

BLURRED LINES IN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCING:
EXPLORING THE CONSEQUENCES OF USING
PERSONHOOD AS A PLATFORM

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This position paper discusses the rise of social media influencing in India and its implications for content and consumerism as the lines blur between personal and professional personas, raising concerns about transparency, misinformation, mental health, and materialism. This paper brings these issues to light through specific examples and argues that to address them, there is a need for a collaborative effort among consumers, regulators, brands, agencies, and influencers.

Introduction

In India, social media influencing landscape has become multifaceted and complex, with the rise of influencers who have amassed wealth, fame, social following and significant professional milestones. The implications of this culture on how we define content and consumerism warrant deeper exploration. Historically, Indians have seen singers, actors, and other artists achieve the aspirational status of a superstar based on their skills and projects. Their content has always been distinct from their personal lives unlike the influencer whose personal life fuels their content. For instance, Shah Rukh Khan gained fame through his acting roles in films

such as "Swades" and "Chak de India," and his success was measured through his mega, big budgeted projects. Celebrities like him were the 'original influencers' who received brand endorsements and dictated consumer behavior. Media consumption in India, once dominated by celebrities, is now being taken over by social media influencers who have smaller but more engaged audiences. Even the traditional celebrity is trying to keep up with the modern tools of influence by being active and engaged on their social media platforms.

Scholars have noted the emergence of new forms of celebrity in the digital age. According to Gillespie (2010), social media platforms have transformed the ways in which we understand and perceive a celebrity, as individuals can now accrue fame and influence outside of traditional media industries through new forms of cultural capital (Marvick and Boyd, 2011). Rajput and Jain (2021) found that consumers are more likely to purchase products endorsed by social media influencers than those endorsed by traditional celebrities.

Influencers are the typical Indian Aam Aadmi, who have built a following based on their niche interests such as food, fashion, travel, etc. They command a substantial portion of content consumption on the internet and hold sway over their audience's interests and wallets. Their followers dictate how powerful their platform is and the kind of opportunities they get. Never have celebrities experienced such direct access and such great degree of control their 'fans' have on their professional lives. Influencer accessibility has led to an increase in aspirations of their viewers. Viewers are witnessing 'celebrity' as a function of social media algorithms rather than pure skill. Social media algorithms underpin the attention economy – they are fast, addictive, favor virality and can often be manipulative. The content creator economy rides on the wave of these algorithms, raising grievous questions about transparency and authenticity of the new age celebrity.

The rise of social media influencing has blurred the lines between personal and professional personas, transforming the ways in which we understand fame and influence in India.

Some of the major issues arising from the burgeoning influencer culture in India are:

Lack of transparency and authenticity in influencer marketing:

A deep dive into a major Indian Skincare Influencer's Instagram feed showcased that in a month, she recommended a total of 147 skincare products as "skincare essentials" as paid promotions. Her followers spotted paid collaborations for prod-

ucts she had earlier announced did not work for her and weren't good in quality. In this scenario, does the influencer's accountability lie with their audience that has given them the platform or does it lie with the brands who are paying them for advertisement aka promotions?

The influencer culture in India has blurred the lines between advertisement and content. Influencer endorsements can sway purchasing decisions of their followers, and brands are willing to pay big money to tap into this influence. Some brands have made it big by riding on the back of influencer marketing. Contrastingly, Nair and Gupta (2021) found that the Indian consumer is growing skeptical of influencer marketing and often perceives it as dishonest. Lack of transparency and authenticity in influencer marketing has become a concern.

To address this issue, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) introduced guidelines for influencer marketing in 2019. These guidelines require influencers to disclose their paid partnerships with brands and to ensure that their posts do not mislead consumers. However, compliance with these guidelines remains a challenge. Bansal and Kohli (2021) found that many influencers in India do not follow the ASCI guidelines adequately. Enforcing these guidelines will require a collaborative effort between regulators, brands, agencies, and influencers to ensure that the consumer interests are protected. This is difficult to achieve because influencer contracts can be highly informal in nature, such as barter, exposure, etc.

The burden of transparency is not on influencers alone. Mamaearth, an Indian skincare brand positions its products as natural and free of harmful chemicals. The brand has observed meteoric growth thanks to influencer marketing even though they do not even manufacture their products. Their products are sourced from a mass manufacturer, but they are marketed as something unique and innovative that the brand has worked on. The parent company paid 3958 influencers in March to September 2022 for promotions and is now seeking to go public with a valuation of over INR 1,000 Cr (The Morning Context) with just INR 14 Cr in profits. The company tripled its spend on social media marketing during the pandemic.

Many Indian skincare brands took advantage of the growing market (for active-based and natural skincare) and launched with little quality control using aggressive influencer marketing as a crutch.

