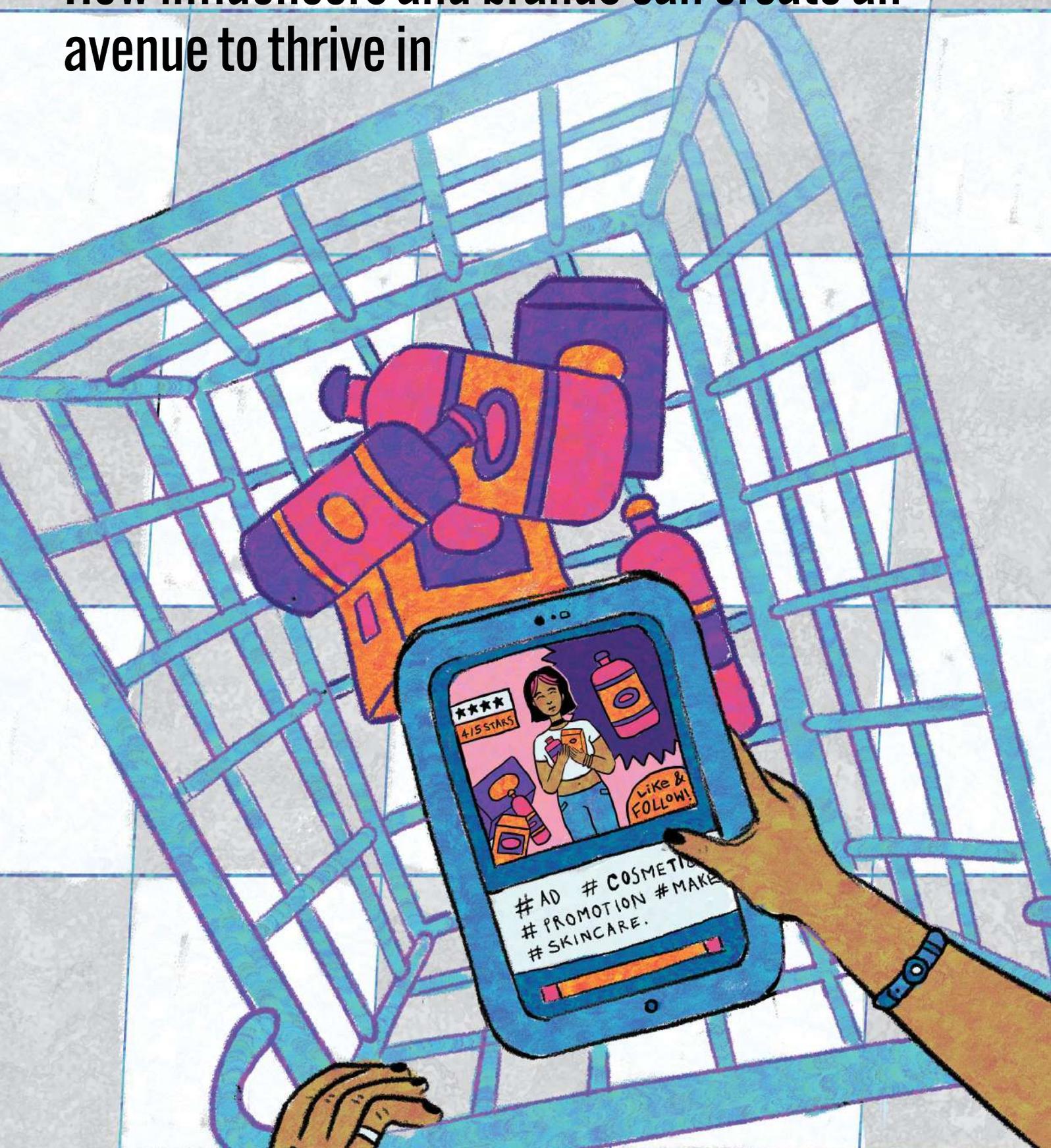


Wielding Influence, Nurturing Trust

How influencers and brands can create an avenue to thrive in



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For further details write to us at contact@ascionline.in.

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रोहित कुमार सिंह
भा प्र से
Rohit Kumar Singh
IAS



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भारत सरकार
उपभोक्ता मामले विभाग
Secretary
Government of India
Department of Consumer Affairs

FOREWORD

We live in a time where influence is truly getting democratized, and a fascinating and diverse set of people are wielding this in ways that were unforeseen. The creator movement which started with interesting and entertaining content just as a means of self-expression, established an audience that was highly engaged. For brands, this presented a new opportunity to connect with audiences in a way that traditional advertising could not.

Fueled by the creators' compelling need to express themselves, the availability of platforms to reach audiences, and the possibility of brand money, creators turned influencers. Audiences who were highly engaged with creators were targeted as recipients of brand messages. Thus, influencers and brands came together in a win-win situation. For influencers, creating content that they loved could become an actual profession. For brands, access to an ever-growing and engaged audience is nothing short of a goldmine!

As this relationship deepened, it raised some concerns about the impact on the audience-consumer. They were eventually the ones, fueling this economy through engagement and consumption. The more they engaged and consumed, the more valuable the ecosystem would become. And hence, ensuring that they remain connected was a key motivator for both brands and influencers.

Short-term thinking made some brands and influencers conceal the fact that certain messages were commercial in nature. It was felt that the impact of influencer advertising comes from how it is perceived differently from advertising, and revealing that would dilute the effectiveness of the medium. However, it must be asked if the fundamental premise is one based on a certain deception, how long would this last? An increasingly digital native audience would soon catch on to this and trust would come crashing down. This is an unsustainable and unstable foundation for this nascent industry, which holds so much promise.



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Ministry of Consumer Affairs has released Endorsements Know-hows guidelines dated 20th January 2023 to social media influencers. The guidelines 'Endorsements Know-hows!' is for celebrities, influencers and virtual influencers on social media platforms and also aims to ensure that individuals do not mislead their audiences when endorsing products or services and that they are in compliance with the Consumer Protection Act and any associated rules or guidelines, and now with the law taking the same view, disclosing the commercial nature of relationships is fundamental to consumer trust and in their ability to take an informed decision. Lines between organic content and commercial messages are blurring to an extent that overt and prominent disclosures are the need of the day.

There are those concerned with the effectiveness of messages that carry a disclosure. Well, there is good news for creators. At least the ones that produce truly great content. Global empirical evidence points to no reduction in engagement or reach for high-quality content. And in fact, this becomes a great filter for brands to work with influencers who can be truthful and effective. Any equation that puts honesty and effectiveness as opposing forces is certainly not built to last.

The brand-influencer story is just beginning and it is at its very nascent stage. Undoubtedly it will see several moments where it pivots into new territory, perhaps faster than regulation can keep up. It is here that the industry's own sense of responsibility to build guardrails around itself will become central to its growth and longevity. The thousands of young people who are looking at influencing as a career would aspire to be part of an industry that prides itself on high ethical and moral standards. And that has the foresight to know that the consumer is the goose with the golden egg, and their rights must be protected fiercely. There is no "nice-to-do" about consumer protection. Consumer trust is pretty much the nucleus around which successful businesses are built, and that can only come when the industry comes together to nurture it.


(ROHIT KUMAR SINGH)
10 February 2023

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Introduction

Why another report on influencer marketing? This is the question we asked ourselves at the outset when creating this report. Do we need another report to remind us of the key tenets of influencer marketing? Haven't several reports and publications on influencers, on the influencer marketing economy and the imperatives for brands within it, already established what are considered to be the must-dos for effective influencer marketing campaigns? Authenticity, transparency, personal connection with followers/audience - these are now established principles that brands and influencers themselves must recognise to tap the power of a new channel of marketing.

As a regulatory body in the field of advertising, it is important for The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) to understand what seems to be becoming the newest and rapidly used mode of advertising, for the different beast it is. The age of the influencer also represents a new age of the consumer and demands a new avatar from brands. **The aim of this report is not to add to the buzzwords or metrics that already exist in this space, but to understand at a fundamental level, the nature of advertising in the age of social media influencers.** This report thus aims to provide insights for both influencers and brands to see the roles they play or can evolve to play, and truly take advantage of the opportunity at hand. **Does the age of social media and the influencer as icon, let brands access a multi-dimensional realm that will make traditional advertising seem like a self-limiting 2-D model?**

Before we place another lens on this highly celebrated new phenomenon that promises to revolutionise the way brands speak to consumers through the new age icon of the influencer - there needs to be some acknowledgement of the fact that **this is a realm of newness that is fast evolving, seemingly always a few steps ahead of the attempts to cast in stone its 'working principles'**.

