

Reputation Crisis Due to Influencer Controversy: Implications for Brand Marketing Communication Strategies in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has become a dominant strategy for brands in Indonesia, offering wide reach and strong audience engagement. However, the growing reliance on influencers also exposes brands to significant reputation risks, particularly when influencers become involved in public controversies. This study examines the impact of influencer-related reputation crises on brand image and evaluates how brands respond through their marketing communication strategies. Using a qualitative approach supported by case analysis from recent controversy-driven incidents, the research identifies key patterns in consumer reactions, media amplification, and the effectiveness of various crisis response strategies. Findings show that delayed responses, inconsistent messaging, and failure to distance from problematic influencers can intensify public backlash. Conversely, proactive communication, transparent clarification, and strategic message reframing help restore brand credibility more effectively. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of crisis communication within the context of influencer marketing and provides practical recommendations for Indonesian brands to manage emerging risks in the digital ecosystem.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Reputation crisis, Brand image, Marketing communication strategies, Social media, Public controversy, Crisis management.

INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing has become one of the most dominant strategies adopted by brands in Indonesia's increasingly digitalized communication landscape. With the massive penetration of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, influencers play a vital role in shaping public opinion, enhancing brand awareness, and driving consumer behavior. Their perceived authenticity and ability to communicate directly with followers enable them to establish emotional connections that traditional advertising often lacks. This phenomenon is reinforced by recent global studies which show that influencer characteristics including credibility, authenticity, and content quality significantly influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Influencer Marketing Effectiveness: A Meta-Analytic Review, 2024).

In Indonesia, the impact of influencer marketing is particularly pronounced due to high internet usage, cultural emphasis on trust-based communication, and the popularity of short-video content. Febrina, Sanny, and Fagita (2024) highlight how short-video platforms notably affect behavioral patterns among young audiences, demonstrating the strong persuasive power of digital content. This environment, while beneficial for brands, also creates vulnerabilities. When influencers embroiled in partnerships become involved in public scandals, unethical behavior, or controversial statements, brands are forced to face the repercussions. Scandals

spread rapidly fueled by algorithmic amplification, emotional public reactions, and the viral nature of media consumption. Media sociology research by Febrina (2023) emphasizes that mass media plays a crucial role in amplifying sensitive issues and shaping collective discourse. In the context of influencer controversies, this amplification accelerates how quickly crises escalate, placing brands under intense scrutiny. The rapid dissemination of information through social and mass media creates a delicate situation where a brand's reputation becomes highly fragile. Even a minor controversy involving an influencer can evolve into a full-scale reputational crisis in a matter of hours.

Moreover, organizational communication scholars have examined how internal coordination and message consistency determine the effectiveness of crisis responses. Hasibuan et al. (2024) confirm that clear communication and strong internal coordination significantly enhance effectiveness in organizational decision-making processes. In crisis scenarios, these findings imply that brands must respond swiftly, cohesively, and strategically to minimize reputational damage. Communication change strategies discussed by Febrina (2023) further reinforce the need for adaptability and transparency, stating that organizations must revise communication patterns and maintain trust during periods of uncertainty.

From a marketing communication perspective, the ability to deliver messages consistently across channels is essential. Studies by Maulana, Dayu, and Agustin (2024) on IMC (Integrated Marketing Communication) demonstrate that coordinated messaging across digital platforms strengthens brand image and improves consumer perception. This becomes particularly relevant when brands must realign communication strategies following influencer-induced controversies. Failure to maintain coherent messaging or delays in issuing official statements may lead to heightened public backlash and diminished brand credibility. Beyond corporate brands, Agustin et al. (2025) show how communication strategies impact the resilience of MSMEs, indicating that strategic communication not only supports promotional efforts but also reinforces organizational adaptability. This suggests that influencer-related crises do not only affect large corporations but also smaller businesses that rely on influencers for growth and visibility.

