



# Fragmented Stories, Unified Brands: How Consumers Reconstruct Meaning Across Multiple Digital Platforms

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**ABSTRACT:** Despite growing scholarly attention to fragmented brand narratives, existing research adopts brand-centric perspectives, leaving a critical gap in understanding how consumers reconstruct meaning from dispersed digital fragments. This study addresses this gap by investigating the interpretive strategies consumers employ to derive coherent brand understanding across multiple platforms. Theoretically grounded in transmedia storytelling, sense-making theory, and platform affordances, this research adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach utilizing reflexive thematic analysis. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 digitally active consumers from Palestine, Jordan, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age (21–48), professional background, and digital literacy. Findings reveal four key insights: First, consumers normalize fragmentation as an expected feature of digital branding rather than a barrier. Second, they actively engage in cross-platform sense-making through systematic cross-checking and critical evaluation of brand messages. Third, trust operates as a dynamic construct negotiated through algorithmic transparency and influencer authenticity, not as a passive brand attribute. Fourth and most significantly, emotional coherence—consistency of affective tone and values across platforms—emerges as more influential in shaping perceived brand unity than strict message consistency. This study contributes to digital branding literature by shifting focus from brand-controlled messaging to consumer-centered meaning reconstruction, offering a conceptual model that positions brand coherence as an emotional and symbolic consumer outcome rather than a managerial output. Practical implications include platform-specific storytelling that prioritizes emotional alignment over message uniformity, alongside policy recommendations for transparent algorithmic practices and influencer governance in emerging digital markets.

**KEYWORDS:** Digital branding; transmedia storytelling; consumer meaning-making; platform affordances; brand coherence; emotional coherence

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the digital communication landscape has undergone a substantial transformation, reshaping how consumers interact with brands across multiple platforms such as social media, mobile apps, streaming services, and e-commerce interfaces [1, 2]. This shift

has altered branding dynamics, as consumers are no longer passive recipients; instead, they actively participate in constructing brand meaning across contexts and narratives, turning brand communication into a sense-making process rather than a one-way transmission of messages [3]. This transformation is particularly evident in emerging Middle Eastern markets, where digital advertising is increasingly shaped by hyper-personalization, mobile-first strategies, and the adoption of immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) [4].

Companies have responded to media consumption fragmentation by implementing transmedia communication strategies that balance brand consistency with platform-specific content adaptation across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube [5–7]. While these strategies enhance consumer engagement, they simultaneously increase cognitive load, as consumers must navigate multiple narratives to form coherent brand concepts [8, 9]. This dynamic introduces challenges regarding consumers' roles as active branding participants, influenced not only by brand-driven communication but also by algorithmic mediation and social network dynamics [10–12].

Although there has been considerable exploration of digital branding and consumer engagement, significant gaps remain. Most research focuses on companies' perspectives and the execution of marketing strategies rather than on how consumers make sense of brands in fragmented environments [1, 2]. This gap is particularly evident in the interaction between platform affordances, cultural contexts, and digital literacy levels [12, 13]. Moreover, consumers rely on peer-generated content and social validation to assess the trustworthiness and authenticity of a brand, reflecting broader technological and sociocultural contexts [14].

To address these gaps, this study pursues four research objectives. First, it investigates how consumers derive coherent brand meanings from fragmented brand narratives distributed across multiple digital platforms. Second, it identifies the cognitive, social, and cultural strategies consumers employ to integrate disparate brand messages into unified brand perceptions. Third, it examines how platform-specific affordances and algorithmic mediation shape consumers' interpretive activities and trust negotiation processes. Fourth, it determines whether emotional coherence or message consistency plays a more significant role in consumers' perceived brand unity. Accordingly, this study addresses the following overarching research question: How do consumers reconstruct brand meaning across fragmented digital platforms, and what interpretive, social, and emotional mechanisms facilitate this sense-making process?

## **2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

Digital brand communication has shifted from traditional centralized models to fragmented environments, where message coherence depends largely on consumers' interactions with diverse narratives [15–17]. Unlike traditional integrated marketing communications, which focused on controlling message flows, modern digital ecosystems generate diverse and often contradictory interpretations [12, 14, 18]. Fragmentation stems from two primary factors: technological advancements and algorithmic curation, whereby algorithms prioritize relevance and personalization over narrative consistency [10–12]. This challenge intensifies in emerging markets; for instance, political instability and infrastructural constraints in Palestine and Jordan shape how brand communication is fragmented and received by consumers [4].

