

A Study on digital Instagram Influencers: Marketing Strategies and Sustainable leadership

Sukanya Koti

Faculty of Business and Commerce, Atmiya University, Rajkot, India
ORCID: 0009-0009-2477-7010.

Vishal Khasgijwala

Faculty of Business and Commerce, Atmiya University, Rajkot, India
ORCID:0000-0003-2203-7712

Abstract— In India's tier-2 cities, such as Rajkot, Instagram has evolved into a digital ecosystem, and influencers shape consumer attitudes toward technology products. This paper explores how digital and tech influencers in Rajkot, specializing in smartphones, AI, and mobile applications, adopt marketing strategies aligned with sustainable leadership principles. A qualitative, in-depth interview design was adopted with eight Instagram influencers each having more than 5,000 followers. Data was analyzed thematically using NVivo for coding (Ahmed et al., 2025). Findings indicate that influencers act as micro-sustainable leaders, embedding ethical values, authenticity, and environmental awareness into digital branding. They try their best to balance between commercial collaborations with responsible messaging, showing that sustainability can coexist with profitability. The study contributes to influencer-marketing and leadership literature by conceptualizing a model linking influencer authenticity → ethical collaboration → follower trust → sustainable engagement. Managerially, it guides brands to partner with ethically aligned influencers to advance Sustainable Development Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

Keywords—Instagram Influencer, digital Marketing, Sustainable leadership, Smart gadgets, Qualitative research, Thematical Analysis

I. Introduction

Social media influencers, especially on visual platforms like Instagram, have become central actors in digital marketing ecosystems. Brands now routinely collaborate with influencers to leverage their trust, engagement, and niche reach. This phenomenon is powerful in India's tech, telecom, and gadget sectors, where consumers often rely on peer reviews, unboxing videos, and personal use-case demonstrations before purchasing. The intersection of influencer marketing and sustainable leadership becomes meaningful when we consider that tech products also raise concerns about e-waste, resource use, and consumer responsibility.

A. **Growth of Influencer Marketing in India:** Influencer marketing in India is rapidly evolving. According to EY's "State of Influencer Marketing in India," the sector is projected to reach ₹3,375 crore (approximately USD 404.8 million) by 2026, growing at a CAGR of 18 % over 2022–2026. (State of Influencer Marketing in India Impact of Influencers on Brands, n.d.). Other sources report similar trajectories: Forbes notes that India's influencer marketing industry is expected to cross USD 405 million in 2026, up from around USD 289 million in 2024 (*Indian Influencer Market To Cross \$400 Million In 2026*, n.d.). In terms of platforms and technology, the India influencer marketing platform market generated USD 687.2 million in 2022 and is forecast to reach USD 7,146.2 million by 2030, reflecting a very high CAGR of ~34 % (*India Influencer Ing Platform Market Size & Outlook, 2030*, n.d.). These numbers underline how brands in India are increasingly allocating marketing budgets to influencer campaigns, especially in sectors where product demonstration, trust, and relatability matter, precisely the domain of gadgets and telecom. India's influencer marketing industry is expected to swell to ₹34 billion by 2026 from ₹19 billion in 2023 (*India's Influencer Marketing Industry to Swell to ₹34 Billion by 2026* _ Mint, n.d.). Moreover, about 47 % of brands in India now prefer to run influencer campaigns using micro and nano influencers due to their lower cost per reach, while also providing higher engagement.

Globally, the influencer marketing space is also expanding. The Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report 2025 estimates the total global influencer marketing value will reach USD 32.55 billion in 2025 (Home Influencer Marketing Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report, n.d.). These trends suggest that influencer marketing is not a passing fad, it has become a core channel in brand communication strategies.

B. **Types of Influencers: Classification and Strategic Use:** To understand the type of influencer, we need to know the classification on the basis of followers count. Niche influencers to engage with are critical, as each category brings different strengths, costs, and audience dynamics. Details of type of follower in given in table 1. mega >1M, macro 500k–1M, mid-tier 50k–500k, micro 10k–50k, nano 1k–10k (Sanders, n.d.). Also, CMS Wire summarizes the widely accepted standard four-tier model (mega, macro, micro, nano) (*Types of Social Media Influencers_ Mega, Macro, Nano and Micro Influencers*, n.d.).

Beyond reach-based categorization, influencers can also be typified by *functional role* or content style. For example, in the literature "To clarify the typification of influencers," authors propose classification considering reference group theory and roles like opinion leaders or market mavens (CRITERIA FOR CLASSIFICATION OF INFLUENCERS 1 To Clarify the Typification of Influencers: A Review of the Literature, n.d.). Gross & von Wangenheim (2018) offer a typology of influencer types: Snoopers, Informers, Entertainers, Infotainers — each defined by their content role (e.g., pure entertainment, product info, etc.) (The Big Four of Influencer Marketing, n.d.).

II. Literature Review.

A. **Evolution of Digital Influencer Marketing:** Social media has redefined marketing communication by empowering individuals to act as opinion leaders and content entrepreneurs. Digital influencers—creators who earn credibility and followership through consistent online engagement—now drive a major share of brand communication (Abidin, 2016). Platforms like Instagram integrate visual storytelling and parasocial interaction, enhancing brand trust and emotional engagement (Belanche et al., 2021). Globally, the influencer marketing industry is projected to reach USD 32.55 billion by 2025, growing at a rate of more than 30 % annually (Home Influencer Marketing Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report, n.d.). In India, influencer marketing is experiencing what EY (State of Influencer Marketing in India Impact of Influencers on Brands, n.d.) calls a "re-evolution of digital commerce," transitioning from celebrity endorsements to collaborations with micro and nano influencers. The Indian influencer marketing industry is forecasted to achieve ₹3,375 crore (USD 405 million) by 2026, with technology and gadget sectors among the highest spenders (State of Influencer Marketing in India Impact of Influencers on Brands, n.d.).

Influencer credibility has been explained through the Source Credibility Model proposed by Hovland and Weiss and later extended by Ohanian (HOVLAND & WEISS, 1951), (Audrezet et al., 2020a) where persuasion depends on *expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness*. However, authenticity has emerged as a newer dimension of trust in social media contexts.

