Research Article

Study on the Role of ICT and Scope of Influencer Marketing in India for Brand Promotion and Recognition during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a significant increase in screen time and online shopping due to the lockdown. Consequently, many brands turned to influencer marketing to capitalise on this online opportunity. A survey found that the majority of participants spent more than 3 hours on social media, with a significant number considering influencer marketing as a crucial digital marketing tool during the pandemic. Influencer marketing, an extension of traditional word-of-mouth campaigns, has become a powerful instrument for targeting the millennial population and is facilitated by advancements in technology. This study aims to examine the impact of influencer marketing on brand promotion and recognition, its influence on consumer buying behaviour, and the role of information and communication technologies in its growth in India. The research methodology of this study is a survey questionnaire among 100 participants. The study's results reveal that a significant proportion of participants hold a strong conviction that social media influencers strongly influence their ultimate purchasing verdict.*

Keywords: *Influencer Marketing, ICT, COVID-19 Pandemic, Brand Promotion, Brand Recognition.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Advertisements have always employed famous personalities and well-known celebrities to endorse their product. Celebrity endorsement has become a popular tool for reaching consumers individually and personally. When your famous personality endorses saying they have used and loved a particular product or service, it instantly enhances the brand value and sales. The trust and aspirational attitude of a consumer, especially Indian consumers, to look like their favourite celebrities and be like them is one of the main reasons influencer marketing is flourishing today. Famous brand ambassadors with a good fan base have the potential to create incredible brand equity. With the advent of the internet, slowly, the shift of brand ambassadors and celebrity endorsements started entering the virtual ecosystem. Digital marketing is the central reason for this shift. Unlike traditional marketing, influencer marketing has started to bloom globally without any geographical restrictions. Influencer marketing is a robust new-age marketing instrument for capturing the country's millennial population. Moreover, it can also be seen as an extension of traditional word-of-mouth marketing campaigns. With a click of a button, consumers now have access to anything under the sky due to the evolution of smartphones and new communication and information technologies. Consumers have many choices and opportunities to make their final purchase, but their attention is limited. Hence, creating advertisements that will keep the audience engaged is important. Most brands have expanded their digital presence on social media handles, as this is the future of marketing. Social media influencers are people who have a large number of followers on their profiles. They have the power to influence and strongly impact their followers.

Brands use social media influencers to reach a wide range of audiences on a personal level. Influencers curate content for a wide range of markets, including niche markets. Like beauty, lifestyle, fitness, etc., brands can reach out to influencers who resonate with their line of products, which will, in turn, strengthen the testimony of the advertisement. Social media marketing became substantial during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in India. Many offline businesses became online because of the pandemic to push their product ahead of their competitors, as the entire country was under lockdown. The scope of traditional marketing was very limited. There was a significant rise in social media influencers during the pandemic, as screen time on social media was higher than usual. More specifically, influencer marketing must be incorporated into traditional and digital media, such as sponsored posts, pop-up advertising, etc., to get the desired benefits in this dynamically evolving digital marketplace. Influencers promote a product or service, build a brand, and create a trusting, amicable relationship between the brand and the customer. Gone are those days when we did not know how the products we bought were sourced, made, and delivered. Now that the entire process of production to delivery is transparent, the consumers feel absolute certitude and develop a sense of confidence in the brand. The influencers could be divided into Nano, Micro, Macro, and Mega categories. This depends on the number of followers they have on their social media handles (Misshka Gupta

2021). An influencer is anyone who promotes products or services and impacts many people. Consumers intentionally look for testimonials or marketing by influencers on social media platforms to make an informed purchase decision. The consumers feel a sense of belonging and proximity and connect with social media influencers. As the influencer is also an "everyday person", the audience feels like they are one among them. Influencer marketing feels more real than typical traditional celebrity marketing. The primary objective of influencer marketing is to employ social media influencers to propagate a brand's message and connect with a potential customer. Influencers have a significant social media following and are regarded as trustworthy and influential in one or more niche areas (Sudha & Sheena 2017).

A. Aim:

To understand the role of social media influencers in advancing brand recognition using ICT and their impact on consumers' purchase behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Questions
RQ1 - How does social media influencer marketing impact brand recognition, recall and loyalty?
RQ2 – Does influencer marketing influence the buying behaviour of the consumer?
RQ3 – What is the role of ICT in the growth of influencer marketing in India?