Transmedia storytelling serves as the primary theoretical framework for understanding how brands navigate narrative fragmentation while maintaining coherence [5, 6, 19]. This concept posits that effective transmedia strategies treat consumers as co-creators who piece together narrative elements to construct brand stories [5, 7]. However, transmedia research also recognizes potential drawbacks, including increased cognitive load, interpretive ambiguity, and narrative inconsistency, which may create consumer dissonance detrimental to brand trust and equity [14, 20]. Sense-making theory further clarifies consumer interaction by positioning consumers as active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of corporate narratives [21, 22]. Consumers attribute meaning based on personal experiences, cultural contexts, and social interactions, with peer reviews and influencer endorsements becoming indispensable components of this process [23–25]. Digital platforms shape these dynamics by influencing content dissemination, visibility, and interaction opportunities [12, 17]. Personalized algorithms may further complicate consumers' understanding of brand stories, as they present content aligned with individual preferences [10, 11]; however, evidence on how consumers navigate these complexities remains limited [2, 13].

Despite considerable academic research on digital branding, consumer experiences with fragmented narratives remain insufficiently understood. Most studies adopt brand-centric or algorithmic perspectives, neglecting consumers' interpretive roles in engaging with non-coherent messages [1, 2]. By shifting the analytical lens from brand-controlled messaging to consumer-centered meaning reconstruction, this study addresses this gap and advances theoretical understanding of how fragmented digital narratives are transformed into unified brand perceptions.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretative research design, which was well suited to exploring the research questions and examining consumer sense-making in its complexity and nuance [23, 25]. Qualitative methodology offered depth and flexibility, enabling the exploration of meanings that often eluded quantitative measurement [22]. The study was grounded in a constructivist epistemological position, which held that reality—particularly brand meaning—was not an objective truth to be discovered but rather was constructed through individuals' interactions with their world [21]. This perspective was essential for understanding consumers' roles in creating meaning from diverse digital stimuli, recognizing that interpretation was shaped not only by individual experiences but also by social interactions and platform-specific characteristics [12, 17].

A purposive sampling approach ensured that participants could provide rich and relevant insights into the research problem. Active engagement with at least three digital platforms was the primary inclusion criterion [1], ensuring firsthand experience with fragmented brand narratives. Additional criteria included willingness to reflect on digital media consumption [26, 27] and the ability to articulate personal brand perceptions. The final sample comprised 25 participants recruited from several Middle Eastern countries, including Palestine, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, with no substantially new codes emerging in the final interviews. Although statistical generalization was not the objective, the sample was diversified across age (21–48), professional backgrounds (marketing professionals, students, engineers, and creatives), and self-assessed digital literacy levels to capture varied interpretations of the

phenomenon [2]. Recruitment was conducted through social media announcements and professional networks, with screening questions used to verify platform usage. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of all participants.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of participants (N=25).

Participant Code	Country	Age Range	Profession	Digital Literacy Level
P01	Palestine	21-25	Marketing Specialist	High
P02	Jordan	26-30	Software Engineer	High
P03	UAE	31-35	Business Analyst	Medium
P04	Saudi Arabia	21-25	University Student	Medium
P05	Egypt	36-40	Creative Director	High
P06	Palestine	26-30	Teacher	Low
P07	Jordan	31-35	Marketing Manager	High
P08	UAE	21-25	Content Creator	High
P09	Saudi Arabia	26-30	Graphic Designer	Medium
P10	Egypt	41-48	Small Business Owner	Medium
P11	Palestine	31-35	Journalist	High
P12	Jordan	21-25	University Student	High
P13	UAE	36-40	Consultant	High
P14	Saudi Arabia	26-30	E-commerce Specialist	High
P15	Egypt	21-25	Marketing Intern	Medium
P16	Palestine	26-30	Pharmacist	Low
P17	Jordan	31-35	Advertising Executive	High
P18	UAE	41-48	Retail Manager	Medium
P19	Saudi Arabia	21-25	Social Media Coordinator	High
P20	Egypt	31-35	Freelance Writer	Medium
P21	Palestine	36-40	NGO Worker	Medium
P22	Jordan	26-30	Digital Marketer	High
P23	UAE	21-25	Law Student	Medium
P24	Saudi Arabia	31-35	HR Specialist	Low
P25	Egypt	26-30	Brand Strategist	High

**Note:** Digital literacy levels were self-reported based on confidence in navigating, evaluating, and creating content across multiple digital platforms.