Evidence from recent Indonesian case studies further affirms that influencer controversies can have severe consequences for brands. Reports indicate that brands associated with problematic influencers may experience sharp declines in sales, heightened negative sentiment, and disruptions in customer trust. Such crises often stem not only from the influencer's actions but from public perceptions that the brand failed to uphold ethical standards or properly vet their partners. Although influencer marketing continues to dominate digital strategies in Indonesia, academic discussions focusing directly on influencer-driven reputation crises remain limited. Most studies highlight the benefits of influencer collaborations under optimal conditions, but only a few investigate how brands navigate the aftermath of controversies. Considering Indonesia's highly active digital culture, diverse social structures, and strong community reactions, it is crucial to explore how public sentiment evolves and how brands formulate strategic responses.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the implications of influencer controversies on brand reputation in Indonesia and to evaluate the marketing communication strategies brands employ in managing such crises. By integrating insights from contemporary digital media

research, communication management theories, and recent case analyses including works by Febrina (2023; 2024), Agustin (2024; 2025), Hasibuan (2024), Maulana (2024), and other recent related literature this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities faced by brands in an era where public image is heavily intertwined with influencer behavior. Ultimately, the study seeks to expand the academic discourse on crisis communication within influencer marketing while offering practical guidance for Indonesian brands to develop proactive communication strategies that safeguard their reputation in the increasingly volatile digital ecosystem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer Marketing and Its Strategic Importance

Influencer marketing has evolved into a central pillar of contemporary brand communication. Influencers are individuals with substantial digital followings who can shape audience behavior through perceived credibility, expertise, and authenticity. According to the *Influencer Marketing Effectiveness: A Meta-Analytic Review* (2024), influencer marketing significantly impacts consumer attitudes, engagement, and purchase behavior. Findings show that influencer credibility, content authenticity, and follower characteristics are among the strongest predictors of campaign success. In Indonesia, the prevalence of social media users intensifies the strategic role of influencer marketing. Studies show that consumers tend to trust recommendations from influencers more than traditional advertisements due to parasocial relationships formed online (Maulana, Dayu & Agustin, 2024). This makes influencer partnerships highly effective in shaping brand perceptions.

Digital Media Dynamics and Public Sensitivity

The rapid expansion of short-video platforms such as TikTok significantly affects how information is consumed and shared. Febrina, Sanny, and Fagita (2024) identify that short-video content influences behavioral patterns, particularly among pre-teen audiences, indicating the persuasive power of fast-paced, algorithm-driven media. This trend contributes to the viral nature of controversies, where influencer misconduct can spread instantly. Moreover, mass media continues to play a crucial amplification role. Febrina (2023) argues that media frames sensitive issues in ways that influence societal perception and collective responses. In cases involving influencer controversies, traditional media coverage often reinforces public opinion formed on social platforms, escalating reputational risks for associated brands.

Brand Reputation and Vulnerability to Influencer Controversies

Brand reputation is a valuable intangible asset that determines consumer trust, loyalty, and market performance. Influencers, as external partners, introduce both opportunities and risks to brand reputation. When influencers engage in unethical behavior, insensitive statements, or moral violations, their associated brands may suffer guilt by association. Case studies in Indonesia demonstrate that brands often experience increased negative sentiment, product boycotts, or declining sales due to influencer-related scandals. Recent Indonesian research on reputational risk underscores that brands are highly vulnerable in the social media era due to the speed and scale of public responses (Reputational Risk in the Social Media Era,

2024). A single negative event can escalate into a full-blown crisis when amplified by digital users, trending features, and online communities.

Crisis Communication Theories and Strategic Communication Response

Crisis communication aims to protect an organization's reputation during high-risk events. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) suggests that crisis response strategies should match crisis type, severity, and stakeholder expectations. Transparency, timeliness, and emotional intelligence are key elements in maintaining trust during crises. Febrina (2023) discusses communication change strategies in organizational contexts, highlighting the importance of adaptive messaging, audience-centered communication, and leadership coordination during uncertainty. This perspective aligns with crisis communication demands when brands must respond to influencer controversies.

Additionally, Hasibuan et al. (2024) argue that strong internal communication and coordination enhance organizational effectiveness, which is crucial during crisis management. Lack of coordination may result in delayed responses, inconsistent messaging, and stronger public backlash.

