



An empirical assessment of the drivers of digital brand engagement in Kampala, Uganda

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Abstract

The rapid spread of digital technology in Sub-Saharan Africa has significantly changed the dynamics of consumer-brand interactions in this region. Although marketing spend on digital advertising is increasing in Uganda, consumers continue to display poor and inconsistent levels of engagement with brands through digital media. The existing studies tend to rely on knowledge developed within Western markets and fail to address the need for empirically grounded knowledge about factors that influence digital brand engagement in Eastern African cities. The study uses a cross-sectional quantitative survey design and collects the data using a structured self-administered questionnaire completed by 60 respondents who use digital platforms in Kampala, divided into five areas. All dependent and independent variables were measured using five-point Likert scales. Statistical analysis was performed with the use of reliability analysis (Cronbach's Alpha), normality analysis, Pearson correlation, one-way ANOVA, and multiple linear regression in IBM SPSS Statistics. Multiple linear regression model showed that 67% of variance in digital brand engagement ($R^2 = .67$, Adjusted $R^2 = .65$, $F = 27.40$, $p < .001$) could be explained using the identified variables. Among those, Brand Strategic Capabilities turned out to be the best predictor of digital brand engagement ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$), followed by Cultural Mediators ($\beta = .29$, $p = .001$) and Structural Enablers ($\beta = .18$, $p = .031$). AI-Mediated Engagement proved to be an ineffective predictor ($\beta = .12$, $p = .102$) in this particular context. All constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.78 - 0.91$). Based on the obtained results, the authors conclude that human-focused brand experiences tailored according to local cultural norms play the main role in shaping brand engagement in Kampala, while technological and AI factors are secondary.

Keywords: Digital brand engagement, Structural enablers, Cultural mediators, Brand strategic capabilities, AI-mediated engagement, consumer behaviour, Kampala, Uganda, Sub-Saharan Africa, East Africa, Social media marketing, Mobile internet, Ubuntu collectivism, influencer marketing, quantitative research

Introduction

The digital economy of Sub-Saharan Africa is currently experiencing its biggest transformation yet. With more than 600 million mobile internet subscribers expected to be registered across Africa by 2023 (GSMA, 2023), and a growth rate of social media users exceeding 12% per year in East African countries, the environment for thriving digital consumer-brand engagement is maturing. The digital landscape of Uganda – Kampala, specifically – has been one of the most dynamic within Sub-Saharan Africa. With a population of 3.5 million inhabitants, most under the age of 35, Kampala is distinguished by widespread smartphone use, heavy social media presence, and a consumer culture that mixes international digital influences with strong local traditions (Uganda Communications Commission [UCC], 2023).

However, in this market, brand engagement on digital platforms emerges as an essential strategic topic for consideration among marketers and brand managers. Although considerable growth in digital marketing budgets has been observed in recent years, many brands still struggle with low, sporadic, and insufficiently explained consumer engagement. Even though successful campaigns have worked in Western or Eastern markets, brands often fail to achieve satisfactory results when applied in Kampala. This implies that factors affecting digital brand engagement in Kampala might be different from those discussed in the literature.

The current literature review on digital brand engagement is dominated by studies that focus mainly on the Western/North American/East Asian consumer market (Islam & Rahman, 2017; Brodie et al., 2013), and there are not many studies that consider the structural, cultural, and strategic factors affecting digital brand engagement among Sub-Saharan Africans. This paper will analyze the unique

socio-ecological environment in which digital brand engagement occurs in Kampala. Digital brand engagement can be defined as a process which is enabled through Structural Enablers (SE), mediated through Cultural Mediators (CM) and brand-specific Marketing Strategies (BSM) and further facilitated through AI-Mediated Engagement (AI). While SE, CM and BSM have each been explored individually in previous studies, very few studies have explored these factors together and in conjunction with AI on the relationship between the two.

Thus, the current paper aims to fill the gap by conducting an empirical examination of the independent and interactive effects of Structural Enablers (SE), Cultural Mediators (CM), Brand Strategic Capabilities (BSM) and AI-Mediated Engagement on Digital Brand Engagement among digital platform users in Kampala, Uganda. Using a quantitative cross sectional survey approach to collect data from 60 participants who are adults engaged with various digital platforms in all five regions of Kampala, Pearson correlation, Multiple Regression and ANOVA analyses will be performed in this study to test the following four hypotheses. The paper is structured as follows: Literature Review (Section 2), Theoretical Framework (Section 3), Research Methodology (Section 4), Findings (Section 5), Discussion and Conclusion/Implications/Future Research Direction (Section 6).

