



Mills Brand Marketing Communication Strategy in Increasing Brand Awareness Through Instagram Social Media

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received: July 18, 2026

Revised: September 04, 2026

Accepted: September 07, 2026

Available Online: October 13, 2026

Keywords:

Brand Awareness;

Instagram;

Marketing Communication

Strategy;

Mills



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Abstract

Background: This study analyzes Mills' marketing communication strategy in increasing brand awareness through Instagram social media.

Method: A qualitative case study design was employed because the research focuses on communication processes, strategic meanings, and audience engagement in a real-life digital context. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with key informants, observation of Mills' Instagram content, and documentation of posts, captions, visual elements, and audience interactions. The data were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, supported by source triangulation and member checking.

Results: The findings show that Mills uses Instagram as a strategic communication infrastructure by integrating structured content planning, consistent visual identity, influencer and athlete collaboration, active audience interaction, and performance-based evaluation. These elements strengthen brand awareness by increasing repeated exposure, reinforcing recognition, supporting recall, and building associative positioning in the sports apparel market.

Conclusion: The study provides practical benefits for sports apparel brands that need to manage digital communication consistently and theoretical benefits for integrated marketing communication studies in social media environments.

To cite this article: Abdul Faqih Sahid. (2026). Mills Brand Marketing Communication Strategy in Increasing Brand Awareness Through Instagram Social Media. *Equivalent: Jurnal Ilmiah Sosial Teknik*, 8(4), 1685-1697. <https://doi.org/10.59261/jequi.v8i4.420>

INTRODUCTION

The integration of digital technologies has transformed marketing communication. Social media platforms enable direct audience interaction and coordinated messaging (Kotler et al., 2022; Kotler & Keller, 2016). The rapid development of digital technology has transformed marketing communication practices, particularly through the emergence of social media as a dominant communication channel. Platforms such as Instagram enable companies to interact directly with audiences, produce more dynamic messages, and build participatory communication environments. In this context, social media is no longer limited to information dissemination; it functions as a strategic space where consumers encounter brand narratives, evaluate visual identity, respond to promotional messages, and participate in communication through likes, comments, shares, stories, and direct messages. These characteristics make social media a central medium for contemporary marketing communication because it allows brands to inform, persuade, remind, and interact with audiences in the same communication ecosystem (Abbas, et al., 2021; Yuefei et al., 2024).

Instagram is especially relevant for brands operating in markets that rely on visual identity and lifestyle representation. The platform provides a combination of feed posts, reels, 1685 | Equivalent: Jurnal Ilmiah Sosial Teknik

stories, live sessions, captions, and interactive features that enable brands to deliver messages in both visual and narrative forms. For sports apparel brands, Instagram offers the opportunity to present products not merely as functional clothing, but also as symbols of performance, team identity, national pride, lifestyle, and consumer aspiration. The effectiveness of such communication depends on whether the brand is able to maintain message consistency, visual coherence, and interaction quality across different content formats ([Bulmer et al., 2024](#); [Wibowo et al., 2024](#)).

Within this digital environment, brand awareness becomes a fundamental objective of marketing communication strategy. Brand awareness refers to the extent to which consumers can recognize and recall a brand in a particular category. Recognition occurs when audiences are able to identify a brand after being exposed to its name, logo, product, or visual cues, while recall occurs when the brand comes to mind when consumers think about a product category or consumption situation. Social media can support both processes because audiences repeatedly encounter brand-related content through their timelines, algorithmic recommendations, influencer posts, and interactions with other users ([Aaker, 1996](#); [Efendioğlu & Durmaz, 2022](#)).

Previous studies have shown that social media marketing activities contribute to consumer response, brand equity, and purchase intention in apparel and other consumer markets. Abbas et al. ([2021](#)) and Yuefei et al. ([2024](#)), for example, indicate that social media marketing activities influence consumer responses through brand equity. Efendioğlu and Durmaz ([2022](#)) show that social media advertising perception influences advertising value, brand awareness, and brand association. Other studies emphasize that Instagram communication can build awareness through content marketing, storytelling, endorsement, and audience engagement ([Prasojo & Aliami, 2024](#); [Rahardani & Sanjaya, 2022](#); [Wibowo et al., 2024](#)). These findings suggest that social media is not merely a promotional tool, but an important strategic component in the formation of brand meaning. Studies on consumer reach and social media content also indicate that audience feedback, brand image, and continuous digital exposure can support awareness development in younger and digitally active markets ([Vinay, 2023](#); [Wasik et al., 2025](#); [Zanuarizqi et al., 2025](#)).