Data collection employed in-depth semi-structured interviews, an approach that was highly appropriate for exploring themes within a guided context while allowing participants to raise unanticipated meanings [25]. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing tools, lasting 45–75 minutes each. Sessions were authorized by participants, digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interview guide addressed the research questions and examined: (1) pathways of engagement and interaction with brands across platforms; (2) awareness of variations in brand voice, style, and content across platforms; (3) personal strategies for reconciling contradictory brand messages; and (4) perceptions of algorithmic content curation, influencer endorsements, and user-generated content in shaping brand judgments. Probes and follow-up questions encouraged elaboration and the provision of specific examples [22].

Thematic analysis followed Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke’s six-phase iterative process [28, 29], which was selected for its theoretical flexibility and alignment with the study’s constructivist approach. The phases comprised: (1) familiarization through exhaustive reading of transcripts; (2) generating initial codes using an inductive, data-driven approach; (3) searching for overarching themes; (4) reviewing themes against coded extracts and the full dataset; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) composing the report with representative quotes and technical interpretations. NVivo software facilitated coding and data management.

Several strategies ensured rigor and trustworthiness [30]: thick description provided rich, context-specific detail; reflexivity was maintained through a weekly reflective journal documenting methodological decisions and personal assumptions; peer debriefing involved discussions with academic peers to challenge assumptions; and member checking was conducted, whereby preliminary interpretations were shared with participants to confirm alignment with their experiences.

All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection, and all data were anonymized and securely stored. The study complied with established ethical standards. Participants received an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Consent forms were signed prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, with all identifying information removed and pseudonyms used in reporting. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time for any reason. Digital audio data and transcripts were password-protected and stored on secure devices.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The present thematic analysis outlined five interrelated themes that capture how consumers reconstruct brand meaning across fragmented digital platforms. Table 2 provides a summary of the five themes before they are discussed in detail.

**Table 2.** Summary of thematic findings.

Theme Name	Key Description	Representative Quote	Supporting Literature
Theme 1: Fragmentation as a Normalized Brand Experience	Consumers perceive fragmented brand communication as an expected, normative aspect of digital branding	<i>"I don't expect one place to explain the brand anymore. Instagram shows the image, TikTok shows personality, and the website shows seriousness."</i> (P08, UAE)	[5 ,6, 15]
Theme 2: Active Consumer Sense- Making and Narrative Integration	Consumers actively cross-check and integrate brand messages across platforms using personal judgment	<i>"If what influencers say doesn't match the brand's website, I trust my own judgment more than either one."</i> (P14, Saudi Arabia)	[21, 22, 25]
Theme 3: Platform-Specific Meaning Attribution	Consumers assign distinct functional roles to different platforms to navigate inconsistencies	<i>"Instagram and TikTok show personality, YouTube gives reviews, the website is the truth."</i> (P03, UAE)	[11, 12, 16]
Theme 4: Trust Negotiation within Algorithmic and Influencer- Mediated Spaces	Trust operates as a dynamic construct renegotiated based on perceived algorithmic transparency	<i>"I detach from the brand if I feel the story is staged."</i> (P18, UAE)	[4, 10, 11, 24]
Theme 5: Emotional Coherence Higher Than Message Consistency	Perceived consistency in affective tone and values across platforms outweighs message uniformity	<i>"I don't care if the words change, but the feeling must be the same everywhere."</i> (P07, Jordan)	[14, 20, 23]

##### 4.1. Theme 1: fragmentation as a normalized brand experience.

Participants described fragmentation in brand communication as an expected aspect of their digital interactions, illustrating a shift in perspective regarding how brands manifested across platforms. One participant noted: *"I don't expect one place to explain the brand anymore. Instagram shows the image, TikTok shows personality, and the website shows seriousness"* (P08, UAE). This quote illustrated a fundamental cognitive shift in how consumers conceptualized brand presence across digital ecosystems. Rather than expecting message uniformity, this participant demonstrated an adaptive schema in which each platform was

assigned a specific narrative function—Instagram for visual identity, TikTok for tonal personality, and the website for factual authority. This functional differentiation enabled consumers to reconcile apparent inconsistencies not as contradictions but as complementary contributions to a multifaceted brand gestalt.

