

The Availability Trap: How the Availability Bias and Fitness Influencers Mould Followers Behaviour

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Abstract

The advent of social media has opened up a gateway of opportunities to provide people with information and means to a healthier lifestyle. However, due to this, there has also been a change in what people consider to be “normal”. With social media apps like Instagram and TikTok, people fall prey to the “Availability Bias” in which individuals rely on readily available information, making conclusions and assumptions, even if they are not necessarily accurate or credible. As viewers assume the “top 1%” to be normal, there is an increase in depression and anxiety, and a need for instant gratification of reaching goals in the quickest way possible. This study is being conducted to understand how we can prevent individuals from falling for the Availability Bias and steps to educate ourselves about unsubstantiated promotions on social media.

Pedagogical Objectives

- To understand the Availability Bias that individuals might inadvertently come under and how to respond accordingly.
- To understand the amount of time individuals spend on social media and how it affects their mood as well as their relationship with themselves.
- To understand the steps to be taken while spending time on social media and how to protect oneself from spurious information.

Case Positioning and Setting

This case is relevant for Undergraduate and Postgraduate students who are studying Behavioural Finance as well as students in the fields of Marketing and Human Psychology.

Keywords: Social Media, Availability Bias, Influencers, Fitness, Body Image

History

Social media has been on the rise since the early 2000s with the inception of apps like MySpace and Yahoo, and the number of users has been growing exponentially year after year. More popular apps like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook have users in the billions and take a shorter period to gain the number of users. For example, TikTok launched in 2016, and by mid-2018 had already reached half a billion users. Looking at the data, we can see that social media apps are more popular with the younger population groups. There is a direct correlation between the age of users and the amount of time they spend on social media apps.

In the US, adults spend more than 6 hours on average daily on social media apps. A survey done by the Pew Research Center found that adults from age 18 to 29 in the US are more likely to get information via social media rather than newspapers or news sites. They have also reported being online ‘almost constantly’ (Ortiz-Ospina, 2023)[1].

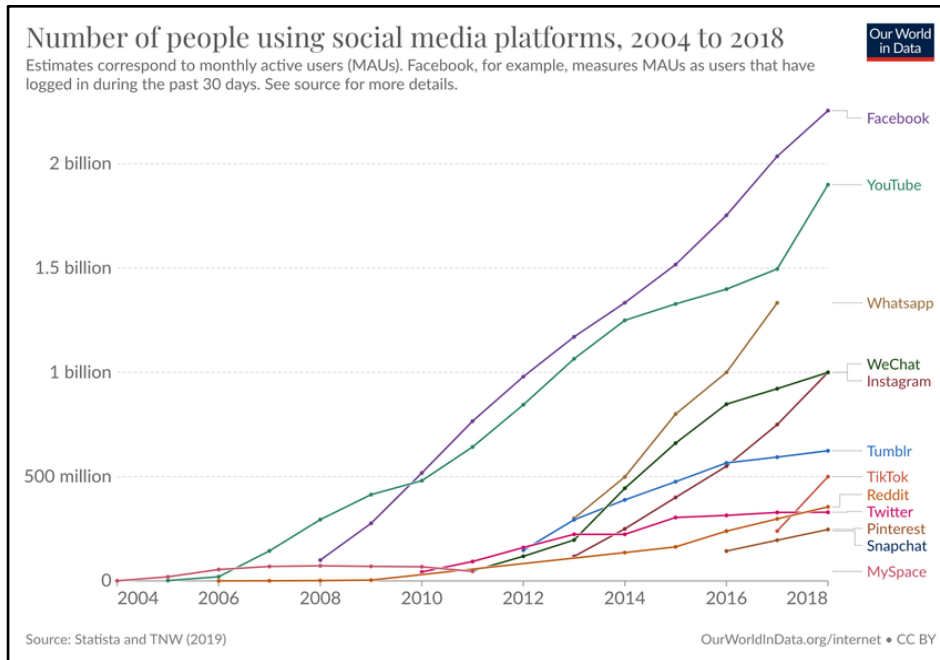


Exhibit A: Use of Social Media over the last decade. (Source: Statista)