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and Brand Cohesion

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) ensures message consistency across all communication channels. According to Maulana, Dayu, and Agustin (2024), IMC strengthens brand identity and perception through aligned communication strategies, making it an essential framework for crisis management. During influencer-related crises, IMC helps brands maintain coherence in official statements, social media responses, and consumer engagement activities. IMC also reinforces brand resilience, particularly for MSMEs. Agustin et al. (2025) demonstrate that strategic communication positively influences business development, internal alignment, and public trust. These findings highlight that robust communication frameworks help both large companies and MSMEs withstand reputational disruptions.

Media Sociology and Audience Perception in Crisis Situations

Media sociology provides insights into how audiences interpret messages during crises. Febrina (2023) notes that media narratives shape public discourse, particularly on sensitive issues. In the context of influencer controversies, audience reactions often involve moral judgment, emotional responses, and social pressure, all of which influence brand reputation. The user-generated nature of digital spaces adds complexity. Viral reactions, comment storms, and boycott movements often emerge spontaneously, leaving brands with limited control. Moreover, the interplay between mass media and social media creates layered reputational risks, where misinformation, exaggeration, or emotional framing may intensify crises.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze the implications of influencer controversies on brand reputation and to examine the communication strategies used by brands in managing such crises. A qualitative approach is suitable because influencer-

related crises involve complex social dynamics, public sentiment, and communication patterns that require interpretative understanding rather than numerical measurement. The qualitative descriptive design enables an in-depth exploration of real cases, focusing on how brands respond, how audiences react, and how communication strategies evolve throughout the crisis lifecycle. This approach follows recommendations in communication studies emphasizing contextual analysis, narrative interpretation, and pattern identification in crisis situations.

Data Collection

Secondary Data (Document Analysis)

Data for this research were collected through document analysis, including:

1. News articles covering influencer controversies in Indonesia
2. Official brand statements, press releases, and public apologies
3. Social media postings from brands and influencers
4. User-generated content such as comments, discussions, and online sentiment
5. Academic literature related to influencer marketing, crisis communication, media studies, and brand reputation

Sources included reputable digital news outlets, company websites, social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X), and peer-reviewed journals such as those authored by Febrina (2023; 2024), Hasibuan et al. (2024), Maulana et al. (2024), and Agustin et al. (2025).

Case Study Selection

Three cases of influencer controversies in Indonesia were selected using purposive sampling, based on the following criteria:

1. The controversy involved a widely recognized influencer.
2. The scandal generated substantial media attention and public discourse.
3. The influencer was directly affiliated with a brand partnership at the time of the controversy.
4. The brand issued an official communication response.

This sampling method allows the study to focus on cases that provide the richest insight regarding crisis development and brand communication strategies.

Data Analysis

The study applied thematic analysis to interpret and categorize data. This analytical method is widely recommended in qualitative communication research due to its flexibility in identifying recurring patterns across textual data.

Analytical Steps

1. Familiarization: Reviewing all relevant documents, social media posts, and news coverage to understand the chronology and context of each crisis.
2. Coding: Assigning codes to segments of text representing key elements such as brand response, audience reaction, influencer actions, and media framing.
3. Theme Development: Grouping codes into broader themes such as
 - o Crisis triggers

- Public sentiment escalation
- Brand communication strategy
- Media amplification
- Reputational impact

4. Cross-Case Comparison: Comparing themes across multiple cases to identify similarities, differences, and strategic patterns.
5. Interpretation: Connecting findings with existing theories such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), and communication change strategies (Febrina, 2023).

The thematic approach ensures systematic analysis while allowing room for theoretical insights and contextual interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Characteristic forms and brand reputation crises in Indonesia due to influencer involvement in controversies

The results of this study show that one of the most prominent forms of reputation crisis faced by brands in Indonesia due to influencer controversies is the rapid erosion of public trust. When an influencer becomes involved in unethical behavior such as fraud, offensive statements, legal violations, or moral scandals the public often interprets this as a reflection of the brand's poor judgment in choosing their promotional partners. This declining trust is visible through a sharp shift in online sentiment, where positive perceptions of the brand decrease almost immediately after the controversy becomes viral. Consumers begin to question the credibility, integrity, and professionalism of the brand, demonstrating that influencer misconduct has a direct and immediate impact on audience confidence.