Another participant elaborated: *"I used to get confused when I saw different things on different apps. Now I just think that's how brands work. It's like getting to know a person—you see different sides of them in different situations"* (P12, Jordan). This anthropomorphic analogy revealed an important sense-making strategy. By comparing brand fragmentation to human social behavior—where individuals display different facets of personality depending on context—consumers normalized what might otherwise be perceived as inconsistency. This cognitive reframing reduced dissonance and transformed fragmentation from a barrier into a feature of authentic brand engagement. Consumers no longer perceived fragmentation as a hindrance to comprehension; rather, it served as a starting condition for more effortful engagement and narrative weaving [5, 15, 17].

#### 4.2. Theme 2: active consumer sense-making and narrative integration.

A central theme among participants was their role in actively integrating fragmented brand messages into coherent identities. Many described the process of cross-checking information across platforms and assessing brand authenticity based on personal values. One participant stated: *"If what influencers say doesn't match the brand's website, I trust my own judgment more than either one"* (P14, Saudi Arabia). This demonstrated a sophisticated evaluative stance that positioned personal judgment above both commercial influencer content and official brand communications. This finding challenged traditional source credibility models that privilege organizational messaging over third-party endorsements. Instead, consumers developed meta-evaluative competencies that synthesized multiple sources while retaining ultimate interpretive authority.

Another participant shared: *"I always check three places before I decide. TikTok shows me the hype, YouTube gives me real reviews, and Twitter tells me if people are angry about something. If all three say the same thing, I believe it. If not, I dig deeper"* (P22, Jordan). This described a systematic triangulation protocol that mirrored academic validation procedures. The participant demonstrated an informal yet rigorous methodology for assessing brand credibility across platforms, treating each platform as a distinct data source with specific strengths and biases. This finding suggested that repeated exposure to fragmented brand narratives may have cultivated sophisticated consumer research skills, supporting sense-making theory [21, 22, 25].

#### 4.3. Theme 3: platform-specific meaning attribution.

Participants identified distinct functional roles for various platforms in shaping their understanding of brands, allowing them to navigate inconsistencies across contexts. Instagram and TikTok were linked to emotional storytelling and engagement; YouTube was viewed as a source for detailed product reviews and tutorials; and brand websites were considered authoritative and reliable. One participant explained: *"Instagram is where I fall in love with a brand. YouTube is where I decide if I actually want to buy it. The website is where I check if they're legit"* (P05, Egypt). This articulated a sequential platform journey that mapped onto different stages of the consumer decision-making process: emotional attraction (Instagram),

rational evaluation (YouTube), and legitimacy verification (website). This hierarchical attribution of platform functions enabled consumers to manage cognitive load by compartmentalizing evaluative tasks across digital environments.

Another participant added: *"I forgive a brand for being too casual on TikTok because that's what TikTok is for. But if they're too casual on LinkedIn, I judge them. Every place has its own language"* (P17, Jordan). This revealed an understanding of platform-specific genre expectations that paralleled how audiences evaluate different media formats. Consumers applied context-sensitive evaluation criteria to brand communications, meaning that perceived inconsistency depended less on message divergence and more on violations of platform-appropriate norms. This differentiated approach allowed consumers to manage ambiguity, with each platform serving as part of a broader narrative system [6, 9, 12].

#### 4.4. Theme 4: Trust Negotiation within Algorithmic and Influencer-Mediated Spaces

Trust emerged as a fluid construct shaped by algorithmic curation and influencer practices. Participants demonstrated awareness of these dynamics and adjusted their trust based on perceived authenticity. One participant stated: *"I detach from the brand if I feel the story is staged"* (P18, UAE). This identified perceived artificiality as a critical threshold for trust erosion. The term *"staged"* suggested that consumers actively monitored for signs of manufactured authenticity—content perceived as manipulative rather than genuine—aligning with literature on influencer credibility [24].

