

CHAPTER: 12

INFLUENCER MARKETING AND DIGITAL TRUST IN THE ERA OF AI

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ABSTRACT

The rapid evolution of digital platforms has reshaped traditional marketing into a dynamic and multifaceted landscape, prominently featuring influencer marketing. This strategy leverages the reach and credibility of digital influencers to foster authentic consumer engagement and brand visibility. At the core of its effectiveness lies the concept of digital trust – a critical yet often overlooked factor that significantly affects the sustainability and impact of influencer-brand collaborations. This paper presents a theoretical examination of influencer marketing and digital trust, discussing their foundational concepts, the relationship between influencer credibility and consumer perception, the role of social media, and the ethical implications for marketing practices in the era of AI. Through this exploration, the study offers insights into how brands can strategically and ethically use influencer marketing while cultivating long-term trust with consumers in digital environments.

Keywords: *Influencer Marketing, Digital Trust, AI, Brand Collaboration.*

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of the internet and social media, marketing has transitioned from traditional, one-way communication to more interactive, personalized, and content-driven approaches. This transformation has given rise to influencer marketing, a strategy that involves individuals with established online followings endorsing products or services. These individuals - commonly known as influencers - possess perceived authenticity and trustworthiness, which make their endorsements more impactful than traditional advertisements.

Digital trust, defined as a consumer's belief in the reliability, honesty, and integrity of a digital entity, is central to the effectiveness of influencer marketing. This paper explores the interconnection

between influencer marketing and digital trust, focusing on how trust influences consumer behaviour in online contexts in the era of AI. It discusses the theoretical framework underpinning these concepts, highlighting how trust acts as a mediating factor between influencer activity and consumer decision-making. Ultimately, the paper emphasizes the need for ethical marketing approaches that prioritize genuine consumer relationships.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing involves partnerships with individuals who hold significant credibility and audience engagement on digital platforms. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, influencers often build closer relationships with niche communities, creating content that is relatable and engaging (Freberg et al., 2011).

Types of Influencers:

- **Mega-influencers:** Public figures or celebrities with millions of followers.
- **Macro-influencers:** Influencers with large followings in specific industries or interest areas.
- **Micro-influencers:** Individuals with 10,000 to 100,000 followers, known for high engagement.
- **Nano-influencers:** Everyday users with fewer than 10,000 followers but perceived as highly authentic.

Each category varies in reach, engagement, and perceived credibility, offering different value propositions for marketing campaigns (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Core Mechanisms:

- **Content Creation:** Personalized, often story-driven promotional content.
- **Community Engagement:** Two-way interactions that enhance relatability and trust.
- **Word-of-Mouth Amplification:** Shared experiences that extend the brand's message organically.

Digital Trust

Digital trust reflects a consumer's readiness to engage with digital entities based on the belief that they will act reliably and ethically (McKnight et al., 2002). This trust is essential in digital environments, where personal connections are often absent.

Key Dimensions of Digital Trust:

- **Competence:** Perceived expertise and professionalism of the influencer.
- **Integrity:** The degree to which influencers are seen as honest and principled.
- **Benevolence:** The influencer's perceived goodwill toward their audience.

These dimensions shape consumer trust in influencers, ultimately influencing their response to brand endorsements (Gefen, 2000).

INTERPLAY BETWEEN INFLUENCER MARKETING AND DIGITAL TRUST

The relationship between influencer marketing and digital trust is deeply interconnected. Influencers act as conduits between brands and consumers, capable of building-or damaging-trust through their actions and communications.

Trust as a Mediator

As consumers grow wary of traditional advertising, trust becomes a central factor in purchase decisions. Influencers who are perceived as authentic and transparent tend to establish stronger emotional connections with followers, influencing attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (Casaló et al., 2020).

Influencing Factors:

1. **Authenticity:** Influencers who share honest, personal narratives gain greater trust.
2. **Transparency:** Clear disclosure of paid partnerships enhances credibility.
3. **Engagement Quality:** Thoughtful, sincere interaction reinforces trustworthiness.
4. **Reputation:** A history of ethical behaviour and third-party validation boosts perceived trust.

Effects on Marketing Outcomes:

- **Purchase Intent:** Higher trust leads to greater willingness to buy.
- **Brand Loyalty:** Trusted influencers help forge long-term consumer relationships.
- **Consumer Advocacy:** Loyal followers often become brand advocates through word-of-mouth.

Social Media's Role in Shaping Influencer Marketing and Trust

Social media platforms are the primary space for influencer marketing, offering features that affect how trust is developed and maintained.

Platform Attributes:

- **Interactivity:** Real-time engagement through comments and messages builds connections.
- **Transparency Features:** Tools like “paid partnership” tags support honest communication.
- **Algorithms:** Platform algorithms can influence content visibility, potentially affecting perceptions of authenticity if promotional content is overexposed.

Key Challenges:

- **Fake Followers:** The use of bots and purchased followers undermine authenticity.
- **Over-commercialization:** Frequent sponsored content can lead to audience fatigue and distrust.
- **Misinformation:** False or exaggerated claims by influencers damage both brand and consumer trust.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR BUILDING SUSTAINABLE DIGITAL TRUST

Sustaining trust in influencer marketing requires a commitment to ethical practices. It is not simply a strategy but a moral responsibility for both brands and influencers.

Essential Ethical Practices:

- **Transparent Disclosures:** Clear identification of paid content prevents deceptive marketing.
- **Authentic Endorsements:** Influencers should promote only those products they genuinely support.
- **Regulatory Oversight:** Social platforms and governing bodies must enforce guidelines to ensure ethical behaviour and protect consumers.

Outlook and Theoretical Implications

As digital ecosystems continue to evolve, new opportunities and challenges will emerge in the domains of influencer marketing and trust.

Areas for Further Research:

- **Technological Evolution:** The rise of AI-generated and virtual influencers prompts questions about digital authenticity and trust.
- **Cultural Variability:** Cross-cultural studies are needed to understand how trust is formed and perceived in different regions.

- **Long-Term Trust Dynamics:** Examining how trust evolves over time and impacts brand equity can offer deeper strategic insights.

CONCLUSION

Influencer marketing has firmly established itself as a vital component of modern digital strategies. However, its true effectiveness hinges on the development and preservation of digital trust. This trust is shaped by perceived authenticity, transparency, and the quality of engagement between influencers and their audiences. Ethical, well-grounded influencer marketing not only drives immediate conversions but also strengthens long-term brand relationships. As platforms and technologies evolve, a multidisciplinary approach to understanding and applying influencer marketing and digital trust will be essential for sustainable success in the digital age.

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