In addition to the decline in trust, brands often encounter significant social media backlash characterized by a surge of negative comments, criticism, and sarcastic content directed at the brand. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X (Twitter) become spaces for public outrage, where users amplify the issue through mocking videos, protest hashtags, and calls for accountability. This online reaction is fast-moving and highly emotional, often intensifying within the first 24–72 hours after the controversy emerges. The virality of digital content further magnifies the crisis, as negative narratives spread faster than official brand statements, leaving companies with limited control over the unfolding discourse.

Another form of crisis identified in this study is the emergence of consumer boycott movements and reduced audience engagement with the brand. These responses often arise when consumers feel the brand has acted irresponsibly by continuing or previously engaging in partnerships with controversial influencers. As a result, consumers may reduce their interactions with brand content, unfollow official accounts, or actively avoid purchasing the brand's products or services. In some cases, these boycott movements become organized within online communities, influencing broader public behavior. This decline in engagement affects not only brand reputation but also sales performance, as consumers shift their loyalty to competitors perceived as more ethical and socially responsible.

Finally, the study finds that influencer controversies often result in long-term brand

association damage, where negative traits linked to the influencer are transferred to the brand itself. When influencers are associated with dishonesty, irresponsibility, toxic behavior, or controversial ideologies, these perceptions become intertwined with the brand, shaping public opinion even after the crisis subsides. This form of reputational harm is more enduring, as it affects how consumers recall and interpret the brand in future contexts. The lasting nature of this association highlights the importance of careful influencer selection and ongoing monitoring, demonstrating that brands must adopt more strategic, ethical, and cautious marketing communication practices to prevent similar crises in the future.

Impact of Influencer Controversies on Consumer Perception, Trust, and Loyalty

The study finds that controversies involving influencers significantly reshape consumer perceptions toward a brand, often in immediate and unfavorable ways. When an influencer becomes associated with unethical behavior such as fraud, offensive remarks, or moral misconduct—consumers frequently generalize these negative attributes to the brand they endorse. This associative transfer occurs because consumers tend to view influencers as extensions of the brand's identity and values. As a result, brands are perceived as careless, unprofessional, or lacking ethical screening mechanisms. The shift in perception is typically rapid, occurring as soon as the controversy gains visibility in digital spaces, demonstrating the strong psychological link between influencer reputation and brand image.

Influencer controversies also produce a measurable decline in consumer trust toward a brand. Trust erosion happens because consumers expect brands to maintain high standards of integrity and social responsibility when choosing promotional partners. When an influencer violates these expectations, consumers interpret it as a failure in the brand's judgment, transparency, and ethical responsibility. This loss of trust is evident through spikes in negative sentiment on social media, increased skepticism toward brand messages, and consumer demands for public clarification or corrective action. In many cases, the decline in trust persists long after the incident, indicating that influencer misconduct can have lasting reputational consequences for the brand.

A decline in trust extends further toward a reduction in consumer loyalty. The findings reveal that consumers who feel disappointed or offended by the influencer's actions often choose to distance themselves from the brand, even if they previously had strong emotional or experiential ties. This detachment appears in several forms, including reduced engagement with brand content, avoidance of brand products, and a shift toward competitor brands perceived as more credible or socially aware. Loyalty loss is particularly acute among younger digital-native consumers, who are highly responsive to online discourse and value-based marketing. This demonstrates that influencer controversies do not merely affect brand impressions temporarily but can undermine long-term customer relationships.

Overall, the extent to which influencer controversies affect consumer perception, trust, and loyalty is substantial and multidimensional. The crisis does not occur in isolation; rather, it unfolds across interconnected psychological and behavioral responses that amplify one another. Negative perception leads to decreased trust, which in turn fuels declining loyalty and purchasing intentions. The impact is further intensified by the speed and virality of social media platforms in Indonesia, where public opinion forms quickly and spreads widely. These findings

underscore that influencer controversies pose a serious threat to brand stability and necessitate proactive risk management strategies, careful influencer vetting, and transparent communication responses to mitigate long-lasting damage.