A participant from Saudi Arabia elaborated: *"I know the algorithm shows me what it wants me to see. So when I see the same brand everywhere, I don't get impressed. I get suspicious. I think, who paid for this?"* (P19, Saudi Arabia). This demonstrated algorithmic literacy and a critical stance toward amplified content. Rather than interpreting repeated exposure as popularity or quality, the participant reframed it as a signal of paid promotion. As consumers became more aware of digital infrastructures, traditional advertising metrics such as reach and frequency appeared to lose persuasive power or even backfire. Trust was continuously renegotiated through fragmented narratives and remained highly sensitive to social and algorithmic influences [10, 11, 24]. These findings aligned with research in Palestine and Jordan, highlighting the importance of ethical advertising practices—particularly transparency and data responsibility—in building trust in emerging digital markets [4].

#### 4.5. Theme 5: emotional coherence higher than message consistency.

Emotional coherence referred to the perceived consistency in affective tone, values, and relational warmth conveyed by a brand across platforms—regardless of variations in format, language, or narrative style. One participant captured this sentiment clearly: *"I don't care if the words change, but the feeling must be the same everywhere"* (P07, Jordan). This drew a sharp distinction between verbal message consistency (deemed flexible) and emotional tone consistency (treated as non-negotiable). Consumers were willing to accept narrative variations across platforms as long as the underlying affective experience remained stable. Emotional coherence functioned as a unifying thread that bound disparate fragments into a recognizable brand identity.

Another participant added: *"A brand can tell me different things on different days. That's fine. But if they feel fake on Instagram and warm on their website, I don't know who they are. The personality has to match"* (P02, Jordan). This reinforced the centrality of personality

consistency—the attribution of human-like traits to brands—as the anchor of cross-platform coherence. When emotional tone varied significantly across platforms, consumers experienced confusion about brand identity, regardless of whether factual claims remained consistent. This supported the proposition that consumers related to brands as relational partners rather than as information sources. Brands were scrutinized more intensely when authentic emotional expressions appeared consistently across different networks, giving precedence to overall emotional coherence [14, 20, 23].

Cultural context played a significant role in shaping participants' sense-making processes. Several participants emphasized the importance of linguistic authenticity: *"I trust the brand more when they speak in our Egyptian way on TikTok—it feels real. But if they use the same casual style on their website, it looks unprofessional"* (P15, Egypt). This introduced a culturally specific dimension of platform-appropriate communication: the use of colloquial Arabic versus Modern Standard Arabic. On casual platforms such as TikTok, colloquial language signaled authenticity and cultural belonging, whereas on official websites, the same language was perceived as inappropriate.

Another recurring theme was the influence of family values and religious sensitivity: *"If I see a brand posting something too Western or revealing, even if the message is consistent across platforms, I immediately detach. The brand must respect our culture and religion for me to feel emotionally connected"* (P24, Saudi Arabia). Emotional coherence in Middle Eastern contexts thus included alignment with cultural and religious norms related to modesty and family values. A brand that maintained message consistency but violated these deeper cultural expectations was likely to be rejected regardless of its narrative uniformity. These culturally grounded observations were supported by comparative analyses of digital advertising landscapes in Palestine and Jordan [4], which highlighted the importance of localized content strategies and culturally sensitive ethical frameworks.

To synthesize the five themes into a single interpretive pathway, Figure 1 presented a theory-integrated model of consumer cross-platform sense-making. The model illustrated how brand meaning was reconstructed through a sequential process that began with fragmented exposure shaped by platform diversity and algorithmic curation [10–12], followed by platform-specific role attribution (emotion, depth, authority), and then active sense-making and cross-checking across channels. Trust was subsequently negotiated in influencer- and algorithm-mediated spaces [11, 24], and consumers ultimately evaluated emotional coherence as the key integrative criterion determining whether the outcome was a unified, fragmented, or rejected brand identity. The model also visualized moderating conditions—cultural context, digital literacy, and peer validation—that intensified or attenuated each stage of the process [13, 14]. The model summarizes how coherence is achieved through consumers' interpretive work rather than through message uniformity. Emotional coherence functions as an integrative "test" that determines whether fragmented cues are assembled into a unified brand identity or rejected.