Literature Review

Digital Brand Engagement: Conceptualization and Dimensions

The concept of digital brand engagement can be seen as one of the basic constructs in current marketing research, which evolved from previous researches in such areas as customer engagement (Vivek, Beatty & Morgan, 2012) and consumer-brand relationships (Fournier,

1998). According to Hollebeek et al. (2014, p. 154), "digital brand engagement is defined as a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions". In fact, this three-fold approach to understanding of digital brand engagement has become standard for most researchers in this field and forms the basis for the way the dependent variable is operationalised in the present research.

The cognitive aspect of brand engagement relates to the extent of mental efforts, attention, and elaboration involved by the consumer when processing digital brand content (Brodie et al., 2013). Emotionally, brand engagement relates to the affective involvement of consumers with brands in digital environment and enthusiasm experienced while interacting with a particular brand (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2010). From a behavioural point of view, digital brand engagement covers all activities performed by consumers regarding a certain brand within digital platforms (Van Doorn et al., 2010). These include not only actions, like buying something, but also other actions, like posting information about the brand online or commenting on their performance.

Structural Enablers of Digital Brand Engagement

Conditions associated with the structural capacity to undertake digital engagement such as infrastructure for mobility, affordability of data usage, platform ecosystem readiness, and digital literacy have all been found as being necessary preconditions for engaging brands digitally. Aker and Mbiti (2010) have shown that mobile phone availability is one of the most important drivers behind altering economics and social behavior within Sub-Saharan Africa, allowing greater penetration into the digital economy and facilitating consumer engagement with brands

and commerce using mobile technologies. As for Uganda, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC, 2023) indicated in its reports for 2023 that in the first quarter, mobile internet penetration stood at 53.4% of the adult population, mainly facilitated by widespread adoption of smartphones alongside development of 4G coverage in the urban environment.

One of the key structural issues preventing consumers from engaging online remains the issue of data affordability in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the cost of 1 GB of data in relation to average monthly income is among the highest in the world (Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2022). That said, declining prices of data usage over the past decade, along with the growing presence of social media platforms adapted to low bandwidth conditions (such as WhatsApp and TikTok Lite), have gradually alleviated the issue among urban consumers in Kampala. Perceived ease of accessibility to digital infrastructure has also been shown to be an important determinant of mobile marketing adoption, as per findings from Okazaki and Taylor (2013) and Venkatesh et al. (2012), which aligned with TAM's focus on perceived ease of use.

Cultural Mediators of Digital Brand Engagement

Culture has long been acknowledged as a crucial factor in consumer behavior (Hofstede, 1980). Its importance in the context of digital brand engagement has been increasingly studied by researchers in recent years. In terms of the African culture, Ubuntu philosophy – the collective humanistic worldview encapsulated in the Nguni saying "I am because we are" (Mbiti, 1969) – forms the basis of the collective and social nature of digital consumption. Digital brand engagement within the framework of Ubuntu collectivism is reflected in such factors as community approval, peer recommendations,

and social experience affecting the response of digital consumers to brand communication (Mungai & Ogot, 2012). Accordingly, brands engaging in social media communication appealing to their sense of community values and culture will elicit higher engagement on the part of the Kampala community than those applying an individualistic Western marketing approach.

As for cultural elements promoting digital brand communication effectiveness in Kampala, Blythe (2017) and Escalas (2004) demonstrated that narratives communicated through storytelling are more emotionally engaging and memorable than brand messages delivered factually. In the context of Ugandan culture, in which storytelling is one of the most popular traditions among different cultures represented by Baganda, Banyankole, and Acholi people, a brand narrative will prove more engaging if it includes some elements of storytelling in the digital format, such as episode-based social media posts, influencer storytelling, or even videos telling stories about the brand and its products. Another element of culture shaping digital brand engagement is community trust – a phenomenon rooted in the social relationship-based structure of the Ugandan society and increased trust in peers and influencers rather than corporations (Abiodun, 2015).

Brand Strategic Capabilities

The brand strategic capabilities, which refer to the specific marketing capabilities of brands that use their knowledge of consumer context in order to connect with them through compelling means of engagement, have been singled out as key predictors of successful digital brand engagement in literature for both the international and emerging markets. One of such capabilities has been found to be the content strategy that involves adapting brand communication to the linguistic, cultural,

humorous, and stylistic specifics of consumer audiences in question (De Mooij, 2019). In particular, the brands that create content in Luganda, allude to local cultural events, and employ local actors and scenery have been shown to attract greater interest from consumers in Kampala.

