

Effectiveness of Instagram Reels and Short-Form Video Content in Driving Brand Engagement: A Secondary Research-Based Analysis

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of Instagram Reels and short-form video content in driving brand engagement among digitally active consumers, with specific focus on the Indian digital marketing landscape. Using an exclusively secondary research methodology, the study synthesizes evidence from over 30 published academic journals, industry benchmark reports, and platform analytics publications spanning 2010-2024. Theoretical grounding is provided by the AIDA Model, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Engagement Theory. Key findings reveal that entertainment value and authenticity are the strongest drivers of brand engagement with Instagram Reels, followed by influencer credibility and content informativeness. Industry benchmarks consistently demonstrate that Reels outperform static posts in engagement rate (3.8% vs. 1.4%), brand recall lift (+26%), and click-through rate (+35%). These findings carry significant implications for marketing practitioners seeking to optimize social media strategies and allocate digital advertising resources effectively in competitive content environments.

Keywords: Instagram Reels, short-form video, brand engagement, social media marketing, digital consumer behavior, influencer credibility.

INTRODUCTION

The global digital advertising industry has undergone extraordinary transformation over the last decade, driven by smartphone proliferation and the rise of social media platforms. India, with approximately 467 million social media users as of early 2024 and a median population age of 28, represents one of the world's most dynamic digital marketing contexts (DataReportal, 2024). Instagram, with over 362 million users in the country, is the fastest-growing platform for brand engagement and has become a primary vehicle for short-form video marketing following the 2020 TikTok ban.

Instagram Reels, introduced in August 2020, enables users to create and share videos of up to 90 seconds, with algorithmic amplification extending content reach beyond existing followers through the Explore page and Reels tab. Meta's advertising data indicates that Reels ads achieve 35% higher click-through rates

than traditional video advertisements (Meta Business, 2023), underscoring the format's strategic importance. Despite widespread adoption, there remains a limited body of synthesized research specifically examining how content attributes-entertainment value, informativeness, authenticity, influencer credibility, and call-to-action effectiveness-translate into measurable brand engagement outcomes.

This paper addresses five core research objectives: (1) assessing the role of Instagram Reels in shaping brand awareness and recall; (2) identifying the content attributes most significantly influencing brand engagement; (3) evaluating the relationship between Reels consumption and engagement behaviors; (4) analyzing the applicability of established theoretical frameworks (AIDA, UGT, Engagement Theory) to short-form video; and (5) providing actionable recommendations for marketing practitioners. The study adopts secondary

research methodology, synthesizing evidence from academic journals, industry reports, and platform analytics databases.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Frameworks

The AIDA Model

The AIDA Model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action), originally formulated by Lewis (1898) and elaborated by Strong (1925), offers a durable sequential framework for understanding advertising effectiveness. In the Instagram Reels context, Attention is captured within the first 1-3 seconds through visual hooks or music; Interest is sustained through relatable storytelling or valuable information; Desire is generated through product demonstrations and social proof; and Action is prompted through direct calls-to-action. Wijaya (2012) and Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan (2021) extend this model to include post-action advocacy behaviors, which are particularly salient in the social sharing affordances of Reels.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch's (1973) Uses and Gratifications Theory positions media audiences as active agents who select content to fulfill specific psychological needs: entertainment (hedonic), information (utilitarian), social interaction, and identity expression. Applied to Instagram Reels, UGT predicts that brands whose content satisfies multiple gratification needs simultaneously will generate higher engagement. Chen and Kim (2022) found entertainment gratification to be the strongest predictor of engagement on short-form video platforms, followed by social interaction and information gratification-findings directly applicable to the present study.

Engagement Theory

Kearsley and Shneiderman's (1998) Engagement Theory identifies three dimensions of meaningful engagement: relating (community and connection), creating (participatory content creation), and donating (contribution to a larger cause). Adapted to social media marketing by Gambetti and Graffigna (2010), the framework suggests that brand content fostering community, participation, and shared values generates the deepest engagement. Instagram Reels campaigns that leverage user-generated content (UGC), challenges, and social alignment are consistent with this framework.

Empirical Evidence on Short-Form Video Engagement

Meng and Pan (2022) identified entertainment value, information quality, and visual attractiveness as the strongest predictors of engagement with TikTok short-form video advertisements. Perceived intrusiveness was a significant negative predictor, emphasizing the importance of native, organic-feeling content. Zhang et al. (2021) demonstrated that videos inducing positive emotional arousal-joy, surprise, inspiration-generated significantly higher sharing rates, highlighting the role of emotion in viral distribution.