However, many previous studies tend to examine communication elements separately. Some studies focus on content marketing, while others discuss influencer collaboration, audience engagement, platform features, or advertising perception. This fragmented approach provides important insights, but it does not fully explain how these elements interact as a coordinated communication system. In practice, brands do not build awareness through one element alone. Awareness is formed through the cumulative interaction of strategic planning, media selection, message consistency, visual identity, endorsement, engagement, and evaluation. Therefore, an integrated marketing communication perspective is needed to understand how social media strategies systematically support brand awareness formation ([Butkouskaya et al., 2024](#); [Kalogiannidis et al., 2022](#); [Nabila & Wibowo, 2022](#)).

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) emphasizes the coordination of messages across communication channels to create a unified brand image. In digital communication, IMC becomes increasingly important because audiences encounter brand messages through many touchpoints at the same time. Message inconsistency may weaken brand identity, while consistent and coordinated communication can strengthen brand associations and audience perception. IMC also highlights the importance of aligning communication objectives with audience targeting, content planning, media usage, and evaluation mechanisms. In other words, IMC is not only about using many channels, but about ensuring that every communication element supports the same strategic direction ([Butkouskaya et al., 2024](#); [Palevska, 2023](#)).

The sports apparel industry provides a relevant context for examining these issues because competition in this sector is increasingly shaped by digital visibility, brand community, and consumer engagement. Sports apparel brands must communicate product quality, performance value, emotional identity, and social relevance. A brand that succeeds in maintaining digital visibility may become more familiar to audiences, but visibility alone is not sufficient. The brand also needs to establish distinctive visual codes, consistent messages, credible associations, and active interaction so that audiences can recognize the brand and associate it with a particular category or lifestyle ([Pertiwi & Sigit, 2024](#); [Wasik et al., 2025](#)).

The sports apparel market also has a strong symbolic dimension. Consumers do not

evaluate sportswear only through material quality, price, or availability; they also interpret the brand as part of their lifestyle, team identity, athletic aspiration, and social belonging. On Instagram, these symbolic meanings are shaped through repeated visual encounters. Product images, athlete appearances, campaign messages, comment interactions, and reposted user activities gradually construct a brand image that may be remembered even before consumers make a purchase. For this reason, the communication strategy of a sports apparel brand needs to combine functional product information with emotional and social cues that are relevant to the audience. This symbolic dimension is also connected to brand experience, brand attitude, and electronic word-of-mouth processes, which influence how consumers interpret brand messages in social networking environments (Ayu & Nasir, 2024; Pourkabirian et al., 2023).

For national brands, this challenge becomes more complex because they must compete with global brands that already have strong recognition, international athlete endorsements, and long-established brand communities. Local or national sports apparel brands therefore need to use digital media strategically to create visibility, credibility, and distinctiveness. Instagram can help reduce this gap because it allows a brand to appear frequently in the audience's daily media environment, communicate directly with followers, and connect products with moments of sports enthusiasm. However, frequent posting alone does not automatically create brand awareness. Awareness is more likely to emerge when digital communication is planned consistently, when visual identity remains recognizable, and when collaboration choices support the desired brand association.

This context strengthens the research gap addressed in this study. Previous studies have discussed social media marketing, endorsement, and brand awareness, but fewer studies have explained how a national sports apparel brand integrates those elements within the same Instagram communication system. A qualitative case study is therefore useful because it can show how strategic planning, content categories, visual repetition, collaboration, engagement, and evaluation operate together in everyday brand communication. By focusing on Mills, this study seeks to provide a contextual explanation of how brand awareness is built through coordinated Instagram practices rather than through isolated promotional actions. Related studies on marketing communication practice further show that communication programs need to be read through strategic coordination, not only through isolated promotional actions (Amin & Priansah, 2019; Andriani et al., 2023).