B. **Influencer Ecosystem in India:** India has over 460 million active social-media users, of which 362 million are on Instagram. The rise of digital entrepreneurship in tier-2 cities such as Rajkot, Surat, and Ahmedabad reflects localized influencer ecosystems catering to regional languages and community markets. According to Kantar and the GOAT Agency (India's Influencer Marketing Industry Hits Rs 3,600 Crore in 2024, Reveals The Goat Agency-Kantar Report, n.d.), telecom and gadget brands are among the top adopters of influencer marketing in India. A joint KPMG–FICCI (2023) report found that nearly 63 % of smartphone buyers rely on social-media recommendations before purchase. Nielsen also confirmed that Indian consumers perceive influencer reviews as four times more credible than traditional advertisements. Thus, digital influencers have become trust intermediaries in high-involvement purchase decisions like gadgets and apps.

C. **Types and Roles of Influencers:** Influencers are commonly classified by reach: *mega, macro, mid-tier, micro, and nano* (*India Influencer Ing Platform Market Size & Outlook, 2030*, n.d.). Gross and von Wangenheim (Review StGallen & St Gallen, 2018) additionally group influencers by purpose—informers, entertainers, snoopers, and infotainers. In India, micro and nano influencers are increasingly valued for higher engagement and local relevance (India's Influencer Marketing Industry Hits Rs 3,600 Crore in 2024, Reveals The Goat Agency-Kantar Report, n.d.).

For gadget and tech categories, functional sub-types include reviewers, unboxers, tutorial creators, and lifestyle-tech influencers, who blend technology with day-to-day utility. In regional markets like Rajkot, these influencers symbolize "localized credibility," where community proximity reinforces trust.

D. **Brand-Influencer Collaboration and Marketing Strategy:** The collaboration model between brands and influencers has evolved from short-term promotions to long-term ambassador partnerships (State of Influencer Marketing in India Impact of Influencers on Brands, n.d.). Studies confirm that brand-influencer congruence (alignment of values and audience) determines campaign effectiveness (Audrezet et al., 2020b). Han and Yoon [16] further link such alignment to sustainable brand image and ethical leadership. Performance-linked collaborations are increasingly popular: about 29 % of Indian marketers tie compensation to engagement or sales metrics (State of Influencer Marketing in India Impact of Influencers on Brands, n.d.). In telecom and gadget marketing, common influencer formats include unboxing videos, comparative reviews, and demo tutorials, which improve perceived product expertise and brand recall.

E. **Authenticity, Trust, and Engagement:** Authenticity remains the foundation of digital persuasion. (Audrezet et al., 2020a) found that self-consistent influencers achieve stronger audience loyalty. Similarly, (Avolio et al., 2004) established that authenticity significantly predicts both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty.

Indian data reinforce this: 82 % of social-media users trust influencers who use regional languages or relatable cultural contexts (Digital Vernaculars: How Regional Languages Are

Shaping India's Online Discourse, n.d.). Authenticity therefore functions as both a moral and strategic asset—central to sustained audience engagement.

F. Sustainable Leadership and Influencer Ethics: Sustainable leadership, emphasizes long-term, ethical, and stakeholder-driven decision-making. *co-creating sustainable futures through moral imagination*. (Karaman, n.d.) This concept was extended to the digital realm, defining sustainable influencer leadership as value-driven behavior that inspires responsible consumer choices. (Hoch et al., 2018) highlight similar ethical-leadership traits—integrity, fairness, and role modeling—mirroring expectations from today's digital creators. In India, sustainability is increasingly embedded in brand-influencer campaigns. Companies like Samsung India, Tata Power, and Boat collaborate with influencers to promote e-waste recycling, energy efficiency, and sustainable gadget use. Yet few academic studies examine how influencers themselves internalize these principles, marking a clear research gap addressed by this study.

G. Influencer Marketing, Consumer Trust, and Sustainability Integration

Beyond sales, influencer marketing drives behavioral change. Deloitte (Growth and the Pursuit of Money, Meaning, and Well-Being, n.d.) reports that 61 % of Indian Gen Z consumers favor brands showing visible sustainability efforts on social media. Sustainability messages mediated by influencers increase both brand equity and emotional engagement (Audrezet et al., 2020c). Nevertheless, sustainability communication remains inconsistent often limited to slogans rather than genuine practice. This calls for research exploring how influencers integrate sustainability narratives authentically within everyday content.

H. Problem Statement:

- 1) Research on influencers is largely focused on consumers, with limited attention to influencers' marketing strategies and leadership roles.
- 2) The integration of ethical and sustainability practices within Instagram content remains conceptually weak and underexplored.
- 3) Regional and tier 2 markets, such as Rajkot, are significantly underrepresented in existing literature.

This creates a need to qualitatively examine how digital Instagram influencers balance marketing, ethics, and sustainability in a regional context.

I. Research Objectives:

- 1) To explore the marketing strategies used by digital Instagram influencers.
- 2) To understand the practices of digital influencers regarding sustainable leadership.
- 3) To analyse the integration of sustainability messages by digital influencers.

III. Research Methodology

A. Research Design: A qualitative exploratory design enabled a rich understanding of influencers' lived experiences. (Tarnoki & Puentes, 2019). This study employed a qualitative exploratory design, suitable for uncovering deep insights into the behaviors, perceptions, and strategies of digital influencers. Qualitative research was selected because the study focuses on subjective meanings, lived experiences, and leadership perceptions, which are not easily quantifiable. This design allows interpretation of influencers' viewpoints within their natural digital and cultural contexts. Lim (2025) highlights that qualitative research is essential for dissecting complex social phenomena where experiences, meanings, and interpretations are central. Cited 478 times.

Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger (2020) — cited over 4000 times, making it a highly impactful and well-referenced methodological source for qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is particularly useful for exploring phenomena in their natural contexts and understanding how participants perceive their experiences (Busetto et al., 2020).

B. Sampling and Participants

A Purposive and snowball sampling used and generated eight Rajkot-based digital/tech influencers meeting the following criteria:

- More 5 000 followers;
- Active promotion of smart gadgets, smartphones, smartwatches, or digital apps;
- Consistent posting (≥ 1 per week);
- Active with Brand collaboration.

C. Data Collection.

The primary and secondary data collection methods were adopted. Primary data was collected from eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews (45–60 min). Three online, two face-to-face, and two telephonic interviews were conducted. Secondary data was collected to understand the digital marketing strategies, brand collaboration system and sustainability.

D. Data Analysis: Data Analysis was done thematically, and Nvivo software was used for coding. Braun & Clarke (2006) (Naeem et al., 2023).