Of particular significance to digital brand engagement in Kampala is the development of influencer marketing practices. As noted by Lee & Watkins (2016), and Lou & Yuan (2019), social media users who create content for smaller niche audiences and are credible communicators of cultural meanings within those audiences can serve as valuable partners for brand communication in terms of fostering community trust and culture-based affinity, as described in cultural mediator literature. In this regard, local micro-influencers – individuals who create content in local social media channels and have followings between 10,000 and 100,000 – may prove especially effective. Furthermore, as suggested by Kumar et al. (2019), data analytics maturity, i.e. brands' ability to leverage consumer data in creating tailored messages, is a key strategic capability of modern competitive digital brands. Lastly, purpose-driven brand alignment (commitment to specific social causes relevant to consumer community), as advocated by Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan (2021), appears to foster greater emotional and behavioural engagement, especially among young consumers.

AI-Mediated Engagement

The application of artificial intelligence-based technologies to digital brand engagement, which involves using AI-powered chatbots, personalisation, automated customer support and AI-based content recommendations, is a new aspect of digital marketing that has received considerable scholarly and practitioner focus around the world (Huang & Rust, 2021). In

developed nations, such engagement through AI has been linked to faster response time, better personalisation, and increased levels of consumer satisfaction scores (Davenport et al., 2020). Conversely, in Sub-Saharan African countries, the use of AI-based brand interactions has been relatively limited due to factors such as the lack of robust digital infrastructure, the unfamiliarity of consumers with AI-based technology, and culturally-based consumer preference for human interaction.

According to Paschen, Kietzmann and Kietzmann (2019), AI-powered chatbots and engagement technologies are best used in regions where consumers have reached a certain point of technological competence. The current research has adopted AI-Mediated Engagement as a separate fourth independent variable to explore whether a globally prominent determinant has reached statistical significance in terms of affecting digital brand engagement in Kampala, making an important addition to the growing literature on this subject matter in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Research Gap

In sum, the literature review outlined above indicates a definite research gap in the existing body of knowledge concerning digital brand engagement determinants. While the independent factors of digital brand engagement have been investigated in multiple diverse geographical locations, there has yet to be an empirical study that explores the combined effect of structural, cultural, strategic, and AI-related factors on digital brand engagement in a unified East African urban market environment. Most previous studies in the domain of digital marketing in Africa focused on the adoption of mobile commerce services (Abebe, 2014) or the use patterns of social media (Ndung'u & Waema, 2011). At the same time, none of those studies were built upon an integrated theoretical

framework like the present study, nor did any consider multiple determinants of consumer behavior at once. This study fills the identified gap by creating a new, empirically proven framework of drivers of digital brand engagement in the Kampala consumer market.

Theoretical Framework

This study relies on three distinct theoretical perspectives to create an appropriate framework for discussing the determinants of digital brand engagement.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) formulated by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973) asserts that media consumers are goal-oriented agents who choose specific media channels and contents in accordance with their ability to fulfill certain needs. In regard to digital brand engagement, this theory shows that users interact with branded content on digital platforms due to their ability to gratify consumers' psychological, social, and/or hedonic needs. UGT can help us understand the role of the Cultural Mediators and Structural Enablers categories as predictors of digital brand engagement among the consumers from the Kampala market due to the fact that consumers engage with brand content on accessible media platforms that satisfy their culturally determined needs.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

According to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), as proposed by Davis (1989), perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are the two most critical determinants of an individual's intention to adopt and use a specific technology or digital system. The Theory of Technology Acceptance (TAM) has been widely used for examining digital platform adoption and online consumer behavior within various cultural and economic contexts (Venkatesh et al., 2012). In the current research, it is argued that TAM can

be used as the underlying theoretical mechanism that explains how infrastructure and access conditions facilitate brand engagement behavior. As a result, if a digital platform offers reliable access (reduced usage barriers), relatively low data charges (ease of access perception), and easy-to-use, meaningful features (usefulness perception), consumers are expected to engage actively with digital brand content on a regular basis.

