

CONSUMER TRUST DURING BRAND CRISES: INFLUENCER VS. BRAND SPOKESPERSON

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- This research aims to investigate the sourcing of the message and the responsibility for the brand crisis that affects consumer trust in the brand in brand crisis scenarios. The study examines the impact of the different message sources (brand spokesperson vs. influencer) and different levels of crisis responsibility (low vs. high) on consumer perceptions of brand trust, brand attitude, purchase intention, and source credibility.

Methodology- The research design used was experimental with a quantitative approach. 115 participants were recruited and split into a 2 × 2 between-subject factorial design. The message sourcing (brand spokesperson versus influencer) and the crisis responsibility (low versus high) factors were manipulated in the experiment across four fictional skincare brand crisis scenarios. Following exposure to the scenarios, participants filled out a structured questionnaire that assessed brand trust, brand attitude, purchase intention, and source credibility. Data analysis was performed by SPSS, descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha reliability test, chi-square test, and two-way ANOVA.

Findings- The results showed a high internal consistency for all the constructs measured, such as brand trust ($\alpha = .918$), brand attitude ($\alpha = .928$), purchase intention ($\alpha = .920$) and source credibility ($\alpha = .937$). There was a statistically significant effect on all of the dependent measures of crisis responsibility (all $p < .001$), with the low responsibility condition having higher means than the high responsibility condition. When looking at the source of the message, there was a significant effect on brand attitude ($p = .010$) and purchase intention ($p = .027$), there was no significant effect on brand trust ($p = .092$). Furthermore, no significant interaction effects were found between message source and crisis responsibility.

Conclusion- From the analysis, it can be concluded that during a crisis, more than the source of the message, the responsibility of the crisis is more influential in shaping the consumer's trust and related perceptions of the brand. While the message source has some influence on attitude and purchase intention, its impact on trust is limited. The results indicate that the perception of responsibility in times of crisis must be taken care of to maintain consumer trust and brand evaluation as the main focus of effective communication strategies.

Keywords: Brand crisis, consumer trust, crisis responsibility, influencer marketing, brand spokesperson, crisis communication, source credibility, purchase intention, brand attitude, social media.

JEL Codes: M31, M37, D12

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's digital landscape, filled with instant information through online media and social networks, brand crises have become a frequent occurrence. Brand crisis is an event that occurs unexpectedly and puts an organization's reputation, credibility and relationships with stakeholders at risk. (Ishrat et al., 2023) In those moments, the trust of the customer is one of the most important but easily lost assets for companies. Trust can be built through performance, transparency, and positive customer experience, but can be lost quickly if a company does not respond appropriately during a crisis. (Chandrasekar & Rehman, 2024) With digital media becoming so popular, it has escalated the pressure on the public to scrutinise the actions of businesses, so effective communication during a crisis is crucial to maintaining consumer trust and protecting the brand's reputation. (Jankovska, 2023)

The development of social media has completely revolutionized the way social crises are communicated, allowing for more than just one-way messaging from companies, but rather for interactive, real-time communication. Today, organisations are required to be responsive, open and consistent as consumers contribute to the development and sharing of brand information via platforms like Instagram, Facebook and X (Twitter). (Ajegbomogun, 2021; Prasetyo, 2025). Social media has taken the place of the official corporate communicator with the addition of influential third-party communicators that impact public opinion and consumer perceptions during a crisis. As a result, organisations are increasingly using digital communication strategies to respond to the growing online influence. (Lu, 2023)

Of these communication channels, social media influencers and traditional brand spokespersons are two standout sources of crisis communication. By being authentic and relatable and using non-rigid communication, influencers may cultivate a relationship with their audience that allows them to shape consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions. (Helme, 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021) If they are perceived as credible, their message acceptance and trust-building may improve if their values are congruent with the brand's values. (Claeys & De Waele, 2022). On the other hand, brand spokespeople - executive and public relations - are seen as more powerful, professional, and responsible when they communicate, which can help to bring some comfort to consumers, as they see that the organization is taking responsibility for the crisis. But they might come across as less easy to relate to in formal communication, especially when it comes to digital consumers. (Coleman, 2023; Goodwin, 2025)

The concept of source credibility has been shown to have a significant impact on consumer reactions in times of brand crisis. Whether the source is an influencer or an official spokesperson, consumers are more likely to take crisis messages as true when the source is seen as knowledgeable, credible and trustworthy. (Van Zoonen & Van Der Meer, 2015) In addition, timely, transparent, and consistent communication has been proven to lower negative perceptions, aid in trust rebuilding, and enhance brand recovery. Although influencers have increasingly been used in crisis communication, there is little empirical research that directly compares the effectiveness of influencer-led communication to traditional spokesperson-led communication with regard to rebuilding consumer trust. (Mgbe-Ordinma & Arijeniwa, 2024)