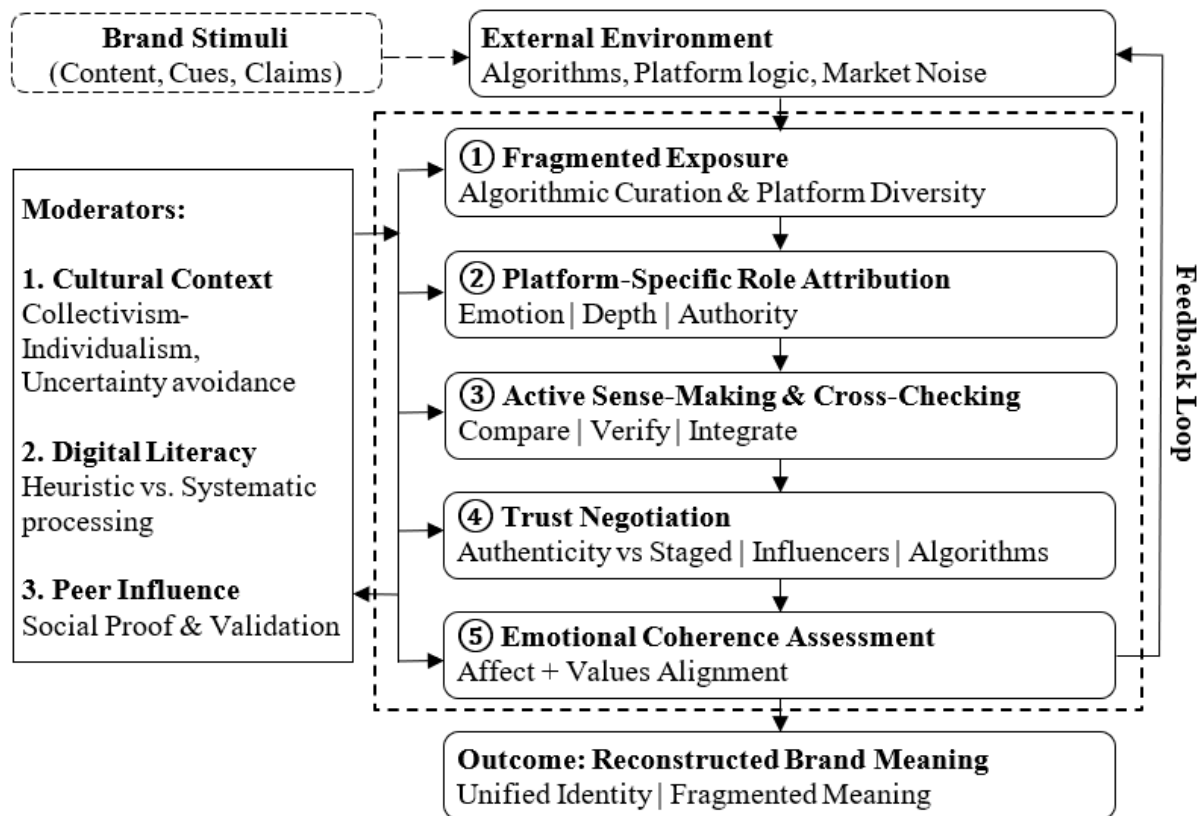


Figure 1. A theory-integrated model of consumer cross-platform sense-making.

#### 4.6. Contributions to digital marketing theory.

This research contributed to digital marketing theory in three significant ways. First, it conceptualized fragmentation not as a managerial barrier but as a consumer-experiential phenomenon that consumers actively navigated rather than passively endured, thereby shifting the analytical focus from brand-controlled communication to consumer-centered meaning reconstruction [1, 2]. Second, by integrating sense-making theory [21, 22] with platform affordance theory [11, 12], this study elaborated on how meanings were constructed through cross-platform interpretive processes, demonstrating that consumers actively constructed coherence through systematic evaluation strategies. Third, this research repositioned brand coherence as grounded in emotional and symbolic connections rather than merely informational consistency.

The finding that emotional coherence outweighed message uniformity directly challenged foundational assumptions of integrated marketing communications (IMC) theory [18], which posited that consistency of message content was the primary driver of brand equity. In fragmented digital ecosystems, consumers operated with a different evaluative logic: they assessed brands not by what was said uniformly, but by what was felt consistently—a distinction that previous research had suggested but had not empirically demonstrated in cross-platform contexts [20].