Mills is a national sports apparel brand that actively uses Instagram as a primary communication channel. The brand's Instagram activities include product-focused content, campaign information, athlete and influencer collaborations, interactive features, and visual storytelling. These activities provide an appropriate case for exploring how a local or national sports apparel brand manages Instagram communication to strengthen brand awareness. The case is also important because sports apparel brands face strong competition from both global brands and local competitors. Therefore, understanding how Mills constructs awareness through Instagram can offer practical insights for brand managers and theoretical insights for digital marketing communication scholarship.

The research problem addressed in this article is how Mills implements marketing communication strategies through Instagram to increase brand awareness. The study is guided by the assumption that brand awareness is not built through isolated promotional activities, but through an integrated communication process. The analysis therefore focuses on the relationship between platform utilization, content planning, visual identity, influencer collaboration, audience engagement, and performance evaluation. By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to explain how Instagram functions as a strategic communication ecosystem for brand awareness formation.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated perspective. Instead of treating Instagram content, endorsement, engagement, and evaluation as separate variables, this article organizes them into a coherent framework of Instagram-based marketing communication. The study contributes theoretically by enriching the literature on IMC and social media marketing in the context of brand awareness. It contributes practically by offering recommendations for brands that aim to build awareness through consistent and adaptive social media management.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with an exploratory case study design. The qualitative approach was selected because the research seeks to understand communication processes, meanings, and strategic practices in a real-life digital context rather than to measure variables statistically. A case study design is appropriate because the research focuses on a specific case, namely the marketing communication strategy of Mills through Instagram. This design allows the researcher to explore how strategic communication elements are planned, executed, evaluated, and interpreted within the brand's digital communication environment (Lim, 2025; Salim & Syahrurum, 2012). Recent qualitative methodology literature also emphasizes that case-based inquiry is useful for evaluating, refining, and expanding theory when the research object involves contextual and process-oriented phenomena (Abidin et al., 2023; Fife & Gossner, 2024).

The research object is Mills' Instagram account as a communication channel used to build brand awareness. The selection of this object was based on the brand's active use of Instagram features, including feed posts, reels, stories, live sessions, and direct interaction with audiences. Mills was also selected because it represents a national sports apparel brand that needs to compete in a digital market characterized by high visual exposure and strong brand competition. The object is therefore relevant for examining how social media communication supports recognition, recall, and associative positioning in the sports apparel industry.

The subjects of the study were selected using purposive sampling. Informants consisted of key individuals who were directly involved in Mills' marketing communication activities, including the Head of Brand Activation and the Marketing Manager. Supporting perspectives were also obtained from audiences or consumers who followed Mills' Instagram account. These informants were selected because they possessed relevant knowledge, professional responsibility, experience, and understanding of the brand's communication practices. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the data came from individuals who could provide rich and relevant information about the research focus (Saraan et al., 2025). The study involved 8 informants: 2 managers (Head of Brand Activation, Digital Marketing Manager) and 6 consumer informants (age 18-35, regular Instagram engagement minimum 3 posts/month, familiarity with Mills ≥ 6 months).

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews. The interviews were used to explore strategic objectives, content planning, message development, platform management, collaboration decisions, audience engagement practices, and evaluation mechanisms. Secondary data were collected through observation of Instagram content and documentation. Observation focused on feed posts, reels, stories, captions, visual identity, interaction patterns, and the use of Instagram features. Documentation included archived content, screenshots of interactions, campaign materials, and relevant supporting literature. The combination of these techniques enabled the study to capture both managerial perspectives and observable communication practices.

The interview procedure was semi-structured. The questions were organized around several themes: communication objectives, target audience, content planning, Instagram feature selection, visual identity management, collaboration with athletes or influencers, engagement practices, and evaluation indicators. This format allowed the researcher to maintain consistency across informants while still giving space for additional explanations that emerged during the interviews. The managerial informants were asked to describe not only what strategies were used, but also why those strategies were selected and how they were evaluated in practice.

