
Impact of Social Media Influencers on Corporate Reputation

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 5 | 2026 | Article Number: 045

Accepted: 16 September 2026 | Published: 10 October 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)



Crossref : <https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-46CWD382>



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Abstract

The study investigates the impact of social media influencers on corporate reputation, focusing on how influencer credibility, authenticity, content type, and behaviour shape public perceptions of organizations. As businesses increasingly rely on digital influencers for brand promotion, concerns arise regarding the reliability of influencer messages, the risks associated with influencer misconduct, and the overall effect of such partnerships on organizational reputation. Using a descriptive survey research design, data were collected from Nigerian social media users to examine their attitudes towards influencers and brands they endorse. Findings reveal that social media influencers significantly affect public perception of corporate brands. Influencer credibility, particularly trustworthiness and expertise, emerged as a major determinant of positive reputational outcomes. Authentic and experience-based content was found to foster stronger trust compared to highly commercialized or scripted posts. Conversely, influencer scandals and unethical behaviour were identified as major sources of reputational risk for brands. The study concludes that while influencers can enhance corporate reputation, the benefits depend largely on the credibility, authenticity, and alignment between the influencer and the brand. It recommends that organizations adopt strategic influencer selection processes, develop clear communication guidelines, regularly monitor influencer activities, and establish crisis management plans for potential influencer-related reputational threats.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Corporate Reputation, Influencer Credibility, Influencer Marketing, Brand Trust, Social Media Communication

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has dramatically transformed corporate communication and stakeholder engagement. In the pre-digital era, organizations relied heavily on traditional media outlets, press releases, and celebrity endorsements to shape public perception. Communication was largely one-directional, with limited opportunities for consumers to interact directly with brands. The advent of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) has revolutionized this landscape, enabling organizations to engage audiences in real time and foster interactive relationships.

A particularly influential development within this digital ecosystem is the emergence of social media influencers. These individuals, often non-traditional celebrities, build credibility and loyal followings through consistent content creation and personal branding (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers are perceived as more relatable and accessible, which enhances their persuasive power. Their ability to shape opinions and consumer behavior has made influencer marketing a strategic tool in modern public relations (Brown & Hayes, 2008).

Corporate reputation, which is defined as stakeholders' collective judgment of a company built over time; is a critical intangible asset. It influences customer loyalty, investor confidence, and resilience during crises (Keller, 2013). Because influencers often act as extensions of a brand's identity, their behavior and content can either strengthen or damage corporate reputation. Cases of influencer misconduct, fabricated lifestyles, and unethical endorsements have forced organizations to reconsider influencer partnerships (Boerman, 2020). This underscores the need to examine how influencer credibility, authenticity, and content affect public trust in corporate brands.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the widespread adoption of influencer marketing, organizations remain uncertain about its reputational value. While influencers can generate visibility and engagement, concerns over fake followers, influencer scandals, and excessive commercialization threaten the credibility of influencer content. For instance, several Nigerian influencers have been criticized for promoting fraudulent investment schemes, leading to reputational crises for associated brands. Globally, controversies such as Logan Paul's insensitive YouTube content have demonstrated how influencer misconduct can tarnish corporate partners.

The challenge lies in determining the extent to which influencer partnerships genuinely enhance or harm corporate reputation. Without clear guidelines, organizations risk associating with influencers whose values or behaviors conflict with corporate identity, thereby undermining stakeholder trust.

Objectives of the Study

1. To determine how influencer partnerships shape public perception of corporate brands.
2. To identify key credibility factors that make influencers effective in building reputation.
3. To examine the types of influencer content that influence public trust.
4. To assess reputational risks associated with influencer-brand collaborations.
5. To evaluate how influencer authenticity contributes to positive reputational outcomes.

Research Questions

1. How do social media influencers affect public perceptions of corporate reputation?
2. What factors influence the credibility of influencers in shaping organizational reputation?
3. What types of influencer content most significantly impact public trust?
4. What reputational risks do brands face when partnering with influencers?

5. To what extent does influencer authenticity enhance corporate reputation?

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for academia, practitioners, and society. For scholars, it contributes to the growing body of literature on digital public relations and influencer communication, particularly within the Nigerian context where empirical studies remain limited. For practitioners, findings will inform evidence-based influencer marketing strategies, enabling organizations to mitigate risks and enhance reputation (Aaker, 2014). For society, the study promotes informed consumer decision-making by clarifying how influencer content shapes attitudes and trust (Todd, 2018).

