

INFLUENCER MARKETING – A NEW VIRTUAL FRONTIER

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Abstract

Prolific advertising continues to be the determinant for exponential growth of businesses. Traditional advertising is constricted in its impact due to limitations of media access. The past few years have seen a rapid increase in use of Instagram Influencers as an important alternate to traditional advertising. This segment has registered an enormous impact in influencing the psyches of prospective buyers. Despite the huge potential of this platform from a futuristic point of view, researchers have not yet explored this medium of unconventional marketing. Consumers have begun to extensively rely on online platforms for purchase decisions. In this context the influencers who have established credibility and audience on the platform have a major impact on the purchasing decisions of their followers. Thus, it has become very important for marketing professionals to study this mode of marketing. The purpose of this study is to build a model giving a structure to the types of influencers on Instagram and to categorize them into groups based on various attributes. This study is an observational study done by analyzing various Instagram profiles to understand the kinds of profiles, the content being consumed by viewers and other attributes including number of followers, kinds of content being posted and engagement strategies with their audiences.

Key words: Influencer Marketing, Marketing Model, Social Media Marketing, Social Media Influencers, Social Networking, Instagram Influencer

Introduction

Social Media is, generally speaking, a computer aided online networking platform that enables sharing of information, ideas, art etc. in the form of images, videos or written content on virtual communities. It comprises of many websites and apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Snapchat, TikTok. While some sites such as Twitter specialize in short messages and links, others such as Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram are optimal for sharing pictures and short videos. YouTube is a unique platform that allows users to share videos of any length.

Anyone with access to internet can create a social media profile and share any content they choose (subject to the restrictions imposed by the social media companies). While every social media platform is unique in its own sense, most of them can be accessed with a user creating a profile and signing up with their username and email ID. After a profile is created the users can begin to share content. Along with sharing content, these users can also follow other users. By following other users, the content shared by them can be viewed, liked or commented on. While the terminology used in various platforms about following may differ, the underlying meaning remains the same. For instance, following is usually called, SUBSCRIBE on YouTube, FRIEND on Facebook, CONNECT on LinkedIn.

Typically, on a social media platform, the content seen is called FEED, this feed comprises of content posted by the people or profiles we follow. These networking sites usually use an algorithm which determines what feed is to be seen on the page based on various aspects such as, people one follows, posts liked and followed. Hence, it has also become an important method for marketers to spread their message or engage with their target markets. Consequently, it is important to study the evolution of social media in order to better understand the impact and predict the futuristic trends.

Currently most companies advertise on social media. It was the turn of the millennium which brought in a new era for social media marketing. Today social media has become an integral part of our lives. In a study

conducted by (Irene J. Dickey, 2010) on survey data and broad literature reviews show that in the past few years not only have social networking sites evolved, as have social media, customer needs, and social media marketing tactics used by marketers.

Users are constantly engaging with other users and sharing content. This continuous engagement and connectivity are an opportunity that marketers capitalize on. (Rand 2006) found that one of the major reasons social networking sites grow is because they provide content that consumers cannot find on their own. The degree of personalization offered by this platform is lucrative for both the user and the marketer owing to minimal traction. (Klaassen 2007) states that recommendations and brand affiliations on social media sites should be an important means for marketers to extract information on consumer behaviour.

Social media has become an intrinsic part of consumer decision making process, it provides valuable information in an instant from every nook and corner of the world

Evolution of Social Media

The evolution of Social media can be divided into three Stages: Phase-I, Phase-II, Phase-III.

Phase-I:

Contrary to popular belief the social media boom did not begin with the evolution of MySpace but rather in the 20th Century with the beginning of Usenet in the year 1979 which allowed users to post news posts or articles to newsgroups. The 1970s saw introduction of Bulletin board Systems (BBS) which was hosted on personal computers and allowed users to log in and connect with each other. These were the first instances of social media when internet was not easily accessible. Then came Instant Relay Chat (IRC) which was introduced in the year 1988 which could be used for link and file sharing. This was a very rudimentary form of instant text messaging. Launched in 1997, Six Degrees is considered to be the first ever social media platform. From 1997-2001 other platforms like Asianavane, Migente and Black planet followed. Users could create profiles and add friends in these sites. However due to lack of filtering and inefficient spam clearing these platforms slowly faded away. This evolutionary stage is Phase-I and the roots for most social media platform and websites today can be found at this stage. The success of social media websites and platforms at this stage resulted in the development of social media networks in the next phase.