In our conversations with influencers, brands and influencer marketing agencies, what became evident is the shape-shifting nature of the space itself - Earlier, mega influencers were the obvious choice to bring brands the large reach and engagement that traditional advertising is not built to generate. Today, however, there is a highly fragmented world of influencers to choose from - from mega to micro to even nano influencers - each representing increasingly tighter connections with their followers and promising greater engagement.

Regional influencers, fluent in the vernacular promise stronger connections for brands - yet, brands admit they are yet to utilize this grade of influencers effectively.

Different platforms place different demands on influencers, engage consumers on different levels and deliver different goals for brands.

There are several metrics that measure the effectiveness of influencer marketing, yet there is a lack of a common understanding of how these metrics need to be evaluated. Benchmarks are weak in a space where changing algorithms of social media platforms repeatedly wipe the slate clean on learnings that both brands and influencers make over time.

The greater formalisation of this industry also means greater regulation. Steps in this direction have already been taken by ASCI through the release of Guidelines for Influencer Advertising in Digital Media in 2021. The guidelines mandated prominent disclosures for brand promotions, allowing consumers to make an informed choice.

Recently, the Department of Consumer Affairs too released its own guidelines requiring influencers to be transparent about their brand associations. Regulation itself is perceived to have impacted the effectiveness of influencer content -something that influencers and brands have to learn to navigate.

What became evident to us was that there was a need to take a step back and look at the influencer marketing ecosystem through the lens of what is slower to change in a space where rapid change redefines the playing field at frequent intervals.

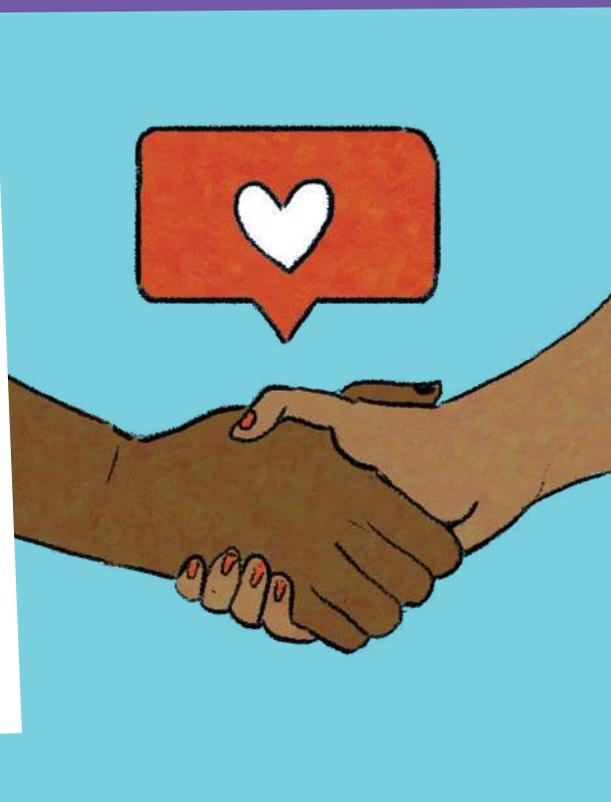
It is with this intent that we have framed the content of this report:

In Part 1, we aim to capture the industry's current view of the influencer marketing realm, by presenting the views and opinions of influencers, brands and influencer marketing agencies gathered through first-hand conversations with them.

In Part 3, we build further on the new paradigms offered in Part 2, by offering new modes for influencers, brands and consumers to engage. These not only truly tap the potential of marketing in a social-media reality, but also shape relationships of trust that serve brands, influencers and consumers in the long term.

In Part 2, we seek to look beyond current definitions and explore underlying structures and meanings that let us grasp the deeper roles that influencers, platforms and social media itself plays in our lives today and how new definitions might be required.

Here we look at a mapping of influencers in the Indian ecosystem to identify the key archetypes through which they embody influence. We also break down what the social-media existence of this era means for consumers, brands and how it makes influencers a valuable marketing tool unlike any available to brands before. **We tackle the central question of trust - and offer a new imagination of it where influencers, brands and consumers exist in a more pragmatic and open dynamic of a social media marketplace.**



Executive Summary

This report explores pressing questions in influencer marketing, with a view to make sense of the landscape and achieve a win-win-win for brands, consumers and influencers.

As stated in the foreword, the aim is not to add to the buzz-words or metrics that already exist in this space, but to understand, at a fundamental level, the nature of advertising in the age of social media influencers.

Through covering conversations with influencers, brands and influencer marketing agencies - combined with robust secondary research for a panned out view of the space - the report provides rich insights for both influencers and brands to see the roles they play, or can evolve to play, and truly take advantage of the opportunity at hand.

In Part 1, we aim to capture the industry's current view of the influencer marketing realm, by presenting the views and opinions of influencers, brands and influencer marketing agencies, gathered through first-hand conversations with them. It gives an in-depth view into the experience of being an influencer, where brands find themselves in the influencer economy, and the role that influencer marketing agencies see themselves playing in the landscape.

Influencers: We see that influencers, in their role as content creators and drivers of consumption, feel the pressure to be authentic, while serving the best interests of brands. As a result, they seek long-term partnerships, clear monetary benefits and clear disclosure guidelines.

Brands: While most acknowledge the importance of influencer marketing, many are still waking up to the opportunity and are unclear on how to use it best to achieve their marketing goals. They're still learning how to organise branded content and how to measure the impact.

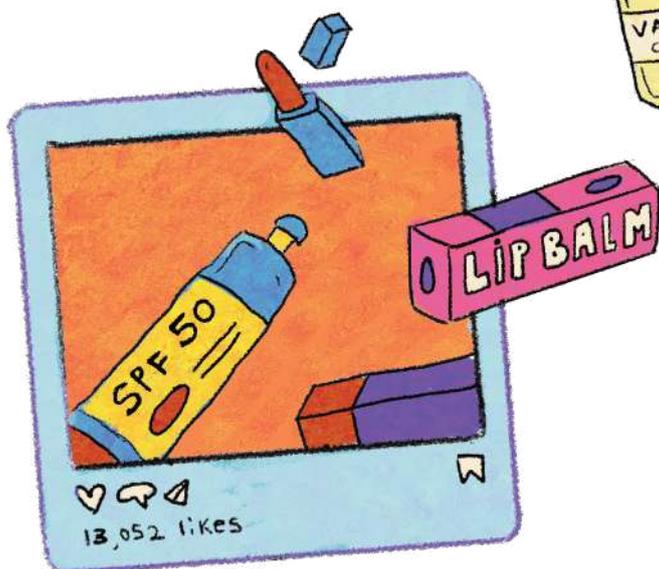
Agencies: An emerging force in the influencer landscape, agencies play a legitimising role as they help the science of influencer marketing to evolve, and help brands and influencers find a positive fit.

In Part 2, we seek to look beyond current definitions and explore underlying structures and meanings that let us grasp the deeper roles that influencers, platforms, and social media itself, play in our lives today - and how new definitions might be required.

This section takes a deeper look at how influencers impact the consumption economy and the 'archetypes' they craft for themselves in the process - whether as approachable insiders, insightful curators, radical normalizers of the other or, indeed, showcasing their everyday lives and, at times, helping us see a lighter side of things.

It also focuses on the unspoken roles that various social media platforms play in people's lives - from the airbrushed, aspirational worlds of Instagram to the vernacular landscapes brought alive by the likes of Moj and MX Takatak. Or even the unique democratic role that YouTube plays.

This section further investigates the currents of change that are shaping the influencer landscape to unpack the trust model at the heart of the brand-influencer-consumer trinity. It draws learnings from trust 'fails' and trust 'wins' to clearly identify the challenges at the heart of the landscape, as it evolves and defines its new paradigms. We question if the current model of trust well serves stakeholders (influencers, brands and consumers), and offer a model of a more 'informed' trust which recognises the truth of the market forces operating on social media, and the consumer's rising awareness of the same.



In Part 3, we build further on the new paradigms offered in Part 2. We offer new modes for influencers, brands and consumers to engage, which not only truly tap the potential of marketing in a social-media reality, but also shape relationships of trust that serve brands, influencers and consumers in the long term. Do brands need to allow themselves a stakeholder view of the influencer and consumer? Are there roles the influencer can play beyond just being brought in to 'produce' and 'distribute' content? What do Influencers need to recognize about their role in consumption itself?

This section introduces and explores a new model of collaborative trust, with key recommendations for all three stakeholders - influencers, brands and influencer marketing agencies.