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on Nigerian social media users aged 18–45, a demographic that represents the most active segment of digital consumers. Platforms examined include Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X, where influencer activity is most prevalent. Traditional celebrity endorsements are excluded unless the individuals function primarily as influencers. This scope ensures relevance to contemporary digital communication practices.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers are individuals who leverage digital platforms to create content that resonates with audiences, thereby shaping opinions, behaviors, and purchasing decisions. Freberg et al. (2011) describe influencers as opinion leaders who establish credibility through consistent engagement and authentic communication. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers often emerge organically from niche communities, building trust by sharing relatable experiences.

Influencers can be categorized into tiers: mega-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers. Each tier offers distinct advantages. Mega-influencers provide mass reach but may lack relatability, while micro- and nano-influencers often generate higher engagement rates due to perceived authenticity and accessibility (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

A systematic review by Dhingra, Keswani, Samac, and Qureshid (2024) synthesizes over 60 studies from 2011–2023, highlighting authenticity, transparency, and parasocial relationships as recurring themes in influencer effectiveness. Importantly, the review identifies emerging areas such as AI-generated influencers and deep learning analytics, suggesting that influencer credibility is increasingly shaped by technological innovation.

Corporate Reputation

Corporate reputation refers to stakeholders' collective assessment of a company's trustworthiness, quality, and ethical behavior (Aaker, 2014). It is an intangible asset that directly influences customer loyalty, investor confidence, and employee satisfaction. Keller (2013) emphasizes that reputation is built over time through consistent alignment between corporate values and stakeholder expectations. Strong reputation provides competitive advantage by differentiating organizations in crowded markets. It also serves as a buffer during crises, enabling companies to recover more quickly from reputational damage.

Recent studies expand this concept into employer branding. Janssen and Rudelof (2024) found that corporate influencers (employees who act as brand ambassadors) often have stronger reputational impact than external influencers, particularly in shaping perceptions of organizational culture and trust. This suggests that influencer credibility extends beyond consumer markets into recruitment and HR contexts, broadening the scope of reputation management.

Influencer–Brand Collaboration

Influencer–brand collaboration involves partnerships where influencers promote products or services to their audiences. Lou & Yuan (2019) argue that such collaborations enhance brand awareness, foster relationships, and influence consumer attitudes. The effectiveness of these partnerships depends on credibility alignment—whether the influencer’s values, lifestyle, and communication style resonate with the brand’s identity (Ohanian, 1990).

Transparency in sponsored content is essential to maintain credibility (Boerman, 2020). Misaligned collaborations can backfire, leading to reputational risks for both the influencer and the company. More recently, Xin, Hao, and Xie (2024) examined virtual influencers and found that while they offer scalability and control, they pose unique reputational risks due to perceived artificiality. Their study highlights the need for brands to balance innovation with authenticity when engaging influencers.

Theoretical Review

- **Source Credibility Theory** (Ohanian, 1990) posits that persuasiveness depends on expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. This theory remains foundational, emphasizing expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as determinants of persuasive power. Recent applications in influencer studies confirm that these attributes continue to shape consumer trust, particularly in digital contexts.
- **Social Learning Theory** (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013) suggests individuals model behaviors observed from others. Followers adopt attitudes and behaviors reflected in influencer content, reinforcing the influencer’s role as a behavioral model. Dhingra et al. (2024) reinforce this by noting that parasocial relationships—where audiences feel personally connected to influencers—amplify the modeling effect, making influencer communication a powerful reputational tool.

Empirical Review

Empirical evidence consistently highlights the dual nature of influencer impact. Todd (2018) found that authenticity boosts brand trust, while Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) observed stronger engagement from micro-influencers. Boerman (2020) emphasized transparency in sponsorships, and Carr & Hayes (2014) documented reputational damage from unethical influencer behavior.

Recent studies add nuance: Janssen & Rudelof (2024) show that corporate influencers enhance employer branding, while Xin et al. (2024) caution against reputational risks posed by virtual influencers. Dhingra et al. (2024) call for more quantitative modeling and cross-cultural analysis, underscoring the need for context-specific research in regions like Nigeria.

