

Digital Marketing: Exploring Emergence of Social Media Influencers in Kashmir

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Abstract: Digital marketing plays a significant role in today's business landscape keeping in view its wide audience reach, enhanced customer engagement, personalized content, direct and interactive digital communication channels with potential buyers and strong commercial prospects. It has assumed tremendous scope and significance for individuals and institutions worldwide. Different strategies are devised to reach a specific customer base; Social Media Influencers being the one. Influencers play a significant role in digital marketing due to their ability to connect and create localized content with personal sense of belongingness and relationship marketing. Social Media Influencers play a crucial role in audience-engagement by influencing potential buyers, their opinions and perceptions and weaving marketing strategies around them. It has a tendency to boost customer loyalty, influence purchasing decisions, generate business opportunities and enhance revenue generation in this technological era. The study focuses on exploring the emergence of Social Media influencers in Kashmir Valley and find out how they approach their target audience and several challenges that they face in the process. Also categorizing influencers into various themes would be explored. The shift from traditional advertising to social media marketing would also be examined in view of increasing trend in Social Media Influencers. Being descriptive and analytical in nature, the study emphasized on qualitative approach wherein indepth interviews of Social Media Influencers and business owners was conducted apart from analyzing few case studies to get deeper and detailed insights into the topic. Data gathered was analysed and interpreted to derive meaningful conclusions.

Key Words: Social Media Influencers, customer loyalty and engagement, personalized content, relationship marketing, niche audience and market.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become increasingly important for business in the modern technological era as it enables companies to achieve market recognition. New digital media technologies are used in different spheres of life to derive maximum benefits. It is used in countless ways ranging from academic purposes to professional growth to promoting culture and business networking and much more. Offlate, advertising over internet has emerged as one of the most powerful and indispensable marketing tool. There has also been a significant rise in Social Media Influencers and this marketing approach has become quite popular in the advertising world.

The influencer culture is gaining momentum and providing an opportunity and space to earn and gain popularity. Social media Influencers represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media (Freberg et al, 2011). In traditional marketing setup, brands approached celebrities to endorse their products and influence the potential customers. The influencer marketing now switches the brands to new advertising approach. In influencer marketing, the influencers collaborate with a brand to promote or advertise their products or brands. Influencers may have a strong influence on young consumers' brand attitudes and purchase decisions than celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Both celebrity endorsements and social media influencing are major methods of advertisement but social media influencing has proved to be more reliable and trustworthy. The major loophole of celebrity endorsements is that the

celebrity doesn't necessarily have to have expertise in the subject matter of the product they are endorsing. Social media influencers, however, select a niche for their content and knowledge of the product they endorse. Influencer marketing has become so popular that it was a \$13.8 billion industry in 2021 (Barker, 2022).

With growing influence of social media and advertising agencies allocating more of their media budgets to it, the advertising industry is in search of effective strategies to get the most return on investment when it comes to social media. Influencer marketing has been one of these strategies, where focus is on specific individuals rather than a target market as a whole. It identifies the individuals influencing potential buyers and orients marketing activities around these influencers (Woods, 2016).

As elsewhere, social media influencers are showing an increasing trend in Kashmir Valley as well through newer formats, features, programmes and opportunities offered by platforms and brands, encouraging many to leave their traditional professions and pursue their passions full-time. Whether one is a fashion fan, a food lover, or wants specific information regarding travel or health, there is an influencer to follow. Advertisers also capitalise on this. A study by Twitter and analytics firm Annalect suggested that 56 percent of users surveyed said they rely on recommendations from friends while 49 percent said they rely on influencers (Swant, 2016).