Phase-II:

The early 2000s, Friendster which was launched in the year 2002 was the first proper network in terms of modern social media networks. It was very popular in Asia and was known to have half a million users just in the Asian continent. This site's interface resembled that of early dating sites with features like circles and common interests. This site was deemed to be the foundation for the idea behind posting and sharing similar interests, ideas etc. Following this, the launch of LinkedIn in the year 2003 marked the beginning of Social Media as we know it. This website was the first mainstream network used for business and now has various new options. My Space was the beginning of a new era in modern social media networking. Launched in the year 2004, it became one of the most popular networking platforms just in two years. This website allowed users to create profiles, embed videos and post music. Use of graphic content was one of the most important achievements of this phase. In the same year, Facebook one of the most popular social networking sites of the modern era was launched in Harvard. By 2008, this networking site had spread to other schools and continues to be one of the most popular and widely used networking platforms in the world. Its Ad platforms allow marketers to reach audience like never before. This phase of social media marketing saw the launch of VIRAL CONTENT. Facebook with its different form of advertising model attracted marketers to these forms of platforms.

Phase-III:

YouTube launched in the year 2005 marked the beginning of Phase-III. This is one of the most popular and widely used video sharing and video hosting platforms. Users can upload personalized video content and also embed them to other sites and blogs. The launch of Twitter in 2006 caused a dynamic shift in terms of how users viewed social media. This platform allowed users to post content but only using 140 characters and this quick headline mode of communication attracted the attention of masses and it currently has a user base of around 300 million. This was also the phase where hashtags took off and became popular. The 2010 launch of Instagram changed the way content was viewed by users. Users could now post pictures, edit them with captions and post videos.

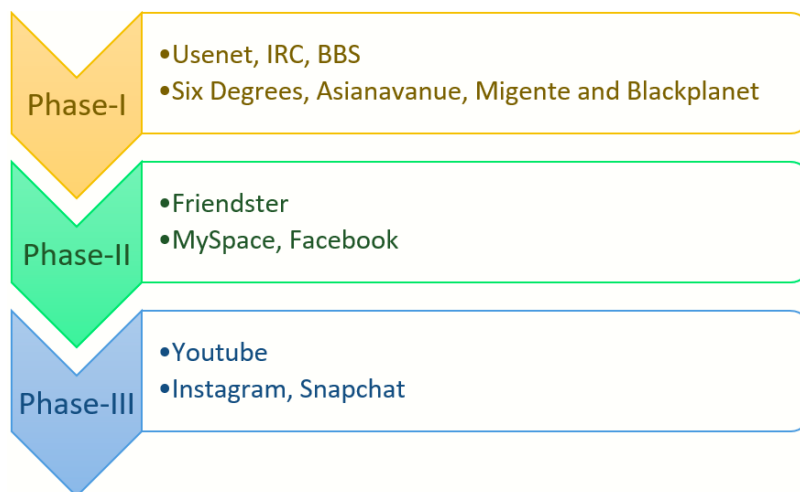


Figure1: Evolution of Social Media

Instagram:

Launched in the year 2010, Instagram marked the beginning of a new era for marketers world over. This platform uses visual communication in terms of pictures, videos etc. and social interactions to connect with people. It also allows user to share stories and upload videos.

The recent years have seen an increased reliance on peer reviews and communications for buying decisions. Instagram has become an extremely important social media tool for marketers world over due to the enormous number of active users on this platform. In a world with 3.5 billion active social media users, it is very important for both consumers and brands to have an online presence. Instagram is one of the most preferred platforms with a user base of over 1 billion monthly active users (Omnicores, 2020).

Instagram is a social networking app made for sharing photos and videos from a smartphone. Similar to Facebook or Twitter, everyone who creates an Instagram account has a profile and news feed. When you post a photo or video on Instagram, it will be displayed on your profile. Other users who follow you will see your posts in their own feed. Likewise, you'll see posts from other users whom you choose to follow (Moreau, 2017) (Raj Vinaika, 2017).

On an average there are 500million users who post pictures on a daily basis, there are 50+ billion pictures shared on this platform and averages to 4.2 billion likes per day (Omnicores, 2020).

This platform hosts 25+million businesses already with 2 million monthly advertisers. Instagram has a potential reach of 849.3 million users. Additionally, there are 200+ million users who view at least one business profile daily. (Omnicores, 2020)

These statistics are a clear evidence of Instagram's growth and potential and also give us reasons to show why most brands prefer this platform to other social media platforms to promote their brands. The platform is the most effective in terms of audience reach as evidenced by the vivid numbers and ever arching impact.