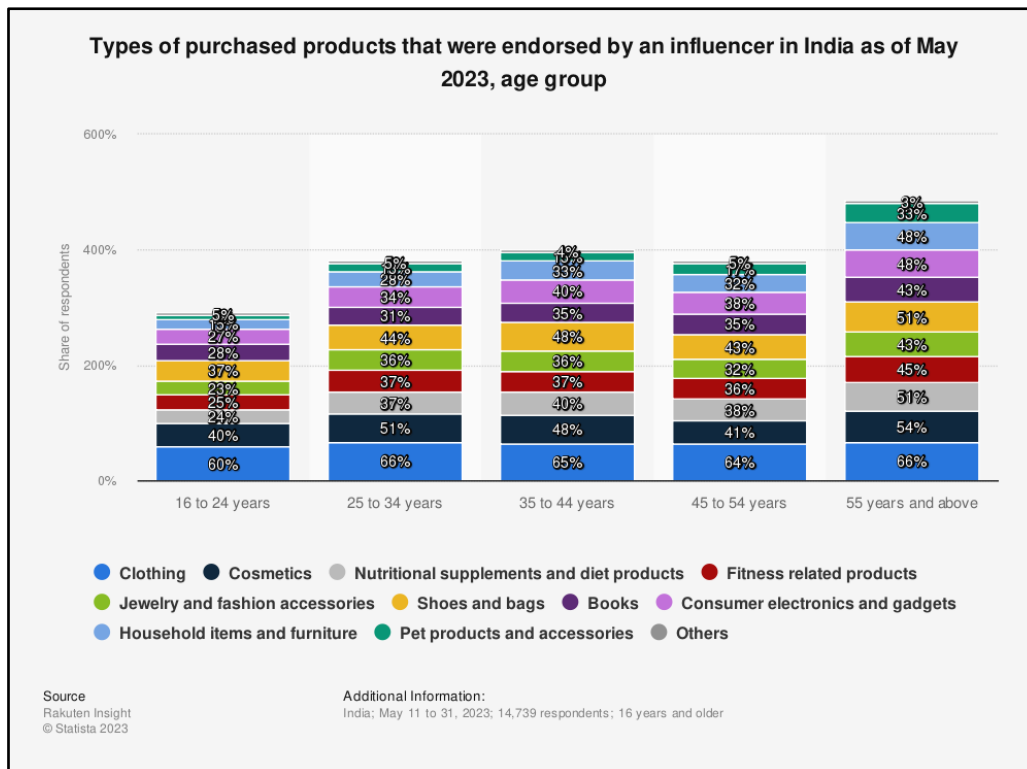


Exhibit B: Distribution of fitness related purchases over different demographics. (Source: Statista)

Non Regulated Social Media Marketing

The rise of social media is an important example of how social behaviours can change so drastically in a short period. Something that is a must in our everyday lives today, was incomprehensible less than a few decades ago. With these changes, there is even a question regarding the effects social media brings, especially the negative ones.

Fitness Influencers who have amassed a large following on social media platforms, often do so because of their uniqueness and being able to provide something that is not easily attainable. However, due to the number of users on these platforms and the algorithm promoting similar content, people assume that the influencers with the best physiques and sculpted bodies are the new normal and easily achievable, when in fact, it is not. These are usually obtained due to a mixture of hard work and genetics and in most cases due to the use of PEDs (Performance Enhancing Drugs) or Steroids which is not openly talked about by many using these platforms.

This leads to companies and influencers exploiting customers and followers by making fake promises about their products and supplements which supposedly will help them reach their goals quicker, even if it is unsubstantiated or does not work at all. Not only that, this also leads to the promotion of PEDs as well as steroids, which provide short-term results, but have adverse health effects later in life.