Taking this trusting relationship and combining it with a large following on one or more social networks, it is no wonder advertisers are paying these influencers to post favourably about their brand or product (Woods, 2016). The Influencer Marketing Report 2022 was released by Influencer, in an influencer marketing platform and an initiative by Social Beat to provide insights on how influencer marketing has become one of the most important channels that big brands are leveraging as part of their digital marketing. The report indicated that 61.2 percent of all brands recognise the power of influencer marketing to tap into a newer audience pool to boost brand awareness. Larger organisations have recognised influencer marketing as integral to their digital marketing strategies, while smaller organisations recognise its importance but have yet to invest significant resources into influencer marketing.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

With the expanding role of social media from communication, knowledge sharing, and opinion building to marketing, it has become significantly essential to explore and understand the impact of influencer marketing on choice, preferences and satisfaction of customers.

The significant growth of social media has affected consumer behaviour in terms of their buying decisions, customer engagement, market orientation and relationship marketing. Brand communities offer consumers new ways to engage with the brand. Organisations benefit from the use of social media by engaging with loyal consumers, improving perceptions about the brand and learning more about consumers' behaviour. Also, customers benefit while interacting through social media as they gain value before and after the purchase of products or services. Customers not only become more satisfied and loyal but also experience relationship benefits after engaging with the online brand community such as entrainment (Moustakas, 2015).

The attractiveness of social media influencers would form a highly favourable attitude among respondents towards a brand or product, resulting in purchase intention. This phenomenon is justifiable in the context of social media influencers, where attitude plays a significant role in mediating the fit between a product, the celebrity and the purchase intention for an advertised product (Lim et al., 2017). Influencer marketing has the potential to gain appeal and acceptance. It has evolved from a simple concept to a vital ecosystem in the marketing industry. Nowadays, influencer marketing is a potent tool for boosting online visibility, building brand reputation, and obtaining high-quality leads. Thus, the idea of influencer marketing is changing the look of developing the social media industry. The newest colossal thing is influencer live-streaming wherein online sales of products happen in real time (Ramachandran, 2022).

In India, influencers have a reach of more than one in four people and three in five consumers are likely to try a product after hearing about it from an influencer. About two out of five consumers follow more than five influencers on social media and the average number of influencers followed is 7.5 (Joel et al., 2022).

Businesses with a social media presence have the ability to significantly influence business income. Businesses should engage in social media marketing as most customers use social media to learn about products or services that a company provides. On a daily basis, people spend three or more hours on social media. Customer loyalty and purchasing decisions are heavily influenced by social media marketing. Online visibility, brand awareness, customer-to-business communication, meaningful feedback, and the chance to see what customers, prospects, colleagues, and competitors are

saying are some of the reasons that social media not only allows direct engagement with customers but also rewards businesses with client loyalty. Social media can assist firms to maintain ties with prospective clients and direct them towards profitable projects (Gibson, 2018).

In this context, studying the emergence of digital marketing, specifically with reference to influencer marketing becomes imperative. As such, the study focused on the emergence of Social Media Influencers in Kashmir Valley in different fields, the challenges they face, and the way they approach their target audience.

3. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were to:

- Examine the shift from traditional advertising to social media marketing
- Explore reasons that lead to emergence of Social Media Influencing as niche specialization
- Classify Social Media Influencers into various themes and understand how they approach their target audience and the challenges they face

4. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive and analytical research design to investigate emergence and influence of social media influencers in Kashmir Valley. It enabled a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon including its underlying causes and implications for local businesses and culture. A qualitative approach was selected to dive into influencers' and business owners' personal experiences and practices that helped to understand their diverse perspectives.

The study utilised purposive, intensity and snowball sampling techniques to identify and interview various respondents. While purposive sampling ensured the selection of cases that aligned with the research objectives, intensity sampling focused on individuals who exhibited prominent characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation and snowball sampling expanded the pool of participants by leveraging referrals from initial subjects. The respondents included 10 influencers and 06 business owners. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and case studies, providing a thorough understanding of the influencers' methods, challenges and their collaboration with businesses.

Data analysis involved thematic coding of interview transcripts and observational data. The researcher highlighted emerging themes and categorised them into meaningful patterns. Key themes were identified and analysed in terms of motivations for becoming influencers, role of niche specialisation and impact of social media on traditional marketing. This qualitative analysis illuminated the dynamic interplay between influencers, their audience, and the local business ecosystem around.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The study observed that influencers used several social media platforms with Instagram being the most used one followed by Facebook and YouTube and each influencer that was studied for the purpose of study had a following above 32K. The influencers were spread across various areas of interest ranging from entertainment to fashion to poetry.