Part 1

Voices of the industry

Influencers

Brands and marketers

Influencer marketing agencies

1. The experience of being an influencer

The owning of influence that can impact consumption decision-making is not at all a new phenomenon.

Our primary interactions revealed a dynamic outlook and excitement towards the future of influencer marketing, and also certain anxieties and challenges that each stakeholder faces.

Here is an overview of how each stakeholder defines the opportunities they foresee and the challenges they face.

1. The creator vs. influencer conundrum

While sometimes used interchangeably, the creator and influencer are not necessarily the same.

A content creator is someone who creates content such as comedy sketches, dance reels, cooking vlogs etc., on topics of their choosing at a regular frequency. They may or may not create this content for a brand. Mostly, they are focused on publishing original content on the internet that showcases a certain skill or talent. A content creator is not necessarily an influencer. For Example, An ASMR channel that puts videos of soothing sounds on YouTube everyday.

An influencer on the other hand is someone who can influence the decision-making or attitude of the masses. They are able to influence the way a person thinks or perceives a certain topic or brand. An influencer may or may not be a content creator i.e., they may or may not create original content. For example, Nithin Kamat the founder of Zerodha is an influencer in stock markets and mutual fund investing. His tweets can affect investor sentiment.

Many influencers have started out as content creators and, over time, have gained popularity such that people started seeking their advice/ reviews before consuming a product/ category. For Example, Kusha Kapila & Dolly Singh, both started out as comedians creating daily or weekly sketches. Today they are also highly sought-after beauty & style influencers.

2. Authenticity & creative liberty, the essential tools in the influencer's kit

Creative liberty is crucial to maintain authenticity. After receiving a brief, any influencer will either write their own script or tweak an existing script to stay as close to the character/s built on their channels over time. This is integral to the creative process. Most brands willingly cooperate, but there are instances where the brands dictate the content in a granular fashion. The problem is that audiences are extremely sensitive to over-selling and the influencer will quickly lose followers if they come across too soliciting. It is wise to rely on the influencer's discernment for the benefit of both the brand and the influencer.

3. Understanding the target audience is different from connecting with your followers

For influencers, connecting with followers is not the same as the traditional approach to building audience connection. While brands try to speak the consumer lingo through advertising, the appointment-based, templatised and constructed nature of advertising has made audiences progressively immune to the average brand message. Influencers don't segregate their followers based on demographics or psychographics. They have a knack for framing insights in a universally appealing way - simple and common parlance. Often comedy, satire and self-deprecation are themes that help develop a strong connection with the audience.

4. Influencers desire long-term partnerships

Engaging in long-term relationships with brands is the most ideal scenario for influencers. Currently, the industry operates more like a gig economy, and influencers are often roped in to play a small role during the course of a brand campaign. Often, this leads to a situation where a category influencer has eventually no choice but to endorse competition brands, diluting the influencer's credentials. The need of the hour is long-term partnerships like some brands have forged with their artists and the opinion leader fraternity. Long-term relationships in the content world can mean anything for more than three to six months.

5. Making your content stand out

In a sea of similar content, influencers maintain relevance by staying ahead of trends, making the most mundane topics fascinating. Their content draws on the latest news, trends, and music. Most influencers have alter egos and characters that add drama and complexity, bringing in diverse following for their content.

6. Alter egos have a demand of their own

Influencers spoke about brands sometimes approaching them with scripts that employ created personas, alter egos or alternate characters that the influencer has built. Presently, these identities are often not protected by IP rights. Is there scope for creating advisory manuals that protect and remunerate influencer characters?

7. Too many influencers spoil the broth

Influencers believe that the landscape is becoming increasingly hyper-competitive. A lack of entry barriers allows anyone to become an influencer today. Moreover, brands with smaller budgets are able to take advantage of this supply skew, opting for quick and easy influencer

gigs instead of long-term partnerships. Having said that, some influencers are also of the belief that the market is still nascent and untapped. And there is a plethora of opportunities for all kinds of diverse influencers. The need is to move away from a transactional attitude towards onboarding influencers.

8. Barter engagements don't pay the bills

According to the Influencer Marketing Report, the Indian influencer industry is predicted to be valued at Rs 2,200 crore by 2025, and grow at a 25 percent CAGR. Influencers make money per engagement. While most engagements are similar to freelancing gigs, many engagements include only a barter payoff. While barter payments have been a popular modus operandi for influencer engagements, this is not sustainable, as most influencers invest their own resources in content production. Besides, monetary compensation helps to pay bills. Some brands rely on a barter system to reduce their marketing costs. However, as the industry grows, a shift is needed to formalise the compensatory structure, moving it away from payments in kind. For influencers, who are not yet well established, gathering resources to create quality content is imperative but expensive. Going forward, a transparent and formalised compensation structure will be essential to ensure fairness and safety for all industry participants.

9. The house is divided on the impact of disclosure guidelines

The need for disclosure guidelines elicited a mixed response from influencers. While some believe the "paid promotion" tag was a long time coming and doesn't disrupt their feed or quality of content in a big way, some influencers believe the paid promotion tag hampers an authentic connection and creates a 'sell out' impression amongst followers. Either way, influencers agree with the need to maintain a balanced feed between paid and unpaid content to maintain followership.

2. Where brands find themselves in the influencer economy

1. Influencers bring impactful reach for brands through storytelling

The true power of influencer marketing goes beyond just creating mass reach and awareness. The real value lies in identifying passionate customers who will advocate the brand in an impactful way through storytelling. Followers often rely on influencers to share product reviews, and testimonials before actually buying products. Moreover, the influencer's personality, delivery style and online persona determine how the brand's personality is perceived amongst lookalike audiences. Influencers are able to create trust and credibility for brands through inspirational content that enhances purchase intent in a long-term way.

2. Despite its growing strategic importance, influencer marketing is still being discovered by brands

In India, influencer marketing still constitutes a very small fraction of the overall marketing budget. Influencer marketing being a primarily digital led medium, ecommerce and Instagram brands find it most useful as a brand awareness and outreach tool. According to a report by [Influencer.in](#) & [Social Beat](#), 50 percent of marketers stated that they spend up to 10 percent of their annual digital marketing budget on influencers while 10 percent of the respondents dedicate more than 40 percent of their annual digital marketing budget to influencer marketing.

Currently, while large conglomerates are able to onboard a bigger base of influencers, the nature of their categories, especially FMCG and Retail, are offline heavy and don't always lend themselves to influencer marketing. Large companies are however gradually building influencer marketing capacity, and seeing opportunity in mass platforms such as Moj, TakaTak etc., as well as live commerce. Scaling brand presence on these channels will also be dependent on overall internet penetration, and smartphone and platform adoption across metro and non-metro geographies.

3. In absence of standardised metrics or benchmarks, brands need to have clearly aligned campaign objectives for measuring influencer performance

For brands that are just starting out with influencer marketing, tracking performance and offering fair compensation to influencers can be a learning curve. This is due to the absence of standardised metrics or benchmarks for influencer performance. Unlike affiliate marketing, wherein affiliates earn commission on actual sales and conversions, influencer compensation includes commission, product gifting, flat rate fees, or a combination of all three, for brand awareness, increased web traffic, or cold lead generation. Aligning on campaign objectives with the influencer ensures a successful ROI for both parties. Each brand may have a differing set of parameters, based on which, they track influencer performance - depending on the category the brand operates in, and the end goal they want to achieve.

4. Brands need organic & snackable content from influencers

Influencers are expected to make content that cuts through low - attention spans and content fatigue. Brand managers want influencers to immerse themselves in the brand while creating content that meets campaign objectives. This ensures that the message is high impact and lands in the audience's mind in a crisp and memorable way. It is the brand's responsibility to ensure that the influencer's core values match the brand's personality and ethos. The best and most successful relationships are those where the influencer already uses the product/ category on a regular basis, and can naturally vouch for the brand. Force-fit partnerships are a big turn off for followers, and can harm the brand and the influencer's image.

5. An influencer's relevance to a brand is often cyclical

One of the reasons stated by brand managers for preferring short term partnerships with influencers is the cyclical relevance of the influencer's content to the brand's campaign objectives. For example, an influencer partnership for topical conversation like Diwali might be different from the type of influencer partnership needed to launch a new product campaign.

6. Regional influencers are yet to be tapped in a fuller way to build vernacular reach for brands

As internet access further improves across the country, regional influencers pose a big opportunity for building deep and local reach for brands. Especially for FMCG brands, creating a strong presence across multiple platforms through video content and storytelling in regional languages presents the next frontier in driving brand penetration.