Coding in thematic analysis focused on identifying recurring concepts related to marketing strategies, ethical practice, sustainability awareness and leadership behavior.

1) **Data preparation and organization.** All the transcripts were cleaned and organized using Excel sheets prior to qualitative analysis. The Excel file consists of a tab containing Research objectives and questions used as a coding reference. And separate sheets are for each influencer's interview. In the future, these sheets were converted into individual Word documents for NVivo.

2) **NVivo based data management.** Qualitative data analysis was conducted using Nvivo software. Interview transcripts were imported as source files and a custom file classification titled "influencer interview" was created to organize interview data. Each influencer was treated as a distinct analytical unit through the creation of individual cases.

Step 1: Data Preparation

- All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent.
- Recordings were transcribed verbatim using AI-assisted transcription (ChatGPT).
- Each transcript was saved as a separate Microsoft Word document for NVivo compatibility.

Step 2: Importing Data into NVivo

- All interview transcripts were imported into NVivo as source files.
- Each file represented one influencer interview.

Step 3: File Classification

- A custom file classification titled "Influencer Interviews" was created.
- This enabled structured organisation of interview data within NVivo.

Step 4: Case Creation

- Each influencer was treated as a distinct analytical unit.
- Individual cases were created for each participant.
- Case-based analysis allowed:

Step 5: Initial (Open) Coding

- Transcripts were read multiple times for data familiarization.
- Initial codes captured ideas related to (refer fig 2)
- Authenticity
- Marketing practices
- Ethical behavior
- Sustainability awareness
- Leadership perceptions

Step 6: Focused and Axial Coding

- Similar initial codes were grouped into broader categories.
- Relationships between codes were examined and refined.
- Redundant or overlapping codes were merged.

Step 7: Theme Development

- Codes and categories were synthesised into higher-order themes.
- Themes were aligned with the research objectives.
- Final themes reflected shared patterns across influencer narratives.

Step 8: Review and Refinement of Themes

- Themes were reviewed for:
- Internal coherence, and
- Clear distinction between themes.
- Weak or overlapping themes were refined or reorganised

The flow chart in Figure 1 below explains the methods used for the analysis step by step.

E. Ethical Considerations. Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Business and Commerce Research Ethics Committee, Atmiya University, Rajkot. Participants were briefed about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. All personal identifiers were removed, and pseudonyms (Influencer 1 – Influencer 8) were used in analysis and reporting to protect anonymity.

Data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

IV. Findings and Analysis. Thematic analysis of eight in-depth interviews with Rajkot-based digital influencers revealed five dominant themes that describe their marketing strategies, leadership orientation, and sustainable practices in brand collaborations

The word frequency analysis shows that content is the most dominant theme, indicating that influencer-generated content plays a central role in shaping audience perceptions (ref fig 3 and table 2). The frequent appearance of words such as audience, audiences, and followers highlights the strong focus on how people receive, engage with, and respond to influencer messages. Terms like products and product suggest that promotional activities and product-related information are key discussion points. The prominence of Instagram confirms it as the primary platform for these interactions. Additionally, the repeated use of words such as responsibility, ethical, and information reflects growing concern about ethical responsibility, transparency, and responsible communication by influencers, especially in technology-related product promotions. Overall, the analysis indicates a strong link between influencer content, ethical responsibility, and audience engagement in the context of Instagram-based product communication.

A. Authenticity as Sustainable Capital:

All respondents emphasized authenticity. The degree to which content reflects real experience forms the bedrock of influencer credibility and follower trust. Refer to Table III for the Instagram influencer table exported from NVivo. All the influencers interviewed were brand themselves, so a sense of authenticity was found in them. Influencer 1 noted: "If I recommend a gadget I never use, followers lose faith immediately."

Influencer 4 added: "I post only what I personally test. My audience connects with that honesty."

These observations echo recent findings by (Ardley et al., 2022) and (Casaló et al., 2020), who confirm that authenticity enhances engagement and perceived integrity of influencers. Authenticity thus becomes sustainable social capital—a reputational asset that builds resilience in long-term collaborations.

In Rajkot's mid-tier ecosystem, authenticity is strengthened by regional proximity, vernacular communication, and community familiarity, reinforcing followers' belief in influencer integrity. The bar chart (ref fig 5) presents a comparative analysis of eight influencers based on their percentage scores related to authenticity, trust, and engagement. Each bar represents the extent to which these themes were identified in the qualitative data (references coded in NVivo).

Influencer 8 shows the highest percentage (78.89%) with four references, indicating a very strong presence of authenticity and trust-driven engagement in their content. This suggests that audiences perceive Influencer 8 as highly credible and engaging. Influencer 6 follows with a moderately high score of 53.04% and two references, reflecting a consistent but comparatively lower emphasis on these attributes.

Influencers 2 (40.56%) and 7 (23.34%) demonstrate moderate levels of authenticity and engagement, suggesting that while these qualities are present, they are not as dominant as in Influencers 8 and 6. Influencers 1 (22.7%), 4 (17.94%), and 3 (14.57%) show lower percentages, indicating limited evidence of strong authenticity-based trust and engagement in their content.

Overall, the graph highlights clear variation among influencers, with a small number strongly excelling in authenticity and trust, while others show weaker alignment. This suggests that authenticity-led engagement is influencer-specific rather than uniform, reinforcing the importance of credible and transparent content in building trust with Instagram audiences.

B. Ethical Collaboration and Brand Fit

Participants reported consciously evaluating the ethical standards of brands before accepting partnerships. They mentioned transparency, commitment to sustainability, and truthful advertising as essential criteria. But sometimes, due to the requirement of monetary benefit, they do promote some gadgets or apps that are not so helpful to viewers. Influencer 3 shared: "Its very difficult to avoid brands that exaggerate performance because we need to pay our team."

Influencer 6 said: "I work with startups that show eco-friendly production or repair support."

These practices align with the framework of responsible influencer collaboration. The value congruence between influencers and brands enhances authenticity and trust, but it's very difficult to find space for this in the current competitive environment. Hence, Rajkot influencers try to demonstrate a micro-model of sustainable leadership, balancing commercial growth with moral integrity, particularly well-known brands and celebrity influencers look in more sustainability.

The graph (refer fig 5) shows how strongly each influencer talks about ethical brand collaboration and brand fit. Influencer 7 has the highest percentage (51.97%), which means this influencer clearly focuses on collaborating with brands that match their values and audience expectations. Influencers 8 (36.62%) and 5 (35.52%) also show a strong focus on ethical collaborations, indicating careful brand selection and good brand-influencer fit.

