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**THEORETICAL INSIGHTS ON INFLUENCER MARKETING AND
TRUST REBUILDING**

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<i>Keywords</i>	<i>Abstract</i>
<i>Influencer Marketing, Trust Rebuilding, Social Exchange Theory, Source Credibility, Digital Marketing, Consumer Trust, Conceptual Framework.</i>	Influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant tool in digital marketing, capable of shaping consumer perceptions and rebuilding trust in brands facing reputational challenges. Drawing upon theories such as Social Exchange Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and Trust Transfer Theory, this paper provides conceptual insights into how influencer marketing fosters consumer trust. The study highlights the mechanisms by which influencers act as intermediaries between brands and audiences, emphasizing authenticity, transparency, and relational engagement. A conceptual framework is developed to explain the trust-rebuilding process, followed by the identification of effective marketing techniques that leverage influencer credibility to restore consumer confidence.

Introduction

Trust is one of the most fundamental components of any exchange relationship between consumers and brands. In marketing theory, trust functions as a social currency that not only reduces perceived



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risk but also strengthens long-term loyalty and enhances consumer willingness to engage in repeated transactions. However, in the age of globalization, digital connectivity, and real-time information sharing, brands are increasingly vulnerable to reputational damage. Scandals, misinformation, unethical practices, or even negative consumer experiences can severely erode brand trust. When trust is broken, rebuilding it becomes a complex challenge that requires not only traditional public relations strategies but also innovative marketing approaches grounded in theoretical insight. One of the most prominent strategies that has gained momentum in recent years is **influencer marketing**.

Influencer marketing is broadly understood as a form of social media-based marketing that leverages the popularity, credibility, and persuasive ability of individuals who have established loyal followings on digital platforms. Unlike celebrities of traditional media, influencers cultivate close parasocial relationships with their audiences, often based on relatability, authenticity, and shared interests. This makes them more approachable and trustworthy in the eyes of consumers. From a theoretical standpoint, influencer marketing draws heavily on the **Source Credibility Theory**, which posits that the effectiveness of a communication source depends on three dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Applied in the digital context, these dimensions explain why influencers are often perceived as more authentic and persuasive than corporate communication channels.

The rise of influencer marketing also aligns with **Social Exchange Theory**, which suggests that consumer-brand relationships are based on a cost-benefit evaluation. Consumers are more likely to accept marketing messages when the perceived benefits—such as trustworthy information, entertainment, or relatable recommendations—outweigh the costs, such as skepticism or monetary risk. Influencers function as intermediaries who reduce these perceived risks by offering content that resonates with audiences' values and lifestyles. Similarly, **Trust Transfer Theory** provides further insight into this process, explaining how the trust consumers place in influencers can be transferred to the brands they endorse. This trust transfer mechanism is particularly valuable in scenarios where a brand has lost credibility due to a reputational crisis.

The erosion of consumer trust is not a new phenomenon in marketing. Literature on corporate reputation and crisis management highlights that once consumer trust is broken, it is difficult to regain. Traditional tools such as corporate apologies, public relations campaigns, and advertising efforts have been moderately effective, but they often lack the authenticity that modern consumers demand. Today's consumers, particularly millennials and Gen Z, are skeptical of corporate messaging but are more willing to engage with individuals who they perceive as genuine and authentic. This cultural shift highlights the theoretical relevance of **Parasocial Interaction Theory**, which explains the one-sided psychological relationships audiences develop with media figures. These parasocial bonds enhance the credibility of influencers and give them a unique ability to mediate between skeptical consumers and brands in need of trust repair.



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Another important dimension in the theoretical discussion of influencer marketing is the role of **digital community and social proof**. Concepts from network theory and social psychology suggest that individuals rely heavily on peer opinions and observed behaviors when making decisions, a phenomenon known as social proof. Influencers act as both opinion leaders and peer role models, providing endorsements that audiences interpret as credible forms of social validation. When strategically aligned, this mechanism enables influencers to rebuild consumer trust by reframing brand narratives in more relatable and socially acceptable terms.