Instagram observation was conducted by examining visible communication patterns rather than by focusing on isolated posts. The observation emphasized recurring content categories, consistency of visual elements, caption style, use of platform features, audience interaction patterns, and the presence of athlete or influencer collaborations. The observed materials were then grouped into thematic categories so that the analysis could identify how each content type contributed to brand exposure, recognition, and category association. Publicly available Instagram content was treated as documentation of brand communication practice, while interview data were used to clarify the strategic reasoning behind those observable practices. Observation period: January-June 2024 (6 months). Stratified sampling of 150 posts by

content type: product-focused (n=45), athlete/influencer collaboration (n=45), lifestyle/brand story (n=40), user-generated content (n=20).

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was conducted by selecting and focusing interview, observation, and documentation data that were relevant to the research question. Data display was conducted through narrative descriptions, thematic organization, tables, and visual mapping. Conclusions were drawn by identifying patterns related to strategic platform utilization, content categorization, visual consistency, influencer collaboration, audience engagement, and performance evaluation. The interpretation was then linked to marketing communication, IMC, social media marketing, and brand awareness concepts (Miles et al., 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

To ensure credibility, this study applied source triangulation by comparing interview findings with Instagram observation and documentation. Member checking was conducted by confirming relevant interpretations with informants to reduce misunderstanding and improve accuracy. Prolonged engagement with the research object was also carried out through continuous observation of Instagram activities. These procedures were used to improve the trustworthiness of the findings and to ensure that the analysis reflected the actual communication context.

Triangulation was carried out by comparing three forms of evidence. First, interview data were used to identify managerial explanations regarding planning and evaluation. Second, Instagram observation was used to examine whether those explanations were reflected in visible content practices. Third, documentation was used to support the analysis through archived posts, campaign materials, captions, and interaction evidence. When the same pattern appeared across these sources, it was treated as a stronger finding. When a pattern appeared only in one source, it was interpreted more cautiously and presented with qualifying language.

The analysis also considered the limitation of using social media metrics as evidence. Engagement rate, reach, impressions, and follower growth are useful for understanding exposure and interaction, but they do not fully represent internal consumer awareness. Therefore, these metrics were not treated as direct proof of brand awareness in a psychological sense. Instead, they were interpreted as indicators of communication visibility and audience response that can support awareness formation when combined with consistent visual identity and repeated message exposure. This cautious interpretation helps maintain objectivity in presenting qualitative findings.

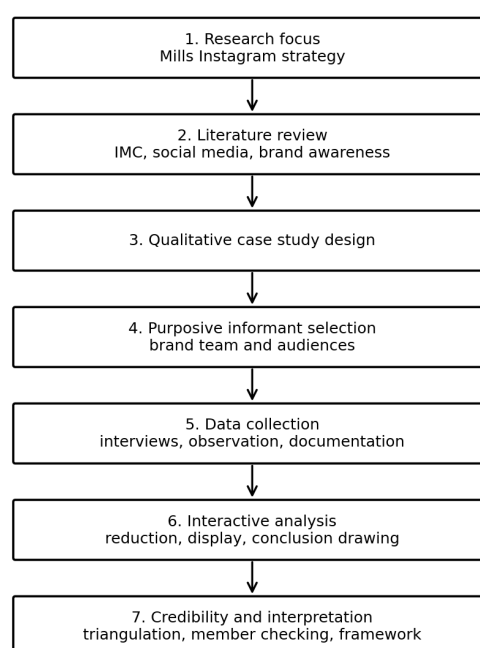


Figure 1. Research Flow

Figure 1 illustrates the research flow from the formulation of the research focus to the interpretation of findings. The flow begins with the identification of Mills' Instagram communication strategy as the research focus, followed by literature review, case study design, purposive informant selection, data collection, data reduction and display, triangulation, and conclusion drawing. The diagram is included to meet the requirement that the method section presents a research flow diagram.