The interpretation of data is based on indepth interviews of Social Media Influencers and business owners followed by few case studies. Accordingly, the data is interpreted as:

A) Indepth Interviews

Based on indepth interviews, following themes were identified and analysed.

Rise of Influencers and Influencer marketing

Majority of the respondents stated that they started Social Media Influencing as a hobby that later turned into a profession. Most of them started it during COVID-19 as part of their hobby and as it evolved with time they became popular and people started looking up to them. slowly and steadily, it turned to an online community. Due to the pandemic, people started spending more time at home and utilising internet much more than before, which led to an unanticipated boost in social media participation. One of the female participants who has a successful business and is also a successful influencer said that she started it in 2017 and there were no female influencers back then to endorse

her products. So she decided to advertise her products and that's how her journey of becoming an influencer began. She further believed that influencers have the ability to mobilise business, drive consumer behaviour and influence advertising. In December 2022 she had attended an influencer summit in Dubai that helped her to understand the value of influencer marketing and the possibilities it brings to the advertising world.

Social media influencer marketing has essentially become a requirement for businesses in the contemporary scenario. The organizations or companies that advertise their goods, services, brands, etc. are mindful of the low-cost and frequent reach through social media. While social media influencing has played a transformative role in business ecosystem in major cities of the country, it is yet to gain that momentum in Kashmir valley due to limited business deals between brands and influencers. But all the respondents were hopeful that influencer marketing will soon gain ground in Valley as well. In India, the influencer marketing sector is projected to reach INR 3,375 crore by 2026 with a compound annual growth rate of 18 percent (Swarup, 2024).

Influencers mostly establish themselves on a particular social networking site, such as Instagram, YouTube or Facebook. Instagram's visually focused platform lends itself particularly well to influencer marketing. Monetary compensation was concentrated among fashion influencers, which comprised only about a quarter of the participants, whereas the majority used barter collaborations. When a company or brand approaches an influencer to help promote its product in exchange for free product samples for the influencer to utilise, it is known as a barter relationship. Some of the participants however, opined that Jammu division pays relatively more than Kashmir region because of the understanding of social media marketing. Also they felt that businesses from Jammu area were more approachable due to several socio-religious factors.

Many people were compelled by the COVID crisis to shop online from the comfort and safety of their own homes in order to escape long lines and crowded places. As a result, e-commerce grew and attracted new clients and a wider range of goods. This also gave rise to businesses approaching influencer marketing.

Creating and Developing Niche Market

Majority (90 percent) of the respondents felt that developing a social media niche is very crucial. Besides, influencers need to have a distinct vision for what they wish to accomplish. The influencer should be familiar with pros and cons before making any content. Due to the socio-religious fabric of the society here, influencers observed that they were occasionally trolled for the content generated by them. Female respondents felt that due to the societal conservative outlook, they are more trolled than men. A couple of female respondents infact pointed out that if a male influencer makes the same content as they do, he is applauded by the followers whereas females are heavily judged and shamed.

With rare exceptions, these categories follow traditional gender roles: male content creators predominate in humour, entertainment, and food, while female content creators predominate in fashion, beauty and parenting. One of the participants started having young girls reach out to her thanking her for her suggestions concerning certain products and her honest reviews.

The business participants acknowledged the significance of maintaining engaging and fresh content through social media, which is why they have made their social media accounts to stay connected to their consumers. Every day hundreds or perhaps thousands of advertisements attempting to sell products are seen to consumers. Consumers prefer information versus constant sales pitches. The respondents from business side noticed that influencer marketing also helped them to know how their brands are doing through the constant feedback that is provided to them by the social media users through comments etc. This provides the business houses an opportunity to customize the material and engage customers more actively and meaningfully.

