

# The Potential of Influencer Marketing in India for Enhancing Brand Promotion and Recognition amid the Covid-19 Crisis

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## Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant rise in screen time and online shopping was observed as a consequence of the nationwide lockdown. Consequently, many brands and enterprises turned to influencer marketing to capitalise on this online opportunity. Influencer marketing serves as a modern and robust marketing tool aimed at attracting the millennial demographic, particularly in the country. It can be viewed as an extension of conventional word-of-mouth marketing strategies. Consumers have instant access to a wide array of products at their fingertips, thanks to the advancements in smartphones and emerging communication and information technologies. This study seeks to explore the impact of social media influencers on enhancing brand visibility through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and their influence on consumers' purchasing behaviour during and after the pandemic. The research approach is a mixed method, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Within the quantitative research paradigm, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The researcher also delved into two theoretical frameworks, namely the two-step flow theory and social learning theory, to provide a more conceptual understanding of the research domain. The insights gathered from this study will not only benefit academic researchers but also enable businesses to gain a comprehensive comprehension of consumers and modern digital marketing trends.

**Keywords:** Influencer marketing, Brand Promotion, Brand Recognition, COVID-19 pandemic, ICT.

## Introduction

Advertisements have historically utilised renowned personalities and well-known celebrities to endorse their products. The practice of celebrity endorsement emerged as a widely adopted strategy to engage consumers on a personalised level. A well-known figure's endorsement of a specific product or service can significantly elevate the brand's prestige and sales figures. In the context of India, consumers exhibit trust and an aspirational inclination towards emulating their favourite celebrities, which contributes to the current prosperity of influencer marketing. Esteemed brand ambassadors with a substantial fan base possess the capacity to generate substantial brand equity. The proliferation of brand ambassadors and celebrity endorsements in the digital sphere commenced with the rise of the internet, primarily propelled by the domain of digital marketing. In contrast to conventional marketing methods, influencer marketing has transcended global boundaries, flourishing without constraints of geographical location. Positioned as a potent contemporary marketing tool, influencer marketing effectively targets the millennial

demographic. Furthermore, it can be construed as an evolution of traditional word-of-mouth marketing endeavours. The contemporary landscape, characterised by the prevalence of smartphones and advancements in communication technologies, offers consumers unparalleled access to a diverse array of products and services. While consumers are presented with a multitude of options for their purchases, their attention span remains limited. Consequently, the development of engaging advertisements is imperative to captivate the audience. The digital domain, particularly social media platforms, represents the future of marketing, prompting most brands to enhance their online presence. Social media influencers, individuals boasting a substantial following on their profiles, exert considerable influence on their audience. Brands leverage social media influencers to engage diverse audiences on a personal level effectively. These influencers curate content tailored for various markets, including niche segments.

In the realm of beauty, lifestyle, fitness, and more, brands have the opportunity to engage with influencers who align with their product offerings, thereby enhancing the credibility of the promotional content. The era of social media marketing witnessed a surge in relevance during and after the COVID-19 outbreak in India. Numerous brick-and-mortar establishments transitioned online in response to the pandemic, striving to outshine their rivals in a scenario where nationwide lockdowns prevailed. The efficacy of traditional marketing was notably constrained, leading to a pronounced upsurge in the prevalence of social media influencers amidst the pandemic, owing to escalated screen time on digital platforms. Integrating influencer marketing into both conventional and digital advertising mediums, encompassing sponsored posts, pop-up advertising, and other strategies, is imperative to harness the advantages in this dynamically evolving digital landscape (Khamis et al. 2017).

Influencers play a pivotal role in endorsing products or services, cultivating brand identity, and fostering a relationship of trust and affinity between the brand and its clientele. As we advance from an era of ambiguity regarding purchased goods' origins, production processes, and delivery mechanisms, the contemporary landscape boasts transparency from production to distribution, instilling consumers with a profound sense of assurance and brand loyalty. The classification of influencers into Nano, Micro, Macro, and Mega categories is contingent upon the magnitude of their social media following (Misshka Gupta, 2021). An influencer, by definition, is an individual who endorses products or services, exerting influence on a substantial audience. Consumers actively seek out endorsements or marketing initiatives by influencers across social media platforms to facilitate informed purchase decisions. This engagement engenders a feeling of inclusivity and closeness, fostering a connection between consumers and social media influencers who are perceived as relatable figures. In contrast to conventional celebrity endorsements, influencer marketing imbues a sense of authenticity, with the primary aim being the utilisation of social media influencers to disseminate a brand's message and establish connections with potential consumers. Endowed with a sizable following on social media, influencers are deemed as credible and persuasive entities within specific niche domains (Sudha & Sheena, 2017).