3. Agents of influence - Influencer marketing agencies and their role in the influence economy

1. An emerging driving force in the influencer landscape

The rise of Influencer marketing agencies (hereon referred to as 'agencies') has been a fairly recent phenomenon. Today most agency businesses will offer influencer marketing services as a vertical, or operate as independent outfits. By definition, these are essentially marketplaces where creators, influencers, brands and media buyers can discover value partnerships for driving marketing campaigns. They are mediators for brands scoping brand-fit influencers, as well as talent managers for influencers/ creators seeking the best compensation and deals for their content. Agencies are also able to enhance the partnership between media buying, brands and influencers by giving insights, analysis, performance metrics, benchmarks, production support, and keeping a steady pulse on platform developments (such as filters, algorithm changes, trends etc.). Many agencies have developed sophisticated proprietary tools and dashboards for onboarding influencers and connecting brands.

2. A legitimising face for the influencer landscape

Today, these agencies are an organising force for an industry that is mostly dependent on short transactional partnerships, barter exchanges and mutual trust. Agencies promise brands what is called 'brand safety' in industry parlance - i.e., ensuring that the brand value does not get diluted in influencer-created branded content. Agencies manage and balance the control dynamic between the influencer and the brand, ensuring both parties are able to extract the best ROI.

3. Ensuring positive brand fit

Agencies have a roster of influencers that brands can tap into, depending on the campaign objectives and brand's personality. Since agencies maintain friendly relationships with influencers, this creates a degree of mutual trust and comfort for the brand and influencer partnership. Moreover, agencies are able to play an advisory role for both brands and influencers. This allows brands to engage with only those influencers who are appropriate to the brand's tonality. Similarly,

for influencers, agencies act like a network that ensures a steady flow of projects, in line with the influencer's area of expertise.

4. Evolving the science of influencer marketing

Agencies believe that influencer marketing has a long way to go, especially when it comes to establishing a praxis. Agency founders are optimistic about influencer marketing becoming a legitimate area of expertise and study. They cite the rise of digital marketing as an example of a tide that changed marketing as a function itself. Agencies believe influencer marketing is a science that needs to be co-developed by expert brand and business managers, influencers, creators and agencies. They feel there is a need for developing metrics and benchmarks that moves the needle from influencer marketing being seen as a tool that helps attain short term objectives to a platform that builds always-on, deep and long term consumer connect.

5. The POV that brands and influencers both need to lean in

Managing stakeholder expectations is a key area of expertise for influencer marketing agencies. Agency heads feel that there is a need to evolve the outlook brands and influencers have toward each other.

Brands need to start seeing influencers as brand custodians who can generate long-term conversions. Brands can often have expectations of 'highly produced' and high-definition content from influencers. However, the amateurish aesthetic of influencer content is what essentially makes them popular and authentic amongst their followership.

Influencers on the other hand need to start understanding the brand's values and product philosophy in a deeper way, instead of seeing the partnership as a way to make a quick buck. They have to study the brief and offer customised solutions, breaking away from templatised styles.

Currently, the attitude towards each other is very transactional and commoditised. Both need to become more cognisant of the other's working style.

Part 2

Looking beyond current definitions

Influencers archetypes

Social media existence

Platforms and their affinities

Reconsidering 'Trust' - finding a definition that effectively serves a new-age in media

4. Influencers as archetypes - larger truths they speak to

Currently, influencers are grouped through a simplistic connection to the category/product/genre of content they most commonly work with. We've identified influencer types that go beyond the strict confines of 'category appeal' or amorphous ideas such as influencer-personality, to identify the archetypes that these influencers embody through a reading of their content strategy.

Living in an era of rapid social change has made growing aspiration collide with rising vulnerability. The role of traditional systems that were rooted in the collective, that helped us cope and thrive, seem to have weakened in this hyper-individualised era. **As we manoeuvre through change (technological, social, individual) at a rate unlike past generations, the need for new systems, new guides become even stronger.**

The Influencer is exactly this new system - evocatively alive in the social-media realm we are all plugged into - giving us everything from knowledge and information, entertainment and awe, inspiration and wisdom - or sometimes just relatability - are delivered through mirroring our very own experiences in life.

The worlds of finance, health, beauty, exercise, lifestyle and food see some interesting archetypes, some of which are obvious extensions of the pre-digital world to today, while others are uniquely born of today.

The Amicable Oracle

deliver deep expertise through display of lived-in experience of products, categories and, ideas.

This archetype is probably most unique to how social media works. It is popularised by financial advisors, fitness enthusiasts, chefs, nutritionists, therapists, gynaecologists, etc. They demystify the worlds they belong to through content that is insight-based and often offer personal life anecdotes that are relatable. These are influencers who offer tips, hacks and advice backed with their own experience in the field, either as expert advisors associated with big companies, or as entrepreneurs. Their background gives credibility, to which they add light-hearted delivery, to make information relatable and memorable. Best examples of this archetype are fin advisors such as Pranjal Kamra, Finance with Sharan and Anmol Sharma; chef-nutritionists such as chefchinuvaze, Pooja Makhija, Luke Coutinho and Ryan Fernando. When it comes to sex positivity and female sexual health, influencers like drcuterus, Seema Anand and Fertility Scribbles lead the conversation.

This archetype of influencer can uncomplicate and reduce hesitancy in categories and brands that represent new interests/concerns to consumers, but can be perceived as complex or daunting. This archetype of influencer works best when they detail out a product, its features and benefits are revealed through their lens of expertise - displaying their understanding of the product as an expert first, and as a consumer next.

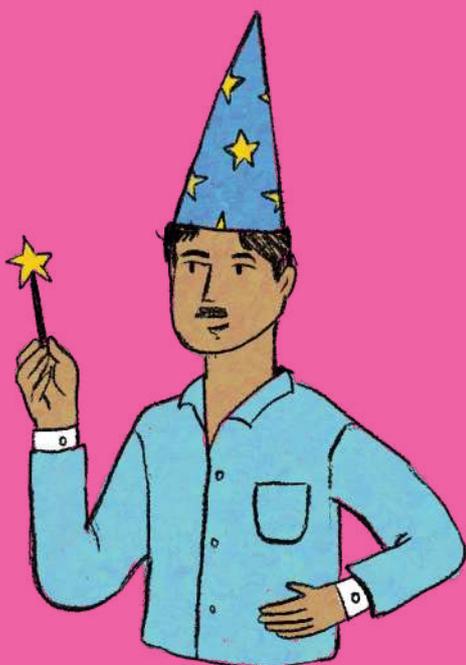


Survival-Wizards

provide handy tips on self-improvement to hack success in life.

This archetype is popularised not by insider experts, but by smart curators that put together information and advice, keeping the average Indian's everyday concerns in mind. Topics range from everything to insurance, tax, loans for big ticket purchases, as well as how to negotiate job interviews, how to choose the ideal career and larger questions on ambition, self-worth, spirituality, etc. Curators like beerbiceps, Ankur Warikoo, Priya Kumar, Neil Patel and Joseph Annamkutty are amongst the most popular, with their own podcasts, books and interviews with celebrity experts. This archetype also includes curators like Neha Nagar, Unfinance and Anushka Rathod on finance.

This archetype of influencer can present brands/categories as tools for successful living in multiple aspects of life - career, relationships, education - giving a brand/category a clear role to play in the consumer's path to their respective goals.





Soul Stylists

contemporary voices that make spirituality a means of managing challenges, and answering questions that are not otherwise easy to address.

These curators make spiritual lessons available through anecdotal life stories, quotations from spiritual texts, podcasts, interviews or book reviews. They have an ability to pose questions that have to do with the intrinsic nature of life - yet are also able to provide answers that seem accessible and, can be practiced in daily life. Their personal spiritual journeys or their own decades of monkhood brings them a credibility that is otherwise difficult to own. Influencers such as Jaya Kishori, Devi Chitralekhaji and Swami Ramdev rule the roost here. Their global versions include Sadhguru, Gaur Gopal Das, Jay Shetty and dandapanillc.

This archetype of influencer tends to have a halo that gives their 'teachings' a sense of a purer source - not from intellectual pursuits - as much as journeys of self-enquiry and insights into the human condition. Brands/categories can most effectively associate with this archetype of influencer by integrating their offering into larger goals than a single moment of consumption itself.



Radical Normalisers

These rejectors of rejection, who give us powerful evidence of the power of self-worth and belief.