Influencer 4 has a moderate level (30.20%) with more references, showing frequent discussion of brand collaborations, but with less depth in each instance. Influencers 2, 3, and 6 fall in the middle range, suggesting that ethical collaboration is mentioned but is not a major focus in their content. Influencer 1 shows the lowest percentage (19.71%), indicating very limited emphasis on ethical brand partnerships.

Overall, the analysis suggests that only a few influencers strongly emphasize ethical collaboration and brand fit, while others mention it occasionally. This shows that ethical brand collaboration is not equally important for all influencers and depends on individual content strategy.

C. Balancing Commerce and Conscience

Many influencers discussed the dilemma of choosing between high-paying offers and ethical self-consistency.

Influencer 4 explained:

"If I take every paid deal, my credibility disappears. I prefer smaller but genuine collaborations."

Influencer 7 reflected:

"Our followers are smart. They can spot when content is purely promotional."

The graph (refer fig 6) shows how different influencers balance commercial interests with ethical responsibility. Influencer 8 stands out with the highest percentage (7.25%) and the most references (8), indicating a strong and consistent effort to balance promotions with ethical concerns. Influencer 3 (6.9%) and Influencer 4 (6.3%) also show high values, suggesting they actively consider ethical aspects while promoting products.

Influencers 7 (6.36%) and 5 (3.99%) demonstrate a moderate balance, where ethical concerns are present but not always central. Influencer 6 (3.83%) and Influencer 1 (3.07%) show lower emphasis, indicating limited discussion on balancing business goals with conscience. Influencer 2 has the lowest percentage (1.36%), suggesting minimal focus on ethical balance in commercial content.

Overall, the analysis indicates that only a few influencers clearly integrate ethical considerations into commercial promotions, while others focus more on business aspects with limited attention to conscience.

These views support the concept of conscious capitalism in digital influence, where influencers act as *moral entrepreneurs* within the platform economy. The analysis indicates that successful influencers sustain engagement not by quantity of sponsorships, but by selective authenticity, choosing collaborations that match their ethics and audience values. This is possible only by collaborating with well-known brands or telecommunication retail outlets.

D. Educating and Empowering Audiences

Another strong pattern was influencers' self-perception as digital educators who guide followers toward responsible technology use.

Influencer 8 stated:

"I post about extending device life and reusing gadgets. People ask for practical eco-tips."

Influencer 5 added:

"Tech influencers can teach digital minimalism less hype, more value."

Another influencer mentioned that "most of audience are Gen Z, they don't accept any kind of "GYAN" on usage of mobile or screentime, they will just scroll the reel". The graph (refer fig 7) shows how strongly each influencer focuses on educating and empowering their audience. Influencer 3 (14.21%) and Influencer 1 (14.17%) have the highest percentages with the most references, indicating that they actively share informative and educational content that helps audiences make better decisions. This suggests a strong emphasis on knowledge-sharing and audience empowerment.

Influencers 8 (8.86%), 7 (8.21%), and 5 (7.88%) show a moderate level of educational focus, meaning they provide useful information but not as consistently as

the top influencers. Influencers 2 (4.29%) and 6 (4.85%) have a lower emphasis, indicating occasional educational content.

Influencer 4 has the lowest percentage (2.32%), showing minimal focus on educating or empowering the audience. Overall, the analysis indicates that only a few influencers strongly prioritize educational content, while others focus more on promotion or engagement rather than audience learning.

E. Vision for Long-Term Impact

Participants linked sustainability to consistency, credibility, and social contribution. They viewed leadership as long-term influence built on reliability.

Influencer 5 said: "I want my content to stay useful years later. That's real impact."

Influencer 8 echoed:

"Leadership online means being remembered for honesty, not just reach."

digital influencers as strategic identity builders who create enduring trust through authentic storytelling and sustainable behavior.

The graph (refer Fig 8) shows how strongly influencers express a long-term vision and sustainable impact in their content. Influencer 4 stands out with the highest percentage (33.25%) and the highest number of references (22), indicating a clear and consistent focus on long-term impact rather than short-term gains. Influencer 3 (29.67%) and Influencer 1 (28.32%) also show a strong long-term orientation, suggesting they frequently discuss future impact, responsibility, and sustained value.

Influencers 7 (26.99%) and 2 (25.29%) demonstrate a moderate focus on long-term vision, while Influencers 8 (24.19%), 5 (23.40%), and 6 (23.19%) show relatively lower but still noticeable attention to long-term impact.

Overall, the analysis indicates that most influencers acknowledge the importance of long-term impact, but the strength and consistency vary. A few influencers clearly prioritize sustainable, future-oriented thinking, while others balance it with more short-term or immediate content goals.

In Rajkot's community-oriented market, this long-term orientation fosters digital ecosystems grounded in integrity, where influencers function as both entrepreneurs and community leaders.

The graph (Refer Fig 9) presents the level of sustainability awareness expressed by selected influencers. Influencer 6 shows the highest awareness (0.14), indicating a stronger and more consistent focus on sustainability-related issues in their content. Influencer 7 follows closely with 0.13, suggesting a clear but slightly lower emphasis on sustainability awareness.

Influencer 8 records a moderate level (0.10), showing occasional discussion of sustainability topics. Influencer 3 has the lowest value (0.09), indicating limited attention to sustainability awareness compared to the others.

Overall, the analysis suggests that sustainability awareness is present but not very strong across influencers. Only a few influencers actively emphasize sustainability, while for others it remains a secondary or occasional theme rather than a central focus.

F. Interpretation and Theoretical Integration. The five themes identified in this study collectively position Rajkot's digital influencers as **emerging sustainability leaders** operating within localized digital brand ecosystems. Rather than functioning solely as persuasive marketing agents, these influencers integrate **authenticity, ethical judgment, audience education, and long-term vision** into their content practices. This reflects an important shift in influencer marketing from transactional promotion toward **purpose-driven digital leadership**. The findings indicate that influencer credibility serves as the foundational resource that enables trust, ethical collaboration, and sustained engagement. Over time, this credibility transforms into **long-term sustainable impact**, manifested through responsible brand partnerships, mindful consumption narratives, and community-oriented digital practices. Thus, influencer marketing in Rajkot evolves into a form of **social stewardship**, where influencers balance commercial objectives with ethical responsibility and societal value creation. The integrated model presented in **Figure 10** conceptualizes this progression, illustrating how **authentic influencer identity and strategic marketing practices interact with sustainability messaging** to generate enduring trust and sustainable influence within digital ecosystems.