Spread of Misinformation

The rise of influencer culture in India has contributed to the changing media landscape, with social media tools like Instagram Reels and YouTube shorts (short

form video content) becoming increasingly popular among young people (Chen & Sharma, 2021). This has disrupted traditional media channels like TV, newspapers, etc. and created new opportunities for content creators and brands alike (Kumar & Mirani, 2021). There is increasing pressure by platform algorithms on influencers to create engaging content that is concise and catchy (Nair, 2021). The virality of content is unrelated to the skill and the actual substance of it – it is often algorithm dictated.

One example of this is finance content, which has seen a meteoric rise on content platforms due the ability of reels to make it more digestible and understandable for the audience who does not have training or expertise in the domain (Maheshwari, 2021). However, this content can also be misleading as it often does not convey complete information and can reduce the most important aspects to a catchy hook (Hans, 2021). This is an extremely dangerous precedent as finance creators offer advice on savings and investments – often recommending financial products and services to their followers who might act on the advice without research. The terms and conditions of these financial products are often not conveyed to the audience. The 2024 Union Budget was a common topic covered by Indian ‘finfluencers’, with many being called out for spreading misinformation or a blatantly wrong interpretation of the new tax regime introduced by the government. The SEBI (Securities and Exchange Board of India) is now coming up with new regulations for these ‘finfluencers’, where only SEBI-registered entities will be able to offer financial advice on social media.

Social media content is not regulated the way traditional advertisements are; the platforms themselves moderate the content. Lack of cultural and geographical context leads to promotion of blatant misinformation, harmful content, cultural appropriation, and stereotypes. There is an entire generation of social media users that relies excessively on the niche influencer of their choice for recommendations about the best skincare, travel destinations, style guide, or even personal finance. Confirmation bias can also lead viewers to believe that popular sentiments expressed on social media are really facts. Packaged content designed to capture attention might pass off as actual information or news.

Health and Finance are two domains where an average consumer turns to the internet for better comprehension. This democratization of information is good until the consumer starts acting on influencers’ advice to better their finances or improve their health. Here, regulatory responsibility is very nascent. Anyone with a Social Media account can start creating content, without research or qualifications, and it can be difficult to disassociate fact from content that is carefully crafted to garner engagement. Even if regulations are put in place, enforcing them

can be challenging. In 2020, ASCI had to issue warnings to several celebrities and influencers for promoting products that made false claims about their benefits (ASCI, 2020). However, the ASCI has limited powers to enforce its guidelines, and influencers can quickly delete posts or change their content to avoid regulatory action.

Formation of Para-social relationships and mental health implications:

The pressure to maintain an image consistent with their content on social media can take a toll on the mental health of influencers. Influencers are both accessible and aspirational, unlike Bollywood celebrities who are only aspirational but inaccessible which allows them to take on projects that are not associated with their personal brand and opinions and have a diverse range of opportunities. However, the influencer whose entire personality is their brand, the constant need for likes, followers, and engagement for their content can lead to anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues (Fardouly et al., 2020).

Para-social relationships are prevalent in influencer culture in India, where followers believe that they have a personal connection with the influencer, even though it is often one-sided and illusory (Veena & Sruthi, 2020). Followers perceive themselves as being friends with influencers and therefore feel entitled to know personal details about their lives (Blinka & Smahel, 2009). Since the degree of access is very high, influencers readily see the discourse on their personal lives unfold on their own platforms. Kritika Khurana, fashion and lifestyle influencer, recently announced separation from her husband on Instagram. Her wedding was featured heavily on her platform, and her followers got to follow along as she picked outfits, venues, and décor for it. When she announced her separation, it came as a shock to her audience who had always seen the pair as an ideal couple who had a fairytale wedding. Her followers made the argument that if they had such access to her marriage so far, they even deserved to know the reason for the split which she wasn't comfortable sharing publicly. They opined that by the virtue of her being a public influencer – she forgoes the right to privacy. If she can share the good parts of her life, then why not the bad?

The commodification of authenticity in influencer culture has been well-documented. In her book, 'No Filter: The Inside Story of Instagram', Sarah Frier highlights how influencers often present a highly curated and filtered version of their lives on social media to maintain their brand image and appeal to their audience (Frier, 2020). This creates a false sense of intimacy between the influencer

and their followers, leading to a sense of entitlement on the part of the audience. In a personal interview, a fashion influencer (who requested to be anonymous) revealed that she often finds herself making content with her partner about how good her relationship is, even if she is not on speaking terms with him.

In a survey conducted by Hopper HQ, 42% of influencers reported that social media had a negative impact on their mental health. This can be attributed to the constant need to be present online, create content, and maintain a certain image, which can lead to feelings of burnout, anxiety, and depression.

