EFFECT OF ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ON CONSUMER DECISION PROCESS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC WITHIN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

Dr. Ravindra Kumar[*]
Sunny Jaiswal[**]

ABSTRACT

Social media has changed from regular just entertainment and networking platform to a great marketing space led by influencers. Influencers are the ones who hold a strong grip on people over social media through their content, views, thoughts and uniqueness they offer. These influencers specially impact younger generations. Influencer marketing is a new form of marketing which is not just limited to selling a product but involves building a brand identity and creating a trustful relation between the audience and the brand. As the number of social media users are increasing, so number of influencers are also growing so influencer marketing is now being embraced by more and more companies. The purpose of this study was to examine impact of social media influencers on consumer's purchase decision during the pandemic.

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Keywords: *Social Media, Influencer, Marketing, Purchase Intention.*

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Introduction

Influencer marketing involves marketing products and services through collaboration with famous people, bloggers and anyone with decent number of followers to promote their product or services. Product or service can be placed in Influencer's feed or stories in Influencer marketing. There are wide range of social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook, Youtube, TikTok and Twitter etc. although Instagram has been the best influencer marketing platform specially for fashion industry.

As the Covid-19 hit the world, a lot of people expressed themselves through various content on social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, Youtube , TikTok etc. As they gained popularity among users, they started using online spaces even more than usual, they also gained valuable brand collaborations that have now turned into a whole marketing prospect. So, the Social media marketing and influencer marketing becomes very crucial in this situation of uncertainty. Due to this global pandemic, fashion industry is also facing various challenges. It impacted companies profit and the demand has decreased and many physical stores were forced to close. This further pushed digital marketing and online consumption. Sum of lockdowns, the closure of brick and mortar stores and social distancing emphasise the vital role of social media marketing, making digital presence a major priority for fashion companies.'

Based on above context, the current study has planned to study the relationship between social media influencers, engagement, trust, brand awareness and purchase intention.

Literature Review

- **Influencer Marketing**

Creation and communication of promotional messages by influential people, also known as opinion leaders and not through the brand itself is called influencer marketing. Influencers affect decision making of the consumers by examples rather than just by using word of mouth.(Referral Rock Learn, 2020)

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[*] Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Yogoda, Satsanga Mahavidyalaya, Dhurwa, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

[**] Research Scholar, University Department of Commerce, Ranchi University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

Influencer marketing is mix of new and old marketing perspectives. It is a content driven marketing campaign which is having their roots in celebrity endorsements. Influencer marketing involves collaboration between brand and social media influencer where influencer market one of its products or services. (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2019)

In pandemic, brick and mortar stores were sitting down and physical campaigns were getting cancelled, in such situations marketers were exploring the ways to reach consumers. Brands strategically collaborated with influencers to increase their sales as well as achieved authenticity of their campaigning.

- **Rise of Influencer Marketing**

Companies are going to have huge budget for influencer marketing in coming years. Success of influencer marketing, currently seen on YouTube, Instagram - is not short lived but a tectonic shift in the field of digital marketing and advertising. Influencer marketing created another set of challenges for marketers like finding the right influencer, measuring and quantifying results. (Levin, 2020)

Influencer marketing is set to be worth $15 billion by the end of 2022– up from $1.7 billion in 2016 – according to Influencer Marketing Hub.This extraordinary growth reveals that spread of influencer marketing as a major marketing tool will gain momentum as pandemic ends. The last one year have shown the diversity and strength of influencers as marketing mainstream. Businesses have started to believe that long term tangible results can be achieved by influencer marketing.

- **Influencer Marketing and Its impact on Consumer decision process during Pandemic**

Trust has been a major key point when we talk about influencer marketing. It has been learnt that celebrities and stars promote the products and services they don't even care about while influencers are those individuals who promote those things only about which they are passionate and they have thoroughly vetted otherwise they will loose their followers. This is the reason for audience trust them. (Cobain, 2020)

One of the reason why influencer marketing is picking up because consumers prefer to ad block on various websites and social media platforms and they prefer the content from social media influencers. This is very clear from trends and numbers that consumer decision making process is getting affected by influencer marketing. One can say that if stars have reach, micro influencers have power. (Cobain, 2020)

Specifically, in fashion industry, consumers can get idea of fitting, styling of products from influencers, all at touch of smartphone screen. The interaction with an influencer almost gives a feel of a physical interaction with shop assistant at Brick and mortar store. In that way, influencers build a deeper and meaningful relationship with their followers.