V. Discussion

A. Instagram-based digital influencer. The findings confirm that Instagram is the primary platform through which Rajkot-based digital influencers build credibility, engage audiences, and shape perceptions of consumption. The dominance of content, audience, and follower-related terms indicates that influencer-generated content is central to trust formation and engagement. Prior research also establishes Instagram as a trust-intensive platform where perceived authenticity significantly influences audience attitudes and behavioural intentions (Casaló et al., 2020; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Unlike metropolitan influencer ecosystems driven by scale and celebrity reach, Rajkot's mid-tier digital environment strengthens influencer credibility through regional proximity, vernacular communication, and repeated social interaction. This finding extends source credibility theory by demonstrating how **local embeddedness** enhances perceived trustworthiness and authenticity in influencer marketing contexts (Audrezet et al., 2020).

B. Brand Collaboration and Value Alignment. The study reveals that influencers consciously evaluate brand ethics, transparency, and sustainability before entering collaborations, although economic pressures sometimes necessitate compromise. Influencers' reflections indicate a continuous negotiation between ethical ideals and financial sustainability, particularly when managing teams or content production costs. This aligns with research showing that ethical alignment enhances trust, but financial dependency often constrains ideal influencer-brand partnerships (Ardley et al., 2022). Further, the importance of brand-influencer fit observed in this study supports prior findings that perceived congruence between influencer identity and brand values strengthens credibility and reduces audience resistance to sponsored content (Schouten et al., 2020). However, the uneven emphasis across influencers suggests that ethical collaboration remains a strategic choice rather than a universal practice, particularly in competitive regional markets.

C. Marketing Strategies. The marketing strategies adopted by Rajkot influencers emphasize selective promotion, authenticity-driven storytelling, and long-term audience engagement over aggressive monetization. Influencers deliberately limit excessive sponsorships to avoid credibility erosion, reflecting a shift from transactional advertising toward relationship-oriented marketing. This finding aligns with prior research demonstrating that informational value and credibility-driven content generate stronger engagement and trust than purely promotional messaging (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The resistance of Gen Z audiences to overt educational or prescriptive messaging further supports the need for subtle, value-based communication strategies. Influencers thus operate as curators of meaning rather than mere promoters, reinforcing relational marketing principles within digital influencer ecosystems (Ki et al., 2020).

D. Sustainable Leadership Through Digital Influence. The findings position Rajkot's digital influencers as emerging forms of sustainable leadership, where influence is exercised through consistency, ethical conduct, and long-term orientation rather than short-term visibility. Influencers associate sustainability with credibility, responsibility, and enduring usefulness of content, echoing research that frames sustainability as a strategic, long-term leadership orientation (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010). This leadership role aligns closely with India's **Viksit Bharat 2047** vision and SDG 12, which emphasizes responsible digital growth, ethical entrepreneurship, and community-centric development. By promoting mindful technology use, ethical brand collaborations, and trust-based influence, these influencers indirectly contribute to national sustainability goals. Digital platforms thus enable influencers to act as informal sustainability leaders and social stewards within the platform economy (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

E. Ecosystem Perspective of Digital Influence and Sustainability

From an ecosystem perspective, Rajkot's influencer environment can be understood as a dynamic interaction between three core elements:

1. Digital Influencers
2. Marketing Strategies
3. Sustainability-Oriented Messages

At the centre of this ecosystem lies influencer credibility, developed through authenticity, transparency, and consistent engagement. Credibility enables influencers to implement selective marketing strategies such as ethical brand collaborations, storytelling-based promotions, and audience education. These strategies, in turn, facilitate the diffusion of sustainability-related messages—often subtly embedded rather than explicitly communicated.

Unlike metropolitan influencer ecosystems that prioritize reach and visibility, Rajkot's community-oriented market fosters relational trust and long-term accountability. Influencers operate simultaneously as entrepreneurs, educators, and informal leaders, reinforcing sustainable consumption norms and responsible digital behavior. This ecosystem aligns with India's broader sustainability agenda under **Viksit Bharat 2047** and SDG 12, where digital platforms act as catalysts for inclusive growth, ethical entrepreneurship, and social responsibility.

VI. Conclusion

This study explored the marketing strategies, ethical orientations, and sustainability practices of Instagram-based digital influencers in Rajkot through thematic analysis of eight in-depth interviews. The findings highlight authenticity as a critical form of social capital that enables influencers to build trust, sustain audience engagement, and maintain long-term credibility. Ethical brand collaboration and brand–influencer fit further reinforce this trust, although financial pressures sometimes challenge ethical consistency.

The study reveals that successful influencers adopt selective, credibility-driven marketing strategies rather than aggressive monetization, balancing commercial objectives with audience expectations. While influencers increasingly position themselves as educators promoting responsible technology use, sustainability messages are often embedded subtly due to audience resistance to overt instruction. A strong long-term orientation—focused on consistency, reliability, and social contribution—emerges as a defining characteristic of sustainable digital leadership.

Theoretically, the study extends influencer marketing literature by integrating source credibility, value congruence, and sustainable leadership perspectives within a regional Indian context. The proposed ecosystem model illustrates how influencer credibility evolves into long-term sustainable impact. Practically, the findings align with India’s **Viksit Bharat 2047** vision, emphasizing the role of grassroots digital influence in fostering ethical entrepreneurship and responsible consumption.

VII. Scope of Study.

While the study provides valuable insights into Rajkot’s influencer ecosystem, several opportunities exist for expansion:

1. Geographical Extension: Future studies can compare influencer practices across other tier-2 cities such as Surat, Ahmedabad, and Vadodara to understand regional differences in digital sustainability narratives.
2. Quantitative Validation: Incorporating survey-based or mixed-method research can statistically test the relationship between influencer authenticity, follower trust, and sustainable engagement.
3. Platform Diversity: Future work could examine influencers on YouTube, LinkedIn, or emerging short-form apps to assess how platform affordances shape ethical communication.
4. AI and Virtual Influencers: With the rise of AI-generated influencers, research should explore the implications of synthetic authenticity and whether AI avatars can exhibit sustainable leadership traits.
5. Consumer Perspective: A comparative study on how Gen Z and Millennial consumers perceive sustainability messages from influencers can refine future digital communication strategies.
6. Brand-side Investigation: Research on how marketing managers evaluate influencer sustainability metrics could help develop ethical branding frameworks within the telecom and gadget sectors.