Stimulus Organism Response (S-O-R) Theory

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, elaborated by environmental psychologists Mehrabian and Russell (1974), serves as the theoretical framework that integrates the proposed conceptual model. S-O-R theory stipulates that stimuli in the environment (S) trigger internal organism-level responses such as cognitive evaluations and affective reactions (O) that, in turn, lead to behavioral outcomes (R). In this regard, the S-O-R theory suggests that different categories of stimuli (independent variable clusters in the current research) should be considered. Therefore, Structural Enablers should be recognized as environmental stimuli related to digital infrastructure and access conditions, Cultural Mediators serve as socio-cultural stimuli that initiate consumers' affective responses and processes, and finally, Brand Strategic Capabilities act as stimuli generated by brands and affecting consumer decision-making. Furthermore, a novel type of technological stimuli called AI-mediated engagement is suggested. These stimuli are integrated in the Organism level, consisting of consumers' cognitive and affective response system, to generate three types of brand engagement behavior (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral).

In the combination of UGT theory, TAM and S-O-R Theory used in this study, the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of explanation for digital brand

engagement in Kampala can be covered complementarily in terms of individual psychological processes, cultural and social factors, and structural and technological influences respectively. The adoption of a multitheory approach in this regard corresponds well to the holistic and multi-layered nature of the Kampala digital consumer environment as well as the theoretical reductionism inherent in previous digital marketing theories.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey research design was chosen for this study, which is a type of quantitative research design. With this design, data are collected only once from the target population, which allows researchers to analyze the relations among variables based on their current status in the population being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this research, the cross-sectional survey design was adopted since it is applicable for investigating the independent and joint impact of several determinant categories on digital brand engagement in Kampala consumers over a practically achievable period.

Study Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of adult consumers aged 18 years and older living in Kampala and using at least one digital platform such as social media, brand websites or apps to engage with brands. All of the five divisions in Kampala (Central, Makindye, Kawempe, Rubaga, and Nakawa) formed the sampling frame in order to maintain geographical representativeness. Purposive convenience sampling method was used whereby respondents were sampled from important business areas within the city such as shopping malls, business centres, universities, and online communities. Purposive sampling method was preferred owing

to lack of an available sampling frame for digitally active urban residents, and to ensure all selected respondents met the basic requirement of being able to answer the questionnaire since they used digital platforms. The total sample size used in this research was 60 respondents.

Research Instrument

A questionnaire-based data collection strategy was adopted, with the instrument operationalising all variables under study. Respondents answered the questions on a five-

point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire consisted of five main sections namely; Section A (Respondent demographic profile); Section B (Structural Enablers: 5 questions); Section C (Cultural Mediators: 5 questions); Section D (Brand Strategic Capabilities: 5 questions); and Section E (AI-Mediated Engagement: 4 questions and Digital Brand Engagement: 6 questions). Indices for the composite variables were created through average scoring of all the questions in a section. See Table 1.

Table 1: Variable Operationalisation Framework

Variable	Type	Indicators / Sub-dimensions	Measurement
Structural Enablers	IV1	Mobile penetration & smartphone access; Data affordability; Platform ecosystem maturity; Digital infrastructure quality	5-item Likert scale per indicator
Cultural Mediators	IV2	Ubuntu collectivism; Oral storytelling norms; Community trust; Cultural resonance of content	5-item Likert scale per indicator
Brand Strategic Capabilities	IV3	Localised content strategy; Influencer ecosystem utilisation; Data analytics maturity; Purpose-driven brand alignment; AI-mediated engagement capability	5-item Likert scale per indicator
Digital Brand Engagement	DV	Cognitive engagement; Emotional engagement; Behavioural engagement	6-item Likert scale (composite)

Data Analysis

Analyses of data were done using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26. The order of analysis is described below: (i) descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were performed on all demographic variables; (ii) Cronbach's Alpha was used in reliability analysis for each construct; (iii) composite scores were created for each construct through calculation of mean scores on Likert items measuring the construct; (iv) normality of distributions of composite variables was checked using skewness, kurtosis and Shapiro-Wilk tests; (v) Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used in bivariate correlation analysis of all variables; (vi) multiple regression analysis was performed to determine

the effect of the IVs on the DV; and finally (vii) ANOVA was applied to evaluate the significance of the regression model. Results will be presented in the subsequent sections.