During pandemic, there was need of virtual interaction over internet to build connections with consumers. This has created the need of creditability in human touch when dealing with consumers. Social media influencers, who are having the huge reliable followers over social media platforms are well suited to do this. Marketers have well recognised the importance of SMIs in bringing online campaigns to attract consumers.

Consumers feel genuinely connected with peer recommendations and this impacts their decision making as they are considered more reliable than direct advertisements by brands, making influencer marketing more useful. If a product is accepted within their circle, that immediately boosts its reputation and affiliated connection - which means the strongest voices within any group have huge sway over that initial relationship. (Barker, 2020)

It is an established fact that consumers gives a lot of importance to recommendations of influencers because influencers are able to connect with their followers with creditability and reliability and influencers are viewed as experts. A study by Olapic reveals that 39% consumers believe on influencer's expertise about endorsements made. Expertise of influencers on social media have greatly impacted consumer buying behaviour. (Wiley, 2019)

Objective of the Study

A review of past research papers about effect of social media influencers on consumer behaviour and fashion industry has been carried out anti has been understood that there are not many researches were conducted on the impact of influencers on fashion industry specially in pandemic situation. Thus keeping in view the gap identified through review, primary objective of the study is to find how creditability and attitude of social media influencers impact consumer purchase decision process.

Research Hypotheses

Creditability, reliability and attitude are some of the qualities of social media influencers which help in creating engagement, brand awareness and trust which further results purchase intention. Dependent variable is consumer's buying behaviour and independent variable is creditability and attitude of social media influencers. Research Hypotheses is as below:

H_0:   There is no significant impact of creditability of social media influencers on consumer's purchase decision process

H_0:   There is no significant impact of attitude of social media influencers on consumer's purchase decision process

Research Methodology and Data Collection

The instrument for this research was developed by adapting 5-point Likert scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") from research studies.

The questionnaire was created and shared online via Google forms to the consumers in Delhi NCR. Participants who are active on any social media were participated in the survey. The online survey was conducted during the months of February and March 2021. For the purpose of study, a filter question is posed to respondents whether they followed any influencer on social media. If they replied positive, then survey takes them to next level, which include statements related to variable considered in this study. To obtain responses quota sampling technique was used, as those participants who are active users on any social media and followed a SMIs, were included in the study. 400 responses were obtained, out of which 210 respondents are active users on social media and followed a SMIs. So only 210 responses were utilised further for data analysis.

Data Analysis

- **Demographic Data and Descriptive Statistics**

The results show that majority (59.8%) respondents were female while the rest were male. Majority (65.6%) of the respondents belong to age group 20-30 years, 22.1% of respondents belong to age group of 30-40 years, 12.3 % respondents are from age group 40-50 years. The data on most used application reveals that 61.1% of the respondents use Instagram, 19.7% respondents use YouTube, 12.1% use Face Book while 7.1% respondents use other social media platforms. The other characteristics of influencers that can impact the consumers purchase intention can be trust, experience

Table 1: Agreement of respondents regarding attitude of social media influencers

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
You will buy the product from influencers if the influencers give the good response to you?	60	89	47	12	2
Before you buy the product, you need to ask the influencers about the product information	48	75	54	24	9
Do you think the influencers who communicate with their followers are more trustworthy	56	85	49	17	3

in the field, community management techniques, engagement through content creation, etc.

It can be extracted from table-1 that influencers who have communicate to their followers are considered to having trustworthy attitude and impact purchase intention of respondents.

Table-2 shows the question asked from respondents w.r.t. creditability of social media influencers. 117 respondents agreed/strongly agreed that if their favourite blogger/online personality i.e. influencer recommends a brand, they are more likely to try it.