B. Theoretical Framework by the Author
Pre-requisite for powerful influencer marketing techniques
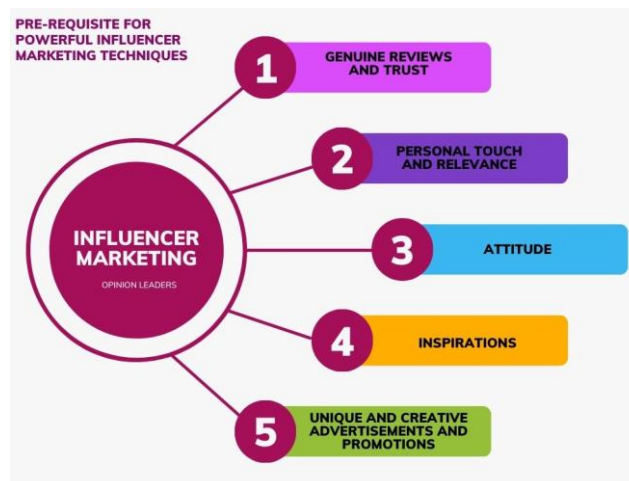
Figure 1: Theoretical Framework: Pre-Requisite for Powerful Influencer Marketing Techniques
Source: *Author*

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research data was obtained through primary data collection from 100 respondents through an online questionnaire survey. This research paper utilises both qualitative and quantitative research methods, such as observing social media platforms and conducting an online survey questionnaire. The target audience is tech-savvy individuals in Tier I cities who are active on multiple social media platforms. Questionnaires are used to collect precise information, with a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. The survey was conducted online using a Google form, and participants were selected based on shared background, social media habits, and buying behaviour. The participants were professionals in IT, Media, Marketing, and Law and were avid social media users. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, including demographic information, to assess the participants' knowledge of influencer marketing and their understanding of social media trends and patterns for brand promotion in India. To ensure accuracy, the survey employed a non-probability sampling technique, specifically snowball and convenience sampling. The data is edited and coded in MS Excel, and the results are graphically represented in a pie chart.

III. RESULTS

A. Most Used Social Media Platform

The study required participants who were active on multiple social media platforms and had a presence on these platforms. Based on the results, Instagram emerged as the most popular platform among the respondents, with 69% of them having a presence on it. YouTube followed with 20% and Facebook with 7%. This preference for Instagram can be attributed to its focus on visual features and widespread mobile device use. Moreover, Instagram has become an important marketing tool, providing a visual platform for effective communication and customer engagement.

B. Average Time Spent on Social Media Platforms

The result reveals the respondents' daily average time spent using social media platforms. About 91% of the participants spend more than 30 minutes daily consuming content on various social media platforms. The rest, 9%, spend more than 15 minutes and less than 30 minutes daily. This shows that a large number of respondents spend a lot of time on social media platforms, either as passive or active consumers.

C. Following Social Media Influencers

The survey reveals that the majority of individuals in the study sample, approximately 87%, engage with social media influencers, indicating a higher likelihood of being influenced by them compared to purchasing recommended products. Conversely, only a small percentage, 13%, do not follow any social media influencers, resulting in relatively lower chances of buying products suggested by influencers. It is important to note that even individuals who do not formally follow influencers may still passively consume their content, potentially leading to passive influence.

D. Buying Products or Services Recommended by the Influencers

The data indicates that 60% of respondents sometimes purchase recommended products or services from influencers. 27% do not rely on influencer recommendations. 13% actively consume influencer content and make positive purchase decisions based on recommendations. The result suggests that around 87% of participants are likely to buy endorsed products. In contrast, only 27% do not blindly purchase products based on influencer recommendations. Their buying behaviour and decisions are not solely influenced by promotions. The researcher infers that influencers significantly influence brand promotion and recognition.

E. Product Reviews by Influencers before the Final Purchase Decision

The survey found that 65% of respondents seek influencers' reviews before deciding on a purchase. 19% sometimes search for influencer reviews, while 16% don't rely on them. This means 16% of respondents aren't influenced by recommendations. 65% actively seek influencer reviews, impacting their decision-making. Negative feedback from influencers decreases the likelihood of purchase, while positive feedback validates it.