### **Aim and Objectives**

**Aim:** To understand the role of social media influencers in advancing brand recognition using ICT and their impact on consumers' purchase behaviour during the pandemic.

### **Objectives:**

1. To achieve insight into influencer marketing and the impact of ICT on brand loyalty in the Indian market.
2. To critically review how influencer marketing contributes to brand promotion, recall and recognition

in India during the pandemic.

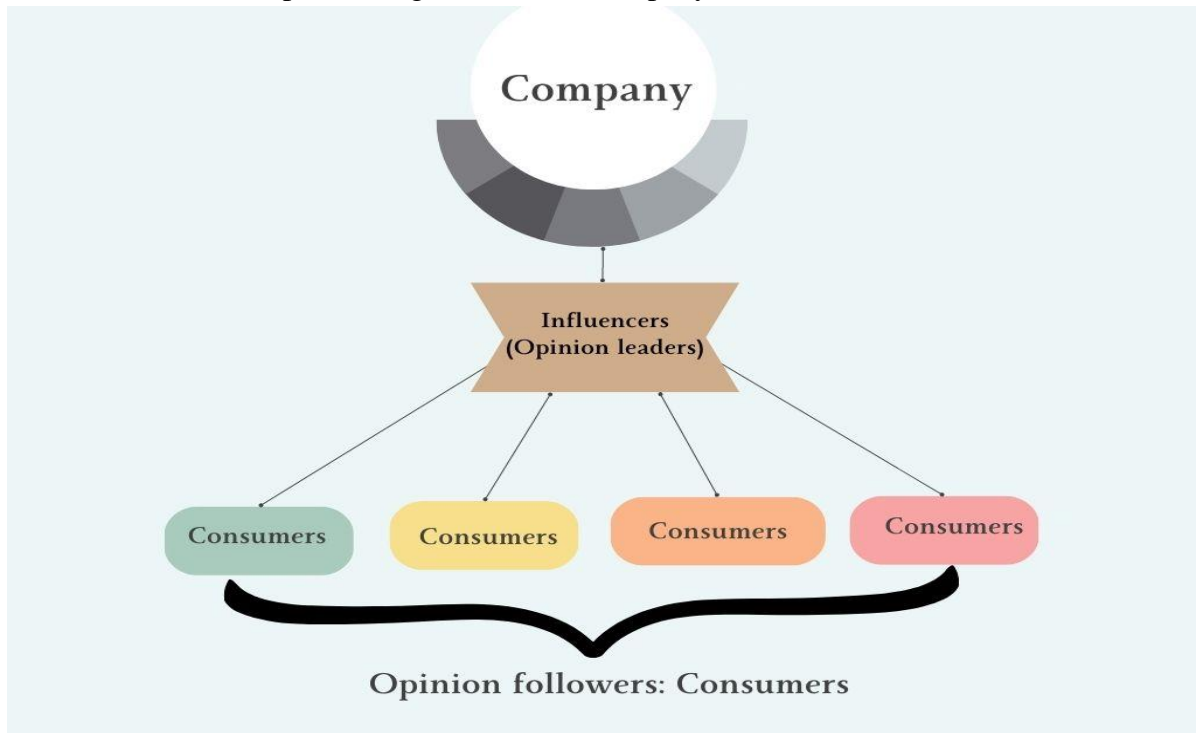
3. To explore the recent trends and shifts in marketing in the Age of the digital retail revolution.
4. To analyse social media consumers' buying behaviour and patterns.

**Theoretical framework**

**Two-step flow theory**

This theory suggests that mass media do not directly influence people; instead, people are influenced by opinion leaders who consume mass media content regularly. Social persuasion takes place when the opinion leader influences the opinion followers. Opinion leaders actively decode and regularly expose themselves to media content. They interpret the media and put them in a box of context. Further, they passively influence the opinion followers and filter the information according to their experience, understanding and, in some cases, biases. Opinion followers are passive consumers of the media message who do not form opinions.

In this paper, the two-step flow theory and model are very relevant as the social media influencers are opinion leaders, and the consumers are like opinion followers. The influencers actively form media content, like advertisements, to promote a brand's product or service. The opinion leaders influence the opinion followers, which are the consumers. Here, the brand companies take the role of the media from how the opinion leaders construct their primary opinion. The brands want the influencers (opinion leaders) to promote their brand in a positive light and in the company's best interest.



**Figure 1: Two-step flow theory. (Source: Authors)**

**Social learning theory**

Albert Bandura proposed the social learning theory. He suggests that learning occurs through imitation, observation and modelling. New behaviours can be adopted by imitating other behaviours. The theory stresses the nature of humans to learn and adapt to their environment. Socialising agents like family, peers, famous personalities and celebrities play a major role in influencing the people around them.