Table 2: Agreement of Respondents Regarding Credibility of Social Media Influencers

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Would you likely recommend any influencer to your family/friends?	59	79	46	18	8
Does Social media influencer persuade you to dress/buy like the picture they post?	51	83	47	20	9
Do you find the information provided by the influencers credible enough	45	98	46	12	9
Your favourite influencers are important to you before buying any new product	41	68	52	32	17
Do you think Influencers will not purposely endorse a brand that will harm you?	47	63	56	30	14
If your favourite blogger/online personality recommends a brand, you are more likely to try it?	42	75	52	28	13

Note: Extracted from Questionnaire

Regression Modelling

In statistical modeling, regression analysis is a set of statistical processes for estimating the relationships between a dependent variable (often called the 'outcome' or 'response' variable) and one or more independent variables (often called 'predictors', 'covariates', 'explanatory variables' or 'features'). In this study, buying behaviour of consumer is dependent variable while creditability and attitude of social media influencer is independent variables.

- **Hypotheses Testing**

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) has been carried out to examine whether there is significant influence of creditability of social media influencers on consumer's buying behaviour. Following hypotheses has been formulated:

H₀: There is no significant impact of creditability of social media influencers on consumer's purchase decision process

Table 3: Regression Analysis of Creditability of Social Media Influencers and Buying Behavior of Consumers.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.658[a]	.432	.430	.79646
a. Predictors: (Constant), creditability				

Regression analysis indicates that value of R is 0.658 which indicates positive relationship between creditability of social media influencers and purchase behaviour of consumers during COVID-19 pandemic. The value of R^2 indicates that 43.2% of the variance in buying behaviour of consumer can be predicted from the creditability of social media influencers.

Table 4: ANOVA of Regression Analysis of Creditability of Social Media Influencers and buying Behavior of Consumers

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	100.538	1	100.538	158.491	.000[b]
	Residual	131.943	208	.634		
	Total	232.481	209			

a. Dependent Variable: buying behaviour b. Predictors: (Constant), creditability

The P (.000) value is less than 0.05 hence null hypothesis (H0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H1) is selected which implies that there is significant influence of creditability of social media influences on Consumer's buying behaviour.

H₀: There is no significant impact of attitude of social media influencers on consumer's purchase decision process

Table 5: Regression Analysis of Attitude of Social Media Influencers and Buying Behavior of Consumers

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.612[a]	.374	.371	.83644

a. Predictors: (Constant), attitude

Regression analysis indicates that value of R is 0.612 which indicates positive relationship between creditability of social media influencers and purchase behaviour of consumers during COVID-19 pandemic. The value of R^2 indicates that 37.4% of the variance in buying behaviour of consumer can be predicted from the creditability of social media influencers.

Table 6: ANOVA of Regression Analysis of Attitude of Social Media Influencers and Buying Behavior of Consumers.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	86.958	1	86.958	124.291	.000[b]
	Residual	145.523	208	.700		
	Total	232.481	209			
a. Dependent Variable: buying behaviour						
b. Predictors: (Constant), attitude						

The P (.000) value is less than 0.05 hence null hypothesis (H0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H1) is selected which implies that there is significant influence of attitude of social media influencers on Consumer's buying behaviour during COVID-19 pandemic in fashion industry.

The study reveals that creditability of influencer is a major characteristic which affect buying decision of the consumer. The study further shows that consumer's buying decision is also dependent on how influencers response to follower's queries and how sensitive they are towards their followers?

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The theoretical perspective of this research is to analyse influencer marketing in the age of Covid-19 in India especially Delhi NCR region. Little attention has been given to the impact of role of social media influencers in consumer decision process during pandemic within the fashion industry. It has been concluded by the study that creditability and attitude of the social media influencers affect the consumer behaviour in fashion industry. Social medial influencers should choose products and services very cautiously while promoting on Social media and must disclose if any paid promotions. SMIs should be more responsive towards their followers to create faith in their content and values.

This study provides several managerial implications. At one hand it provides meaningful inputs to Social Media Influencers regarding what are necessary characteristics they should own for greater success in marketplace, on the other hand this research provides companies valuable inputs so that they can be assured that their investment on influencers will pay off greater returns. Marketers and influencers should more emphasis on influencer content which is well effective and trusted among followers. Partnering with right influencers can enhance better results within fashion industry.

Limitation and Suggestion for Future Study

This study is having some limitations which should be taken into consideration. First the sample size in this study is very less to generalise for the larger population of the Delhi-NCR region. Future studies can be done on larger population and at national level so that better perception of influencer marketing can be known. Also, the respondents in the study belong to the urban class which if another limitation. Future studies can be done on impact on social media influencers on consumers decision making processing rural perspective.

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