Findings

Age Distribution

Table 2: Age Distribution of Respondents (N = 60)

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
18–24	27	45.0%
25–34	22	36.7%
35–44	8	13.3%
45–54	1	1.7%
55+	2	3.3%
Total	60	100%

Majority (81.7%) of respondents were aged 18-34 years. The sample's youth-dominated structure matches accurately the digital age group that makes up the bulk of mobile internet usage in Kampala – i.e., individuals aged between 18 and 34 years old who use mobile phones to engage in social media and other applications that feature brands powered by artificial intelligence (UCC, 2023). The scarcity of older respondents (above 45, $n = 3$, 5.0%) corroborates national trends in digital engagement and is congruent with the study's target demographic.

Gender Distribution

Table 3: Gender Distribution of Respondents (N = 60)

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Female	34	56.7%
Male	26	43.3%
Total	60	100%

The gender composition is relatively balanced; females made up half of the sample (56.7%). As per previous reports, there has been increasing activity by female respondents in mobile-based digital engagement in Uganda, especially in the cities of the country, specifically with WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, etc. Hence, the gender distribution allows broadening the generalizability of the results of this study to the adult digital consumer population in Kampala.

Educational Attainment

Table 4: Highest Level of Education Completed (N = 60)

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Secondary	17	28.3%
Diploma	9	15.0%
Bachelor's Degree	23	38.3%
Master's Degree	6	10.0%
Doctorate	1	1.7%
Other / Certificate	4	6.7%
Total	60	100%

Finally, note that half of the respondents attained a Bachelor's degree ($n = 30$). Thus, this sample reflects the highly educated urban consumption profile of Kampala City. The significant representation of secondary-level respondents (28.3%) demonstrates inclusivity across educational strata, supporting the breadth of the study's findings.

Occupation of Respondents

Table 5: Occupation of Respondents (N = 60)

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Students	15	25.0%
Business Owners / Entrepreneurs	14	23.3%
Professionals (Teachers, Engineers, Journalists)	12	20.0%
Sales / Service Workers	6	10.0%
Unemployed / No Occupation	3	5.0%
Others (Mechanics, Mobilizers, etc.)	10	16.7%
Total	60	100%

The occupational profile of respondents shows a diverse mix of Kampala's working population. Students (25.0%) and entrepreneurs (23.3%) make up nearly half of the sample. These two groups are typically among the most digitally active: students rely heavily on digital platforms for learning, social interaction, and identity expression, while entrepreneurs use them for marketing, customer engagement, and business growth. The presence of professionals, service workers, and informal-sector actors further broadens the sample, enhancing the external validity of the findings across Kampala's socioeconomic landscape.

Division of Residence

Table 6: Division of Residence within Kampala (N = 60)

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Makindye	29	48.3%
Central	20	33.3%
Kawempe	3	5.0%
Rubaga	3	5.0%
Nakawa	5	8.3%
Total	60	100%

Nearly half of the respondents reside in Makindye (48.3%), followed by Central Division (33.3%). Together, these two divisions account for more than 80% of the sample. This distribution reflects the reality that Makindye and Central are Kampala's most commercially vibrant and digitally active zones, with dense youth populations and high smartphone penetration. Although all five divisions are represented, future studies with larger samples could aim for a more balanced distribution to capture deeper cross-divisional differences.

Smartphone Ownership and Platform Usage

Smartphone ownership among respondents was universal (100%, n = 60). This confirms that digital brand engagement in Kampala is overwhelmingly mobile-driven and validates the study's focus on mobile-based digital interaction.

Table 7: Most Frequently Used Digital Platforms (Multiple Responses Allowed; N = 60)

Platform	Mentions (n)	Percentage (%)
WhatsApp	55	91.7%
TikTok	45	75.0%
Instagram	32	53.3%
YouTube	28	46.7%
Facebook	20	33.3%
X (Twitter)	12	20.0%
LinkedIn	3	5.0%

WhatsApp overwhelmingly dominates the digital landscape (91.7%), reinforcing its role as Uganda's primary channel for communication, information sharing, and brand engagement. TikTok's strong showing (75.0%) highlights the rapid rise of short-form video culture among Kampala's youth. Instagram (53.3%) and YouTube (46.7%) also attract substantial engagement, particularly for visual and entertainment-driven content. Facebook (33.3%) and X/Twitter (20.0%) appear to be losing ground among younger users, while LinkedIn remains a niche platform used mainly for professional networking.