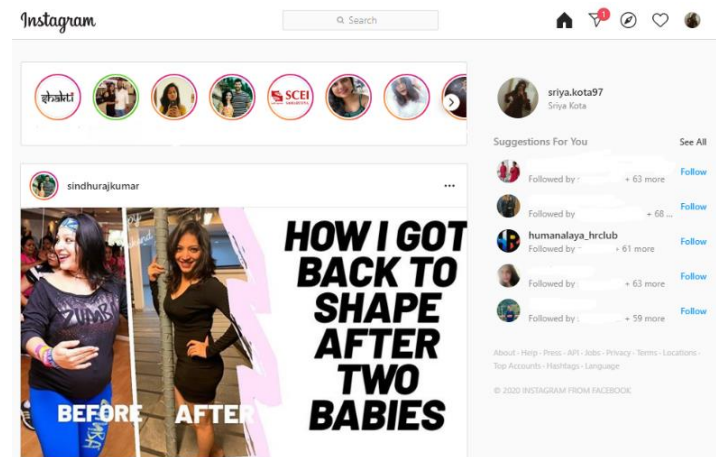


Figure2: Typical Instagram Feed

Social Media Influencer:

A social media influencer is someone who has generated enough credibility in a specific field with the ability to influence behaviors and attitudes of a large section of relevant audiences. The impact of such influencers is usually limited to a very specific niche.

Individuals who have a strong brand presence, or a clear set of activities performed regularly, or pictures posted, or values shared in a specific area are known as influencers. Their primary characteristic is the number of followers they have, who follow them because they share interests, values and beliefs of the Influencer. They have a legitimate voice, an opinion and they stick to it, they involve their followers and engage regularly with them. (Černikovaitė, 2018).

Evolution of Influencer Marketing:

With the booming growth of areas and means of advertising, competition and widespread experimentation, exploiting nomenclature has become the norm. Consumers have grown cynical towards advertisements by marketers. This cynicism and distrust towards marketers could be countered by means of recommendations made by these trusted sources (Influencers). For establishing the gravitas with the target audience, it is quintessential for the trust to be established, and the greater the trust, the greater the impact of influence. It is this growing influence of social media on the decisions of consumers that has pushed marketers into studying this rising new form of marketing.

In the year 2000, along with the rise of networking platforms, a new blogging site called Blogspot was launched. This marked the beginning of opinion leaders and early era influencers. These early era influencers were bloggers who posted their opinions on a particular brand. Marketers at this point still had n't realized its potential. So, this remained just as a review platform for consumers to look at before purchasing. With the launch of networking sites like Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005 and Instagram in 2010, marketers had begun to realize the importance of this particular mode of marketing. Marketers realized the potential these Influencers could have as means of advertising due to their reach and loyalty. The past few years has seen rise of TikTok as a new medium for Influencer marketing. This new platform has some of the highest number of active users and thus not a platform that marketers can ignore.

The content on Instagram has also evolved from written blogs, to pictures on Facebook and short updates on twitter. From Images a shift to video content on YouTube and then to Images on Instagram, 24 hour story updates on Snapchat, Livestreaming, short videos on TikTok and passive content on Podcasts has been seen.

Influencer Marketing

One could say that influencer marketing is about marketing to those with influence to alter the purchasing behavior of an individual(follower).

According to, Activate 2018 State of Influencer Marketing Study:

“Influencer marketing is simply the diffusion of innovation, infinitely amplified by the power of social media.”

There are different definitions of Influencer marketing, for example, “A kind of marketing that centers around utilizing key leaders to drive a brand's message to the larger markets.” (Byrne, Kearney, and MacEvill, 2017). Additionally, “An Influencer is like an opinion leader, they characterize it as an Influential individual with a strong individual and personal brand”. It can also be said that, “Influencers are individuals who are additionally viewed as trustable and brands utilize this individual to spread their products and brand awareness.” (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). (černikovaitė, 2019)

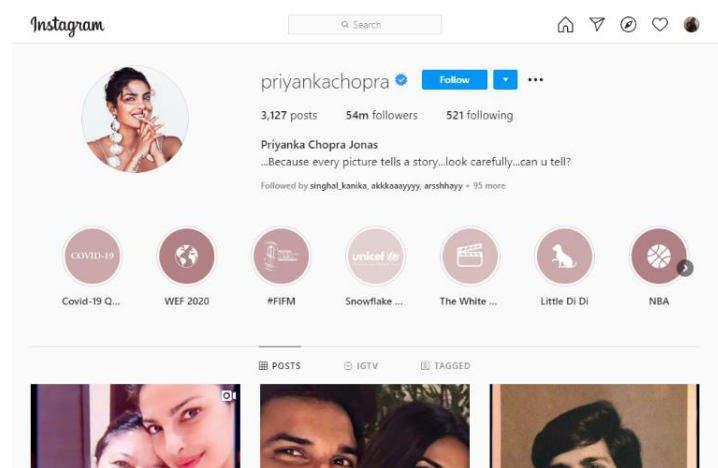


Figure3: Instagram Profile of Priyanka Chopra

According to research conducted by *Activate 2018 State of Influencer Marketing Study* in their *Two Sides of the Same Coin*, article Influencers are not primarily motivated because of expected monetary benefits but rather because they genuinely like the brands and enjoy posting original content about their preferred brands. This research also identified the top four reasons influencers decide to work with brands, the top most reason being they love the brand and that they already post about them organically, the second highest ranked reason is that they want to introduce their audience to a new product/brand. Third highest ranked reason is that they want to get paid and the last reason is that they want more experience working with a brand.