By addressing these areas, scholars can advance a more comprehensive understanding of how influencer marketing can evolve into a sustainable digital leadership paradigm that aligns with India’s vision for a responsible, innovation-driven economy.

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TABLE I. TYPE OF INFLUENCERS

Class(by Reach)	Approx. Follower Range*	Key Strengths	Typical Use
Mega influencers	1 million+	Broad visibility, celebrity status	Brand awareness, mass marketing
Macro-influencers	100,000 – 1,000,000	Large reach, somewhat niche	Product launches, regional campaigns
Mid-tier / Mid-influencers	50,000 – 500,000	Mix of reach and specificity	Category campaigns, tech/gadget niches
Micro-influencers	10,000 – 50,000	High engagement, niche audiences	Long-term collaborations, trust-based marketing
Nano-influencers	1,000 – 10,000	Deep local or hyper-niche trust	Local campaigns, relations, grassroots influence

*Ranges vary by source

^b. Simplilearn classification

TABLE II. TABLE SHOWING TOP 10 HIGHEST USED WORD

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
content	7	75	2.26
audience	8	31	0.93
products	8	25	0.75
instagram	9	24	0.72
product	7	23	0.69
responsibility	14	22	0.66
audiences	9	20	0.60
influencer	10	20	0.60
technology	10	19	0.57
ethical	7	18	0.54

^c. NVivo Generated

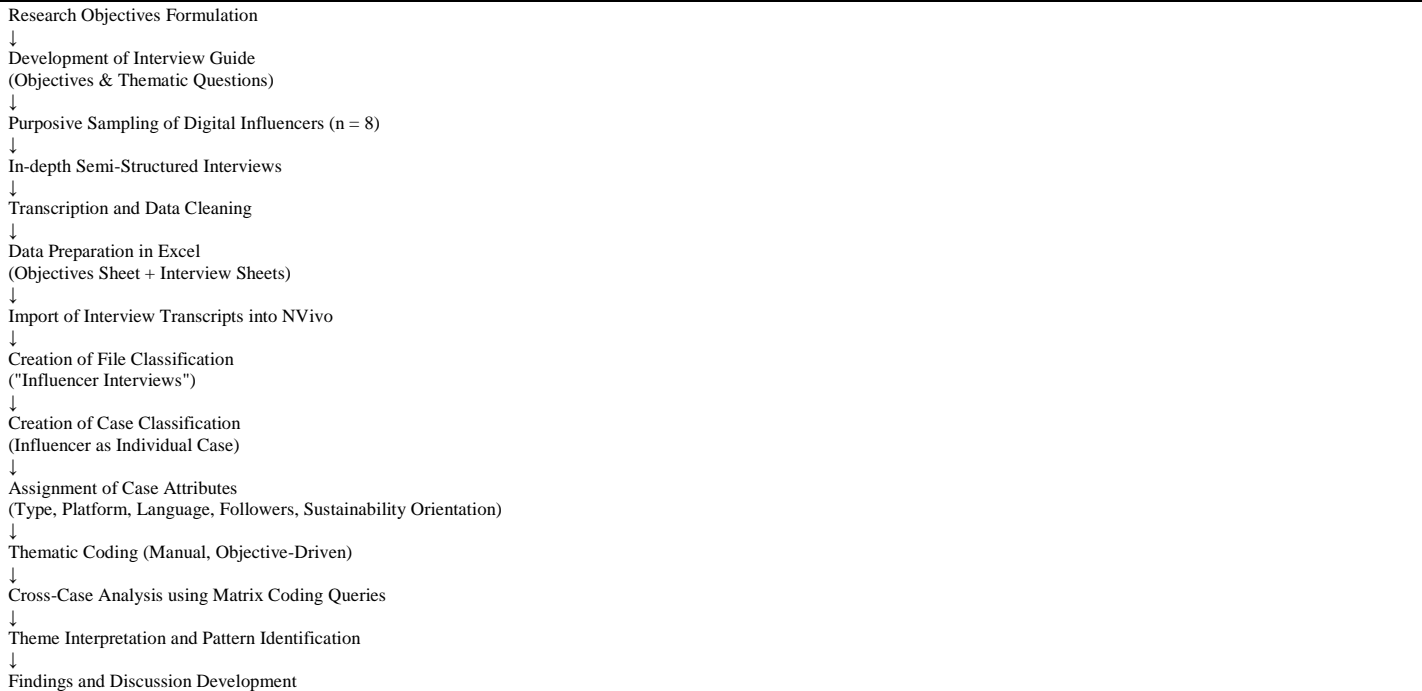
TABLE III. THE INSTAGRAM INFLUENCER.

Interview	Collaboration Type	Number of followers	experience	Content Focus	Influencer category	Interview mode	Audience type	Platform	Language	Sustainability Focus
Inf 1	Company Controlled	12000	6	Awareness	Telecom	face_to_face	Mixed	Instagram	Hindi	High
Inf 2	Company Controlled	Unassigned	5	Product	Telecom	face_to_face	Gen Z	Instagram and youtube	Hindi	High
Inf 3	paid	102000	8	Education	Tech	face_to_face	Gen Z	Instagram	Hindi	Low
Inf 4	paid	30000	5	Awareness	Lifestyle	Telephonic	Mixed	Instagram	Hindi	Low
Inf 5	paid	37000	6	Awareness	Tech	Telephonic	Mixed	Instagram	Gujarati	Medium
Inf 6	paid	8000	4	Education	Tech	online	families	Instagram and youtube	Hindi	Medium
Inf 7	paid	25000	6	Awareness	Tech	online	Mixed	Instagram	Hindi	Medium
Inf 8	paid	54000	6	Product	Tech	online	families	Instagram	Gujarati	High