This archetype consists of people who have typically been othered by society – mainly body positivity icons, trans-icons and trauma-survivors. Influencers such as Natasha Noel, Amit Bittoo Dey, Anjana Bapat, Stylemeupwithsakshi etc. fall in this category. Some of them have become celebrities in their own right - like Pooja Sharma Rekha and Sushant Digvikar. This type of influencer essays his/her struggle or trauma, revealing it to a general population that may otherwise be blind to it. Their stories of overcoming their challenges through their talent, confidence, and honesty make them exemplary icons of hope and victory.

This archetype of influencers resonate very well, not only with those facing exactly the same challenges as themselves, but also with larger audiences that empathise with their courageous fight for acceptance, and celebration of their uniqueness.

Many brands such as the Sangya Project and Tailor and Circus that cater to these audiences, and collaborate with influencers and individuals belonging to this archetype.

Everyday Blissmakers and Sabki Sahelis

Offering candid glimpses into their lives and their ability to find enjoyable rhythms in the cycle of fulfilment and unfulfilment that marks lives of wives and mothers.



From mega to nano, this archetype reflects much of the diversity and all of the commonality in experience that women audiences are sure to nod their heads at. Dominated by women homemakers who chronicle their daily lives with little 'touching up', they almost give an episodic account of their day - events in the lives of their family, their children, what they cooked for lunch, what they packed in their kids' lunchboxes. But it's not only chores - there is pleasure too in the form of content on what they wore to a function, a glimpse of a roadtrip with the family, a romantic song they might enact on their apartment terrace with their husband and more. They cover everything from recipes to home-design, DIY hacks, beauty recipes and general life advice, many a time involving their entire family in their content. Their tone is that of a woman who shares and confides with her friends. There seems to be an agreement on the shared experience of women - catering to an audience that tunes in to affirm that their experiences are common and their feelings are witnessed by other women. They engage with their fans on a regular basis through live streams on YouTube or Instagram. Some examples are Loveeshi, Garimaspride, Dr. Priyanka Shukla and Neena Kapoor.

This archetype of influencer is a highly powerful one - and regardless of the size of followership, they seem to portray their authentic selves most effectively. This is probably explained by the fact this archetype draws its power from an intrinsic bond between women that has always existed and now is dramatically reinforced through social media.



Mega-jesters of Mundanity

bit-size entertainment by juicing humour in the everyday.

These are influencers who are actors and performers at their core. Their talent lies in inventing a multitude of characters - almost like a collection of ventriloquist dolls to which they lend their unique voices. The most successful among them seem to move along a traditional trajectory of success - roles in movies, ambassadorship of large brands, being cast in OTT series as an actor. BBkivines, mostlysane, kushakapila, dollysingh, aiyyoshreddha, NM Niharika are examples of mega influencers who today seem to be moving into celebrity-hood that extends beyond their social media existence. They inch more towards traditional celebrityhood where associations with brands seem more like conventional advertising.

This archetype brings brands a large reach of followers (running into millions). Yet the fact that this kind of influencer relies on their art of performance, also means that though they may be a more authentic option than the traditional celebrity, they seem to inch a brand's marketing intervention back towards more traditional advertising.

5. What Indian social media platforms tell us about India and what they tap in consumers

India is currently the biggest market for social apps globally in terms of downloads, standing second for the most hours spent on social apps (live streaming being the latest trend), according to App Annie's 'Evolution of Social Apps'.

Interestingly, the most downloaded social and entertainment apps in India are MX TakaTak, Instagram, Josh, Moj and Snapchat. While the success of these apps can be attributed to India's ban on TikTok, it is noteworthy that their unique marketing strategies helped in increasing their popularity. Quite a few of them took to influencer marketing and brand sponsorships, but went beyond that. They even offered cash prizes and monetisation. For content makers who are present on these platforms solely for entertainment or artistic purposes, companies are bringing up cash prizes or competitions to them, making them media-channels in their own right. This usually increases user retention and reach, if satisfied users share such content and create UGC. (source: rasucreatives.com)

Instagram is a seductive destination that enables identity creation through consumption

Instagram originated with the idea of presenting one's life through 'filters' that made ordinary moments in life highly aesthetic and consumable. It is inherently rooted in the idea of consumption - and thus an idea of 'showcasing'.

It speaks most strongly to a generation and class of consumers for whom consumption is the most potent means of building identities or finding paths to their aspired 'in-groups'. Young, urban and at the front rows of the burgeoning market of choice, brands and categories represent stronger identity aspirations - and often call for a shift from identities inherited from family, society.

An average log-in to Instagram Reels will take the audience through hundreds of polished daily vlogs shot in Starbucks or an envied NRI university experience, perfectly groomed nails, fancy gyms and luxurious overseas vacations - all sparking an urgency to 'buy into' a lifestyle, a subculture, or a tag to identify oneself by.

For influencers and brands, Instagram needs to be seen as a platform that makes the market most obvious. It takes every step of consumption, including the pleasure we receive from it, and makes it tantalisingly visible.

While it draws in a consumer constituency that is a 'choice-native', it can perhaps be alienating or simply unrelatable to a large mass of Indian consumers who are still negotiating choice and consumption with restraint and caution.

It is here that short video apps represent a massive opportunity. But we first need to understand the difference they bring to the table.

Short video apps represent a thrillingly diverse world of expression

In the short lifetime that TikTok was in India, it revealed a whole population's effortless engagement with social media. At its peak, with 200 million subscribers, TikTok unveiled a stunningly different world of social media content. It possessed an unselfconscious originality that seemed to elude well-established formats such as Instagram.

What TikTok unleashed, has been taken ahead by native platforms like Moj and MX Takatak. Offering users song libraries loaded with regional hits was like extending a friendly welcome that said, "this is your space".

There is much in reportage about the popularity of native short video platforms. Millions of Indian consumers gravitate towards them for a key reason - an inability to connect with, or even understand, the global-speak of a format like Instagram. These short video apps offer a vernacular space that signals immediate acceptance.

This open-armed acceptance has encouraged content generation from a massive constituency of consumers that live more or less unseen and unreflected in the visual worlds that brands have built and continue to build through social and digital content.

A defining aspect of the content on these platforms is a sense that the creators are enjoying their own creation. The content on platforms like Moj and MX Takatak abound with reflexive expression of the way people live. Whether they are selfies, dance routines or dubbed dialogues being acted out, the content creators on these platforms seem to extract joy from their own performance. **It is almost as if the platform is a new form of leisure that allows for unlimited expressiveness.**

Short video apps seem to echo the more cacophonous cultural spaces of our country - where consumption, socialisation and cultural celebration go hand in hand.

If Instagram represents shiny malls, platforms such as Moj and Takatak are melas. While 'consumption' is the currency on Instagram, 'expression' seems to be the currency on Moj and MX Takatak.

While creators on Instagram curate their content for a consuming eye - Moj and Takatak are a democracy of expressiveness.

YT Shorts also seems to be closer to the Moj and Takatak apps than the Instagram reel, which stays comparatively 'elite' in its tone.

YouTube seems to work as a 'library of information', and easily accommodates all socio-cultural strata. It must be noted, however, that content on YouTube straddles both ends

of the spectrum. In contrast to short form video platforms, it has always enjoyed a more democratic appeal, both in terms of demographics as well as the wide range of topics that are explored on YouTube. For many, YT is more like a 'library' of endless information or analysis on any and all topics, while short-form video apps are predominantly for entertainment and branded content. In that sense, one can see both types of content on YT - the reflexive expressions and self-conscious performances that are aimed at attracting the consumption-oriented eye.

Directions for brands and influencers for navigating the differing natures of social media platforms

The most important aspect to understand and define is the meaning of the word 'influencer', especially when it comes to most of the creators on Moj, MX Takatak and a large part of YouTube. The current Instagram-led understanding of followership as 'willingness to be persuaded' may not necessarily fit the other short video / multi-format platforms.

While authenticity is baked-in to the influencer of Moj and MX Takatak, their role embodies a different set of values and expectations than that of the Insta-influencer. While the Insta-influencer's effectiveness is determined by their ability to 'convince and convert', the effectiveness of their counterparts in Moj and MX Takatak is rooted in creating and spreading joy in relatable forms of expression. Their influence is less obvious and less transactional.

When it comes to brands, while 'influential' creators on Moj and MX Takatak might not necessarily be aspirational, they enjoy something valuable - a sense of camaraderie and relatability. **Their appeal lies not in generating the consumption-list of a 'choice-native', but in co-navigating choice and consumption along with the followers.** This understanding is crucial for brands to appreciate the nuance between the two kinds of SM as they plan their marketing strategies.