Despite its growing importance, influencer marketing in the context of trust rebuilding is still underexplored in theoretical literature. Much of the existing research focuses on its effectiveness in consumer engagement, purchase intention, or brand awareness, but fewer studies examine its role in repairing damaged reputations. This gap creates an opportunity for a conceptual exploration of how influencer marketing strategies, supported by established theories, can be systematically applied in situations of trust erosion. Furthermore, influencer marketing is not without challenges: issues of transparency, ethical concerns, and over-commercialization can threaten the very trust that influencers are supposed to rebuild. Regulatory frameworks now require influencers to disclose paid partnerships, emphasizing the delicate balance between authenticity and commercial intent.

In summary, the introduction of influencer marketing as a tool for trust rebuilding brings together several streams of theoretical thought: source credibility, social exchange, trust transfer, parasocial interactions, and social proof. Each of these theories contributes to understanding how influencers mediate trust between brands and consumers in the digital environment. By conceptualizing influencer marketing through these theoretical lenses, this study aims to shed light on its unique potential to restore consumer trust and strengthen brand reputation. The growing reliance on influencers in contemporary marketing demonstrates a paradigm shift in how brands approach trust repair, signaling a move away from corporate-centric communication toward human-centered and relational strategies. This paper, therefore, contributes to the theoretical understanding of influencer marketing not merely as a promotional tool, but as a strategic mechanism for rebuilding one of the most valuable assets in business: consumer trust.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to:

1. Explore the theoretical foundations of influencer marketing in the context of trust rebuilding.
2. Develop a conceptual framework that explains the relationship between influencer credibility, consumer perception, and trust restoration.
3. Identify effective influencer marketing techniques that help brands repair and strengthen consumer trust after reputational setbacks.



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Conceptual Framework

Core Theoretical Foundations:

- **Source Credibility Theory** → Consumers trust influencers based on expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness.
- **Social Exchange Theory** → Consumers evaluate the value of engaging with influencer content versus the risks.
- **Trust Transfer Theory** → Trust in influencers is transferred to the brand they endorse.
- **Parasocial Interaction Theory** → Consumers feel a “friend-like” bond with influencers, strengthening trust.

Framework Flow:

1. **Influencer Characteristics** (Authenticity, Credibility, Relatability)
↓
2. **Consumer Perceptions** (Trustworthiness, Transparency, Social Proof)
↓
3. **Trust-Building Mechanism** (Parasocial relationships, Trust transfer)
↓
4. **Brand Outcomes** (Reputation Repair, Loyalty, Positive Word-of-Mouth)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and Evolution of Influencer Marketing - Influencer marketing involves leveraging individuals with a significant online following, known as influencers, to promote products or services. Influencers have gained prominence with the advent of social media, where their credibility and reach enable them to impact consumer behaviors and brand preferences (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Initially, influencer marketing was predominantly associated with celebrity endorsements, but the rise of social media has democratized influence, allowing a broader range of individuals to become influencers (Hsu et al., 2016). This evolution has reshaped traditional marketing strategies, emphasizing authenticity and personalized connections with consumers.

The Role of Social Media Influencers - Social media influencers play a pivotal role in influencer marketing by establishing genuine connections with their audience, who trust their recommendations and opinions (Freberg et al., 2011). Their influence stems from relatability, expertise, and the ability to create engaging content that aligns with the interests of their followers (Abidin, 2016). This unique bond enables influencers to facilitate product awareness, influence purchase decisions, and foster brand loyalty (De Veirman et al., 2017). (Smith, 2018)



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Influencer marketing has emerged as an effective strategy for brands to establish links with consumers by collaborating with influencers on social media platforms (Jiménez, MP, et al., 2024). Such marketing has positioned itself as a fundamental tool in modern marketing strategies due to its ability to directly connect brands with their audiences through influencers on social media. The author Cabarique, Y. (2023)(Gómez Gavilanes Nicolas, 2024)