^d. Table generated by NVivo

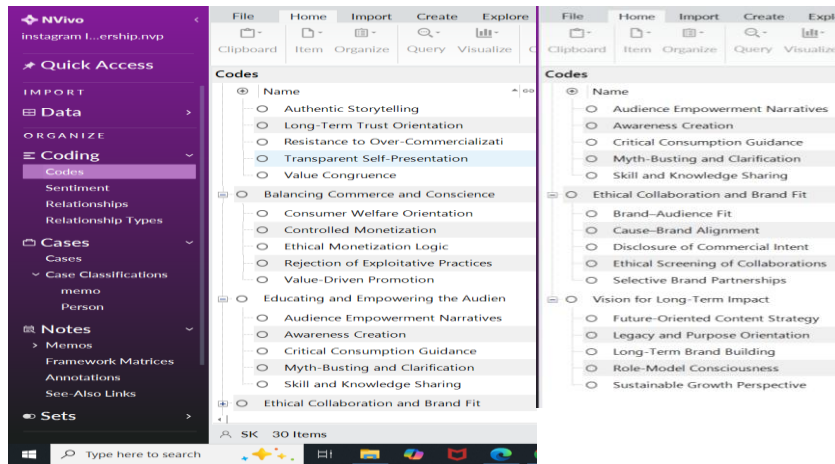
^e. inf means Influencers

Methodological flow of the study illustrating the qualitative research process using



^f source: ChatGPT generated

Fig. 1. Explains the codes and sub codes from NVivo.reenshot from NVivo



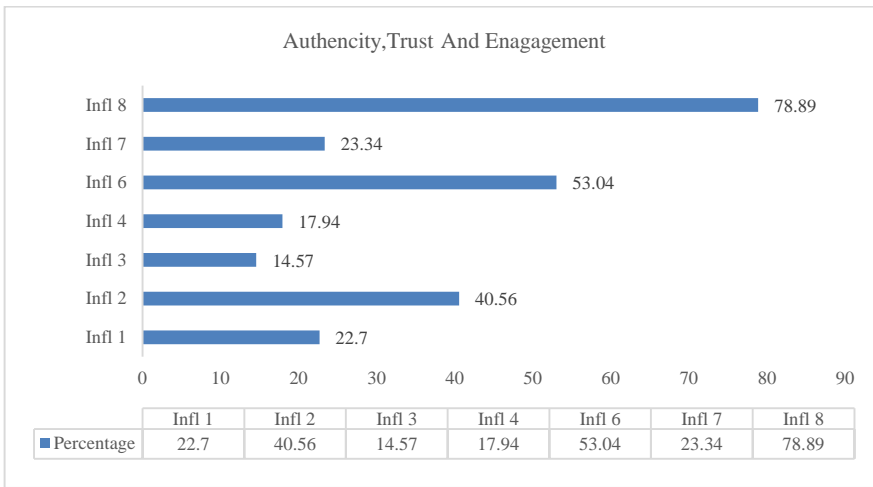
^g screenshot from NVivo

Fig. 2. Word frequency

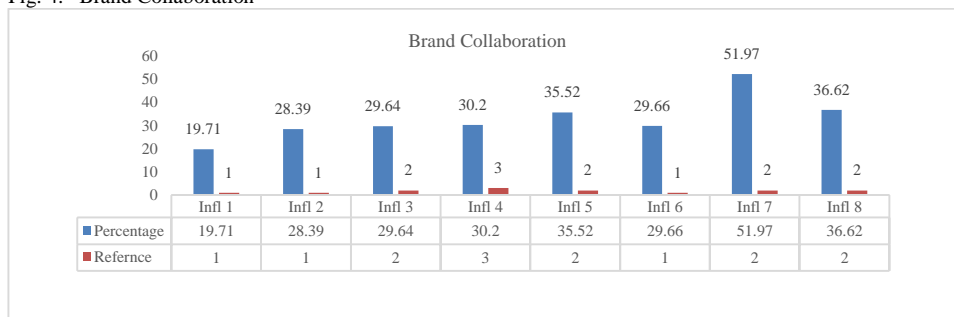


^h Generated by NVivo

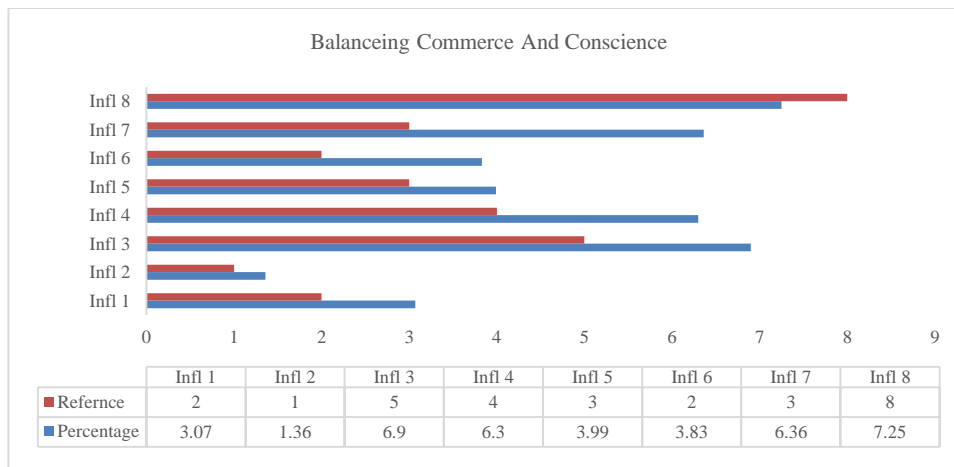
Fig. 3. Authenticity, Trust, And Engagement



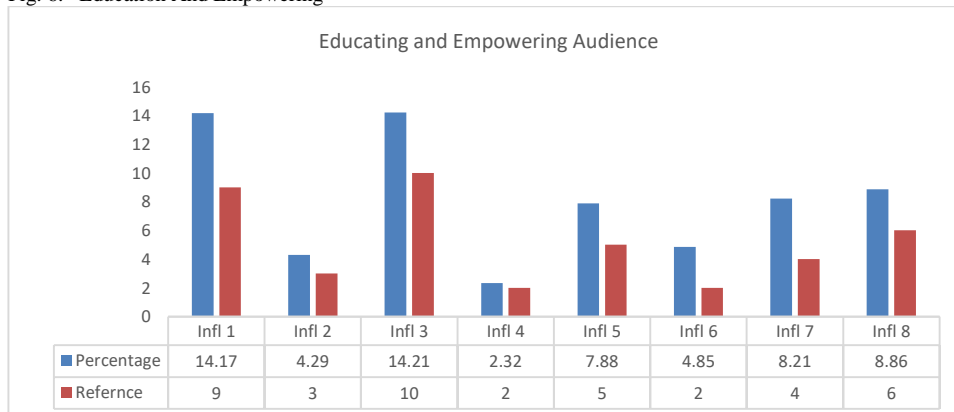
ⁱ Generated by Excel from NVivo data table
 Fig. 4. Brand Collaboration