F. The Niche of the Social Media Influencers

The survey data discusses the niche of social media influencers. Entertainment is the most followed niche, which is understandable as social media platforms were developed for primarily entertainment purposes. 72% of respondents follow influencers who entertain them. Lifestyle-related influencers are followed second most, suggesting that many people like lifestyle-related content. The third most followed topic is fitness. Online fitness classes and fitness-related content have increased during and after the pandemic. A separate category of fitness influencers has emerged, promoting fitness-related content. 37% of respondents follow other topics like make-up, fashion, home décor, and parenting. Electronic topics are followed the least. The Internet and ICT-enabled communication have opened opportunities for consumers to review and shape their buying behaviour for electronic goods. However, consumers are often confused about the most appropriate product for their use, lifestyle, and budget.

G. Social Media Influencers Influence the Purchase Decision

The data reveals that 45% of the respondents believe social media influencers strongly influence their purchase decisions. 33 per cent believe that influencers don't have any influence on their purchase decision. 22% believe that influencers sometimes strongly impact their final purchase decision. This pattern states that most respondents have revealed that social media influencers' recommendation has a powerful impact on their purchase decisions. Hence, the researcher believes that influencers' powerful presence promotes a brand's image and increases brand loyalty and Recognition among consumers. Influencer marketing thus can be used as a robust new marketing tool for brand promotion.

H. Harmful Product Promotion

The survey question focuses on the followers' trust in their favourite influencers. About 59 % of the respondents think their favourite social media influencers will not promote any product or service detrimental to their followers. However, 41% of the participants believe their favourite Influencer might promote a product even if it is harmful. This reveals that most participants have higher trust in their favourite Influencer. With increased trust, there is a higher chance of positively capturing the followers' minds. This way, the Influencer's promotion directly impacts the sale of a brand's product and service. However, it is also important to highlight that a considerable number of people don't trust their influencers' recommendations.

I. Organic Reviews vs Controlled Reviews

The study highlights that 91% of the survey participants believe that organic reviews are more trustworthy and reliable than the reviews promoted and controlled by the brands. The researcher observed that many fake testimonial videos

and reviews are manufactured by the brand itself, which raises a big question on the authenticity of reviews and testimonials. Meanwhile, 9% of the respondents believe that reviews controlled by the brand are more important than organic reviews. This survey question makes us think about whether influencers should promote a product or service merely because of financial or any other personal benefits they receive from it. Or if they should strive to promote a brand, product or service only if they find it genuinely helpful.

J. The Number of Influencers Followed on Social Media

The data reveals that 38% of the respondents follow less than 5 influencers on social media. Meanwhile, another 38% follow 5-10 influencers, and 24% follow more than 10 influencers on various social media platforms. The number of influencers followed on social media might influence their purchase decision. The researcher understands that it is responsible for a respondent who follows more followers to be more influenced by the Influencer compared to someone who follows less than 5 influencers.

K. Influencers as a Consumer Representative

The respondents were asked in the survey questionnaire if they think influencers act like representatives of the consumers. 37% think influencers are consumer representatives, while 63% believe influencers are not. This is a reflection of two schools of thought. Most respondents don't see influencers as a part of them, i.e., a part of the consumers. They might look at the influencers as just another brand ambassador. At the same time, few participants look at the influencers as a part of them, as consumers representing them. This talks about the relationship the consumer share with their influencers.

L. Brand Recognition and Recall

The survey study question assesses if there is a relationship between increased brand recognition and recall due to social media influencer marketing. 89% of the respondents believe there is a direct connection between increased brand recall and Recognition of influencer marketing. Meanwhile, 11% believe that they don't think a brand's recognition increases due to influencer marketing. The researcher can identify a pattern in which influencer Marketing has a powerful impact on the consumer and leads to increased brand recognition and recall. As the survey response demonstrates, social media influencer marketing is a potent tool for promoting products and services. Many respondents believe that when an influencer promotes a brand regularly, the chances of brand recognition become higher. As many respondents spend considerable time on social media, the chances of brand recognition with influencer interaction significantly increase.
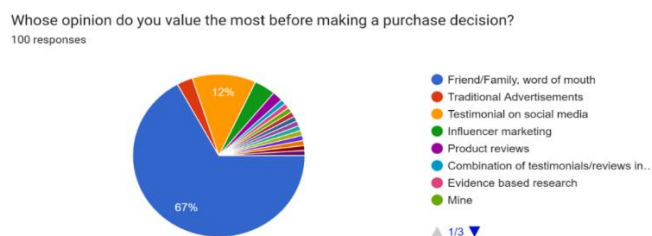
M. Most Valuable Opinion

