

The Impact of Instagram on Customer Engagement in Sri Lanka's Fashion Startups

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Instagram has emerged as one of the most influential social media platforms globally, enabling startups to reach their target audiences, expand their businesses, and foster customer relationships. However, despite its potential, many startups struggle to maintain consistent customer engagement on the platform. Existing studies have broadly examined consumer engagement across various social media platforms, but there is a notable gap in research focusing specifically on Instagram's role in shaping consumer interactions. Although Instagram is widely recognised as a powerful tool for businesses particularly in the fashion sector, limited studies have explored its unique attributes and their impact on customer engagement. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the key factors influencing Instagram engagement, with a specific focus on Sri Lankan fashion startups.

Customer engagement, the dependent variable in this study, is analysed in relation to four independent variables: post format, posting time, message interactivity, and topic attractiveness. Data were collected through an online survey targeting Instagram users in Sri Lanka, yielding 385 valid responses. A filtering question ensured data relevance, requiring participants to have followed at least one clothing brand on Instagram for more than a year. The survey was designed to assess how the identified variables influence customer engagement, and the collected data were analysed using advanced statistical techniques, including regression analysis.

The findings confirm that all hypotheses are supported, indicating that topic attractiveness, message interactivity, post format, and posting time significantly influence customer engagement. Notably, topic attractiveness and message interactivity emerged as the most influential factors, reinforcing prior research that highlights the importance of visually appealing and interactive content in driving social media engagement. These results provide

empirical evidence supporting the strategic use of Instagram to enhance consumer interaction, offering valuable insights for fashion startups in Sri Lanka on how to optimise their content and posting schedules.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. While the sample of 385 Instagram users provides meaningful insights, it does not fully represent the diverse demographic of Sri Lankan consumers engaging with fashion startups, as respondents were predominantly young, female, and students. Additionally, given the dynamic nature of social media, engagement trends observed within the study's timeframe may not reflect long-term behavioural patterns. The findings should also be interpreted within broader social media marketing frameworks due to the limited theoretical and empirical research on Instagram-specific customer interactions.

This study advances the understanding of Instagram consumer interactions and offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it underscores the significance of topic attractiveness, message interactivity, posting time, and post format in shaping customer engagement. These insights provide a foundation for future research exploring engagement dynamics across different sectors, geographical regions, and extended timeframes. Practically, the findings offer actionable strategies for fashion startups to enhance their digital marketing efforts. By developing compelling content, integrating interactive elements, and strategically scheduling posts, businesses can strengthen customer relationships and gain a competitive advantage in the rapidly evolving digital landscape. Future studies should explore the integration of emerging social media features and their long-term effects on customer engagement.

Keywords: *Attractiveness of the Topic, Customer Engagement, Format of the Post, Instagram, Interactivity of the Message, Timeframe of the Post*