Influencer marketing is considered one of the most critical factors in strengthening online brand engagement (Newberry 2018). According to a study conducted by Belton in 2019 and Mediakix in 2018 about 65% of multinational brands have expressed plans on increasing expenditures on Influencer Marketing and also expect the spending to reach approximately \$10 billion by 2020. In addition, 75% of marketers have already started using influencers to spread Word-of-mouth about their brands on various social media platforms. (Christian Huges, 2019)

Proposed Conceptual Model

This is a proposed comprehensive framework that examines Instagram Influencers using attributes such as follower count, type of content, mode of message and artistic control.

The present model based on these attributes, intends to comprehend the structure of influencers on Instagram. This paper aims to throw light on the significance and effectiveness of Influencer Marketing while advancing previous research in this field.

Every Influencers on Instagram belongs to one of the following five sectors:

- **Entertainment**

This set of influencers are artists such as photographers, Youtubers, TikTokers, food bloggers, online gamers, travel sites, technology enthusiasts etc. Instagram focuses extensively on the aesthetics and aspirational attributes of posts. These “Entertainers” are primarily influencers who post content that is aesthetic like travel photographs, food and amusing pictures and videos. Entertainers could be TikTok stars who post videos on this platform, short dances, lip-sync, comedy and talent videos, or YouTubers who post various videos. Videos including influencers vlogging their everyday lives, streaming online games, unboxing videos – which is when an individual films themselves opening up their new purchases, product/brand reviews, or educational videos also fall under this category. People who regularly post about food, review various dishes and post their recipes are also included in this category of influencers along with artists like photographers, painters etc.

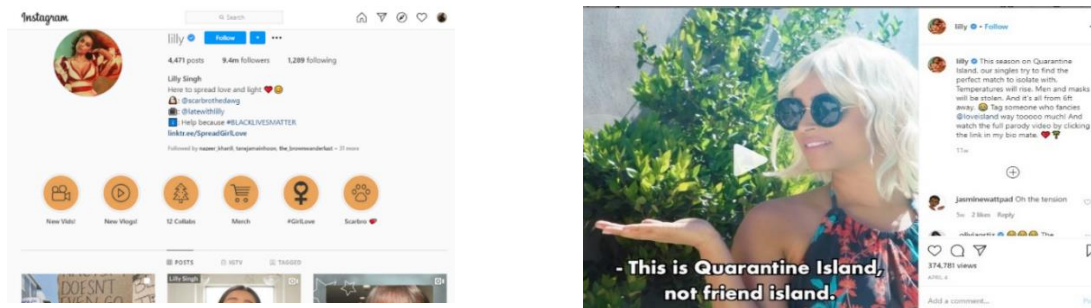


Figure4: Instagram Profile of Lily Singh (Superwoman)

- **Fashion**

This set of influencers are primarily opinion leaders, the trend setters that influence purchasing decisions for apparel and accessories. These influencers include models, fashion bloggers etc. These Influencers are mostly known for posting content that feature, beautiful clothing, accessories and other luxury items which are usually termed “#GOALS”. These influencers are also known for posting aesthetic lifestyle pictures which showcase their lives, their apartments, vacations and places they visit etc.