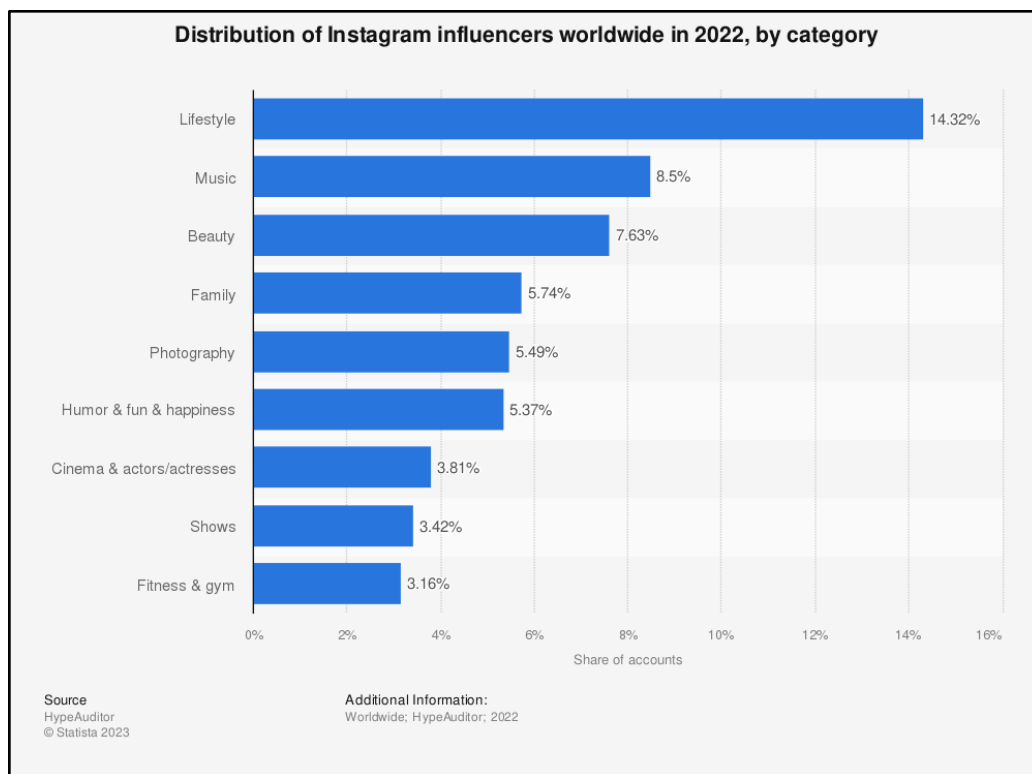


Exhibit C: Lifestyle Influencers take up the majority share on Instagram (Source: Statista)

Influencers in India as well as abroad have tried to make a profit from their followers, some of whom have succeeded, whereas some have been caught and have lost all their credibility. Indian Instagram fitness coach by the name of Rohit Chauhan was exposed by another creator named John Dorsey who through scientific evidence revealed that Chauhan was using steroids. **Khemani, P.(2023, October 11)[2].**

This caused the fitness community to strip him of all credibility. However, he still has a considerable amount of followers, with more than seven lakh as of January 2024. New followers may not know about

his history and there may be attempts to cover it completely as well. This may lead to them falling for the availability bias and inevitably, to the consequences mentioned above.

Another famous US-based fitness influencer called Brian Johnson, also known as the “Liver King” has a huge following on social media with more than 50 lakh followers over multiple platforms. He is known for promoting an ancestral lifestyle and a diet that consists mainly of meat and different organs. He claimed that he achieved his physique by sticking to a caveman-like lifestyle and eating only meat, mostly raw, claiming it is all natural. However, he was exposed as well and later made a video revealing that he did in fact, use steroids. Before he was exposed, he was making \$100 million a year by selling protein and animal supplements under his own brand to the large following he had amassed. **Hearing, A. (2022, December 6)[3].**

The Future Ahead

As Gen Z and Gen Alpha are the largest consumers of Social Media, it is easy for us to fall for the availability trap, which can lead to situations of anxiety, depression, negative body image, and overall poor relationship with oneself.

The rules and regulations regarding social media and influencer marketing are still vague, hence we need to understand each and every aspect of the content we are consuming and the influencers we are following. We should do our due diligence before coming to conclusions and most importantly remind ourselves that content on social media and by influencers is rarely the true picture.

In his book, “Same as Ever”, Morgan Housel[4] says, “*Social Media today adds a new element, in which everyone in the world can see the lifestyles, often inflated, faked and airbrushed, of other people. You compare yourself to your peers through a curated highlight reel of their lives, from where positives are embellished and negatives are hidden from view.*”

However, as time passes, people will become more astute and less susceptible to the Availability Trap. We can already see how some fake content creators have been exposed, but there is still a long way to go as many are still profiting from young audiences' naivety.

Our job as individuals is to be aware of such situations and to be a role model for the coming generations, by showcasing the truth and hard work behind results rather than making them feel worse about themselves in exchange for more fame and wealth.

Assignment Questions

1. Discuss Strategies that individuals can implement to identify and critically evaluate the credibility of information available to them on social media platforms by influencers.
2. Evaluate the existing rules and regulations regarding Social media and Influencer Marketing or the lack thereof in terms of the Indian market.
3. Discuss if Generation Alpha will be more or less susceptible to falling for the Availability Bias.
4. Discuss options about what academic institutions can do about incorporating Social Media literacy into their curriculums.

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