^j Generated by Excel from NVivo data table
 Fig. 5. Balancing Commerce And Conscience

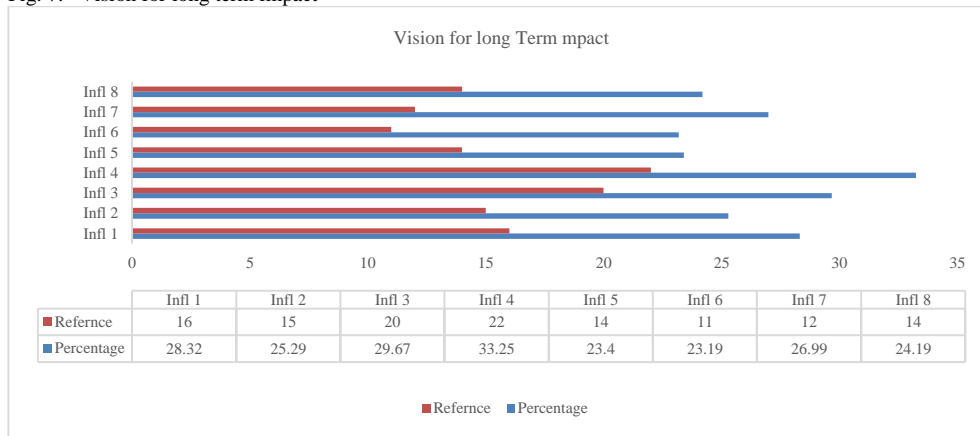


^k Generated by Excel from NVivo data table
 Fig. 6. Education And Empowering



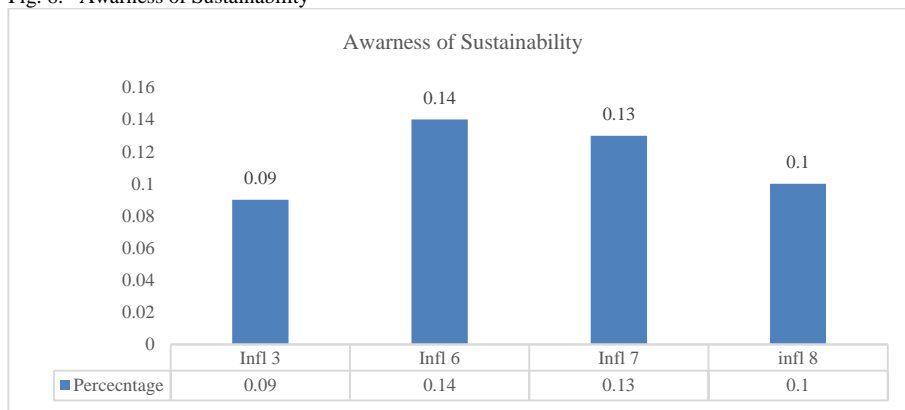
^l Generated by Excel from NVivo data table

Fig. 7. Vision for long term impact



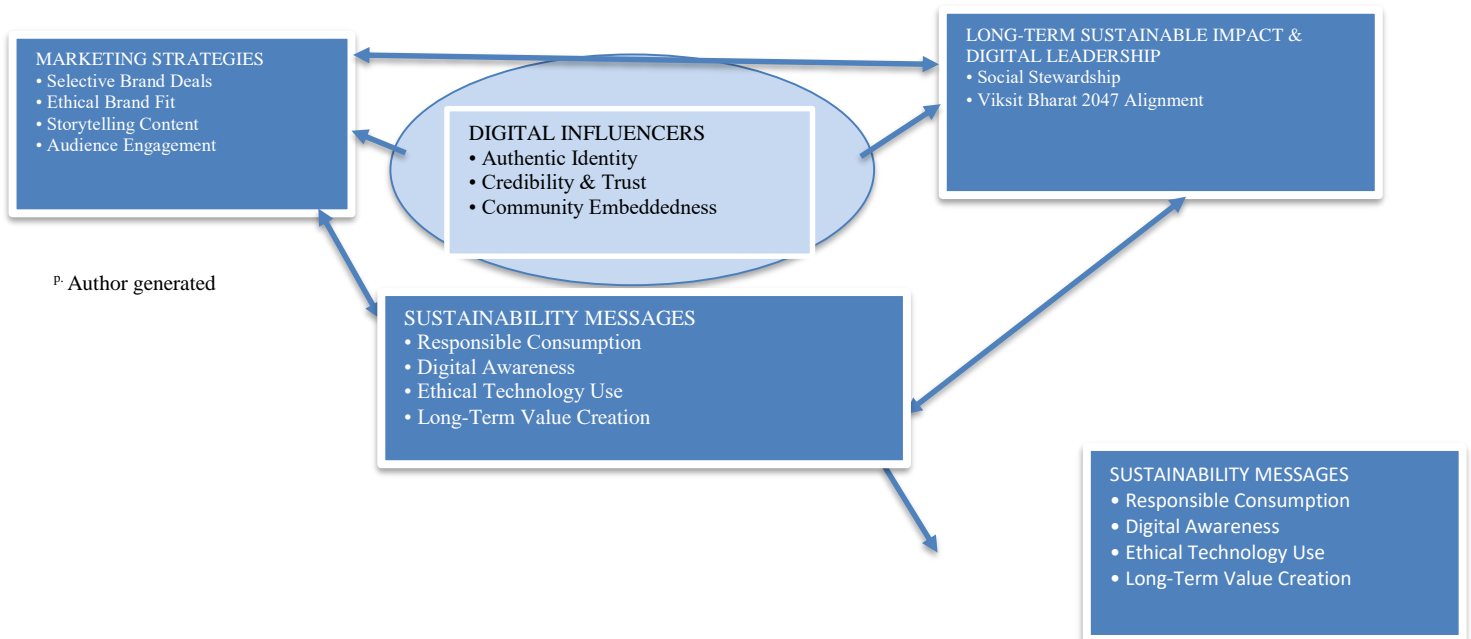
^m. Generated by Excel from NVivo data table

Fig. 8. Awarness of Sustainability



ⁿ. Generated by Excel from NVivo data table

Fig. 9. Integrated Ecosystem of Digital Influencer Marketing & Sustainability



^p. Author generated

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