Brand Responses and Marketing Communication Strategies

The study shows that the first and most essential response brands employ during influencer-related reputation crises is the release of immediate public clarification. Brands typically issue official statements through social media, press releases, or corporate websites to distance themselves from the controversy and clarify that the influencer's behavior does not represent the brand's values. This response aims to reduce speculation, regain narrative control, and prevent the crisis from escalating further. Timeliness is crucial: brands that respond within hours are generally more successful in managing public perception, while delayed responses often worsen the crisis by allowing negative narratives to spread unchecked. In many cases, brands explicitly affirm their commitment to ethical standards, transparency, and accountability to reassure the public.

Another common strategy is the termination or suspension of partnerships with the influencer involved in the controversy. Brands often evaluate the severity of the incident and decide whether the collaboration can be ethically and strategically sustained. When the controversy is severe such as legal violations, unethical conduct, or issues that conflict with social norms brands typically choose to cut ties publicly. This decision serves two functions: it communicates the brand's ethical stance and restores consumer confidence by demonstrating decisive action. Even in less severe cases, brands may temporarily pause the partnership to reduce public tension and reassess reputational risks. Such actions signal to consumers that the brand prioritizes integrity over commercial gain.

After the initial response phase, brands often focus on restoring reputation through strategic digital engagement. This includes launching positive content campaigns, collaborating with trusted micro-influencers, and increasing corporate social responsibility (CSR) messaging. The goal is to rebuild the brand's narrative and redirect public attention toward constructive and value-driven initiatives. Brands may also engage directly with consumers by addressing concerns in comment sections, hosting Q&A sessions, or promoting behind-the-scenes transparency. These strategies help humanize the brand, show empathy, and create a sense of shared responsibility. Additionally, brands often apply sentiment analysis tools to monitor public reactions and adjust communication tactics in real time.

In the long term, brands adopt more comprehensive strategies to prevent similar crises. This includes implementing stricter influencer vetting processes, auditing influencer backgrounds, and establishing clear ethical guidelines for collaborations. Brands also integrate crisis management frameworks into their marketing communication plans, ensuring preparedness for future incidents. Some companies shift toward partnerships with smaller but more credible influencers to minimize risk, while others diversify their promotional channels to reduce dependence on a single public figure. By strengthening internal evaluation systems and prioritizing authenticity, brands aim to create a more resilient communication strategy that can withstand reputational threats and maintain consumer trust over time.

Effective Marketing Communication Strategies for Reputation Recovery

The study finds that the most effective strategy for restoring brand reputation after influencer controversies in Indonesia is the implementation of transparent and timely communication. Brands that respond quickly with clear explanations, accountability statements, and empathetic messaging are better able to regain public trust. Transparency includes acknowledging the issue, clarifying the brand's position, and explaining corrective actions without deflecting responsibility. Indonesian consumers especially digital natives value honesty and authenticity in crisis moments; therefore, delayed or vague responses often exacerbate negative sentiment. Immediate public accountability helps brands regain narrative control and reduces the spread of misinformation, making it a foundational step for successful reputation recovery.

Another highly effective strategy is strategic dissociation from the problematic influencer, combined with strong ethical positioning. When brands explicitly terminate or suspend partnerships with influencers who violate public expectations, consumers perceive the brand as principled and responsible. This ethical stance reinforces brand values, signaling that the brand prioritizes integrity over profit. In Indonesia's moral and socially sensitive cultural environment, demonstrating a firm ethical position is crucial for restoring credibility. Reinforcing this stance through value-driven campaigns, such as promoting fairness, inclusivity, or social responsibility, further strengthens the brand's commitment to ethical marketing and helps rebuild public confidence.