In this paper, social learning theory put forward social media influencers as key socialising agents who influence the behaviour of their followers. The followers try to imitate and observe the influencers and attempt to duplicate their lifestyle, way of talking, body language, etc. The brands tap into the potential of influencers to influence their followers and other social media audiences by promoting their brand's product or service through them. When the influencers promote a brand, the followers passively consume it and make a favourable purchase decision.

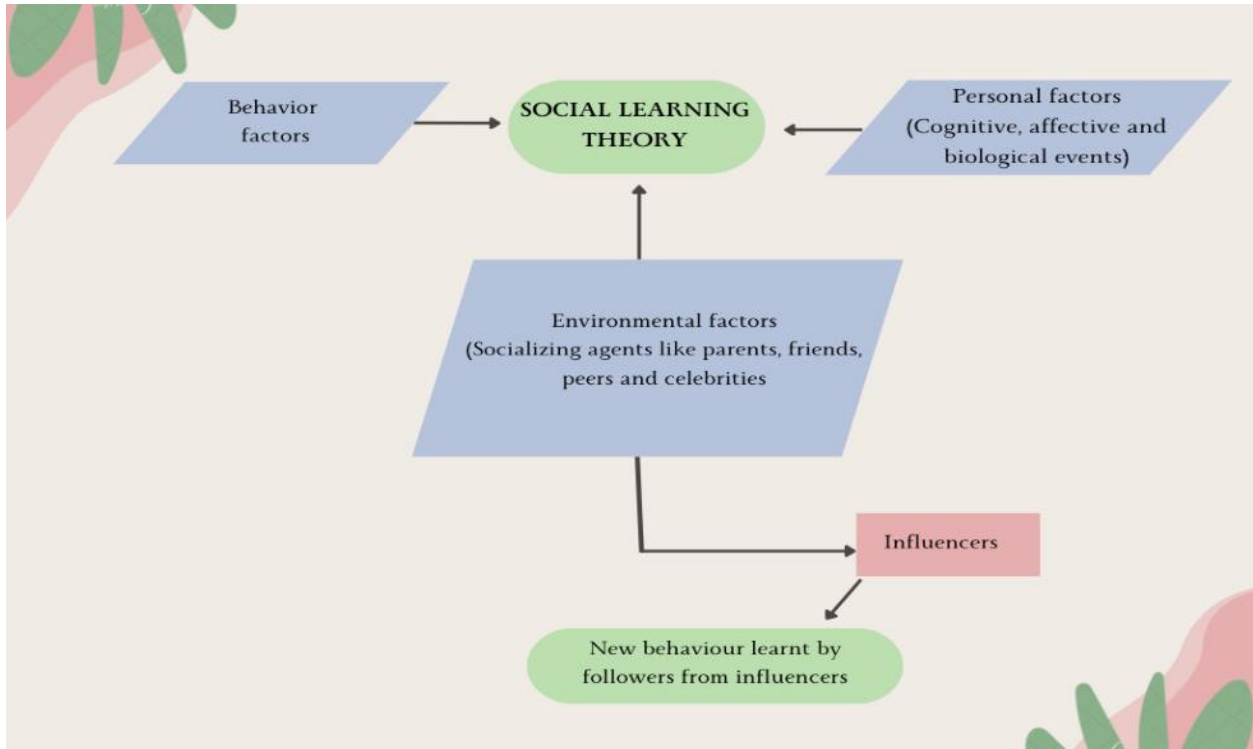


Figure 2: Social Learning Theory. (Source: Authors)

### Background and Related Research

- The lifestyle and electronics sectors significantly impact young people's purchasing habits. Most young people invest their money in these two industries. With the aid of influencers, lifestyle does a wonderful job of producing visuals for food, fitness, organic products, etc. Almost all influencers frequently promote electronics on numerous media. Influencers are a good example of how social media advertising is done subtly, almost subconsciously. The public has been affected by this kind of advertising for a long time. Instead of only appealing to the logical side of the consumer, it should be interactive, engaging, and create a relationship. The sway of social media influencers on Gen Z's purchasing habits for both lifestyle and electronics items is enormous. Influencer marketing surpasses conventional marketing methods in terms of reach. Social media influencers have the power to influence the mentalities of both male and female Gen Z customers with regard to buying products. Influencers' endorsement conjures favourable sentiments towards the brand, thus stimulating consumer purchase intent. (Nimish Kadam et al., 2021)
- As a result of the internet's technological empowerment, the sources of information distribution have undergone a tremendous shift. Research shows that consumers trust bloggers and reviews more than salespeople and businesses. Bloggers have evolved into trustworthy internet speakers because of their persistent efforts in numerous disciplines. Before making a purchase, bloggers are likely to use the data

provided by the related customers while evaluating the services or goods. Consumers can use Web 2.0 tools to share their knowledge and experiences and purchase across various platforms, such as websites, online communities, personal blogs, and independent websites. When online users offer first-hand knowledge about a certain product, other users can check out their comments to evaluate its features before buying it. (Dhoha A Alsaleh 2017)