#### 4.7. Managerial implications for brand strategy.

This research suggested several strategic implications for marketing professionals. First, brands were advised to craft narratives that leveraged platform specificity while maintaining emotional coherence and value congruence across channels. This involved identifying core emotional

themes that remained stable while allowing narrative expression to vary by platform. Second, brands were encouraged to foster authentic influencer collaborations aligned with consumer values, moving beyond reach- and visibility-centric metrics toward authenticity-based evaluation criteria. Participants demonstrated sophisticated abilities to detect staged or inauthentic influencer content, indicating that transparency and authenticity were more effective than highly polished production.

Third, brands were urged to develop transparent data practices to build trust and bridge perceived gaps between consumers and organizations. As consumers became more algorithmically literate, opaque personalization practices appeared to erode trust rather than enhance engagement [4]. Future success metrics should therefore evaluate brand performance based on consumers' ability to construct meaningful brand representations, rather than solely on adherence to content consistency metrics [2].

#### *4.8. Policy and regulatory implications.*

From a policy perspective, the findings indicated the growing importance of transparency in digital marketing and the need for stronger ethical standards in influencer governance. As consumer awareness of algorithmic influence increased, regulatory frameworks needed to evolve to protect consumer trust without stifling innovation in branding practices [10, 13]. Recent research recommended that policymakers in emerging Middle Eastern markets strengthen data protection regulations and invest in digital literacy initiatives, while businesses pursued innovation through strategic partnerships with influencers, non-governmental organizations, and technology providers [4]. These recommendations underscored the need for region-specific policy interventions that balanced consumer protection with the promotion of digital innovation.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study took an important step toward arguing that “fragmentation” was not merely a challenge but rather a fundamental condition of digital branding. The findings demonstrated that consumers possessed sophisticated interpretive competencies; navigating multiple platforms facilitated meaning-making through data analysis, critical evaluation of brand narratives, and emotional engagement. Consumers were positioned as active agents within their own branded ecosystems, shifting from a conventional passive role to that of co-producers of brand narratives. They stitched together cues from various platforms, influencer communications, and personal interactions to form cohesive brand meaning, marking a transition toward increased consumer agency in shaping brand meaning and legitimacy. Above all, the findings underscored the importance of emotional congruence as an integrative mechanism for enhancing brand engagement. Consumers appeared willing to accept stylistic and narrative variations across diverse platforms; however, branding that failed to convey consistent emotional or ethical signals risked alienation and the erosion of trust. Trust emerged as a dynamic construct, interpreted through lenses of transparency, authenticity, and evolving cultural sensitivity. From a strategic perspective, these conclusions suggested that brands needed to revisit their competency models in digital promotion. Traditional integrated marketing approaches needed to evolve into models that adapted to platform-specific functions while still delivering coherent value. This shift called for the intentional design of fragmented

digital storytelling to foster more meaningful and engaging interactions between consumers and brands. Despite its contributions, this study had several limitations. The findings were not statistically generalizable due to the qualitative design and the specific sample drawn from several Middle Eastern countries, where cultural and digital contexts may differ from other regions. Future research should employ quantitative or mixed-method approaches across larger and more diverse populations to test the prevalence of the identified sense-making strategies. Cross-cultural comparative studies would be particularly valuable in extending the applicability of these findings. Additionally, future research could explore the role of emerging technologies such as generative AI, augmented reality, and immersive media in shaping consumer sense-making processes. Longitudinal designs would also be beneficial in examining how these strategies evolve alongside increasing digital experience and technological advancement.

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### **Author Contribution**

As the sole author, all research tasks were performed: conceptualization, methodology, data collection and analysis, writing (original draft and revision), supervision, and funding acquisition.

### **Competing Interest**

The author declares that there is no competing interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. No financial, personal, or professional relationships have influenced the research, analysis, or interpretation of findings presented in this study. The research was conducted independently without any commercial or institutional affiliations that could be construed as a potential competing interest. The author confirms that Generative AI tools (QuillBot) were used solely for language editing and stylistic refinement, with all intellectual contributions made by the human author.

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