The findings also indicate that creating positive counter-narratives is vital in minimizing long-term damage. Brands often deploy content highlighting their strengths such as quality, innovation, or community impact to redirect attention away from the controversy. Engaging trusted micro-influencers with strong credibility and niche audiences is particularly effective in Indonesia, where consumers increasingly value authenticity over celebrity endorsement. Micro-influencers can help rebuild narrative consistency, promote favorable conversations, and amplify messages of brand reliability. Consistent, uplifting, and informative content restores balance in public discourse and gradually shifts sentiment from negative to neutral or positive.

Finally, the most sustainable and impactful strategy is long-term relationship building grounded in customer-centric engagement. Brands that invest in listening to customer concerns, responding empathetically, and involving consumers in restorative initiatives experience greater reputation recovery. This may include interactive campaigns, community support programs, loyalty rewards, or collaborative problem-solving efforts. Such engagement demonstrates commitment beyond crisis management and fosters emotional reconnection with consumers. Over time, the brand strengthens its resilience, reduces dependency on single influencers, and creates a loyal community that is less vulnerable to future reputational disruptions. In the Indonesian context—where emotional connection and community values are strong this long-term approach significantly enhances brand reputation recovery.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that influencer controversies have a profound and multidimensional impact on brand reputation in Indonesia, affecting consumer perception, trust, and loyalty in ways that extend beyond short-term sentiment. These outcomes support previous

research emphasizing the influential role of media figures in shaping public attitudes and behaviors, particularly in digital environments where information spreads rapidly (Febrina, 2023). When influencers engage in unethical or controversial behaviors, consumers often translate these actions into judgments about the brand's integrity, resulting in reputational damage that requires immediate and strategic intervention. This aligns with studies showing that communication failures and weak coordination within organizations can exacerbate public mistrust (Hasibuan et al., 2024).

Moreover, the results highlight that public anger and negative sentiment on social media serve as catalysts that intensify crisis severity. The viral nature of short video platforms and user-generated content accelerates the spread of negative narratives, making crisis management more challenging (Febrina, Sanny & Fagita, 2024). These platforms amplify emotional reactions, prompting consumers to participate in boycott movements or disengage from brand communication. The findings also reinforce the notion that brands bear responsibility for their choice of promotional partners, as influencer endorsement is perceived as a reflection of organizational values (Maulana, Dayu & Agustin, 2024).

In response to these crises, brands employ various marketing communication strategies ranging from immediate public clarification to strategic dissociation from problematic influencers. These responses are consistent with communication change strategies proposed in earlier research, which emphasize adaptability, transparency, and stakeholder engagement as key components of effective crisis management (Febrina, 2023). The strategic use of micro-influencers and positive counter-narratives also aligns with the concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC), which stresses message consistency and credibility to rebuild consumer trust (Agustin et al., 2025). These actions demonstrate that brands must adopt flexible, ethically grounded, and consumer-oriented approaches when navigating influencer-related crises.

Finally, long-term success in reputation restoration depends on brands' ability to build authentic relationships with consumers. This audience-centered approach is supported by broader communication and organizational behavior literature, which highlights the importance of empathy, community engagement, and strategic alignment (Hasibuan et al., 2024). By establishing stronger ethical standards and implementing cautious influencer selection processes, brands can minimize future crises and enhance resilience in Indonesia's competitive and culturally sensitive digital market.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that influencer controversies significantly impact brand reputation in Indonesia by negatively altering consumer perception, diminishing trust, and reducing loyalty. These crises escalate rapidly due to the dynamic nature of social media, where public discourse and emotional expressions can quickly shape brand narratives. The extent of reputational damage is influenced by consumers' expectations of ethical responsibility and authenticity in brand-influencer partnerships. Brands that respond with transparency, ethical clarity, and timely communication are more likely to regain control of public narratives and rebuild trust.

Effective strategies include issuing public clarifications, terminating problematic partnerships, deploying positive counter-narratives, and engaging trusted micro-influencers.

Long-term strategies emphasizing relationship-building, consumer engagement, and ethical marketing practices contribute to sustained reputation recovery and organizational resilience. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of strategic marketing communication and ethical decision-making in the digital age. For brands operating in Indonesia, where cultural values, community expectations, and online engagement levels are particularly strong, sensitivity, authenticity, and responsibility are essential in managing and mitigating the negative effects of influencer controversies

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