- Many individuals turned to social media as the pandemic ravaged the globe like a wrecking ball to express themselves through varied content on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and other platforms. They attracted lucrative brand collaborations that have grown into a full marketing prospect in the marketing business as they gained traction and popularity among users, who are flooding the internet spaces even more than usual. Regardless of size, many businesses have abandoned all other marketing strategies to invest in influencer marketing, a billion-dollar industry. Influencers were expertly divided into niches and areas of interest, which were also linked with the recent rise of influencer marketing. Businesses in a certain niche now find contacting influencers who provide content in that area simpler. The introduction part of the piece clarifies the idea of influencer advertising and its functioning process. It characterises influencers as individuals who possess a substantial social media following and can sway people's buying behaviour through their posts. Furthermore, the piece highlights that influencer marketing transcends conventional marketing practices and aims to establish a brand image while fostering a trustworthy bond between the audience, influencer, and brand. The preface further recognises the ubiquity of social media across all age groups, particularly among young people, and how users have morphed into influencers through their online activities and content. The affirmation put forth by the article that influencer marketing has significantly impacted consumer purchasing behaviour is not supported by the evidence accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study performed by the report exposed that over 50% of the subjects had a belief in the influence of influencer marketing on their purchase decisions and their outlook on marketing methods. Besides, the article undermines the effectiveness of influencer marketing in impacting the buying decisions of a vast majority of consumers. Numerous consumers who regularly use social media have admitted to being exposed to influencer marketing content daily, making them indirect targets of various advertisements featured on social media platforms. (Misshka Gupta 2021)

- The emergence of social media celebrities (also known as influencers) is becoming more widespread as social media and the internet become more pervasive. The rise of new online "celebrities" is not far behind in Africa and Nigeria. It is crucial to establish the effectiveness of influencer marketing as a strategy for promoting brands and sales because brands and advertisers are increasingly using social media influencers as brand influencers. According to the study, influencer marketing efficiently drives some quick sales but less so when boosting post-engagement. It is important to ensure that customers interact with marketers to obtain relevant information influencing their purchasing decisions. Influencer marketing refers to advertising that uses a person's social media following and Influence to promote a brand, a cause, or a product. It entails reaching out to a social media user or page that marketers believe is pertinent to their goods or services and negotiating a condition that permits influencers to market goods or services to their thousands or millions of followers. (Yosra Jarrar, 2020)

- The proliferation of social media over the past five years has further altered purchasing and selling strategies. Customers can share their comments and experiences with products and businesses with friends on websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. To reduce negative word-of-mouth that could easily

spread through social media platforms to other potential customers, businesses are now more than ever required to provide great client experiences. (Sudha et al. 2017)

- We have been living in the digitisation era for the past few years. The world is constantly changing and in motion. Everywhere, in the majority of industries and every aspect of our everyday lives, there is digitalisation. Our generation, often referred to as Generation Z and described as a "group of people who were born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s," has been influenced by technology such as phones, computers, software, social media, and home appliances., which is described as "made of people who were born during the crossover between Generation Z and the new age," is intensely connected. The following generation, generation Alpha, will be even more connected. Young people, children, teenagers, and adults from this generation have been raised in a digital world and use it regularly. The advent of the internet coincided with the birth of Generation Z, and Generation Alpha, which began in 2010, witnessed the introduction of the iPad and Instagram. Both generations lived during a time of quickly advancing technologies. Companies recognised this and incorporated it into their strategies to be even more competitive because Generation Alpha "had already affected the trend of marketing, technology, and objectives of their millennial parent". (Noemie Gelati et al. 2022)