Table 1*Data Sources and Collection Techniques*

Data Source	Technique	Analytical Focus	Purpose
Head of Brand Activation and Marketing Manager Mills Instagram account	In-depth interviews Observation	Strategy, planning, message consistency, collaboration, evaluation Feed, reels, stories, captions, visual identity, engagement patterns	To obtain managerial explanations of marketing communication practices To identify how strategy appears in observable content
Campaign materials and archived content	Documentation	Screenshots, archived posts, interaction evidence, supporting files	To support and verify interview and observation findings
Relevant literature	Literature review	IMC, social media marketing, brand awareness, qualitative method	To connect empirical findings with theoretical concepts

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**Results*****Instagram as a Coordinated Communication Hub***

Across interview and observation data, Instagram emerged as the main communication hub used by Mills. Rather than relying on one feature only, the brand combines feed posts, reels, stories, live sessions, and direct interaction to keep communication continuous. Feed posts are primarily used to display products and maintain a stable visual identity, while reels and stories are used for more dynamic updates, campaign visibility, and audience interaction.

This pattern is closely linked to planned communication routines. The Head of Brand Activation explained that "consistency in posting and visual alignment is deliberately maintained to ensure audience familiarity with the brand identity" (Head of Brand Activation, interview). Observation data also show that posting is scheduled through a monthly editorial calendar and distributed at engagement-relevant times. These findings indicate that Instagram is treated as a managed communication environment rather than a space for incidental posting.

A more detailed reading of the data shows that the editorial calendar functions as a control mechanism. It helps the brand decide which content should appear as product information, which content should support a campaign, and which content should be used to stimulate interaction. This arrangement reduces the possibility of fragmented communication because each post is linked to a broader communication plan. In observation, the same logic can be seen in the way product visuals, campaign captions, and interactive features appear in a repeated but not identical pattern.

The main contribution of this theme is repeated exposure. By appearing regularly through multiple Instagram features, Mills maintains familiarity with its name, product visuals, and communication style. The key evidence for this first theme is summarized in Table 2.

In short, the first theme shows that Instagram serves as the communication base from which other strategic practices are carried out.

Consistent Content Categories Reinforce Recognition

The second theme concerns how Mills organizes its content. Observation and documentation show four recurring content categories: product-focused posts, campaign-related

information, collaborative posts, and interactive content. Product posts typically display apparel items and usage contexts. Campaign posts connect products with events or brand messages. Collaborative posts feature athletes or relevant public figures, while interactive content invites audiences to respond through comments, polls, or reposts.

For example, product-focused posts tend to emphasize the visibility of jerseys, apparel details, and usage situations. Campaign posts tend to connect the product with a particular message, event, or sporting moment. Collaborative posts usually place the product together with athletes or public figures, while interactive content invites audiences to participate through responses, reposts, or short-form engagement. These examples show that content categories are not random; they serve different communication functions while remaining connected to the same brand identity.

Although the categories differ, their presentation remains visually and thematically consistent. Bright color tones, product-centered layouts, and sports-related imagery appear repeatedly across posts. This consistency makes the content recognizable even when the format changes. In practical terms, audiences encounter similar visual cues across feed posts, reels, and stories, which supports recognition of the brand.

A small negative case also appears in this theme. Not all content categories seem to generate the same level of response. Standard product catalog posts tend to be more informational, whereas collaborative or interactive posts tend to attract stronger attention. However, the more routine product posts still play an important role because they preserve product visibility and maintain visual continuity.

Overall, the second theme indicates that brand recognition is supported not by content variety alone, but by the consistency that links those content categories. Table 2 presents a concise summary of these observations.

Athlete Collaboration Strengthens Category Association

The third theme concerns the role of collaboration with athletes and other relevant public figures. Interview data and observed posts indicate that collaboration is used to expand reach and to place the brand within a clear sports context. Collaborative posts do not only show the product; they also connect the product with athletic performance, sports routines, and credible users. This pattern is in line with digital endorsement logic in which relevant public figures can increase visibility and strengthen message credibility (Amin & Priansah, 2019; Andriani et al., 2023).

Observation data suggest that posts featuring athletes tend to attract more visible interaction than standard catalog posts. Informants also reported that athlete-related content usually receives stronger audience attention and is useful for campaign refinement. This does not mean that collaboration replaces other content types. Instead, it works alongside regular product and campaign content.

This pattern was also reflected in the way informants discussed performance review. The Marketing Manager indicated that athlete-related content is often used as a reference for future campaign planning because it tends to create stronger interaction than ordinary catalog content. The statement is important because it shows that collaboration is not evaluated only as a branding accessory. It becomes part of a learning process in which the brand identifies what type of content attracts attention and what type of association strengthens the brand's position.