Reliability Analysis

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha for each construct. The results are presented in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Reliability Statistics for Study Constructs

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Interpretation
IV1 – Structural Enablers	5	0.81	Reliable
IV2 – Cultural Mediators	5	0.87	Highly Reliable
IV3 – Brand Strategic Capabilities	5	0.89	Highly Reliable
IV4 – AI-Mediated Engagement	4	0.78	Reliable
DV – Digital Brand Engagement	6	0.91	Excellent Reliability

All constructs achieved Cronbach's Alpha values above the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). The Digital Brand Engagement scale demonstrated excellent

reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$), while Brand Strategic Capabilities ($\alpha = 0.89$) and Cultural Mediators ($\alpha = 0.87$) also performed strongly. These results confirm that the items within each construct

consistently measure the same underlying concept, supporting the use of composite indices in subsequent analyses.

Normality Tests

Normality of the composite variables was assessed using skewness, kurtosis, and the Shapiro–Wilk test.

Table 9: Normality Test Results for Composite Variables

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis	Shapiro–Wilk p	Interpretation
IV1 – Structural Enablers	-0.42	-0.31	.072	Normal
IV2 – Cultural Mediators	-0.55	-0.28	.064	Normal
IV3 – Brand Strategic Capabilities	-0.61	-0.35	.081	Normal
IV4 – AI-Mediated Engagement	-0.22	-0.47	.093	Normal
DV – Digital Brand Engagement	-0.48	-0.29	.057	Normal

All Shapiro–Wilk p-values exceed .05, indicating no significant deviation from normality. Skewness and kurtosis values fall within the acceptable range of –1 to +1 (George & Mallery, 2010). These results confirm that the data meet the normality assumptions required for Pearson correlation and linear regression.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation was used to examine the relationships between the study variables.

Table 10: Pearson Correlation Matrix for Study Variables (N = 60)

Variables	IV1	IV2	IV3	IV4	DV
IV1 – Structural Enablers	1	.62**	.58**	.41**	.55**
IV2 – Cultural Mediators	.62**	1	.71**	.48**	.69**
IV3 – Brand Strategic Capabilities	.58**	.71**	1	.52**	.73**
IV4 – AI-Mediated Engagement	.41**	.48**	.52**	1	.46**
DV – Digital Brand Engagement	.55**	.69**	.73**	.46**	1

All independent variables show positive and statistically significant correlations with Digital Brand Engagement. Brand Strategic Capabilities ($r = .73$) exhibit the strongest relationship, followed by Cultural Mediators ($r = .69$). Structural Enablers show a moderate correlation ($r = .55$), while AI-Mediated Engagement shows the weakest though still significant association ($r = .46$).

Inter-correlations among the independent variables range from .41 to .71, indicating meaningful theoretical overlap without reaching problematic multicollinearity levels ($r \geq .90$). The strongest inter-IV correlation is between Cultural Mediators and Brand Strategic Capabilities ($r =$

.71), reflecting the close interplay between cultural relevance and strategic communication in Kampala's digital environment.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 11: Model Summary — Multiple Regression Analysis

Statistic	Value
R	.82
R ²	.67
Adjusted R ²	.65
Standard Error of Estimate	0.41
F-Statistic	27.40
p-value	< .001

The model explains 67% of the variance in Digital Brand Engagement, indicating strong predictive power. The adjusted R^2 of .65

confirms that the model remains robust even after accounting for the number of predictors.

ANOVA for Regression Model

Table 12: ANOVA Results for Regression Model

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	18.72	4	4.68	27.40	< .001
Residual	9.18	55	0.17	—	—
Total	27.90	59	—	—	—

The ANOVA results confirm that the regression model is statistically significant ($F(4,55) = 27.40$, $p < .001$), meaning the predictors collectively explain a substantial portion of the variance in digital brand engagement.

Regression Coefficients

Table 13: Regression Coefficients — Determinants of Digital Brand Engagement

Predictor Variable	Unstd. B	Std. Beta (β)	t-value	Sig. (p)
Constant	0.42	—	2.11	.039
IV1 – Structural Enablers	0.18	.18*	2.21	.031
IV2 – Cultural Mediators	0.31	.29**	3.44	.001
IV3 – Brand Strategic Capabilities	0.44	.41***	5.12	< .001
IV4 – AI-Mediated Engagement	0.11	.12	1.66	.102

Brand Strategic Capabilities (IV3) emerge as the strongest predictor of Digital Brand Engagement, followed by Cultural Mediators (IV2). Structural Enablers (IV1) also contribute significantly, though to a lesser extent. AI-Mediated Engagement (IV4), while positively associated with engagement, does not significantly predict it when the other variables are controlled.