- Marketing professionals must concentrate on choosing and utilising the appropriate influencers to boost brand engagement by determining the target demographic to which the communication would be pertinent. Although recommendations from friends or family are consistently ranked as the most reliable information source, consumers' perceptions of influencers as an extension of their friends suggest that the question to ask is not "Why should I use influencer marketing," but rather "How should I use influencer marketing." According to the research, influencers can help create customer connections by fostering empathy and relationships. Yet, as personal relevance is more important than peer influence, using the right influencers for a particular product category is essential. It will, therefore, be challenging for marketers to find appropriate influencers for the intended target demographic who can advance the brand story while forging strong bonds with the followers. When the objective is to enhance conversions, influencer marketing should only be used occasionally. The study discovered that the outlook towards influencers and perceived behaviour control positively impacted consumer behaviour, whereas the role of peers had no influence. Personal significance, motivation, and trust negatively affected conduct, while perceived risk held no weight. The compatibility of the product with the influencer was a vital criterion for customers, as they followed certain types of influencers for distinct product categories. Successful influencer marketing depends on identifying the appropriate influencer who can provide customised advice, stories, and recommendations to attract and engage the audience. The paper describes the aim of the research, which is to determine the primary factors of influencer marketing that affect consumer behaviour using the theory of planned behaviour and social learning theory. The research revealed that the attitude towards influencers and perceived behaviour control had a beneficial effect on consumer behaviour. In contrast, personal relevance, inspiration, and trust positively affected behaviour. The paper is designed to be exploratory research that identifies the antecedents of millennial consumers' behaviour towards influencer marketing. The research used the theory of planned behaviour and social learning theory to identify the principal factors that influence consumer behaviour. The research found that the outlook towards influencers and perceived behaviour control positively impacted consumer behaviour, whereas the role of peers had no influence. Personal significance, motivation, and trust negatively affected conduct, while perceived risk held no weight. Product compatibility with the influencer was a vital criterion for customers, as they followed certain types of influencers for distinct product categories.

Successful influencer marketing depends on identifying the appropriate influencer who can provide customised advice, stories, and recommendations to attract and engage the audience. The research concludes that influencer marketing is a modern concept that is best analysed using qualitative methodology, and further investigation is necessary to comprehend the constructs that can be evaluated. (Anjali Chopra et al. 2020)

- The purpose of the current study was to conceptualise and place social media influencers as a unique sort of child-targeted advertising source. Influencers are essentially very well-liked and respected peers. Children are exposed to embedded advertising techniques while watching YouTube or reading through their social media apps, which appear in social media influencers' enjoyable content. The benefits of both celebrity endorsement and eWOM are combined in influencer marketing. The (marketing) words they transmit are seen as extremely credible word of mouth rather than advertising because of their perceived authenticity (i.e., they have no financial interests). On the other hand, children look up to well-known influencers who have achieved some level of celebrity status and are willing to identify with them while adopting their lives, attitudes, and beliefs. Those about the products that appear on their social media outlets. (Marijke De Veirman et al. 2019)

- The data conclude that most social media influencers successfully influence teenagers, primarily active on social media. Because of this, influencer marketing tactics can take advantage of the connections between followers and influencers who are connected to cultures and lifestyles. Additionally, the influencers can have a greater impact on their followers between the ages of 11 and 15 since they have stated that they plan to buy practically everything their favourite influencers are advertising on social media. Moreover, according to the survey study completed in this research paper, it has been determined that gender can also play a vital part, as female teenagers can be impacted by the influencers more. (Sweta Leena Hota 2022)

- In light of current market trends, enterprises have increasingly adopted influencer endorsements to boost brand content. In line with data from an influencer marketing platform, the majority of consumers, approximately 92%, tend to trust influencers rather than conventional celebrity or commercial endorsements. In 2019, companies spent around \$8 billion on influencers for the sake of sponsored social media content, long-term collaborations, and affiliate program commissions. Some reports indicate that influencer marketing can potentially yield a return on investment of around \$6.50 for every dollar invested. Forbes has also forecasted that influencer marketing will amount to \$15 billion by the year 2022. Despite this expansion, various challenges remain to overcome, from discovering influencers that fit the business to assessing the success of influencer programs. Therefore, it is vital for present-day advertising experts to comprehend consumer perceptions and the influence of influencer marketing completely (Keng-Boon Ooi et al., 2023)

- The investigated how influencer marketing influences the purchasing patterns of Baby Boomers and Millennials in Pune, India, to highlight this marketing plan's difficulties and prospects and emphasise the importance of selecting the right influencers for building a strong brand image among customers. The research discovered that the influence of influencer marketing on the purchasing behaviour of these two age groups differed considerably. As such, marketers can leverage this insight to personalise their influencer marketing strategies and cater to the unique needs of these two generations. This study offers valuable insight into the varying demands of different customer segments in India, further aiding marketers in their efforts to connect with their target audience. (Sanjana Thakker et al. 2022)

### Nature of the Research

The scholars have gathered primary as well as secondary data for analysis. This research will essentially focus on primary data rather than secondary data. Primary data consists of information acquired directly from individuals by the researcher, representing a first-hand data collection approach. Conversely, secondary data refers to information that has been previously gathered and analysed by another party. In this case, the researcher leverages existing, readily accessible data for the study. Primary data was acquired through interviews conducted with industry experts and influencers. Secondary data in this research includes a content analysis of select literature on influencer marketing, scholarly articles, surveys, questionnaires, and interviews conducted by other researchers. This research paper adopts a mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The qualitative segment involves examining observations from various social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. On the other hand, the quantitative aspect entails conducting expert interviews with two prominent social media influencers and a digital marketing executive from the industry.