The main descriptive pattern in this theme is category association. Through athlete collaboration, Mills becomes easier to associate with sports performance and professional sporting environments. This makes the brand more salient within the sports apparel category because the audience encounters the brand together with category-relevant figures.

Thus, the third theme shows that collaboration functions as evidence-based positioning support, not merely as decorative endorsement.

Performance Metrics Guide Adaptive Adjustment

The fourth theme relates to how Mills evaluates its Instagram activities. Interview data indicate that the brand regularly reviews engagement rate, reach, impressions, and follower growth through Instagram insights. These indicators are used to compare the performance of different posts, identify which formats attract attention, and support decisions about future

content planning Such evaluation is consistent with digital marketing communication studies that position audience response data as a basis for strategic refinement (Rizaldi et al., 2021; Rizaldi & Hidayat, 2020; Nabila & Wibowo, 2022).

A consistent pattern across the data is that athlete-related or campaign-based posts are seen as generating stronger interaction than standard product catalog posts. This comparative reading of metrics becomes one basis for adjustment. At the same time, the data also show an important boundary: engagement metrics primarily capture exposure and interaction, not the full psychological depth of brand awareness. Therefore, the brand uses them as practical indicators rather than as complete measures of consumer recall.

The negative case in this section is important for understanding the complexity of brand awareness. Product catalog posts may not always produce the highest interaction, but they provide repeated visibility of the product and maintain the audience's familiarity with the brand's visual identity. In contrast, collaborative posts may create stronger attention but require relevance and credibility to support long-term brand meaning. The findings therefore suggest that Mills needs both types of content: routine content for continuity and collaborative content for salience.

The relationship among the four themes can be read as a cycle. Planning determines how Instagram features are used. Content categories translate the plan into visible messages. Collaboration adds credibility and category relevance. Performance metrics then provide feedback for the next planning cycle. This cyclical pattern explains why Instagram communication in this case is better understood as an adaptive system rather than a one-way promotional channel.

The evaluative process shows that Mills does not stop at publishing content. Instead, audience response is monitored and fed back into subsequent planning. In this sense, evaluation is part of the strategy cycle, not an activity carried out only after the campaign ends.

Taken together, the four themes suggest that brand awareness is built through an interaction between platform use, content consistency, category association, and adaptive review. Table 2 summarises these themes and their representative evidence.

Table 2
Themes, Evidence, and Contribution to Brand Awareness

Theme	Evidence	Contribution
Instagram hub	Feed, reels, stories, live, and direct interaction are managed through an editorial calendar.	Sustains exposure and familiarity.
Consistent content	Product, campaign, collaboration, and interactive posts use repeated visual cues.	Strengthens recognition.
Athlete collaboration	Athlete-related posts attract stronger attention than standard catalog posts.	Builds sports-category association.
Performance review	Engagement, reach, impressions, and follower growth guide planning.	Improves relevance and interaction.
Negative case	Catalog posts are less interaction-heavy but preserve visual continuity.	Shows supportive value of routine content.

Discussion

This study asked how Mills uses Instagram to build brand awareness. The results show that the answer lies in the integration of four practices: Instagram is treated as a communication hub, content is organized into consistent categories, athlete collaboration builds category association, and evaluation guides adaptation. Figure 2 synthesizes these relationships into an integrated framework.

These findings support the integrated marketing communication perspective. IMC emphasizes that communication effectiveness depends on consistency across message design, media use, and audience orientation. In the present study, the integration does not primarily occur across many platforms; it occurs within one platform that contains multiple features and interaction spaces. This extends earlier IMC discussions by showing that feed posts, reels, stories,

live sessions, and direct interactions can operate as a coordinated communication system when they are guided by the same brand logic (Butkouskaya et al., 2024; Kalogiannidis et al., 2022; Palevska, 2023). From a marketing management perspective, the coordination of message, media, audience, and evaluation reflects the broader requirement that brand communication be managed as a strategic system (Kotler et al., 2022; Kotler & Keller, 2016).

