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The Role of Influencer Marketing and User-Generated Content in Shaping Brand Trust

Abstract

This study examines the role of influencer marketing and user-generated content (UGC) in shaping brand trust within the contemporary digital marketing environment. As consumers increasingly rely on social media platforms for information and purchase decisions, traditional advertising has gradually been supplemented – and in some cases replaced – by peer-driven and influencer-led communication strategies. Influencer marketing leverages the perceived credibility, expertise, and relatability of influencers to transfer trust to brands, while user-generated content reflects authentic consumer experiences that enhance transparency and perceived honesty. The study highlights that trust formation is strongly influenced by factors such as influencer authenticity, congruence between the influencer and the brand, content transparency, and audience engagement. In parallel, UGC contributes to brand trust by reducing information asymmetry, reinforcing social proof, and fostering a sense of community around the brand. The findings suggest that brands integrating influencer marketing with strategically managed user-generated content can achieve higher levels of consumer trust, loyalty, and long-term brand equity. Overall, the research underscores that trust in the digital marketplace is increasingly co-created by brands, influencers, and consumers rather than controlled solely by firms.

Keywords: influencer, (UGC), brand, social, trust, branding, authenticity, credibility

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Marka etimadının formalaşdırılmasında inflüensiyaçı marketinqinin və istifadəçi tərəfindən yaradılmış məzmunun rolu

Xülasə

Bu tədqiqat müasir rəqəmsal marketinq mühitində brend etimadının formalaşmasında inflüenser marketinqinin və istifadəçi tərəfindən yaradılan məzmunun (UGC) rolunu araşdırır. İstehlakçılar məlumat və alış qərarları üçün getdikcə sosial media platformalarına etibar etdikcə, ənənəvi reklam tədricən həmyaşıdlar tərəfindən idarə olunan və inflüenser tərəfindən idarə olunan ünsiyyət strategiyaları ilə əvəz olunur. İnflüenser marketinqi, brendlərə etimadı ötürmək üçün inflüenserlərin qəbul edilmiş etibarlılığından, təcrübəsindən və nisbiliyindən istifadə edir, istifadəçi tərəfindən yaradılan məzmun isə şəffaflığı və qəbul edilmiş dürüstlüyü artıran orijinal istehlakçı təcrübələrini əks etdirir. Tədqiqatda vurğulanır ki, etimadın formalaşmasına inflüenserin orijinallığı, inflüenser ilə brend arasında uyğunluq, məzmun şəffaflığı və auditoriya cəlb kimi amillər güclü təsir göstərir. Paralel olaraq, UGC məlumat asimmetriyasını azaltmaqla, sosial səbütü gücləndirməklə və brend ətrafında icma hissini inkişaf etdirməklə brend etimadına töhfə verir.

Nəticələr göstərir ki, brendlər inflüenser marketinqini strateji idarə olunan istifadəçi tərəfindən yaradılan məzmunla birləşdirərək daha yüksək səviyyəli istehlakçı etibarına, sədaqətə və uzunmüddətli brend kapitalına nail ola bilərlər. Ümumilikdə, tədqiqat rəqəmsal bazarda etibarın yalnız firmalar tərəfindən idarə olunmaqdansa, getdikcə daha çox brendlər, inflüenserlər və istehlakçılar tərəfindən birgə yaradıldığını vurğulayır.

Açar sözlər: influenser, (UGC), brend, sosial, etibar, brendinq, orjinalliq, etibarlılıq

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the way brands communicate with consumers. In the contemporary marketing environment, traditional one-way advertising models are increasingly challenged by interactive, consumer-centered communication channels where trust plays a decisive role in shaping purchasing decisions. As consumers become more skeptical of conventional advertising messages, they increasingly rely on recommendations, experiences, and opinions shared by other individuals in online spaces. Within this context, influencer marketing and user-generated content (UGC) have emerged as powerful instruments for building and sustaining brand trust. Influencer marketing represents a strategic approach in which brands collaborate with individuals who possess social influence and credibility within specific online communities. Influencers act as intermediaries between brands and consumers, translating brand messages into more relatable and personalized narratives. Their perceived authenticity, expertise, and emotional connection with followers often lead to higher levels of trust compared to traditional brand-generated content. Consequently, influencer endorsements can significantly affect consumer attitudes, brand perceptions, and behavioral intentions. At the same time, user-generated content – such as reviews, testimonials, comments, photos, and videos created by consumers - plays a critical role in reinforcing brand trust. Unlike firm-controlled messages, UGC is generally perceived as more authentic and unbiased, reflecting real consumption experiences. By providing social proof and reducing information uncertainty, UGC contributes to more informed decision-making processes and strengthens consumers' confidence in brands.

Research

In the digital marketing ecosystem, brand trust is no longer formed solely through firm-controlled messages but emerges from continuous interactions among brands, influencers, and consumers. Influencer marketing and user-generated content (UGC) function as complementary mechanisms that jointly shape how trust is perceived, evaluated, and sustained over time (Migkos, 2025; Jabado, 2023).