In the influencer marketing domain, Lou and Yuan (2019) applied Ohanian's (1990) source credibility model to Instagram, finding trustworthiness to be the strongest predictor of purchase intention. Audrezet et al. (2020) established that perceived authenticity was a significant driver of follower engagement, with micro-influencers (10,000-100,000 followers) generating higher quality engagement than mega-influencers. Schouten et al. (2020) further confirmed that peer influencers produced

the highest levels of consumer trust, challenging assumptions about the primacy of follower count in influencer selection.

Regarding brand recall, Goldstein et al. (2012) demonstrated that advertisements with high visual novelty, emotional resonance, and narrative structure were significantly more memorable. Unnava and Burnkrant (1991) established mental imagery as a mediator of brand recall a mechanism well-served by the sensory richness of Instagram Reels. Hutter et al. (2013) confirmed a significant positive relationship between social media engagement and actual purchase behavior, providing empirical grounding for the strategic importance of engagement-focused content.

Research Gap

A systematic review reveals three critical gaps: First, while research on social media marketing is extensive, studies specifically examining Instagram Reels as a distinct format with unique algorithmic, formal, and social properties are limited. Second, the majority of short-form video research has been conducted in Western or East Asian contexts, with India receiving limited attention despite being one of the world's most important social media markets. Third, existing studies rarely examine multiple content attributes simultaneously in a comparative framework that maps their relative predictive power—a gap that constrains practitioners' ability to prioritize content investment decisions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a secondary research design involving the systematic collection, evaluation, and synthesis of published data from multiple source categories. The design is both descriptive

and analytical: descriptive in its cataloguing of secondary data pertaining to key variables, and analytical in its critical evaluation and synthesis to test study hypotheses. Secondary research was selected for three reasons: the substantial volume and quality of available data from industry and academic sources; the ability to construct a multi-contextual perspective drawing on diverse demographic groups and geographies; and the appropriateness of this design for theory synthesis and strategic recommendation generation.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Data were drawn from two primary categories of secondary sources. Academic sources included peer-reviewed journals indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR, covering digital marketing, consumer behavior, social media analytics, and advertising (minimum 29 studies reviewed). Industry sources included annual benchmark reports from Meta Business Insights, Hootsuite, Statista, DataReportal, Influencer Marketing Hub, Wyzowl, HubSpot, Nielsen, Sprout Social, and HypeAuditor, covering engagement rate benchmarks, consumer behavior analytics, and influencer performance data from 2020-2024.

Sources were evaluated using CRAAP criteria: Currency (published 2010-2024, with priority given to post-2020 sources reflecting the Reels era), Relevance (direct applicability to short-form video, brand engagement, or digital consumer behavior), Authority (peer-reviewed publication, institutional authorship, or established industry provenance), Accuracy (data-driven, methodology-documented), and Purpose (published for scholarly or professional, non-commercial purposes). Sources failing any critical criterion were excluded.

Variables and Analytical Framework

The study examines five independent content attribute variables-entertainment value, informativeness, authenticity, influencer credibility, and call-to-action effectiveness against six dependent engagement outcome variables: attention capture, interest generation, desire formation, action prompting, brand recall, and social sharing. Five corresponding hypotheses (H1-H5) map each content attribute to brand engagement outcomes. The analytical approach employs thematic synthesis: secondary data were organized by theme, cross-validated across sources, and evaluated for convergence and consistency of findings to derive generalizable conclusions.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Instagram Reels vs. Other Formats: Performance Benchmarks

Secondary data consistently demonstrates the superior performance of Instagram Reels relative to other content formats across key engagement metrics. Table 1 presents comparative benchmarks synthesized from Meta Business Insights (2023), Hootsuite (2023), and Later.com (2023).

These benchmarks confirm that Instagram Reels achieve a mean engagement rate of 3.8%, compared to 2.1% for standard video posts and 1.4% for static image posts-a 171% and 81% advantage respectively. Reels also deliver a 26% brand recall lift and a 35% higher click-through rate versus static posts (Meta Business, 2023; Nielsen, 2022). Hootsuite (2023) further reports that Reels generate 22% more interaction than standard video posts, while Instagram Business Blog (2023) indicates that Reels are shared to Stories at double the rate of regular video content.

Content Attribute Analysis

Entertainment Value

Entertainment value consistently emerges as the primary driver of Reels engagement across both academic and industry sources. Meng and Pan (2022) identified entertainment as the strongest predictor of short-form video engagement intention ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$). Wyzowl (2024) reports that 91% of marketers credit video content with increasing brand awareness, with entertainment value cited as the top attribute contributing to video shareability. Zhang et al. (2021) found that videos inducing positive emotional arousal generated 47% higher sharing rates than neutral content. Reels that leverage trending audio, humor, surprise, or aspirational narratives demonstrate the highest organic reach and repeat viewing rates in industry benchmarks.