6. The Influencer as a non-negotiable marketing instrument in the age of social media existence

The dawn of social media sparked a snow-balling change in how we consume. Social media and the 'content-isation' of the self has added previously non-existent dimensions to how consumers choose, compare, like, engage and relate with brands. To understand the phenomenal rise of the influencer, we need to understand the driving forces that make the influencer not just a good-to-have weapon in the arsenal of marketing, but a must-have interpreter that fluently speaks the language of social media-age consumption in every diverse accent, which brands are still learning the A-B-Cs of.

Social media existence has reinvented consumers and consumption itself in dramatic ways. Influencers and brands need to note the following about why marketing will never be the same again:

1. Social media gives us the ability for consumption surveillance while we consume

Platforms like Instagram offer us a never before view into the consumption of others - a live stream of sorts, of the aspirations, satisfactions and disappointments of others like us. Influencers pool aspirations and translate evocatively through their content creation talent, which is otherwise difficult to verbalise. For example, how do we want to make our mothers feel special on Mother's Day? what's the ideal setting for a proposal?

2. Provides access into subcultures through consumption

Social media gives us access to newer sets of collective identities that come intrinsically from what we consume - be it a product or content (e.g. Sneakerheads, Emoboys, cringe fans). *Influencers model sub-culture behaviour giving consumers the passwords to enter sometimes tightly coded and gated subcultures.*

3. Glocalisation of cultures

Web 2 makes culture travel seamlessly across borders. *Influencers import and translate branded cultures / subcultures into native languages making them very pertinent for a multicultural and multi-lingual country such as India.*

4. The need for narrowcasting in the increased fragmentation of a mass-audience

When every consumer is an individual receiver, thanks to the access in personalising/customising quality of the digital-social sphere, the idea of broadcasting breaks down. *Traditional icons like the celebrity, though they stay relevant in terms of sheer recognisability to large numbers, fail to generate the kind of one-to-one engagement that an influencer promises.*

5. For a generation of consumers, the social media-enabled market is becoming the most effective way to engage with emerging movements in society

Globally, we see socio-political awakenings to alternative ideas of life, beauty, gender, freedom of choice, human rights and self-expression. From Me-too to body positivity, green/sustainability, non-binary gender expression, fighting back colorism and mental health, ideas of social change have seeped into how consumers see the world and people or brands within it. *Influencers allow brands to associate with values that are becoming important to their consumers and even triggers for consumption.*

6. Consumption showcasing on social media acts as a guide to evolving one's consumption of a category or product

Influencers can seed ideas of consumption through portraying sustained practices of consumption through their content. They can create a path of consumption that 'suggests' how one can move up/evolve from being a beginner to a virtuoso of consuming a certain product, category or brand. For example, the coffee wave - from instant coffee drinker to a brew perfectionist.

7. Social media collapses the distance between fans and who they follow

One of the trademark features of the traditional celebrity is the distance they maintained from their fans. This is the exact opposite of what social media has trained audiences to desire today - an ability to reach out, connect, engage and garner response from those they follow. Even if it is not a one-to-one contact, the celebrity who does not acknowledge their followers, today seems distant, unrelatable and in many ways, an incomplete person. *The influencer has tapped social media in a way that traditional celebrities (movie, music stars) have been reluctant to. For example, acknowledging and even including their followers in content. This is the source of the authenticity and intimacy that is attributed to influencers.*

8. Social media 'unboxes' product and brand experiences and makes proxy-consumption a key step in decision making

Not only does the social media era see a proliferation of choice in terms of brands or new categories of consumption, it also lets acts of consumption itself become highly visible. Social media greatly and evocatively displays the consumed experience of a brand/product after it has been purchased and unboxed. Today, consumers not only see the product as described by the brand, but the consumption experience as described by peer-consumers - whether they be influencers or not. A product that is not unboxed and whose consumption itself is not made into content, can be largely considered to be incompletely sold. *The influencer is the production manager of this new leg of product-selling. Traditional advertising on mass media leaves the job only half-done by today's standards - it is the influencer who is adept at creating the proxy-consumption that can trigger actual choice and purchase.*

9. The audience simultaneously consumes, produces and distributes

In a social media existence, we need to see the consumer as a multi-dimensional entity that is continuously morphing - from being audience, to being a producer to being media. In some ways, every consumer is an influencer with their own 'influence radius'.

Micro and nano influencers seem to belong more effortlessly to the new social media context

It is not surprising that lately the attention has been moving towards micro and nano influencers. They are said to be more 'authentic'. And when you see their content, their relationship with their followers, we can see them reflexively embody many of the defining elements of social media-led existence. Are micro and nano influencers better at connecting with the social media native consumer?

Are mega influencers tending to fall back into an old-media mode of the celebrity endorser?

There are several examples of mega influencers who seem to be chasing and succeeding into crossing into the 'big screen' - whether as actors in leading roles or featuring on hoardings for iconic brands. While this is an amazing achievement and a phenomenal showcasing of the power of social media to give talent a stage and an audience in the context of brands and consumption, this represents a sort of return to traditional modes of communication. Is a star mega influencer more effective in a TV ad or live?

These are some questions that need to be pursued by brands and marketers.



7. Trust 2.0 - do we need a new understanding of trust in the context of influencer marketing?

A quick search on the web will tell you that consumer's trust what influencers say about a brand more than what the brand says about itself. Or that influencer-created posts about a brand are more trusted than a brand's own advertising.

Influence seems to rest on the foundation of trust - yet 'trust' is an elusive word. What constitutes it? What breaks it? And what is its relevance in the influencer marketing context? How do influencers create, maintain and retain trust? How do brands deploy the trust of influencers to shape purchase decisions of their consumers? How do both brands and influencers guard themselves against the loss of trust, and therefore of follower/consumer goodwill and positive purchase disposition?

Trust is not what it was:

At the outset, we must acknowledge that the social media existence over the last decade and more has surely led audiences to redefine trust, when it comes to influencers they follow. More than a decade of social networking and watching the rise (or fall) of the 'instafamous', being 'sold' to through web-banners, pop-ups, sponsored ads on our social media feeds - has already awakened us to the fact the social media realm is an active market. Whether it be of actual products/services for sale by corporations or friends and colleagues, timelines with posts seeking our likes and reactions, today we are growing aware of the fact that social media is a power that can be wielded to attain goals.

We also need to acknowledge that the notion of trust itself has taken some blows. In a world of fake news, and deep fakes, blind trust in online content is weakening.

The age of hyper-consumption has already revealed that content has an agenda, and that our attention as audience has value.

Hyper-commercialisation of content (product placements in movies and shows) have become highly prevalent with whole departments and agencies managing them. As an audience, we are gradually becoming aware of the agenda behind content.

Whether it be commercial, political, social or personal - the audience is no longer an innocent 'receiver' being 'injected' with messages of persuasion by large entities. The awareness of one's value as an audience should make us consider the concept of 'trust' with some difference.

Influencers and brands need to acknowledge the consumer's 'informed trust'

Over time, the bulk of social media audiences will be digital/social-media natives.

Even non-digital natives are actively participating in creating their 'personal image', even if not deploying them as 'influence'.

As audiences are becoming aware of the power of the medium, they are also becoming aware of the fact that influencers can use that power and share it with businesses that want to target them.

The current model of trust does not account for an audience armed with new knowledge:

Consumers (as followers and, audience) are constantly learning the power of social media, and often putting it to use themselves - even if not with commercial goals in mind.

The current model of trust believes that any whiff of transaction breaks down trust (which could be true if the audience had no inkling or no experience of social media as a live market).

It also places authenticity at the extreme opposite of commercial intentions.

An industry whose survival is dependent on 'trust', cannot thrive with its main strategy to preserve trust as hoping for concealment of commercial intent (i.e., 'seamlessly' authentic posts) - both on the part of the brand as well as the influencer.

A rapidly changing context and social media users, who are getting savvier by the day, call for a new model of trust.

Increasingly, what lies at the heart of the dissonance that audiences feel towards commercial posts? Is it the act of being sold to or the pretence of the content to be cast as purely authentic? Or is it being left out of a tacit agreement between brand and influencer?

Currently, the industry operates with a narrow understanding of trust, while the audience is progressing towards a more pragmatic definition of trust, and awakening to the power to negotiate it.

Trust 2.0: Building 'active trust'

Today, audiences don't just passively trust - they actively 'give' their trust in exchange for a set of pragmatic expectations from the world of content and influencers as creators of this world.

What are the triggers of 'active trust' for consumers today in the context of influencer marketing? What is important for consumers to perceive and for influencers and brands to build?