B) Case Studies

The observations derived from some of the case studies revolving around a social media Influencer and a business owner are discussed as:

Social Media Influencer

Mehak Zubair also known as Mirchi Mehak hosts the morning show from 8 am to noon, six days a week at Radio Mirchi 98.3 Srinagar. Mehak has a post-graduate degree in journalism. She has worked as an anchor for Home Shop 18, Doordarshan and then as a reporter with CNN-IBN before quitting the job to return home. Her show focuses on the

accomplishments of regular individuals in exceptional circumstances. She interacts with her listeners on a regular basis to hear their difficulties and engages professionals to propose answers.

Mehak's show is information-oriented wherein she focuses on various societal issues. She also seeks out stories of women who have overcome adversity to carve a niche for themselves. With one of the most popular Radio jockeys in the city, she also has a massive following of 57.3k on Instagram and 31 k on Facebook. She has become a new sensation on Instagram for her fashion statement. On Instagram, she entertains her admirers with everything from the latest fashion fads to humorous reels. On Facebook, she majorly focuses on information and social issues. Mehak collaborated with an international brand PUMA that got 147k views. She made a reel to promote the brand that created a stir on Social media. She has collaborated with brands like Monte Carlo, PUMA, Lakme Salon, VLCC, Tul Palav etc.

Emergence of Social Media Influencing

Social Media Influencing basically was a prerequisite part of her job. According to her, even radio which is a medium of mass communication has understood the importance of social media and that is why they are incorporating it to stay relevant. Even the organisations or businesses that come to advertise their products/services/brands etc. know that combining radio with social media can be a low-cost strategy to reach more people more frequently and in a more engaging manner.

While radio has the perfect storm of local content, music and personalities that listeners love apart from reaching out to wider and diverse audience, social media influencing allows for one-on-one connections and the potential to humanise the company. Every genre in mass communication, be it television or radio, have realised that they cannot survive without social media. It is the best way according to her to make money through collaborations.

Niche audience and content

Mehak has specifically chosen fashion and body positivity through which she wants to change the ideology about how a woman's body should look. She says that by establishing social media specialisation, it could make or break how viewers perceive the person as an influencer and a potential social asset. As an influencer she wants people to value her content. Influencing needs to be aware of the platform in use. For using Instagram, the influencer should know the algorithms and how they work. Influencers also need to have a clear vision for what they want to achieve with their influence.

As for the genre she has chosen fashion that she believes is the best way to get collaborations in a small region like Kashmir. Although she is trolled sometimes for her content because of the social and religious setup of Kashmir she has still been getting a lot of advertisement collaborations.

Traditional marketing to Social media marketing

Influencer marketing has significantly altered how people think about marketing today. The idea evolved through time, and these forces are now driving the market through content. She says brands have strategically widened their reach with the help of influencer marketing to meet their target audience where they are. This is often done on digital sites such as Instagram, YouTube, and others, which are among the primary venues from where an influencer launches a marketing campaign. Today's industry has grown to the point where everyone can witness vernacular material on almost every social media platform. Influencer marketing is an efficient technique to achieve corporate goals and possibly save money. The tendency also has the advantage of breaking the dry period.

Business Group

Being one of the leading wellness and beauty organisation, VLCC chose social media marketing as a prime marketing technique. Mudasir Ahmed, the Franchise holder of VLCC in Kashmir, emphasized that even when the organisation is popular, seeing the changing dynamics of advertising industry to have a market presence becomes very crucial.

Emergence of Social Media Marketing

The advertising budget before the advent of social media marketing was only allocated for traditional marketing but with changing landscape of advertising the percentage of budget allocated to traditional advertising has reduced with main emphasis on social media marketing as it is the new way to go.

To keep up with the younger audience which is VLCC's major target audience, social media has to be up-to-date, observed Mudasir. The ability to transmit to customers an apparent genuineness and familiarity is one of the key contrasts between influencer marketing today and seeing a commercial. He believed that digital marketing will take over traditional marketing in near future.