### Semi-Structured interview

The researcher conducted three semi-structured interviews to further understand the relationship between the study variables. Interviews are a significant part of the study to learn about first-hand information and experience from two famous influencers and one digital marketing head from the industry. This interview gave the perspective of influencers and a digital marketing head to study the nuances of influencer marketing and increase brand recognition and loyalty.

The interview happened face-to-face on the interviewees' office premises. The author conducted the interview. Permission was taken from the interviewees before recording the interview to eradicate any loss of information, and permissions were also taken to transcript the interview for the study. The study's aim and objective were mentioned before starting the interview. The information shared during the interview will be used only for this study and will not be used elsewhere without the interviewees' knowledge. The interview was conducted in English, and only open-ended questions were asked to allow the interviewees to express their thoughts and opinions freely. We used the same questions for all the interviewees. Follow-up questions were asked throughout the interview based on the interviewee's response.

### Description of the interview

Interviewee	Profession	Date of the interview	Type of the interview	Duration of the interview
<b>Social media influencer 1</b>	Social media influencer, Actor and Content Creator	3 <sup>rd</sup> June 2023	Face-to-face	60 minutes
<b>Social Media Influencer 2</b>	Social media influencer, Actor	8 <sup>th</sup> June 2023	Face-to-face	35 minutes
<b>Industry expert</b>	Digital marketing head	17 <sup>th</sup> June 2023	Face-to-face	45 minutes

**Table 1: Description of the interview. (Source: Authors)**



## **Emerging Themes of the Interviews**

### **Influencer Niche**

The following niches are typically targeted by influencer marketing: Lifestyle, Finance, parenting, technology, fashion, fitness, gaming, and beauty. Influencers in these fields have built expertise, stellar reputations, and loyal fan networks. Influencers and brands routinely collaborate to create sponsored content, reviews, endorsements, and partnerships that speak to their target audience and align with their core beliefs. One of the participants struggles with identifying which kind of influencer marketing they most resonate with as more and more branches of influencer marketing can be seen on social media websites. "This is a question I've struggled with, but I think I will categorise myself as a lifestyle influencer. I struggle since I do a lot of different kinds of work. I'm also an actor, so I can attribute the following to the same. I prefer the word content creator over Influencer as I believe everyone is an influencer".

### **Influencer marketing scope before the COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted influencer marketing in terms of its scope and how influencers and brands collaborated. When estimating the influencer marketing's reach both before and after the pandemic, the respondents talk about the following points to understand; "Before the outbreak, influencer marketing usually focused on lifestyle, travel, events, and experiences. However, certain sectors saw a shift in content focus due to the pandemic's restrictions and limits. Influencers updated their content to reflect the changing environment, emphasising at-home activities, virtual experiences, wellness, and self-care". The study respondent shared their personal experience of being an influencer during the pandemic. She says, "There's been a huge difference pre and post Covid-19. From personal experience, I received more enquiries during that period and consumed more influencer content myself. It was a period when I observed more social media influencers coming forth". Another influencer highlights the tilt towards introducing Jio internet and easy internet access to the average Indian during the pandemic. He says, "After these two milestones, there has been more online content consumption and, as a result, growth in content creation. Pre covid, this was an industry trying to boom in India, but COVID changed the game".

### **Role of Influencer in brand promotion and recognition**

Influencers have created a passionate and engaged fan base on their social media profiles or other content platforms. By collaborating with influencers, brands can reach a larger audience and capitalise on their existing customer base. Influencers can increase brand awareness and reputation by captivating their audience and encouraging conversations. The respondent believes "when consumers watch their favourite influencers use certain products and endorse certain products, they positively influence the audience to purchase them themselves. The chances of remembering the brand's name are greater when influencers use and talk about it." Another respondent talks about the role of influencers in brand promotion and recognition: "I think more than pushing a purchase, it helps in brand recognition. With brand integration into content, people are more aware of brands and products and their functionality".

### **Buying products based on an influencer's recommendation**

Customers do consider recommendations from influencers while making decisions. Influencer marketing has been proven to be a successful strategy for influencing consumer purchases. "By sharing frequently

and being authentic, influencers often win the respect and trust of their audience. Influencers' followers consider their recommendations a personal endorsement from a trustworthy source. This trust and honesty may positively affect consumer purchase decisions". By sharing their experiences, way of life, and objectives with their audience, influencers frequently forge a personal connection with them. Customers who desire to live a similar lifestyle or find a solution to the problem the product addresses may be attracted to it when an influencer recommends it. The respondent shares, "An influencer is usually often in front of the camera, and so physically, they adorn attractive outfits and try and look physically attractive; for the same reason, consumers would easily believe that a product endorsed by an influencer is of good quality. Hence, they would buy it." Another respondent believes, "I'm not too sure about the act of purchase as of yet, but it does help build a sense of consideration to do the same in their mind, which is a huge step".