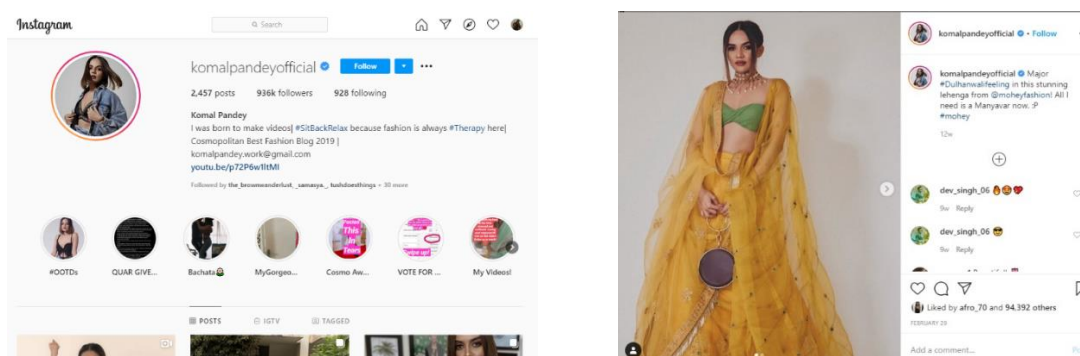


Figure 5: Instagram Profile of Komal Pandey

- **Celebrities**

A celebrity is a well-known individual who gets a lot of public attention due to their profession in the entertainment industries like movies, sports, music etc. The work they do gives them the ability to inspire or influence rather the decisions of their fans. These influencers do not just have influence in particular niche, but rather are able to inspire people through their style, what they do say and show in different niches.

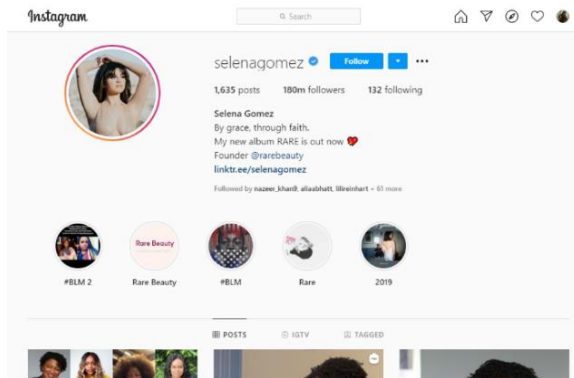


Figure 6: Instagram Profile of Selena Gomez

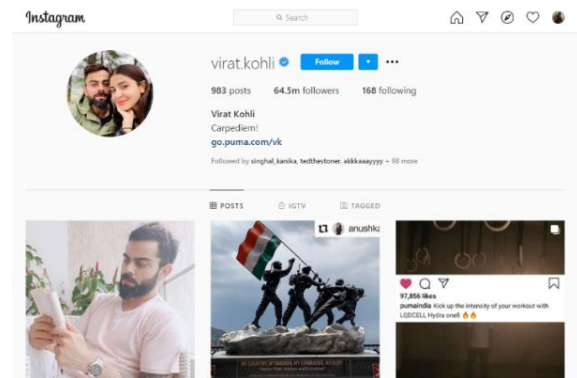


Figure 7: Instagram Profile of Virat Kohli

• Beauty

This set of influencers are make up artists, experts in nutrition and health. These influencers are primarily experts on body care and beauty. These influencers are instructors on how-to and share tips on topics like make-up, skincare, nutrition and health related to body care. These influencers also share stepwise instructions on how to do achieve a certain goal like, a smokey eye make up tutorial, how to get clear skin, reviewing best skincare products.

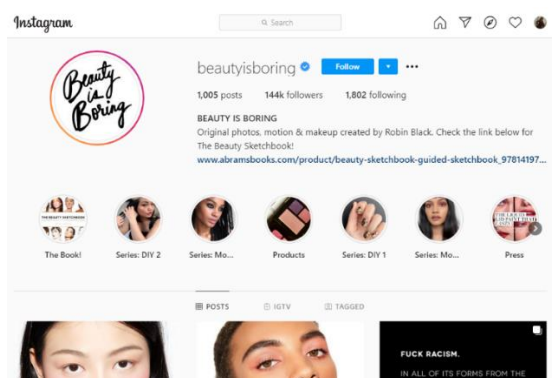


Figure 8: Instagram Profile of beautyisboring

• Lifestyle

This group of influencers are promoters of health both body and mind. Fitness enthusiasts, dieticians, nutritionists, sports and wellness performance enhancers etc. This group also includes motivational speakers and activists. These influencers are individuals who share work-out routines, tips related to fitness, recommended products for fitness. These Lifestyle influencers also include Motivational speakers and coaches who have gained their following by posting content that motivate people and teach important life lessons.



Figure 9: Instagram Profile of Jay Shetty

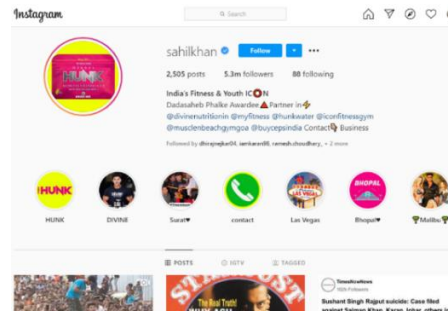


Figure 10: Instagram Profile of Sahil Khan

For the purpose of this article, an observational study of multiple Influencer Instagram accounts was conducted. On analysis of these various accounts certain observations were made which led to the building of this model. This examination led to the structuring of Influencers on Instagram using:

- Content
 - Artistic Control
 - Number of Followers
1. **Based on type of content**

On the basis of the kind of content, influencers can be classified as those that post:

- Pictures – Here the Influencers rely on posting pictures to promote a brand. Here the influencers post pictures with the particular brand and tag that brand both in the picture and in the caption, which provides a further description of the brand being used and why they would recommend this particular brand. These captions sometimes contain discount coupons and other codes for the brand.