Hence, this study attempts to examine the effectiveness of social media influencers and traditional brand spokespersons in dealing with brand crises and consumer trust. Specifically, it reviews consumer perceptions of these communication sources, explores their impact on consumer behavioral reactions and trust, and pinpoints factors that affect the credibility of communication during a crisis. The results will be useful for organizations to look at when deciding which crisis communication strategies will be successful in building trust between the organization and its consumers and safeguarding long-term brand reputation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the present study theorized that the degree of organizational responsibility affects how stakeholders view the situation and the resulting effectiveness of the organization's crisis response strategies. Organizations should tailor communication strategies to the nature of the crisis to mitigate damage to their reputation and re-capture the trust of stakeholders, SCCT said. Recent studies have shown that the source delivering the crisis message is as important as the message itself and can significantly influence the consumer's perception of the crisis. For instance, Mishra and Maheshwari (2025) suggested that the selection of a communication source is highly effective for both the context and the recovery outcomes of the crisis.

It is well known that trust of the consumers is one of the major factors influencing successful crisis recovery. It has been proven in numerous studies that transparency, authenticity and regular, honest communication build consumer trust and brand loyalty. According to (Kanjor & Doshi, 2026), genuine digital communication, which depicts messages in an honest and transparent way with storytelling, increases trust and emotional connection with consumers, while overly promotional messages make customers less credible. Likewise, (Korpilaakso, 2025) stated that open communication and honest remedial efforts are crucial during the process of regaining trust after a high-stakes product-harm crisis. Researches also show that in crisis, the positive impact of CSR measures and open communication within an organization on the corporate image and confidence of customers (Chen et al., 2021; Yang & Battocchio, 2021)

Social media has also revolutionized crisis communication with the emergence of influencers as key communication intermediaries. Influencers tend to relate more personally and relationally, which helps them to impact consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions. (Abu-Alhaja & Elsayy, 2026) showed that the role of brand trust is a mediator between the influencer's authenticity and communication skills and brand loyalty. Similarly, (OUADDI, 2025) argued that the use of an influencer messenger of an apology leads to higher levels of consumer forgiveness, higher levels of trust, and higher levels of purchase intentions post-crisis than a traditional brand apology due to its authenticity and credibility. Still, the effectiveness of an influencer relies on qualities like their knowledge, beauty, credibility, and congruence with the brand they are promoting (Fernandes Crespo & Tille, 2024). On the other hand, the low credibility effect of highlighting the artificial aspect of virtual influencers has been studied as a negative factor on both the influencer's credibility and consumers' trust in the brand (Muniz et al., 2024)

The traditional brand representative is an integral part of a crisis communication team as they are responsible for providing the organization's authoritative, professional and accountable response. According to the findings, the right approach to crisis response, such as the appropriate apology type and responsibility communication, can have a significant impact on consumer trust and reconciliation (Sandstig & Eriksson, 2024). Additionally, emotional and promise-based corporate reactions have been found to be more effective in creating positive electronic word-of-mouth and in rebuilding consumer confidence in the company during crisis situations (Wang et al., 2021).

While there have been a variety of studies that explore different aspects of crisis communication, influencer marketing, and consumer trust, the majority of research has been conducted on influencer communication in isolation and brand communication in isolation. Very limited research has directly compared the effectiveness of an influencer and a spokesperson in a crisis communication campaign and also taken into account the crisis responsibility of both and how they impact brand trust, brand attitude, purchase intention and source credibility all at the same time. This study aims to fill this gap by conducting an experimental study to compare these communication sources with varying amounts of crisis responsibility and provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer responses during brand crises.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The research design in this study was quantitative with an experimental method using a 2x2 between-subjects factorial design to investigate the effect of message source (brand spokesperson and social media influencer) and the level of responsibility (low and high) of the crisis on consumer perceptions during a brand crisis. The four fictional skincare brand crisis scenarios were created, and participants were randomly

allocated to one of four experimental groups: Brand + Low Responsibility, Brand + High Responsibility, Influencer + Low Responsibility, and Influencer + High Responsibility.

The number of participants was 115 (convenience sampling), and they finished an online self-administered questionnaire. The survey was composed of demographic questions followed by validated measurement scales adapted from previous studies for measuring brand trust (3 items), brand attitude (3 items), purchase intention (3 items) and source credibility (4 items). The responses were measured on a seven-point Likert scale from 1-not at all to 7-extremely.

The IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27) software was used for analyzing data. Participant characteristics and study variables were summarized using descriptive statistics, and internal consistency of the measurement scales was obtained using Cronbach's alpha. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine the main and interaction effects of message source and crisis responsibility on the dependent variables. The p-value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Table 1: Demographics

Variables	Categories	N	(%)	Variables	Categories	N	(%)
Gender	Male	56	48.7	Social Media Use	Daily	50	43.5
	Female	59	51.3		Weekly	18	15.7
Age					Rarely	21	18.3
					Never	26	22.6
				Follow Influencers	Yes	55	47.8
					No	60	52.2
Education Level	18–24	38	33.0	Message Source	Brand	67	58.3
	25–29	31	27.0		Influencer	48	41.7
	30–34	27	23.5				
	35–39	19	16.5				
Crisis Responsibility	High School	22	19.1	Perceived Preventability	Not at all	7	6.1
	Undergraduate	35	30.4		Very slightly	47	40.9
	Postgraduate	30	26.1		Slightly	20	17.4
	Doctorate	28	24.3		Moderately	30	26.1
Experimental Condition	Low	70	60.9		Considerably	11	9.6
	High	45	39.1	Crisis Message Source	Brand Official Account	67	58.3
					Social Media Influencer	48	41.7
Total	Brand + Low	47	40.9	Total		115	100
	Brand + High	20	17.4				
	Influencer + Low	23	20.0				
	Influencer + High	25	21.7				

Table 2: Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Items	Cronbach's α	Mean	SD
Brand Trust	3	.918	3.55	0.91
Brand Attitude	3	.928	3.54	0.92
Purchase Intention	3	.920	3.48	0.91
Source Credibility	4	.937	3.45	0.87

Table 3: Experimental Condition Means and Two-Way ANOVA Results

Dependent Variable	Brand + Low	Brand + High	Influencer + Low	Influencer + High	Message (p)	Crisis (p)	Interaction (p)
Brand Trust	4.07 $\pm$ 0.68	3.00 $\pm$ 0.75	3.82 $\pm$ 0.71	2.76 $\pm$ 0.69	.092	<.001	.988
Brand Attitude	4.07 $\pm$ 0.70	3.10 $\pm$ 0.77	3.68 $\pm$ 0.73	2.73 $\pm$ 0.72	.010*	<.001*	.920
Purchase Intention	3.97 $\pm$ 0.72	3.06 $\pm$ 0.74	3.68 $\pm$ 0.70	2.69 $\pm$ 0.70	.027*	<.001*	.802
Source Credibility	3.84 $\pm$ 0.65	3.16 $\pm$ 0.71	3.80 $\pm$ 0.66	2.64 $\pm$ 0.68	.052	<.001*	.090

4. FINDINGS

Demographic characteristics of the participants and the distribution of the samples across the experimental conditions are presented in table 1. The participants included 115 respondents with a roughly equal distribution evenly split by gender, age, education level, social media usage, message source, and crisis responsibility conditions.

Table 2 indicates that the internal consistencies of all the measurement scales were good, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .918 to .937, which is higher than the recommended .70. The descriptive statistics further indicate moderate mean scores for brand trust ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.91$), brand attitude ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.92$), purchase intention ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.91$), and source credibility ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.87$).

The mean scores for the four experimental conditions are shown in table 3 with the results of the two-way ANOVA. The Brand + Low Responsibility condition had the highest scores on all dependent variables, and the Influencer + High Responsibility condition had the lowest scores on all dependent variables. The crisis responsibility had a significant impact on brand trust, brand attitude, purchase intention (all $p < .001$) and source credibility ($p < .01$). Brand attitude was significantly affected by the message source ($p = .010$) as was purchase intent ($p = .027$) but not source credibility ($p = .052$) or brand trust ($p = .092$). Furthermore, no differences were found between interaction effects of message source and crisis responsibility, suggesting that perceived crisis responsibility was the most important factor affecting consumers' responses in a brand crisis.

5. CONCLUSION

The current study assessed the influence of the message's source and the level of crisis responsibility on consumer trust in the brand in the context of a brand crisis. The results showed that crisis responsibility was found to have the most significant influence on brand trust, brand attitude, purchase intention, and source credibility, followed by the influence of the crisis type (low responsibility crises had significantly more positive consumer responses). The results showed that while brand attitude and brand purchase intention were significantly influenced by the message source, the same was not true for the perceptions of brand trust and source credibility. The findings that were found in this study support the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) that suggests that during a crisis situation, transparency, accountability and speed of communication are important factors for organizations to consider. Influencers can help with crisis communication, but it is important to have an official brand spokesperson to provide credible organizational response. To further validate the findings, more participants, a wider range of participants, and a more naturalistic crisis scenario should be employed, as should other factors including brand loyalty, emotions and perceived risk.

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