Competence

The depth of expertise and, flair of talent an influencer is perceived to have is what makes their content valuable - either in terms of knowledge and information, or in terms of entertainment. Influencers need to be specialists of their domains, which means their content needs to reflect their deep engagement with their subject.

Empathy and affirmation

The audience is not only seeking information, but also wants the information to feel relatable. Content needs to acknowledge the needs of the audience that go beyond the functionality of the product being showcased. It must also address the hidden emotional needs behind the act of consumption. E.g., we need to understand the order of using products in a skin-care routine, but skin-care routines are also a way of dealing with our anxieties and wresting control over uncertainties.

The influencer is an interpreter of the brand, not its puppet: As audiences are awakening to the reality of the 'marketplace' that social media is, content that shows the influencer in control of the agenda is more likely to be trusted.

Personal takes that make for review-like content, not infomercials

A consistent and familiar voice, and most importantly, a nuanced voice i.e., one that doesn't sound scripted and isn't afraid to mention areas where the brand or product still needs to improve.

Content that does not treat the audience as a mute observer, rather invites engagement

One sided content is nothing but a 'digital ad'. Content needs to build in triggers for engagement - this could mean a gamification of engagement by building in questions, rewards.

8. Trust Fails and Trust Wins: examples to underline the advent of a new definition of trust

Instances of fails and wins that bring alive that the influencer-brand-consumer ecosystem already operates in Trust 2.0

#fails

When influencers and brands assume that the audience is only in receiving mode and mutes their feedback.

When Popchips made a culturally insensitive ad with Ashton Kutcher or when Dolce & Gabbana released sneakers with the caption "I'm thin and I'm gorgeous", they were called out for it. The co-founder attacked commenters.

When influencers are in the mode of being celebrity endorsers who have no real connection with the product or culture they are endorsing.

#FyreFest posts got 300 million impressions in 24 hours. However, as the day of the festival approached, the festival management had apparently reneged on every promise they made to ticket-buyers, with influencers who were paid in millions of dollars, trying to distance themselves from the debacle.

When brands don't recognise that followers are supporters of well-liked influencers and not just consumers of their content

When finance and lifestyle influencer, Aja Dang, created content for ASICS in 2017, she claimed that she was not paid for two years. After calling the brand out in a YouTube video, many of Aja's followers took to social media to demand that the brand pay the influencer what she deserved. Some followers even commented that they would no longer be supporting ASICS and buying their products.

When influencers showcase products or brands incompletely, or in some cases even fail to disclose their paid partnerships, they hurt the reputation of brands and themselves, and do not recover from their fall many a time.

When Kim Kardashian posted a picture promoting the morning sickness drug Diclegis, she forgot to list the full side effects of the drug. When Oreo collaborated with influencers Dan and Phil on a Lick Race challenge to see who could lick an Oreo clean first. Dan and Phil did not disclose that their content was paid by Oreo's parent company Mondelez.

When influencers don't deliver on the engagement promise either through negligence, carelessness or even malicious intent.

Snapchat tried getting an influencer to promote their product on Instagram, which the influencer did partly. When Snapchat tried to sue him, their own underhanded strategy was exposed, affecting both influencer and brand.

When brands treat influencers as 'viral content' channels without checking on an alignment of values that the brand shares with its consumers.

Sugar Bear, a hair product company, tied up with James Charles to promote their products. He later disclosed that he never used them and only took the deal to get Coachella tickets.

When brands and influencers are upfront about the exchange of benefits.

Instagram powerhouse Frank Beauty uses influencer marketing as a primary method to generate buzz before a new product launch. They linked up with a variety of micro influencers — from beauty influencers to athletes, fitness bloggers and models — to bring product awareness to its coffee scrubs, body balms and glow masks. These micro influencers posted photos on Instagram with Frank Body products using hashtags like #thefrankeffect and #frankpaidme as part of its influencer campaign. In their first year, Frank grew to 350,000 followers on Instagram. Fastforward to the present, and the company is worth more than \$20 million with more than 629,000 Instagram followers. Interestingly, even unpaid celebs got in on the action and said their post wasn't an ad because they just loved the products.

When brands have contests that engage consumers directly, side-stepping the old-media 'campaign feel' that many social-media marketing initiatives have.

When Swiggy created online competitions that its audience would want to actually participate in, like The Voice of Hunger, it was a win-win for both brand and consumer. Its mechanics were fun, easy to implement, accessible on the chosen social media platform, and its prizes were definitely worth it.

When micro influencers enjoy higher levels of trust with consumers than mega influencers.

Brands such as Glossier and Huda Beauty caught on to the fact that 'micro influencers' (accounts with under 50k following) enjoyed a deeper connection with their followers, leading to high rates of engagement. This may well be because they focus on niche subjects that people connect with on a higher level - for example, male makeup influencers. In fact, Social Media Today reports that 'micro influencers command high levels of trust. Only 3 percent of consumers are swayed by celebrity-level endorsements, compared with the 30 percent who would consider purchasing products from non-celebrity bloggers.'

When brands confidently open themselves up to accept infusion to ideas and desires from influencers and consumers

When influencer Barbara Kristoffersen's video featured a Gap hoodie in a colour the company hadn't manufactured since the early 2000s, it caused the #brownhoodie hashtag to go viral, generating a collective engagement rate of 188.35 percent while sparking an influx of the no-longer-made hoodies on resale sites for up to \$300. Quick to capitalise on the organic traction its brand was seeing, Gap worked with additional influencers to create the #gaphoodie campaign, which garnered over 6.5 million views. The brand also brought back the previously retired shade of brown, which was met with such fanfare that it quickly went on back order.

Part 3

New paradigms for influencers and brands

9. The way forward for influencers and brands in the age of collaborative trust

Marshall McLuhan's adage, "The medium is the message" has applied powerfully to every era of media. Every new invention in media has irreversibly redefined us as human beings - even as we are too subsumed in the medium itself to notice. From the printing press, the telephone, the television, satellite TV and mobile phones to the web, smartphones and social media, each medium has redefined how we look at ourselves and how we relate to the world. Defining socio-political movements have been made possible by the era of media they exist in.

Today, we exist in 'social media' and there is more published every day about how it is redesigning the 'given' definitions of living a human life. Whether it is about the revolution that identity politics represents or the way national politics plays out or simply how it rewires our ways of socialising, social media is the very air that we breathe.

Influencers are a potent invention of social media - they are akin to a new technology that brands now have access to, in order to reach their consumers in ways more meaningful than ever before.

Yet, the most commonly applied definitions of influencers reek of an old media frame of 'size' - 'mega', 'micro', 'nano'. When size is the prime definition being used, brands and influencer marketing agencies fall back into patterns that serve mass-media imaginations well - but are weak in tapping the potential that influencers truly represent in increasingly fragmenting consumer segments.

We have already seen how the changing context of social media has transformed the marketing landscape and introduced the influencer as a potent tool. We have also seen that the consumer is 'party' to the market and not a mute outsider or to be treated as such.

What are the ways that influencers and brands can begin to create new paradigms that deepen trust, increase effectiveness and serve all parties better?

Trust Trinity

This is a collaborative model of trust that includes the influencer, brand as well as the consumer in a relationship that shapes effective production of content and aids consumption in a backdrop of authenticity and transparency.

It recognises that trust is not an event, but a process

Trust is strengthened through relationships - and relationships inherently suggest a long-term view, not just marketing event-based bursts based bursts

Influencers need to embrace their roles as counsellors of consumption

'Influencers' and 'Content Creators' only partially describe the role that influencers are truly playing in the social media led consumption context. When it comes to brands, influencers and aspiring influencers need to recognise that they can be more than just a followership number. In the context of brands and consumption, the true power of the influencer lies in the proximity they have with their followers.

Influencers can have a view into the needs, aspirations and anxieties of their followers in ways that are difficult for brands to gain. The better you understand your followers, the better you get at creating content that truly touches a chord.

This means that influencers need to work on the following:

1. Take true interest in your followers

They are not just numbers. They are people with interests, hopes, dreams and fears. Get to know them. Lives and AMAs are opportunities to further a mutual understanding.

3. Invite your followers into your journey of growth

Your followers are not unaware of their role in your progress, especially when sponsorships are involved. It is their engagement and followership that drives your content's effectiveness for brands. There are several ways to 'share' your progress:

- a. Through aiding consumption - something that is already in play through discount codes
- b. Create a cause or goal that your followership aligns with - and contribute towards it. This makes your followers feel that their engagement goes beyond a transaction for a brand, rather it attaches them to you through more meaningful goals. This is especially relevant for younger consumers who are keen to offset their consumption with good actions.