Figure 11: Instagram Picture from Kylie Jenner's profile

Influencers are often seen posting pictures and tagging the brands, by doing so they are creating the impression that they use the brands. By doing so, their followers are interested in that particular brand and they either follow the brand thereby increasing the reach of the brand or they start purchasing their products increasing their sales volume. Influencers usually either tag the brands on the picture showcasing the product they used or they tag the brands in the caption or do both.

- Videos – These Influencers promote a brand using videos. These video posts with brands are usually either a how-to use that product videos, how the brand is providing the service or a review of the product/service of the brand. Even here the Influencer tags the Brand in the post as well as the content with a brief description. Sometimes these captions even contain some coupon codes for the brands.



Figure 12: Instagram Video of Kylie Jenner promoting Sugarbear

Just like with the images, celebrities sometimes post videos of them a particular brand, by doing this they are firstly, endorsing the brands products and also demonstrating how to use that particular product. Celebrity influencers like Kylie Jenner have a huge following on social media, they have a tremendous amount of influence on consumer attitudes. In the above image it can also be seen that another major celebrity influencer Khloe Kardashian has commented saying she uses them too, by doing so firstly, she has provided a testimonial stating her satisfaction with the brand and secondly, her followers will also be influenced to purchase this particular brand being endorsed by Kylie Jenner.

- **Written** – These kinds of influencers usually post written content. Such content is usually posted as stories or post. These are usually awareness posts.

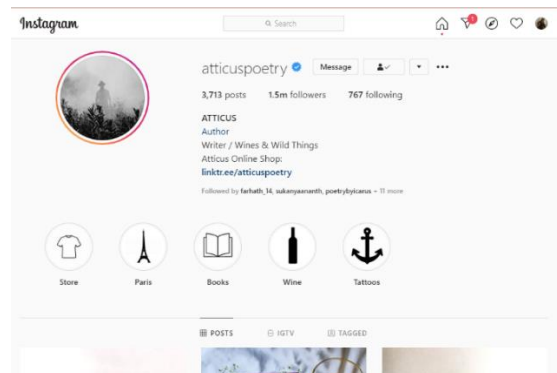


Figure 13: Instagram Profile of Atticus Poetry

Another form of influencer content found on Instagram is in the comments section wherein the individuals promote a particular profile by tagging them in the comments section of that popular page and asking the influencer's followers to follow their page.

Based on levels of artistic control

Patron Produced: These kinds of influencers usually have complete control over the kind of content they post, the mode of delivering the message etc. Brands can only approach these types of influencers to promote their products/services, the method of promotion will be in complete control of the influencers

Brand Produced: For this type of influencers, the brands usually send content as well as mode of delivery of message on this social media platform. The kinds of brands that usually approach these types of influencers are only looking at capitalizing the influencers credibility while not compromising on the brand image they portray across social media platforms.

Collaboration: Here Influencers in collaboration with brands produce content that will best suit the interests of both parties.

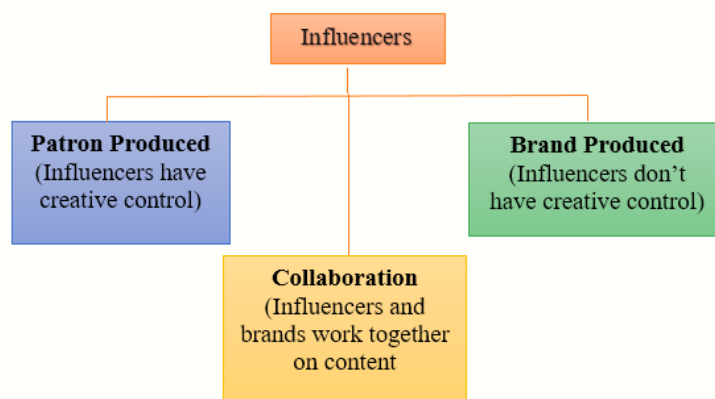


Figure 14: Influencer categorization based on artistic control

Based on number of followers:

On the basis of number of followers this article classifies Influencers as Beginners, Micro-level, Mid-Level, High-Level and Experts.

- Beginners are Instagrammers with a follower count between 500 and 5000. These kinds of Instagrammers are usually contacted by small scale businesses or businesses that have just started and are looking to build awareness of their existence.