Summarily, the literature reveals that influencers can act as both reputation builders and reputation risks. Traditional theories such as Source Credibility and Social Learning remain relevant, but recent research highlights new dynamics: AI-generated influencers, employee-driven branding, and systematic reviews of influencer scholarship. These developments underscore the importance of context-specific studies, particularly in Nigeria, where cultural relatability and authenticity strongly influence public trust.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive survey design, which is appropriate for assessing public attitudes and perceptions. The survey method allows for the collection of quantitative data from a large population, enabling statistical analysis of relationships between influencer credibility, authenticity, and corporate reputation. This design is particularly useful in communication studies where subjective perceptions must

be quantified (West, 2020).

Population of the Study

The population includes active Nigerian social media users aged 18–45. This demographic was chosen because it represents the most digitally engaged segment of society, with high levels of activity on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X. Lagos and Abuja were selected as focal cities due to their cosmopolitan nature and concentration of social media users.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A sample of 200 respondents was selected. Purposive sampling ensured inclusion of individuals who actively follow influencers, while simple random sampling guaranteed diversity across gender, age, and occupation. This combination enhances representativeness while maintaining methodological rigor.

Instrument for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was developed with four sections:

- 1. Demographic Information (age, gender, occupation, platform usage).
- 2. Influencer Credibility (trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness).
- 3. Content Analysis (types of posts, frequency, transparency).
- 4. Reputation Impact (perceptions of brand trust, loyalty, and crisis resilience).

Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

Method of Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, percentage) and correlation analysis to examine relationships between influencer attributes and corporate reputation. Statistical tools such as SPSS were employed to ensure accuracy.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Presentation of Results

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender (Male)	90	45
Gender (Female)	110	55
Age 18–25	80	40
Age 26–35	70	35
Age 36–45	50	25
Platform Most Used: Instagram	85	42.5
Platform Most Used: TikTok	60	30
Platform Most Used: YouTube	35	17.5
Platform Most Used: X (Twitter)	20	10

Table 2: Respondents’ Perception of Influencer Credibility

Credibility Factor	Mean Score	Interpretation
Trustworthiness	4.2	High
Expertise	3.9	Moderate–High
Attractiveness	3.5	Moderate

Table 3: Types of Contents Influencing Trust

Content Type	Percentage (%)
Video-based tutorials	55
Storytelling posts	25
Sponsored advertisements	15
Memes/entertainment	5

Table 4: Reputation Impact

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Influencers affect brand perception		
Strongly Agree	120	60
Agree	50	25
Neutral	20	10
Disagree	10	5
Strongly Disagree	0	0

Analysis of Findings

The results indicate that trustworthiness is the most critical factor influencing corporate reputation, consistent with Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990). Respondents reported higher trust in influencers who disclose sponsorships and maintain transparency. Video-based content was found to foster stronger trust compared to static images or text posts, aligning with Lou & Yuan (2019).

Correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.72$) between influencer authenticity and corporate reputation. This suggests that when influencers share genuine experiences and avoid excessive commercialization, audiences perceive associated brands more favorably.

Discussion of Findings

The findings support literature suggesting that influencers act as reputation gatekeepers (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Authenticity and credibility remain critical determinants of influence, while reputational risks cannot be ignored (Carr & Hayes, 2014). Nigerian respondents emphasized cultural relatability, indicating that influencers who incorporate local language, humor, and traditions are perceived as more trustworthy.

However, scandals involving influencers, such as promoting fraudulent schemes; were cited as major risks. This aligns with global studies highlighting the reputational damage caused by unethical influencer behavior (Boerman, 2020).

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the Study

The study explored the role of social media influencers in shaping corporate reputation among Nigerian social media users. Findings reveal that credibility, authenticity, and content type significantly affect public trust in organizations.

Conclusion

Influencers are powerful communication agents whose behavior and content directly influence how stakeholders perceive corporate brands (Freberg et al., 2011). Properly managed, influencer partnerships enhance reputation; poorly managed, they create reputational risks.

Recommendations

1. Brands should prioritize credible influencers with authentic engagement.
2. Brands should conduct background checks before partnership.
3. There should be established, clear influencer communication guidelines.
4. Brands should always monitor influencer activities consistently.
5. Using micro-influencers is more profitable when the goal is trust-building.
6. It is safer for Brands to develop influencer-related crisis communication strategies.

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