Figure 2: Most Valuable Opinion

The data reveals that 67% of the respondents stated that the opinion of friends, family and word of mouth is their most valuable opinion. Then, 12% of respondents say social media testimonials are more helpful. While 21% of the respondents believe traditional advertisements, product reviews, evidence-based research, google reviews, trying samples and research, professional websites, and YouTube reviews are the most valuable opinions before making their final purchase decision.
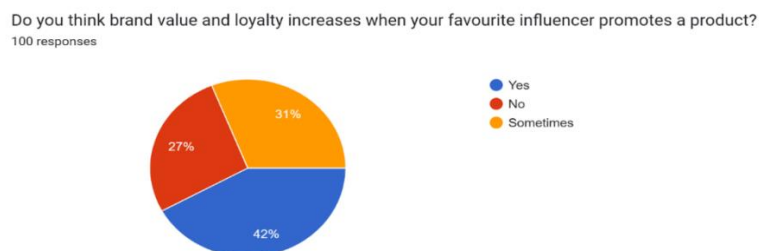
N. Brand Value and Loyalty

Figure 3: Brand Value and Loyalty

The results state that 42% of the respondents believe that brand value and loyalty increase when an influencer promotes a product or a service. 31% of the study sample believes that brand value and loyalty only increase sometimes. The rest, 27%, don't think there is any relationship between an influencer's promotion to increase brand value and loyalty. This data reveals an underlying pattern. Around 73% (42% + 31%) believe that an influencer's marketing, content creation, and recommendation have little or a lot of impact on their loyalty towards a brand, which in turn enhances the brand value.

**O. Brand Loyalty after Influencer's Recommendation**
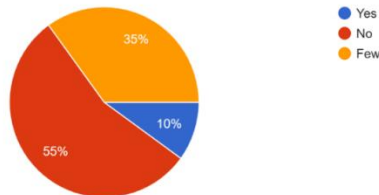
Figure 4: Brand Loyalty after the Influencer's Recommendation

The pie chart reveals that 55% of the respondents think there is no impact on brand loyalty after an influencer's recommendation. While 35% of the respondents feel a relationship exists between an influencer's recommendation and brand loyalty, they believe their brand loyalty sometimes increases due to an influencer's review. And 10% of the participants think their brand loyalty increases when an increase promotes a brand's product or service. The researcher can infer that brand loyalty is affected by many other varied reasons, and an influencer's promotion and marketing have little impact.

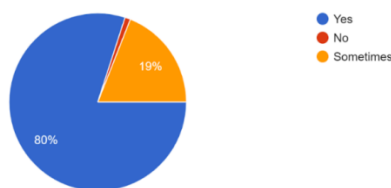**P. Period of Influencer Marketing as a Prominent Marketing Tool**
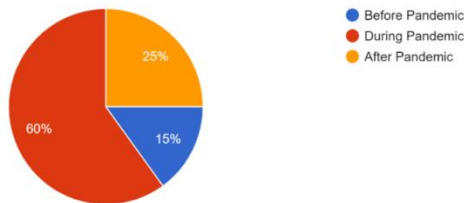
Figure 5: Period of Influencer Marketing as a Prominent Marketing Tool

The survey question explored when influencer marketing became prominent. The data shows that 60% of respondents think it gained popularity during the Covid-19 pandemic. 25% believe it became noteworthy after the pandemic. Meanwhile, 15% believe it evolved before the pandemic. The highest percentage, 60%, think it became pivotal during a pandemic. This leads to certain understanding and inferences. During Covid-19, India and other parts of the country were locked down. The internet became a powerful communication tool. Everyone was at home, which could have inspired influencer marketing due to increased screen time and social media usage.