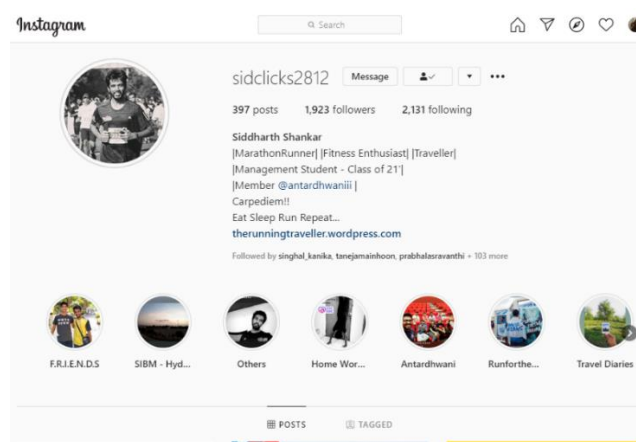


Figure 15: Instagram Profile of Siddharth Shankar

For e.g., this influencer is a fitness enthusiast and usually posts content tagging various travel hostels or fitness related brands. Often times these influencers are not paid for the posts, they tag these brands because they genuinely liked the brand or wish to share their experiences with their followers. For them being paid is not a criterion, liking the brand or having a good experience is what matters to them.

- **Micro-level** Instagrammers are influencers with a follower count between 5000 and 10,000. Small businesses and other entrepreneurs looking to expand businesses collaborate with these Instagrammers.

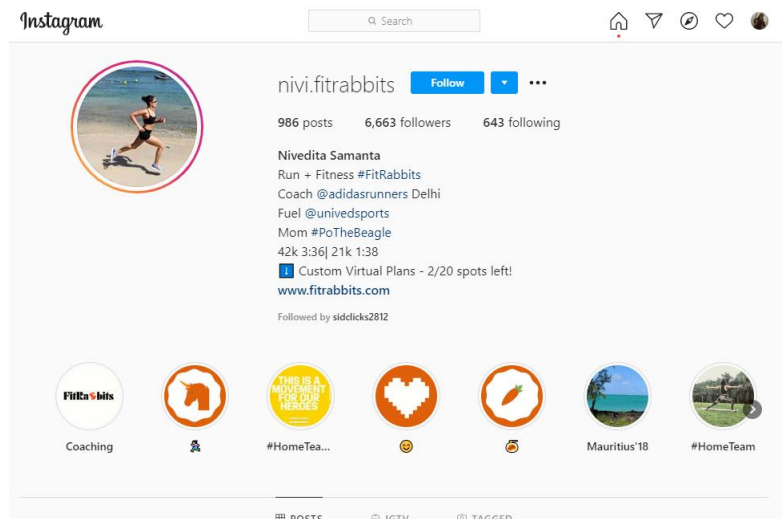


Figure 16: Instagram Profile of Nivedita Samanta

This Instagrammer who is a fitness influencer is usually seen promoting various marathons and fitness related brands. These kinds of influencers have just begun to grow their audience base and thus pay particular attention to the kind of content they endorse.

- **Mid-level** Instagrammers are individuals with a follower count between 10,000 and 50,000. These Instagrammers usually promote all kinds of brands and are also paid to promote a brands content.

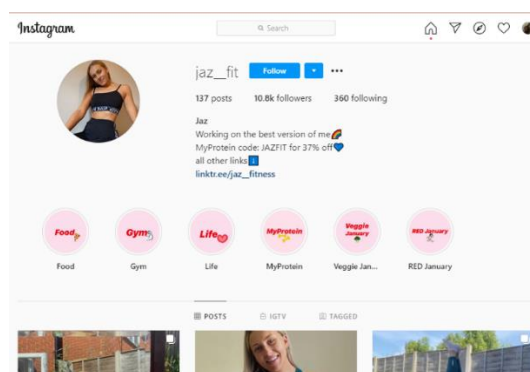


Figure 17: Instagram Profile of Jaz Fit

This fitness influencer has a discount code for fitness products and can be seen promoting sports and wellness related products and services. For these kinds of Influencers while being paid is important, it is not a huge motivating factor in terms of posting about a brand's product or services. While, they post about brands they personally prefer and use on a daily basis, they also promote brands that pay them to do so.

- **High-level** Instagrammers are Influencers whose followers are between 50,000 and 100,000. These Instagrammers are usually approached by the brands due to their high follower count. These Influencers are paid to promote their content and often times feature big brands.