Content Authenticity

Authenticity ranks as the second most important engagement driver, with convergent evidence from both academic research and industry analytics. Stackla (2021) found that 86% of consumers identify authenticity as a key factor when deciding which brands to support on social media. Edelman Trust Barometer (2023) data indicates that consumers trust content from 'people like themselves' three times more than brand-generated advertising. Audrezet et al. (2020) established that perceived authenticity significantly moderates influencer effectiveness, with micro-influencer content (perceived as more authentic) achieving 60% higher engagement rates than mega-influencer posts of equivalent reach.

Influencer Credibility

Influencer credibility comprising trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness is the third most significant

engagement driver. HypeAuditor (2023) benchmark data reveals that micro-influencers (10,000-100,000 followers) generate average engagement rates of 3.86%, compared to 1.21% for mega-influencers (>1 million followers), validating the academic finding that credibility quality matters more than follower quantity. Lou and Yuan (2019) found trustworthiness to be the strongest credibility dimension predicting purchase intention ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), followed by expertise ($B = 0.29$) and attractiveness ($\beta = 0.18$). Influencer Marketing Hub (2023) reports that brands earn an average of USD 5.78 in media value per USD 1 invested in influencer marketing, with returns highest for nano and micro-influencer partnerships.

Informativeness

While ranking below entertainment and authenticity in predictive power, content informativeness remains a significant engagement driver, particularly for purchase intent formation. HubSpot (2023) reports that informative short-form videos including product tutorials, how-to demonstrations, and educational content-generate 40% higher click-through rates than purely entertainment-focused Reels. Google/Ipsos (2022) video research confirms that 70% of consumers say YouTube and Instagram videos have influenced their purchase decisions, with informative content playing a key role in the consideration stage of the AIDA funnel.

AIDA Framework Application to Instagram Reels

Secondary evidence supports the applicability of the AIDA framework to Instagram Reels engagement. At the Attention stage, Wyzowl (2024) data shows that 65% of viewers decide whether to continue watching a video in the first 2 seconds, underscoring the

critical importance of strong visual hooks. At the Interest stage, Hootsuite (2023) benchmarks indicate that Reels with narrative progression and authentic storytelling achieve 2.3x higher average view duration. At the Desire stage, social proof mechanisms including user testimonials, peer endorsements, and real usage demonstrations increase conversion intent by 28% (Sprout Social, 2024). At the Action stage, Reels featuring clear CTAs generate 80% higher profile visits and link clicks compared to Reels without explicit CTAs (Meta Business, 2023).

Hypothesis Testing Summary

Table 2 presents a summary of hypothesis support derived from the synthesized secondary evidence.

All five hypotheses are supported by the convergent evidence of multiple secondary sources. Entertainment value (H1) and authenticity (H3) demonstrate the strongest and most consistent support across both academic and industry data. Influencer credibility (H4) and informativeness (H2) are well-supported with moderate effect sizes. Brand recall (H5) is strongly supported by platform performance data indicating 26% brand recall lift for Reels over static posts.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study exhibit strong convergence with the theoretical frameworks employed. In alignment with Uses and Gratifications Theory, entertainment value and authenticity-the attributes that most effectively fulfill hedonic and identity gratification needs-emerge as the dominant drivers of Instagram Reels engagement. This is consistent with Katz et al.'s (1973) foundational proposition that media engagement is driven by gratification fulfillment, and with Chen and Kim's (2022) empirical finding that entertainment

gratification is the primary predictor of short-form video engagement.

The AIDA framework's applicability to Instagram Reels is confirmed across all four stages, though the sequential nature of the model must be qualified. Industry data reveals that consumers frequently move non-linearly through AIDA stages-entering at the Desire stage through peer recommendations, or cycling back from Action to Interest through post-purchase sharing behavior. This non-linearity is consistent with Kotler et al.'s (2021) post-AIDA advocacy extension and suggests that practitioners should design Reels campaigns as sequential journey architectures rather than single-touchpoint interventions.

The finding that micro-influencer partnerships outperform mega-influencer collaborations in engagement rate has significant strategic implications. This pattern consistent across HypeAuditor (2023), Audrezet et al. (2020), and Schouten et al. (2020) suggests that influencer selection criteria should prioritize audience relevance, trust, and perceived authenticity over raw follower scale. The credibility premium of domain-relevant, authentic influencers outweighs the reach premium of celebrity influencers, particularly in high-involvement product categories where consumer trust is a prerequisite for purchase.