Niche audience and content

Social media influencers bring the factor of relatability and proximity that advertisements on Television couldn't. In the world of social media, influencers are becoming increasingly popular and their ratings and reviews matter to their followers. Also, the fact that through collaborations the reach of the business or organisation becomes more and people get to know about the brand. It is important to select influencers that match the brand voice and ensures quality content and audience response. Another great benefit of influencer marketing is having user-generated content (UGC). Influencers can promote a brand by increasing awareness, generating sales, or both.

Traditional Marketing to Social Media Marketing

Mudasir further observed that 60 percent impact on the business of their brand is through social media marketing and the rest 40 percent is through other means that includes word of mouth, promotion and traditional marketing such as billboards, newspaper advertisements etc. Most people who come to the outlet see offers on the social media of the organisation. The outlet has a social media manager who handles its official account and keeps it updated. The social media manager is paid to interact with and inform the followers through social media. The power social media has is that it has enabled a business to showcase their products or services every minute with just a post.

6. CONCLUSION

As digital platforms grow, social media influencers have assumed great significance in marketing, brand promotion and reaching out to niche audience. When influencer culture began, they were primarily bloggers who shared stories about their lives and promoted products they used every day. Once the influencer reaches a high amount of following and credibility, he/she can charge a high price to promote goods or brands. Being an influencer may also be a creative and entertaining way to meet new people and share life with the world. This has been found to be a primary reason responsible for choosing Social Media influencing as a career in Kashmir Valley.

One of the main objectives of the study was to understand the value of social media for businesses. While analysing literature, it was found that social media is a great tool for bringing in specific visitors to the website and allowing the general public to learn about the company's operations in the contemporary market. Social media marketing provides businesses the option to communicate and join with their audience in a two-way conversation that is essential for debate and persuasion. Additionally, businesses can use social media to gain market data to strengthen their brand. It has been observed that almost everyone uses social media platforms frequently and that this enthusiasm expands every now and then.

Also COVID-19 compelled social media users to look for human connections due to physical constraints. Influencer content was one of the things that benefited from this demand. To effectively reach out to the audience, businesses started reaching out to these influencers that helped them to develop trust for the brand and company, increase brand awareness, improve the content strategy, add value for the audience and forge closer connections. The increase in influencer behaviour was attributed to changes in user behaviour due to COVID-19 lockdown. Influencers frequently encouraged participation from their target market and social media audience.

The study observed that majority (90 percent) of the influencers were willing to publish sponsored content in exchange for cash or gifts. With influencer culture gaining momentum and prominence, it has become a phenomenon unlikely to falter any time soon. The study also observed that majority (90 percent) of the respondents were youngsters and Instagram was the most widely used social media site, followed by Facebook and YouTube. Any organisation can benefit from the power of social media. It can boost reputation, solidify bonds with others, foster communication with clients, provide room for criticism and raise the standing and profile of the businesses. The socio-cultural environment of Kashmir challenges social media influencers that require them to balance creative expression with societal expectations. Influencers in the Valley often face scrutiny over the type of content they produce, especially women who navigate traditional norms while building their presence. Despite these challenges, they have emerged as important voices, not only promoting businesses but also addressing societal issues and inspiring conversations about progress and change. Their ability to connect with local audiences reflects their understanding of the region's values and aspirations.

Additionally, social media influencers in Kashmir play a significant role in linking the region to the broader digital economy. By showcasing the blend of local traditions with modern trends, they create content that resonates with both regional and global audiences. This has helped to bring attention to local businesses, crafts, and culture, while also fostering economic opportunities through collaborations with brands. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, influencer marketing holds immense potential to shape the marketing ecosystem and contribute to the socio-economic growth of the Valley.

Influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful tool in marketing space and has significantly altered how people think about marketing today. Brands have strategically widened their reach with the help of influencer marketing to meet their target audience where they are. Influencers have the ability to mobilise business, drive consumer behaviour and influence advertising. As in other part of the country, Kashmir Valley too sees great scope and potential in influencer marketing. Though it has started with humble beginning in Kashmir valley, but it is set to go far and wide while addressing several challenges that come its way.

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