The findings also align with Aaker, (1996) and Efendioğlu & Durmaz (2022) view that brand awareness involves recognition and recall. Repeated product visibility and stable visual cues support recognition, while collaboration with athletes and recurring sports associations strengthen recall within the sports apparel category. In this sense, awareness is not produced by a single message, but by cumulative encounters that connect visual identity, relevance, and familiarity.

Compared with previous research, the present study confirms the importance of content consistency, endorsement, and audience engagement, but it also addresses a gap in the literature. Earlier studies often isolated these elements by examining content marketing, endorsement, or platform interaction separately (Abbas, et al., 2021; Efendioğlu & Durmaz, 2022; Rahardani & Sanjaya, 2022). The current findings suggest that these elements are more meaningful when read as an interconnected process. Table 3 clarifies how each empirical theme connects to theory and practical implications.

The results also provide a more nuanced view of Instagram performance. Not all posts appear to contribute in the same way. Routine product posts may generate less visible interaction than collaborative posts, yet they remain important because they sustain visibility and reinforce visual continuity. This negative case is important because it shows that lower-interaction content is not necessarily ineffective; its role may be supportive rather than attention-maximizing.

Practically, the findings suggest that brand managers should evaluate Instagram not only by output volume or follower growth, but by the interaction among platform use, content structure, collaboration, and feedback loops. For local or national brands such as Mills, this means that competitive advantage in social media can be developed through disciplined consistency, relevant collaborations, and adaptive planning rather than through promotional intensity alone.

Theoretical implications can be drawn from the way this study positions Instagram as a site of internal integration. IMC is often explained as coordination across several media channels, such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion, and digital media. The present findings suggest that integration is also needed within one platform because Instagram itself contains different communication spaces. A feed post, a reel, a story, a live session, and a direct message do not operate in the same way. Each format has its own rhythm, audience expectation, and communicative function. When these formats are connected by the same strategic direction, they can collectively support brand awareness.

The study also contributes to the discussion of brand awareness by showing that recognition and recall are supported by different but connected practices. Recognition is strengthened through repeated exposure to visual cues, product-centered content, color tone, and layout consistency. Recall is strengthened when the brand is repeatedly associated with a specific category, such as sports performance, athlete credibility, or national sports identity. This distinction is useful because a brand may be visible without being strongly associated with a category. For Mills, the combination of visual continuity and athlete-related association helps connect visibility with category meaning.

The practical implication for social media managers is that content evaluation should be multidimensional. A post with high interaction may be valuable for reach and salience, but a lower-interaction post may still be valuable for continuity and recognition. Therefore, brands should not eliminate routine product posts only because they generate fewer visible responses. Instead, they should define the role of each content type within the broader communication system. Product posts maintain visibility, campaign posts create narrative direction, collaborative posts increase category relevance, and interactive posts strengthen audience participation.

For local or national sports apparel brands, the findings also suggest the importance of selecting collaboration partners carefully. Collaboration should not be based only on popularity or follower count. It should be based on compatibility between the collaborator's public image and the brand's desired association. In the sports apparel category, athletes and sport-related

figures are particularly relevant because they provide contextual credibility. This type of fit can help audiences connect the brand with performance and sporting identity rather than seeing the collaboration as a disconnected promotional activity.

The integrated framework developed in this study therefore contributes both conceptually and practically. Conceptually, it shows that a single social media platform can contain a full communication system when its features are coordinated. Practically, it provides a basis for planning content calendars, selecting collaboration partners, maintaining visual guidelines, and reviewing performance indicators in a more strategic way.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of combining interview data with platform observation. Interviews explain the intention behind communication practices, while observation shows how those intentions appear in visible content. This combination is important in social media research because a brand's stated strategy may not always be fully reflected in its actual posts. By comparing managerial explanations with Instagram documentation, the study provides a more balanced account of how strategy is planned and practiced.

Another practical implication concerns organizational consistency. Social media teams often divide tasks between content planners, designers, copywriters, campaign managers, and performance analysts. The findings suggest that these roles should not work in isolation. Visual guidelines, campaign messages, collaboration choices, and evaluation reports need to be shared across the team so that each post contributes to the same awareness objective. This coordination is especially important for brands that post frequently, because high posting intensity can easily produce inconsistency when it is not guided by a shared communication framework.