Relative Strength of Predictors

Table 14: Relative Strength of Predictors — Ranked by Standardised Beta

Determinant	Std. Beta (β)	Significance	Rank
IV3 – Brand Strategic Capabilities	.41	$p < .001$	1st — Strongest
IV2 – Cultural Mediators	.29	$p = .001$	2nd
IV1 – Structural Enablers	.18	$p = .031$	3rd
IV4 – AI-Mediated Engagement	.12	$p = .102$ (n.s.)	4th — Emerging

The ranking reveals a clear hierarchy: strategic and cultural factors exert the greatest influence on digital brand engagement, while structural and AI-mediated factors play secondary roles. This pattern underscores the importance of human-centered, culturally grounded brand communication in Kampala's digital ecosystem.

Discussion

Brand Strategic Capabilities as the Dominant Driver

Indeed, the result that Brand Strategic Capabilities predict Digital Brand Engagement best in Kampala ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) fits both within a solid theoretical framework and implies practical significance. Within the theoretical framework of S-O-R relations, brand strategy

can be viewed as one of the most direct and controllable stimuli used by brands to trigger consumer engagement responses. The superiority of Brand Strategic Capabilities over other independent variables such as Structural Capabilities and Organizational Culture indicates that when it comes to digital brand engagement, what matters for consumers in Kampala are the activities conducted by brands themselves: their ability to create relevant content, use influencers, personalize communication and connect with social movements.

In other words, this finding supports De Mooij's (2019) statement that adaptation to local market conditions via strategic actions is more important than simply being present on platforms. It also aligns with the notion of Marketing 5.0 suggested by Kotler et al. (2021), according to which brand strategy focusing on the relevance and responsiveness to customers' needs and concerns as well as having a clear purpose is the key element of consumer engagement in the digital space. In relation to Kampala, it is important to mention that the finding under analysis implies that brands working in this market have more agency over the outcome of digital brand engagement despite less-than-perfect conditions in terms of digital infrastructure and consumer culture.

Cultural Mediators: The Deep Engagement Driver

Cultural Mediators is the second strongest predictor of Digital Brand Engagement ($\beta = .29$, $p = .001$). The strong bivariate correlation of the dependent variable ($r = .69$) suggests cultural resonance as an especially powerful driver of the emotional and behavioural dimensions of engagement. The finding lends strong empirical support to the theoretical claims of Mbiti (1969) and Mungai and Ogot (2012) on the centrality of Ubuntu collectivism and communal identity in

shaping of African consumer behaviour. In the Kampala digital marketplace, consumers resonate most with brand content that speaks to them in their cultural language – literally and metaphorically – using local storytelling conventions, community references, trusted peer endorsements, and authentic expressions of Ugandan identity.

The high correlation between Cultural Mediators and Brand Strategic Capabilities ($r = .71$) shows that these two determinants are not independent influences, but are, in fact, very much intertwined: the most effective brand strategies in Kampala are those that are both strategically sophisticated and culturally rooted. The finding challenges the common practice of multi-national brands importing Western content templates for the Uganda market, and provides empirical justification for the significant investment in local content creation, local influencer partnerships and culturally co-created brand experiences that is increasingly evident among leading brands in Kampala's digital landscape.

Structural Enablers: Necessary but Insufficient

The finding that Structural Enablers are a statistically significant but relatively weak predictor of Digital Brand Engagement ($\beta = .18$, $p = .031$) captures a subtle and practically meaningful insight about the role of infrastructure in digital brand engagement. The near-universal ownership of smartphones (100%) and the strong presence of mobile-first platform users in the sample would indicate that the basic structural preconditions for digital engagement have already been largely met within the digitally active population of Kampala – the population that brands are competing to reach. In this context, the structural enablers are necessary but not sufficient conditions for engagement: they

enable digital interaction without providing the motivation for it or its depth.

This interpretation is in line with TAM's specification of perceived ease of use as a threshold condition for technology adoption: once ease of use is satisfactory, further improvements produce diminishing motivational returns and other factors - in particular the content and cultural relevance of brand communication - become more determining. The finding has important implications for brand investment priorities. In the current digital environment of Kampala, brands that invest resources solely into platform access and digital infrastructure improvement at the expense of content quality and cultural relevance are likely to achieve modest returns in engagement.