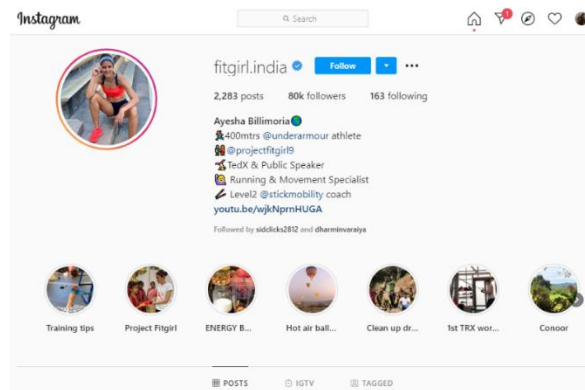


Figure 18: Instagram Profile of Ayesha Billimoria

This influencer can be seen promoting brands that pay. Paid partnerships with this influencer can help reach a huge audience. Influencers with this kind of reach are extremely cautious about the brands they endorse. They mostly post content they get paid for. They can be seen posting about various brands on a regular basis.

- **Experts** are influencers whose reach is maximum, with follower count of more than 100,000. These Influencers are paid a huge amount to post content with their brands. Because of their huge reach and influence, brands collaborate with them.



Figure 19: Instagram Profile of Jennifer Slater

Jennifer Slater popularly known as Jen Slater on Instagram is a fitness Influencer with a follower count of 12.6 million. She is a fitness enthusiast who promotes healthy lifestyle. Healthcare and fitness brands such as Vital Proteins a health supplement partner with her as they can reach their target market easily as the Influencers audience is the same as that of the brands’.

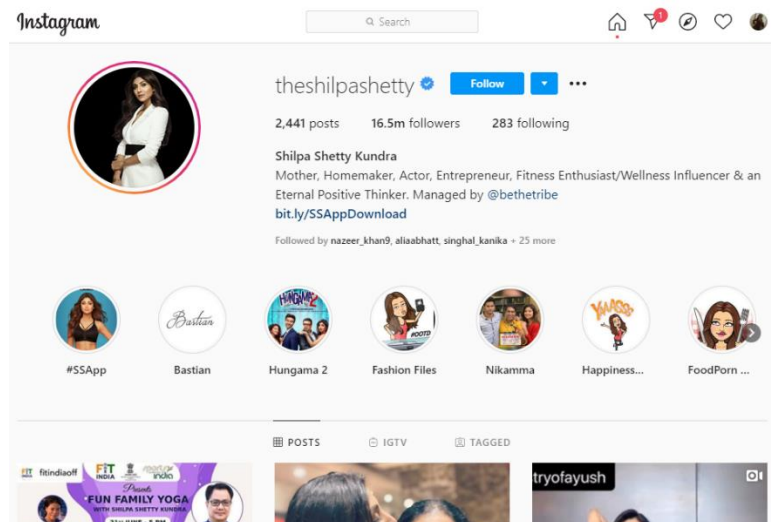


Figure 20: Instagram Profile of Shilpa Shetty

Shilpa Shetty is a known celebrity and a fitness enthusiast. She is known to promote big fitness brands and yoga events. Big brands usually collaborate for paid partnerships with these kinds of big influencers. These kinds of Influencers are usually very expensive and thus only big brands which can afford them are seen doing paid partnerships with them. They charge a huge sum in order to endorse their brands.

Conclusion

Instagram is rapidly changing the way consumers view marketing tactics. The consumers are no longer willing to listen or look at irrelevant or invasive marketing messages. Content on this platform is largely consumer driven and although it is about brands, they have little to no say in the way consumers are viewing their brands and this is why it has become extremely important to collaborate with Influencers who can use their platform and large audiences to promote their brands.

The aim of this study was to provide a comprehensive structure that can help understand Influencers on Instagram and how these Influencers are optimally utilized for maximum efficiency. This research throws light on various attributes of an Influencer and offers a novel contribution by examining various influencer profiles to build a model of Instagram Influencers. By understanding this framework, marketers are able to better understand effectiveness of Influencers and the best way to utilize Influencer Marketing to improve their reach.

In conclusion there is an enormous opportunity for marketers in the form of influencer marketing and this new mode of advertising a brand needs to be studied further to effectively and efficiently use it for the benefit of the brands.

Limitations and Future Scope of Research

Influencer marketing has picked up extensively in the past few years and considering this is a very new field with limited research, it requires further probing and research to understand best way to go about this novel and unconventional form of Marketing. This research is subject to certain limitations such as examination of a limited number of Influencer Profiles on Instagram. This paper may present new directions for further research.

Further Research could be done on topics such as, how to increase followers on Instagram, how to monetize your Instagram accounts, Best way to utilize Influencer Marketing can be utilized to increase brand awareness. There is also a huge scope to study the relationship between number of followers and likeability.

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