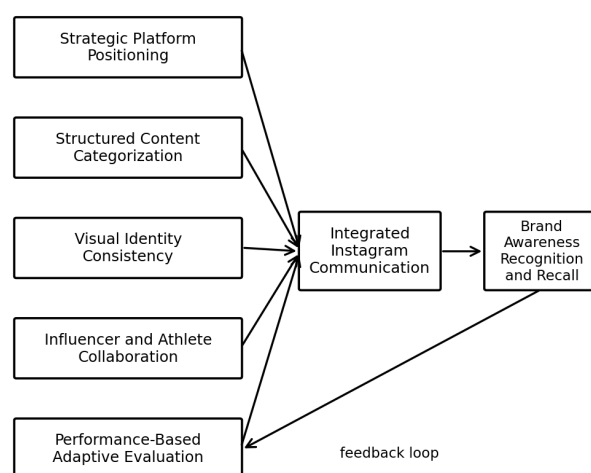


Figure 2. Integrated Instagram Marketing Communication Framework

Figure 2 presents the integrated framework proposed by this study. The framework positions Instagram communication as an interconnected system in which platform strategy, content structure, visual identity, collaboration, and evaluation jointly contribute to brand awareness. The feedback arrow indicates that audience response and exposure indicators should inform future communication planning.

Table 3

Linking Findings to Theory and Practice

Finding	Concept	Interpretation	Practical implication
Instagram hub	IMC	Platform features work as one communication system.	Plan timing, features, and interaction together.
Content categories	Message strategy	Content variety is effective when tied to stable identity.	Balance variety with consistency.
Visual consistency	Brand awareness	Repeated cues support recognition.	Maintain visual guidelines across formats.

Finding	Concept	Interpretation	Practical implication
Athlete collaboration	Associative positioning	Relevant figures connect the brand with sports meaning.	Choose partners that fit the category.
Performance review	Adaptive communication	Metrics provide feedback for content refinement.	Use evaluation for future message design.

This study still has several limitations. It focuses on one brand and two main managerial informants, so the findings are context-bound. The qualitative design also emphasizes interpretive understanding rather than numerical measurement of awareness. In addition, Instagram metrics reflect observable interaction more directly than internal recall processes.

Future research can compare several sports apparel brands, involve more audience perspectives, or combine qualitative interpretation with quantitative brand awareness measurement. Such studies would help test whether the integrated framework identified here also operates in other digital brand contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Mills' marketing communication strategy through Instagram is systematically planned, integrated, and consistently implemented to enhance brand awareness. Instagram is used not merely as a promotional platform, but as a strategic communication infrastructure that supports repeated exposure, audience interaction, message delivery, and performance evaluation. The strategy is implemented through structured content planning, visual identity consistency, influencer and athlete collaboration, and adaptive evaluation based on Instagram insights.

The findings indicate that consistent messaging and visual identity contribute to brand recognition, while athlete collaboration and platform interaction strengthen associative positioning and brand salience. Brand awareness is therefore formed through a synergistic process rather than a single communication activity. The coordination between platform utilization, message structuring, visual coherence, collaboration, and evaluation creates a comprehensive communication system that supports recognition and recall in the competitive sports apparel market. Theoretically, this study contributes to digital marketing communication literature by proposing an integrated Instagram marketing communication framework for brand awareness formation. The framework shows that social media communication should be understood as a system of interconnected dimensions rather than isolated tactics. Practically, the findings suggest that brands should manage Instagram through clear planning, consistent visual identity, relevant collaboration, active engagement, and regular performance review. Future studies are encouraged to test this framework quantitatively, compare different brands, and examine how audience-generated content influences brand awareness over time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to Universitas Bina Nusantara for providing academic support, research facilities, and an environment that contributed to the completion of this study. The author also acknowledges the valuable support from all parties who provided information, insights, and assistance during the research process, particularly those involved in the exploration of Mills Brand's marketing communication strategy through Instagram social media. Their contributions and support have been instrumental in completing this research.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Abdul Faqih Sahid contributed to all stages of this research, including conceptualization, research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, manuscript preparation, critical revision, and final approval of the article. The author is responsible for the content and integrity of this work.

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