influences three outcomes on which the marketing literature concentrates: brand awareness, brand preference and purchase decision.

The framework generates several testable propositions. The first is that each of the four antecedents exerts a positive effect on engagement, with the relative magnitudes an empirical question that the literature does not currently settle. The second is that engagement exerts a positive effect on each of the three outcomes, with awareness expected to respond most strongly given its cognitive character. The third and most consequential proposition is that the effects of the antecedents on the outcomes are transmitted through engagement. Whether that transmission is full or partial is precisely what the existing literature leaves open, since studies establishing that engagement affects outcomes have not generally tested whether direct paths remain.

Testing the framework requires a design that estimates all relationships simultaneously on a single sample, which points towards structural equation modelling with a validated multi-item instrument. It also requires attention to context, since the geographic skew identified in Section 5 makes replication across city tiers and regions necessary before the mechanism can be regarded as general. Extensions worth pursuing include the addition of trust, perceived authenticity and influencer credibility as further antecedents, the treatment of demographic characteristics as moderators rather than controls, and the incorporation of the negative consequences identified in the empowerment literature as constraints on the exposure to engagement path.

8. Conclusion

This review examined three literatures that have developed largely in isolation from one another: research treating social media as an instrument of women's empowerment, research treating it as a business tool for women entrepreneurs, and research treating it as a marketing channel affecting consumer behaviour. Reading them together reveals a shared conditional structure. Each reports that social media confers advantage on those who interact with it and comparatively little on those who are merely present, and each therefore identifies engagement, under one description or another, as the point at which activity becomes consequence.

The methodological assessment indicates that this convergence has not been tested. Descriptive and single-relationship designs predominate, mediation is discussed more often than modelled, engagement is measured inconsistently, and empirical attention is concentrated on metropolitan populations. The seven gaps identified here follow from those patterns, and the integrative framework proposed in Section 7 offers a structure within which they may be addressed.

For research, the contribution of the review is a way of reading the three literatures as one. For practice, its implication is that strategies built on visibility rather than interaction lack a mechanism through which to act, a conclusion the literature supports in each of its three strands even though none states it in those terms. Establishing whether engagement fully or



only partially accounts for the effects attributed to social media remains the central empirical question in this field.

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