### **Thoughts on Influencer's Biases and Fake Promotion**

Yes, influencers could have a bias in favour of a specific brand or product. Influencers are frequently compensated for their efforts with brands through monetary compensation, gratuities, or other benefits. This compensation could create a conflict of interest and sway an influencer's judgement or recommendation of a brand or product. Some opinion leaders could prioritise their financial gain over unbiased and accurate judgements. "Fake promotions, in which influencers promote a product without using or supporting it, are a concern in influencer marketing. This false advertising risks misleading consumers, eroding consumer trust in the Influencer and the brand". One influencer shares how ethics in influencer marketing is grey. "Ethics is a grey area for influencers. I only endorse brands that I use or would consider using. I stay away from betting apps, gaming apps, etc., which have a risk. I'm more biased towards harmless brands that I use, but some influencers endorse for money without knowing the nature or risks of a product." Another influencer discusses how, like others, influencers have certain biases and preferences. "Yes, as humans, it's natural to have certain preferences. For instance, a skincare favourite of an influencer that works very well for them may not necessarily work well for a consumer. Social media collaborations are mostly done for monetary gain, and hence, there is a chance of a lack of genuineness."

### **Purchase based on the Influencer's recommendation**

The advantages of product discovery, usability, and knowledge accessibility may apply to purchases that are recommended by influencers. However, consumers should be cautious when heeding such advice, considering potential biases, personal preferences, and the necessity for full disclosure. Customers must exercise judgment and make informed decisions that suit their needs and interests. An influencer shares her thoughts on consumer purchases based on the Influencer's recommendation: "I believe that such influencer activities and endorsements should be done more for awareness purposes and not with a cut-throat goal to increase sales, per se. Since influencers have a solid follower base, it can be a useful tool to spread awareness regarding several products in the market. It is important for consumers not to believe an influencer's recommendation mindlessly. Still, if chosen carefully, influencer marketing can benefit consumers". Another respondent talks about how influencer marketing is similar to broadcast media marketing: "I think it's just as similar as any other mode of marketing. To question an influencer is similar to questioning a platform like TV or radio. It is a mode that serves the same purpose as traditional marketing. I don't think it's wrong, but it comes with much responsibility. Just like television and radio

have Norms or laws that advertisers need to follow, though influencer marketing is starting to build the same, it needs to be followed stringently".

### **Role of ICT in influencer marketing bloom**

The growth of influencer marketing has indeed been significantly influenced by the development of information and communication technology (ICT). Various ICT-related factors have contributed to the rise in popularity and effectiveness of influencer marketing. "Social media channels are currently the main ones used for influencer marketing. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook have given influencers a direct avenue to engage with and share material with their audience". Marketers may connect with a big online audience created by the widespread use of these platforms through influencer partnerships. "More data consumption and usage and the endless cycle have led to numbers indicating that digital brings results. As I mentioned, the advent of JIO has changed the game's scale".

### **Influencer marketing is taking over traditional marketing.**

"It is unlikely that influencer marketing will ever completely replace traditional marketing, despite the fact that it has become more well-known and popular in recent years. Influencer and traditional marketing are more likely to co-exist and benefit from one another". Traditional marketing channels, including television, print publications, and outdoor advertisements, continue to reach a sizable audience. They are effective at getting a range of demographics, including people who might not use social media or pay attention to influencers. Influencer and traditional marketing can reach a wider audience because different client groups and demographics may respond better to various marketing tactics. The head of digital marketing believes that "If not completely taken over, influencer marketing would be present side-by-side along with traditional marketing practices. More because every marketing activity has the common goal of 'selling' and hence any activity that would garner it would continue". The study respondent thinks they need to co-exist. "I believe that each brand of media will have its loyal consumers. I was under the assumption that print media is dying, but the awareness a print ad brings is so much more. A social media post about a new film I was doing garnered 2 or 3 times more responses than a paper article, but it was still noticed. Maybe radio as a medium has fallen from grace, but I think that print, electronic and social media will co-exist for the next few decades, but social media will dominate."

### **Recent trends and shifts in marketing**

"Micro and nano influencers become more common, yet macro-influencers with substantial followings still have value. These influencers, who have smaller but very engaged audiences, can aid brands in focusing on niche markets and raising levels of engagement and authenticity". Customers want brands to be more transparent and authentic. They look for true connections and first-hand encounters. As a result, corporations collaborate with influencers who uphold their principles and mandate complete transparency in their connections with influencers. "Investments in digital have surpassed investments in traditional marketing, which have made content creation 'serious business". With influencers charging lakhs for a reel, there is much more pressure for the creator to 'make it'. The need to make more content and position more branded content has grown 10x in the last few years, and with the internet growing in India, it will grow multi-fold".