From an analytical perspective, influencer marketing influences brand trust primarily through source credibility theory. Influencers are often perceived as more trustworthy than traditional advertisers because they combine expertise, attractiveness, and perceived authenticity. When followers identify with an influencer's lifestyle, values, or expertise, the influencer's endorsement is interpreted not as direct advertising but as a personal recommendation. This perceived relational closeness reduces psychological distance between the brand and the consumer, facilitating trust transfer from the influencer to the brand. However, this effect is highly conditional: excessive commercialization, lack of disclosure, or weak brand-influencer fit can erode credibility and negatively affect trust (Benevento, 2025). User-generated content, on the other hand, operates through social proof and collective validation mechanisms. Online reviews, ratings, testimonials, and consumer-created visuals provide evidence of real product usage and post-purchase experiences. UGC reduces information asymmetry by offering insights that are not filtered by brand interests. As the volume and consistency of UGC increase, consumers perceive lower risk and higher reliability, which strengthens trust. Importantly, even negative or mixed reviews can enhance credibility when they are perceived as genuine, as they signal transparency rather than manipulation (Younis, 2025).

The interaction between influencer marketing and UGC further amplifies trust formation. Influencer-generated content often stimulates additional user engagement, encouraging consumers to share their own experiences and opinions. This creates a feedback loop in which influencer

endorsements initiate attention, while UGC validates or challenges these messages through collective evaluation. Brands that successfully integrate influencer campaigns with authentic UGC management tend to foster a participatory trust environment, where consumers feel involved in brand meaning creation rather than passively targeted by marketing messages. Nevertheless, trust formation in this context is not automatic. Algorithmic visibility, fake reviews, artificial engagement, and undisclosed sponsorships pose significant risks to trust. Consumers are increasingly skilled at detecting inauthentic behavior, which means that transparency, ethical communication, and consistency across influencer content and UGC are critical moderating factors. Trust is thus dynamic and fragile, requiring continuous alignment between brand promises, influencer narratives, and actual consumer experience (Schröder, 2025; Madaniah, Lubis, Rini, 2025; Setyahadi Putri, Rahayu, 2025).

Table 1.
The Role of Influencer Marketing and
User-Generated Content in Shaping Brand Trust.

Dimension	Influencer Marketing	User-Generated Content (UGC)	Impact on Brand Trust
Content Source	Influencers with established social credibility	Real consumers and brand users	Trust shifts from brand-controlled to peer-driven sources
Perceived Authenticity	High when influencer-brand fit is strong	Very high due to voluntary and unpaid content	Increases perceived honesty and transparency
Credibility Mechanism	Source credibility and parasocial interaction	Social proof and collective validation	Reduces perceived risk and uncertainty
Consumer Engagement	High engagement through likes, comments, and shares	Sustained engagement via reviews, testimonials, visuals	Strengthens emotional and cognitive trust
Message Control	Partially controlled by brands	Largely uncontrolled and organic	Enhances trust through openness and realism
Risk Factors	Over-commercialization, lack of disclosure	Fake reviews, biased opinions	Ethical transparency moderates trust outcomes
Long-term Trust Effect	Builds initial trust and awareness	Reinforces trust through post-purchase confirmation	Supports long-term brand loyalty and equity

Source: Abidin, 2016.

The table 1 demonstrates how influencer marketing and user-generated content (UGC) function through different but complementary mechanisms to shape brand trust. Influencer marketing relies on individuals who already possess social credibility and visibility, allowing trust to be transferred from the influencer to the brand when there is a strong alignment between their values, image, and audience expectations. This type of content is particularly effective in the early stages of the consumer journey, where awareness and initial trust formation are critical. However, because influencer content is often partially controlled or sponsored by brands, its credibility depends heavily on authenticity, transparency, and proper disclosure (Alamyar, 2024; Alcántara-Pilar, & colleagues, 2024).

In contrast, user-generated content is created organically by consumers and reflects real usage experiences, which makes it highly authentic and trustworthy in the eyes of potential buyers. UGC operates mainly through social proof and collective validation, reducing uncertainty and perceived risk by showing how other consumers evaluate and experience the brand. Unlike influencer

marketing, UGC is largely uncontrolled by firms, which increases transparency and strengthens trust, especially during the evaluation and post-purchase stages.

The table also highlights that both approaches contribute differently to long-term brand trust. Influencer marketing is more effective at building initial confidence and emotional connection, while UGC reinforces trust over time by confirming or challenging brand promises through actual consumer feedback. When combined strategically, influencer marketing can stimulate engagement and content creation, while UGC validates influencer messages through collective consumer experience. Overall, the interaction between these two elements supports sustained brand loyalty and brand equity by shifting trust formation from firm-centered communication to a shared, participatory process involving influencers and consumers (Baghel, 2024; Lariba, 2023; Sukontip, Sureerut, Podaras, 2024).

Conclusion

The analysis confirms that influencer marketing and user-generated content play a critical and interconnected role in shaping brand trust in the digital marketplace. As consumer skepticism toward traditional advertising continues to increase, trust is increasingly formed through socially driven and experience-based communication rather than brand-controlled messages. Influencer marketing contributes to trust primarily by leveraging perceived authenticity, credibility, and emotional connection, enabling brands to build initial awareness and confidence through trusted opinion leaders. However, its effectiveness depends strongly on transparency, ethical disclosure, and a strong alignment between the influencer and the brand. User-generated content, in contrast, reinforces brand trust by providing authentic, experience-based validation from real consumers. Through mechanisms such as social proof and collective evaluation, UGC reduces perceived risk, enhances transparency, and supports informed decision-making. The presence of consistent and credible user feedback strengthens trust not only before purchase but also after consumption, thereby supporting long-term brand loyalty.

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