Q. Role of ICT in Influencer Marketing

Figure 6: Role of ICT in Influencer Marketing

The survey data states that 80% of the population believes that the advent of ICT, i.e., information and communication technology, plays a significant role in influencer marketing. While 19% of the population think that ICT only sometimes empowers influencer marketing, 1% think that ICT has no role in influencer marketing. The researcher has observed that information and communication technology has restructured our ways of interacting with people and our environment.

IV. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand the role of social media influencers in enhancing brand recognition using ICT and their impact on consumers' buying behaviour during and after the pandemic. The findings indicate increased brand recognition, recall and loyalty due to strong influencer marketing across various social media platforms. The study also revealed that Instagram is the most popular social media platform among the respondents. The findings indicate that social media influencers, due to their strong social media presence, have a powerful impact on consumers buying decisions and contribute to a better brand marketing experience. Followers seek to replicate and observe the influencers and emulate their mannerisms, language, and physical appearance. Companies acknowledge the potential of influencers to sway their followers and other social media viewers by using them to advertise their products or services. As influencers promote a brand, followers passively absorb the information and make favourable purchase decisions. During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a considerable increase in screen time and online shopping due to the nationwide lockdown. Therefore, numerous brands and businesses resorted to influencer marketing to exploit this online prospect. The study survey revealed that nearly 91% of participants spend over 30 minutes on social media, and approximately 60% believe influencer marketing emerged as a significant digital marketing tool during the pandemic. As per the survey results, influencer marketing has undergone an exponential surge during the COVID-19 pandemic and is now deemed an essential aspect of digital marketing for a majority of brands. On average, participants follow between 5-10 influencers, increasing the chances of being influenced by influencers. Interestingly, many respondents view organic reviews as more trustworthy than controlled reviews, and the emergence of influencer marketing began with a commoner reviewing a product or brand, which is why some participants view them as a consumer's representative. Even though influencer marketing is a fairly new marketing phenomenon, it has grown substantially and experienced remarkable expansion, largely owing to its ease and simplicity of directly communicating and connecting with the target audience. Hence, in today's epoch of digitalisation, the impact of influencer marketing is outshining other conventional marketing strategies.

A. To Meet the Purpose of the Research, the Following Research Questions were Formulated:

a) RQ1- How does social media influencer marketing impact brand recognition, recall and loyalty?

The survey intends to investigate the potential link between enhanced brand awareness and remembrance caused by the Influence of social media marketing. A noteworthy 89% of the survey participants affirm an evident connection between greater brand recall and the Recognition of influencer marketing. Thus, influencer marketing can emerge as a potent and innovative marketing tool for brand promotion. Further, the findings suggest that a significant portion, specifically 42% of those surveyed, believe a positive correlation exists between brand value and loyalty when an influencer promotes a product or service. They assert that an influencer's marketing efforts, content creation, and recommendations favourably influence their allegiance to a brand, thereby elevating the brand's value.

b) RQ2 – Does influencer marketing influence the buying behaviour of the consumer?

The survey demonstrates that a significant proportion of participants, 45%, hold a strong conviction that social media influencers strongly influence their ultimate purchasing verdict. 22% of participants perceive that these influencers sometimes significantly impact purchasing decisions. This trend reveals that a substantial majority of the participants, comprising the 45 and 22% groups, have disclosed that recommendations from social media influencers substantially impact their purchase decisions. According to the survey findings, 65% of participants tend to seek product or service reviews from influencers before deciding to purchase a particular commodity or amenity. Consequently, the author posits that social media influencers can advance a brand's image and boost consumer loyalty and Recognition.

c) RQ3 – What is the role of ICT in the growth of influencer marketing in India?

As per the survey outcomes, a significant proportion, especially 80%, of the respondents believe that the advent of information and communication technology (ICT) has a notable impact on influencer marketing. The interview also indicates that influencer marketing has shifted the paradigm in the online advertising domain. It has introduced novel dynamics and opportunities that have significantly impacted how companies interact with their target markets and promote their products or services. Notably, digital marketing enables interest-based targeting that surpasses any other medium. The consumption statistics are highly accurate, and remarketing to existing consumers is effortless compared to traditional methods that are mostly manual. This technique has allowed creators worldwide on all social media platforms to be instrumental in the

process and earn a livelihood. Moreover, it has employed those who were formerly powerless. Influencers are even relinquishing their full-time jobs to pursue this avenue.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest to disclose.

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