**Influencer marketing is revolutionising digital marketing.**

Influencer marketing has undoubtedly transformed the world of online advertising. It has ushered in new dynamics and opportunities that have significantly altered how companies interact with their target markets and advertise their products or services. "I will second that. It has changed the game. Digital marketing offers interest-based targeting that no other medium can ever offer. The consumption statistics are as accurate as they can be. You can remarket to existing consumers so easily as opposed to a traditional method where it's mostly manual. It empowers creators worldwide to be tools in this process and make a living. It has even offered jobs to the formerly powerless. Influencers are quitting full-time jobs to take this up."

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to comprehend the role of social media influencers in boosting brand recognition through ICT and their influence on consumers' purchasing behaviour during and after the pandemic. The results suggest a rise in brand recognition, recall, and loyalty attributed to effective influencer marketing across different social media platforms. The study also highlights Instagram as the most widely used social media platform. The interview served to corroborate the study, with two renowned influencers pointing out that when consumers see their favourite influencers using and recommending certain products, they tend to sway the audience towards making a purchase themselves. They emphasised that promoting brand recognition is more significant than just driving sales. By integrating brands into their content, people become more familiar with the brands, products, and their functionalities. The interview enabled the researchers to conduct an impartial and thorough analysis of the research domain. The findings reveal that social media influencers heavily influence consumers' purchasing decisions and enhance the overall brand marketing experience, given their robust presence on social media. In the current research, the theoretical framework and model of the two-step flow demonstrate remarkable relevance within the realm of social media influencers, who are perceived as opinion leaders, with their followership consisting of opinion followers. These influencers actively create media content, especially advertisements, to enhance the visibility of a brand's product or service, with the brand desiring the influencers to portray their brand positively and align with the company's best interests in this scenario. The interviews conducted for this study provide further validation to the framework as they indicate that consumers (followers) are influenced by the viewpoints of these influencers. Within this paper, the social learning theory asserts that social media influencers play a vital role as socialising agents, influencing the behaviour of their followers who strive to imitate and observe the influencers, imitating their behaviours, language, and appearance. Companies recognise the power of influencers in swaying their followers and other social media users by leveraging them to advertise their offerings. As influencers endorse a brand, their followers passively absorb the information and make favourable purchasing decisions. In the interview, the influencer disclosed that influencers are constantly in the public eye, and their social media presence instils trust in people regarding both them and the products they endorse.

Amid the Covid-19 crisis, there was a significant surge in screen time and online shopping due to the widespread lockdown measures. Consequently, numerous brands and businesses turned to influencer marketing to capitalise on this online opportunity. Despite being a relatively new marketing trend, influencer marketing has grown substantially and undergone significant expansion, primarily due to its simplicity and effectiveness in directly engaging and communicating with the target audience. Thus, in

the current era of digitalisation, the impact of influencer marketing is surpassing that of other traditional marketing approaches.

### **Suggestions and Recommendations**

The study's survey, interview, and data interpretation have led to a few suggestions and recommendations. With the help of the findings of the study, the following recommendations and suggestions can be made:

- Influencer marketing is one of the easiest and most powerful digital marketing tools, especially for start-ups and small businesses.
- Start-ups and small businesses should capitalise on influencers' strong Influence and followers to expand their business.
- Brands should collaborate with the influencers depending on their Niche and target audience to maximise their reach.
- Influencers should refrain from fake or manufactured reviews in exchange for any financial and monetary benefit.
- A code of ethics for influencer marketing should be formed to protect consumers from being exploited.
- Influencers should attempt to be authentic and genuine to strengthen their existing relationship with their followers.
- Influencers promoting harmful, adverse products should strictly be avoided.

### **Limitations and Future Scope**

This research paper is limited only to urban influencers, particularly Chennai. The research has been conducted only with English-speaking influencers. An intriguing area for future study could encompass examining the influence of influencer marketing on adolescents and comprehensively understanding their social media presence, usage, and consumption. Numerous discussions concerning the study have highlighted worries about the negative consequences of influencer marketing, especially on adolescents who are highly susceptible to being influenced, particularly by endorsements from their favourite celebrities or influencers who capture a significant amount of their attention. It would be interesting to discover the impact of influencer marketing, especially on adolescent consumers. Comprehending how they manoeuvre through social media information and make purchasing decisions would be exceedingly valuable in the present information age. Another captivating area of study could be the study of influencer marketing on small businesses or start-up businesses. A study analysing how these businesses are making use of influencer marketing to expand their business.

### **Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

No conflicts of interest to disclose.

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