AI-Mediated Engagement: An Emerging but Nascent Force

The non-significance of the association between AI-Mediated Engagement as a multivariate predictor of Digital Brand Engagement ($\beta = .12$, $p = .102$) constitutes one of the most theoretically fascinating results of the present study. While on the level of bivariate regression analysis, AI-Mediated Engagement reveals itself as moderately correlated with the concept of Digital Brand Engagement ($r = .46$, $p < .01$), the absence of any significance on the multivariate level of analysis implies that the apparent association detected on the bivariate stage is being mainly mediated or suppressed by the common variance shared by this variable with other predictors (notably, Brand Strategic Capabilities and Cultural Mediators).

Such a result confirms the prediction made by Paschen et al. (2019), who argue that engagement technologies based on AI perform best when applied to consumers who have already developed high levels of digital literacy and familiarity with automated engagement.

The present study suggests that while the role of AI technologies may be considered pivotal in digital marketing practices in more developed contexts, in the case of Kampala, it can best be leveraged as an enabler of human-centred brand engagement strategy. Thus, this finding does not imply that AI is irrelevant for digital brand engagement in Uganda; rather, it implies the potential importance of AI as a facilitator of human-centred brand marketing strategy in the Ugandan context.

Conclusions

The current study has provided evidence-based support for a multidimensional model of drivers of digital brand engagement among the consumers of Kampala, Uganda. Based on an analysis of data obtained from a quantitative survey conducted among 60 adults who use digital platforms in all five regions of Kampala, the results indicate that predictors of Digital Brand Engagement include the following factors: Brand Strategic Capabilities ($\beta = .41$), Cultural Mediators ($\beta = .29$), Structural Enablers ($\beta = .18$), and AI-Mediated Engagement ($\beta = .12$). These four variables collectively accounted for 67% of the variance in Digital Brand Engagement (Adjusted $R^2 = .65$).

These results provide a strong rationale for adopting a model of digital brand engagement that focuses on the role of the consumer within the context of their own cultural setting. The digital consumer of Kampala is not defined by technological opportunities alone or by artificial intelligence capabilities; they are driven by brand engagement experiences that are strategic, culturally mediated, and socially authentic in terms of their fit into the community. This result has important consequences for the ways brands, marketing experts, policy-makers, and academic scholars consider digital engagement in the East African urban context.

Practical Implications

To brand managers and digital marketers within the Kampala context, these results present clear guidance on where efforts must be made in order to maximize engagement rates. It would be wise to invest in the production of content based on local culture — for example, using the Luganda language, incorporating cultural events, and portraying genuine representation of Ugandan life in their communication strategies. Partnership and collaboration with influencers who have cultural legitimacy are also highly recommended over focusing on follower count metrics. Purpose-oriented brand positioning that aligns brands to certain causes and principles relevant in Kampala can create high engagement levels. For AI and technology investments, the results show that AI-based tools should not be used as replacements but rather as enhancements to human-based brand strategies. Chatbots and automated replies can only engage people effectively when their output is personalized and culturally relevant.

Policy Implications

To the government agencies and regulatory bodies, such as the Uganda Communications Commission and NITA-U, these findings emphasize the need for policies aimed at reducing data costs and enhancing mobile broadband access in the country. Even if structure and its enablers do not appear to be the drivers of engagement, they remain a pre-requisite of participating in the market. Policies that will reduce the cost of accessing the internet in Uganda will allow more people to participate in online communities and engage with brands, thereby increasing the market size of online commerce.

The implications of the results for digital literacy programmes and entrepreneurship development initiatives are that such interventions need to focus on training brands and entrepreneurs to

create locally relevant content, engage influencers, and practice purposeful marketing rather than being limited to introducing brands and entrepreneurs to technology and teaching digital literacy. The success of Kampala brands on digital platforms is not related to their ability to master technology but rather to their ability to think strategically and culturally.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are several weaknesses that limit the validity and usefulness of the results of the current study and should be addressed by future research. First of all, although the sample size of 60 participants was analytically sufficient for the use of correlation and regression analyses, the sample remains rather small considering the target population of the study and does not reflect the variety of experiences with digital brand engagement in the city. Future researchers should use larger and probability samples to ensure more precise analysis. Secondly, due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, no causal conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between the selected determinants and the engagement variable under consideration.

A considerable limitation is also associated with the lack of representation of other regions of the city in the study sample because 81.6% of respondents lived in either Makindye or Central Division. In the future, studies should address the issue and conduct research with participation of residents of Kawempe, Rubaga, and Nakawa. In addition, further investigation is needed in the context of other East African urban centres including Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Kigali. Lastly, qualitative research is necessary for gaining deeper insights into the engagement process under examination.

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