The Indian market context introduces moderating factors not fully captured by Western or East Asian studies. The post-TikTok migration of Indian content creators to Instagram Reels has created a uniquely dense and competitive short-form video ecosystem, characterized by high content volume, diverse linguistic and cultural registers, and rapidly evolving audience expectations. These conditions amplify the importance of authenticity and cultural

relevance as differentiating attributes in brand Reels content.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Instagram Reels and short-form video content are significantly more effective than static formats in driving brand engagement, as measured by engagement rate, brand recall, and click-through rate. Five content attributes-entertainment value, authenticity, influencer credibility, informativeness, and call-to-action effectiveness are all positively associated with brand engagement outcomes, with entertainment value and authenticity demonstrating the strongest and most consistent predictive power across secondary evidence.

The AIDA Model, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Engagement Theory each provide valid theoretical lenses for understanding short-form video engagement, with each framework illuminating a distinct dimension: sequential funnel progression (AIDA), motivational alignment (UGT), and participatory value co-creation (Engagement Theory). Integrating all three frameworks offers a more complete and actionable model of Instagram Reels effectiveness than any single theory alone.

For the Indian digital marketing context, these findings are particularly timely. With 362 million Instagram users and a young, mobile-first consumer base, India represents an exceptionally high-opportunity market for brands that invest in evidence-based, authentic short-form video strategies. Practitioners who align Reels content with gratification needs, leverage micro-influencer authenticity, and design sequential AIDA-structured campaigns are positioned to achieve superior brand engagement outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the synthesized findings, the following recommendations are offered for marketing practitioners:

Adopt an entertainment-first content philosophy: Allocate 70% of Reels content to entertaining and authentic storytelling, 20% to educational or informative product content, and 10% to direct promotional content. This 70-20-10 mix aligns with consumer gratification expectations while maintaining conversion-oriented messaging.

Prioritize micro-influencer partnerships: Select influencers based on audience relevance, trust scores, and domain expertise rather than follower count. Nano and micro-influencers (1,000-100,000 followers) consistently deliver higher engagement quality and better ROI than mega-influencer partnerships.

Design Reels as AIDA journey architectures: Structure sequential Reels campaigns to deliver Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action at successive consumer touchpoints rather than attempting to accomplish all funnel objectives within a single piece of content.

Leverage user-generated content (UGC): Integrate brand challenges and UGC campaigns into Reels strategy to activate the 'Relating' and 'Creating' dimensions of Engagement Theory, building organic content volume at low cost.

Implement a comprehensive measurement framework: Track saves, profile visits, and brand lift metrics in addition to likes and comments to capture the full spectrum of engagement value and accurately demonstrate ROI to marketing leadership.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE

This study is subject to several limitations inherent to secondary research methodology. The synthesis relies on the accuracy and representativeness of source data, which varies by source category and provenance. Industry benchmark data may reflect platform-favorable reporting biases. The geographic scope of available secondary data is weighted toward Western and urban Indian contexts, potentially limiting generalizability to Tier 2 and Tier 3 Indian cities.

Future research should prioritize: longitudinal studies tracking long-term effects of Reels exposure on brand loyalty and customer lifetime value; cross-platform comparative studies examining Instagram Reels versus YouTube Shorts; experimental research manipulating specific content attributes to enable causal inference; and structural equation modeling with diverse samples to simultaneously test direct, indirect, and moderated relationships between content attributes and engagement outcomes.

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Table 1: Instagram Reels vs. Other Formats-Engagement Rate Benchmarks

Content Format	Avg. Engagement Rate	and Recall Lift	IR vs. Static
Instagram Reels	3.8%	+26%	+35%
Image Posts	1.4%	Baseline	Baseline
Standard Video Posts	2.1%	+11%	+12%
Instagram Stories	1.9%	+8%	+9%

Source: Synthesized from Meta Business Insights (2023), Hootsuite (2023), Later.com (2023).

Table 2: Summary of Hypothesis Support from Secondary Evidence

Content Attribute	Hypothesis	Secondary Evidence	Support
Entertainment Value	H1	Meng & Pan (2022); Wyzowl (2024)	Supported
Informativeness	H2	Ducoffe (1995); HubSpot (2023)	Supported
Authenticity	H3	Audrezet et al. (2020); Stackla (2021)	Supported
Influencer Credibility	H4	Lou & Yuan (2019); HypeAuditor (2023)	Supported
Brand Recall (Reels Exposure)	H5	Meta Business (2023); Nielsen (2022)	Supported

Source: Synthesized from academic and industry secondary sources.