2. Ace your category

Attempt to deeply understand the category you specialise in. No category is just a product - it is a means of satisfying a human need that goes beyond the functional. This is true for food and health, beauty and fashion or technology and finance. Make the effort to understand the history of the category, and what has changed. Doing this will bring depth to your content that will translate as authenticity - and make your followers see you as someone who has their own point-of-view, and is not toeing the line, even if your content is sponsored.

4. Brands learn from you as much as they 'hire' you

Involve yourself in the work that brands do before they come to you with products and services. Information from feedback, comments and questions you receive are valuable insights for brands. Not only is this a way to monetise your followership, it is also a way of enabling brands to understand people's needs and concerns so they can serve people better.

5. Active engagement with followers

Many influencers already solicit ideas for fresh content from their followers. Formalising it, making it a regular affair, maybe even an incentivised one, can help followers feel the benefits of the unpaid work they're doing in building your career!

Brands need to move into a new paradigm that allows for a 'stakeholder' view on influencers and consumers

1. Listen to your followers

Just like with the Gap #brownhoodie, sometimes marketing ideas are simply winking at you, waiting to be found in the ocean of comments and likes. While orchestrating these moments might not be possible all the time, they could still turn out to be a feather in your cap.

2. Start small / start early to make growth collaborative

Invest in micro influencers, work with them to sharpen their style and positioning. Your brand will benefit from aligning with sharp and effective influencer personalities and their nuanced content. What's more, it minimises risk of diluting the authenticity of your brand.

3. Involve influencers in product innovation / soft launch stage / live events

A lot of the knowledge and expertise that influencers bring to the table is learned at an intuitive level. Aligning at a values-level also means that their inputs while you're planning the next new product / service in your portfolio will help sharpen your offering.

4. Profile your influencers the way you profile your TG

Invest in understanding the appeal that certain influencers have and why the marriage of their content with your brand's marketing works well. Offer them insights on their follower base, and the style and tone of their content. Communicate this to influencers as well. It can prove to be mutually beneficial.

5. Collab campaigns need not be only with influencers, they can include consumers as well

Whether it is the Swiggy contest example, or how a lot of 'indie' brands have giveaways directly to consumers, incentivising the consumer directly can many a time reinforce their goodwill for the brand in a positive way.

Influencer marketing agencies have a new role to play, one that goes beyond talent management

1. You're managing 'brand and cultural assets' not just digital versions of talent

A distinction needs to be made between how talent management agencies work with the talent they represent and influencer marketing agencies. Their responsibility goes beyond keeping the fans interested, because an influencer's followers need not necessarily be fans. Many followers have a critical view and they judge content quality with a keen eye. At the same time, online trolling is to a tune that has hitherto not been seen before. Thus, the influencer marketing agency's role is a little more involved, and probably a little more complicated. Grooming influencers by articulating their strengths and weaknesses (both rational and emotional), as well as offering mental health support and crisis management are important roles for influencer marketing agencies to play.

2. Your role is more strategic as well

Just like brands define a brand positioning and carefully develop the brand's imagery around it, influencers have to do it as well. Quite a few of them, especially the comedy-influencers, have intuitively carved out a positioning for themselves. But unlocking the potential of these positionings is something influencer marketing agencies can aid them in - for brand collabs, for having their own branded products / services, etc.

3. Leading the understanding of 'influence' when it comes to tier 2 and tier 3 preferred social media channels

We've already established that the same metrics that determine the influence of a creator on Instagram do not necessarily apply to the creators on Moj, MX Takatak and others. Leading this understanding, by understanding patterns across multiple influencers can really aid both influencers and brands to better articulate what makes them tick and why.

Regulators need to lay foundations and guardrails that guide a sustainable and equitable growth of the influencer industry.

This means aiding influencers and brands to work together in ways that serve both parties while ensuring protection of the interests of consumers being targeted through this new medium and its new messengers.

There are a few key areas that regulators can work towards:

1. Trust Training

Though multiple guidelines are already in place; regulators will need to invest in training influencers to understand and practice these guidelines. This will help influencers ensure that they do not accidentally draw liability due to any infringements they may make.

Closer engagement and collaboration with influencers will also give regulators a better understanding of the challenges influencers face in staying within the guardrails of guidelines and bring in more perspective for future guidelines. This will also enable better acceptance and implementation of guidelines.

2. Mistrust-proofing content diagnostic

Create a system of due diligence that lets influencers make sure their content does not become misleading or offensive through a checklist that content can be evaluated against.

3. Influencer resources

Create a resource library for influencers that they can refer to, such as a disclaimer glossary, tools for easy identification of content that needs disclosures, quizzes and FAQs.

4. Support formation of an industry body for influencers

Currently influencers operate more like a fragmented community for brands wishing to use social media to reach their consumers. Regulators can support a more formalised 'association' of influencers that not only adheres to codes of trust and transparency, but also has a more equal dialogue with brands through a formalised sharing of ideas on opportunities or challenges with marketing on social media today. This will also facilitate a two-way dialogue with stakeholders and regulators.

5. Recognising honest influencers and brands

Recognise brands and influencers that create meaningful engagements with audience, while ensuring full compliance with the ASCI guidelines in letter and spirit.

End Note

In early 2021, ASCI formed a task force to look at the phenomenon of influencer advertising which was gaining popularity. It represented a new version of advertising- one where content was excitingly different from the way traditional advertising appealed to consumers.

Here were a set of fantastically diverse people, with mostly no background in marketing or advertising, writing scripts and putting up acts that connected with audiences like never before. This was nothing short of a revolution. As guardians of truth and honesty in the advertising landscape, the task before ASCI was to ensure consumer protection, but at the same time ensure that we did not restrict the growth of the creator-led economy. With several rounds of consultations with brands, content creators and other stakeholders, simple disclosure guidelines were launched. This was widely seen as the first attempt to treat content creators as an “industry”, and create some structural foundations that would help sustain this movement.

Nearly two years after the guidelines were issued, we see an ever-increasing enthusiasm amongst brands and content creators to work together. Fears of ‘will this reduce engagement?’ have been put to rest. Our recent [“Influencer Trust Report”](#) indicates that transparency about brand associations is the No. 1 reason to trust influencer content. As greater amounts of advertising money flow into the creator economy, it is time for the greater formalisation of structures and rules that ensure that the benefits of this association are equitably felt by all stakeholders. It is safe to say that consumer trust in brands and influencers is the engine driving this economy.

It is also safe to say that what we are witnessing is just the first phase of a very exciting journey. As the report suggests, there are many more opportunities and greater value to be unlocked for all stakeholders. Using influencers for their ground-up insights, and their intuitive understanding of what consumers want, is a powerful opportunity waiting to be tapped. It also calls for a fuller role of the influencer, and not just as a last mile communicator or outreach mechanism for brands.

ASCI will continue to help shape this industry, constantly bringing consumer interest back into focus, even as it evolves and pivots around different growth opportunities. At this most exciting juncture in the advertising timeline, we are keen to see what the future brings. With phenomenal progress in technology and unleashing of human creativity, advertising is poised to change fundamentally. And we are committed to being part of this journey, through meaningful, nimble and collaborative self-regulation.

Manisha Kapoor
CEO and Secretary-General



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Established in 1985, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) is committed to the cause of self-regulation in advertising and protecting consumer interest. Over the past few decades, ASCI has established a robust mechanism for handling complaints against objectionable advertising content and this has gained recognition from the industry as well as the government. ASCI is a part of The Cable Television Network (Regulation) Act's Advertising Code. ASCI's code is also mentioned in the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority Act and appended in advertising guidelines of All India Radio, Drug Controller Authority of India, and the Press Council of India's norms of journalistic conduct, among others. The ASCI code is constantly updated to keep pace with the needs of consumers and society, as well as changes in the advertising and media environment.

Besides complaint handling, ASCI also works on initiatives to educate and advise the advertising ecosystem so that advertising may be more responsible, thereby protecting both consumer interests and brand reputation.

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Futurebrands is one of India's leading brand strategy and consumer insight consultancies. It has closely watched and mapped the cultural change in India for more than a decade. An expert in immersive ethnography, Futurebrands has consistently advised leading brands on evolving their narratives to become more meaningful in the lives of their consumers. Almost 15 years of first-hand consumer contact to map change and continuous analysis of cross-category advertising, gives Futurebrands a head start in analysing gender depiction in Indian advertising.

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For queries: contact@ascionline.in

www.ascionline.in