Marketing literature is also paying more attention to influencers' function in stimulating brand engagement, including likes and shares as well as purchase intent. The presence of influencer campaigns has been associated with consumer engagement, emotional commitment, and behavioral loyalty (Hughes et al., 2019). Campbell and Farrell (2020) state that influencers operate on several elements, including social, emotional, and cognitive, that altogether determine consumer-brand relationships. The psychological process that frequently underlies such involvement is identification, i.e., consumers see influencers as close and aspirational people whose decisions are worth following (Schouten et al., 2021). The nature of this mimetic relationship has been further theorized as the parasocial interaction, which is a theory that explains one-sided relationships developed with media personalities that feel real and personal (Martin & Sharma, 2022).(Dandona et al., 2025)

According to Jiménez, D., et al., (2022). They mention that the objective of influencer marketing is to boost sales and strengthen support for the product or brand through the transmission of messages among consumers. Subsequently, it could be argued that influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful strategy for brands in the digital age, as it allows them to reach consumers in a more authentic and persuasive way. By collaborating with influencers who have a genuine connection with their audience, brands can leverage digital word of mouth to promote their products or services. Through personal recommendations and relevant content, influencers can influence their followers' purchasing decisions in a way that traditional ads cannot. Not only does this drive sales by generating interest and trust in the products or services being promoted, but it also reinforces product or brand endorsement, as the messages come from sources seen as ordinary and trusted by consumers. In essence, influencer marketing capitalises on the power of word-of-mouth marketing in the digital world, allowing brands to connect more authentically and effectively with their target audience.(Gómez Gavilanes Nicolas, 2024)

The Best Effective Marketing Techniques for Influencer Marketing and Trust Rebuilding

Rebuilding trust after reputational damage is a strategic challenge that requires carefully designed marketing techniques. Influencer marketing, rooted in authenticity and human connection, provides a unique avenue for brands to re-establish credibility with consumers. Unlike traditional advertising, which is often perceived as one-directional and corporate-driven, influencer marketing allows for a more personal, dialogical, and authentic interaction with audiences. The following section outlines the most effective marketing techniques through which influencers can play a pivotal role in trust



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restoration. Each technique is supported by theoretical underpinnings and practical implications for brand managers.

1. Authenticity-Driven Campaigns

Authenticity is the cornerstone of influencer effectiveness. According to **Source Credibility Theory**, consumers evaluate message sources on dimensions of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. Influencers who genuinely use and endorse products foster perceptions of honesty and relatability. Authentic campaigns are not built around scripted endorsements but around real-life experiences, testimonials, and personal narratives.

For instance, when an influencer integrates a brand into their daily lifestyle in a natural manner, it signals to audiences that the endorsement is credible rather than commercially motivated. This aligns with **Parasocial Interaction Theory**, as audiences perceive influencers as “friends,” and authentic endorsements mimic genuine word-of-mouth recommendations. In trust-rebuilding scenarios, authenticity-driven campaigns demonstrate that the brand is not hiding behind corporate messages but is instead willing to be humanized through credible advocates.

2. Transparency and Disclosure

Transparency is a critical technique for reinforcing ethical standards in influencer marketing. Regulatory bodies such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) have emphasized mandatory disclosure of sponsored content. From a theoretical lens, **Social Exchange Theory** suggests that consumers calculate the fairness of an exchange; hidden sponsorships violate perceived fairness and erode trust.

Clear labeling of endorsements (e.g., “#ad” or “sponsored”) ensures honesty in communication. Counterintuitively, research indicates that disclosed sponsorships do not always reduce effectiveness; in fact, they often enhance trust by demonstrating honesty. For brands seeking to rebuild trust, transparent disclosure signals accountability and ethical responsibility. This technique addresses consumer skepticism directly, ensuring that influencer-brand relationships are not perceived as manipulative.

3. Micro-Influencer Engagement

While mega-influencers and celebrities boast large audiences, micro-influencers often provide higher engagement rates due to their niche focus and closer community ties. According to **Diffusion of Innovation Theory**, micro-influencers function as “early adopters” or opinion leaders who influence small, highly connected groups. Their relatability and accessibility make them more effective trust builders than distant celebrities.