Promotion of excessive materialism and gentrification:

The influencer culture in India often promotes materialism, creating a culture of consumerism and excess that can lead to a focus on acquiring material possessions rather than cultivating meaningful relationships and experiences (Mina, 2021). Since influencers base a lot of their content on relatability and approachability, the lifestyle they portray on social media can seem desirable to many, often with the message that these products are essential to achieving the perfect life. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem among followers who feel pressure to conform to these standards (Choudhary & Dhawan, 2020). The consumers are trying to keep up with the evolving trends coming at them with blinding speed. Many young influencers showcase the things they have achieved in a short span of time on their platforms: a luxury car, a self-financed house, international trips etc. Since the relatability factor with influencers is high, and their lifestyle seems just within reach, this creates an anxiety in their followers which is relievable only by purchase or achievement of these aspirational goals. Many followers have also reported increased dissatisfaction with their lives, jobs, vacations and possessions when they see influencers get the best of resources and opportunities. 76% of participants in a survey believed that their wardrobes have significantly expanded after they started following trends and fashion influencers on social media.

Influencers promoted and encouraged ‘Thrifting’, a seemingly affordable and sustainable way of buying secondhand clothes. In a short span of time, hauls and shopping videos from fast fashion brands and thrift destinations became staple fashion content, normalizing owning more and frequent purchasing, which is unhealthy for both individuals and the planet (Ghosh & Mishra, 2021). Sarojini Nagar is a flea market in Delhi, India where consumers can buy trendy clothing at extremely affordable prices. Prices are as low as INR 25 per item. Since the explosion of ‘thrifting’, India has seen a fair share of fashion influencers building a trendy

wardrobe on a budget. These influencers make content about the hauls they get from flea markets like Sarojini, due to which the market has shot into popularity as a destination to acquire pocket friendly, trendy clothes. An Instagram fashion influencer travelled to Sarojini Nagar and returned to her hometown in Bangalore with 3 suitcases filled with clothing sourced from the market. Trendy clothing is readily available in Sarojini because business owners employ seamstresses paying them as low as INR 1.50 per cloth. The Print spoke to 3 women, who make INR 500 per day for cutting over 300 clothes in 12-hour long shifts. Studies have shown that sweatshop employees face a myriad of health conditions including breathing difficulties and chronic joint pain. Even the trade surplus sold in the market is often illegally sourced through Bangladesh.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw the rise of the concept of 'workcation'. After the 1st lockdown when the restrictions were eased in the nation, many influencers moved to places like Bir (Himanchal Pradesh) and Goa and also encouraged their followers to work from the mountains and beaches. This aspiration was easily accessible to young Indian population, many of whom started renting places in destinations like Bir and Goa. From 2019 to presently in 2023, this gentrification has caused the rent these places to almost triple, making housing unaffordable and inaccessible to the local population who do not have the disposable income to spare on sky high rents. Renting a house in Goa, is as expensive as renting a house in South Delhi.

The grim conditions of flea market sweatshops and cultural ecosystems are exacerbated as these destinations come into popular consciousness through influencers' reach. It can be argued that when influencers display content, it should fall within their ambit of responsibility to convey all sides of the aspirational lifestyle - the good, the bad and the ugly.

Conclusion

The rise of influencer culture and its commercialization can be attributed to the emotional connections that influencers are able to create with their followers, which contributes to their influence. This is what made influencer marketing so effective and targeted. Moreover, an influencer's platform has a mix of personal and professional content, making it difficult to discern whether their influence is stemming from proven domain credibility or personal likeability.

With the gradual erosion of boundaries between influencers and their platforms, this problem is further exacerbated, especially in the context of the Indian market which places a strong emphasis on trust and value-consciousness. The re-

liability that consumers once ascribed to industry professionals is now extended to influencers with social capital and/or a platform, leading to deep distrust of influencer marketing, rampant spread of misinformation, grave mental health concerns for the influencer and the influenced, and promotion of excessive materialism with significant socio-cultural costs.

Influencers and brands are facing questions about how to establish and maintain credibility in a digital environment where personal and professional personas are closely intertwined. For consumers, this warrants a deeper exploration of various factors that can influence their choices and decisions, and a re-evaluation of their relationship with content and its creators – because influence does not necessarily imply reliability and ease of access doesn't entitle one to intimacy.

The rise of social media influencing in India makes it crucial to address these concerns. It is the collective responsibility of not just influencers but also brands, agencies, regulators, and consumers to ensure transparency in this ecosystem and to bring balance to this discourse.

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Chapter 16. Blurred lines in social media influencing: exploring the consequences of using personhood as a platform

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