Micro-influencers usually have audiences that share specific interests, values, or lifestyles. These communities rely on strong interpersonal trust, which can be transferred to the brands the influencer



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endorses. In the context of trust rebuilding, collaborating with micro-influencers allows brands to rebuild their reputation from the ground up, starting with smaller but highly engaged consumer segments. This grassroots approach is often more sustainable and credible than mass-market celebrity campaigns.

4. Storytelling and Narrative Alignment

Storytelling is a powerful psychological tool that connects consumers to brands through shared values and emotional resonance. The **Narrative Transportation Theory** suggests that consumers become more receptive to persuasive messages when immersed in compelling stories. Influencers, through their personal stories and experiences, can act as narrative agents who reshape how consumers perceive a brand.

For example, if a brand has faced reputational damage, influencers can frame its recovery journey as a story of resilience, learning, and transformation. When influencer narratives align with consumer values—such as honesty, responsibility, or innovation—they facilitate deeper emotional connections. Storytelling allows brands not only to rebuild trust but also to reposition themselves in ways that resonate with evolving consumer expectations.

5. Cause-Related Collaborations

In today's socially conscious consumer environment, aligning brands with meaningful causes strengthens credibility and moral legitimacy. According to **Stakeholder Theory** and **Carroll's Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**, organizations must go beyond profit-making to demonstrate ethical and philanthropic responsibility. Partnering with influencers for cause-related marketing—such as sustainability, social justice, or public health—creates opportunities for brands to showcase their values.

Such collaborations are particularly effective in trust rebuilding because they shift focus away from self-interest and toward shared community welfare. Influencers amplify these initiatives by lending authenticity and reach to social campaigns. When executed genuinely, cause-related collaborations allow brands to restore trust by aligning with consumer values and demonstrating long-term commitment to societal well-being.

6. Two-Way Interaction

Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing thrives on **dialogue** rather than **monologue**. Two-way interaction—through Q&A sessions, live streams, polls, or comment responses—allows influencers to humanize brands and create an environment of openness. The **Engagement Theory** suggests that interactive communication fosters stronger relationships by increasing consumer involvement and co-creation of meaning.



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From a trust-rebuilding perspective, this technique is critical. Consumers who feel ignored or betrayed by a brand are more likely to forgive and re-engage when their concerns are acknowledged in an interactive space. Influencers serve as mediators who listen, respond, and relay brand commitments to audiences. This interactive process not only addresses skepticism but also rebuilds relational equity between the brand and its consumers.

7. Long-Term Partnerships

Trust rebuilding is not an event but a process. One-time endorsements often appear transactional and fail to convey commitment. Instead, long-term partnerships with influencers signal consistency, reliability, and authenticity. From the perspective of **Commitment-Trust Theory in Relationship Marketing**, sustained collaborations demonstrate that the brand is investing in meaningful, long-term relationships rather than short-term image fixes.

Long-term influencer partnerships also allow for continuity in storytelling, alignment with evolving consumer needs, and cumulative reinforcement of brand values. Over time, repeated exposure to consistent influencer-brand relationships increases **familiarity** and **cognitive trust**, key factors in repairing damaged reputations. This technique transforms influencer marketing from a promotional tactic into a strategic trust-building mechanism.

Conclusion

Influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful tool for rebuilding trust and repairing reputations in today's skeptical consumer environment. By focusing on authenticity-driven campaigns, transparent disclosure, micro-influencer engagement, storytelling, cause-related collaborations, two-way interactions, and long-term partnerships, brands can foster credibility and reconnect with audiences. Grounded in theories such as Source Credibility, Trust Transfer, and Parasocial Interaction, these techniques highlight that trust rebuilding is a gradual, relational process rather than a quick fix. When carefully planned and executed, influencer marketing goes beyond promotion—it becomes a strategic mechanism to restore consumer confidence and strengthen long-term brand reputation.

AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this manuscript.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.



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