Influencer Marketing: An Emergent Trend in Digital Marketing to Influence Consumer Purchase Journey

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ABSTRACT

With the magnificent growth of technology and the proliferation of social networking sites as a significant digital marketing tool, opportunities are increasing for both common people and businesses. SMI marketing is the most contemporary trend in the categorization of digital marketing techniques. These influencers are the common people who are popular on social media platforms for the personality they carry, the lifestyle that they promote on social networking sites, and the digital content which they curate by posting blogs and vlogs. The marketing managers recognized these trends and started collaborating with these influencers as SMIs are very famous among common people and enjoy credibility and trust among them. Marketers leverage this fame and trust for SMIs to affect the buying decisions of consumers. This chapter discusses the evolution of social media influencer marketing and the conceptual framework which elucidates the role of "Influencer Marketing" as an emergent digital marketing trend that influences the consumer purchase journey. The paper is based on secondary data and provides an overview of the influence of SMIs on the pre- and post-purchase journey of consumer decision-making. The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) technique has been used in this research article to meet its objectives. The major understanding developed is regarding the marketer's need to consider technology as an inevitable part of today's marketing strategic planning and make an optimum and appropriate application of digital media marketing techniques to be sustainably flourished from the marketplaces to marketspaces. It is evident from the review of extant literature that social media influencers, Youtubers, and digital micro-celebrities play a significant role in the contemporary consumer buying journey which would have been only a daydream without digital marketing. Future research can be conducted empirically to analyze the impact of local SMIs on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions in their purchase journey.

Key Words: Influencer Marketing, Digital Marketing, Consumer Purchase Decision, SMI (Social Media Influencer), Consumer Behaviour, Consumer Buying Behaviour.

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the massive growth of the Internet has predominated the diurnal life of every individual, this colossal rise in Internet-enabled technologies has spread an illimitable amount of information. Whereas, the ease in affordability and global adoption of smartphones has given access to the Internet that has influenced consumer behavior, the B2C relationship has been dramatically changed with the massive evolution of social networking sites (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Therefore, the burgeoning of such social media technological innovativeness in the global marketspaces has induced major modifications in the contemporary marketing strategy. Thus, this evolution has inaugurated a new and broader perspective of marketing called "Digital Marketing" which is elucidated as: "an adaptive, technology-enabled process by which firms collaborate with customers and partners to jointly create, communicate, deliver, and sustain value for all stakeholders" (Kannan & Li, 2017, p. 23).

In the past few decades, the evolution of "Digital Marketing" has changed the process in which business operates and marketing practice's function. The digital shifting of marketing strategies and their functioning from the marketplaces to marketspaces has brought current technology in the businesses such as Cognitive computing-based models, AI (Artificial Intelligence), AR/VR (Augmented Reality or Virtual Reality), Big data science, etc. The other present-time ITES which are highly used in present-day marketing strategic planning is SEO, SMM, SMIs, video marketing, etc. These recent pioneer trends assist businesses in maximizing their ROI, bringing more potential traffic to the website, developing web trust, improving brand image, and, increasing the comprehensive value of an organization and consumers as a whole. Digital marketing helps marketers in shaping

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and altering consumers' attitudes, develop an effective brand image, create awareness and develop brand advocates, build meaningful interactions, and optimize customer experiences in the looming future (Loebbecke & Picot, 2015; Lombardi, Lardo, Cuozzo, & Trequattrini, 2017).

2. Literature Review

The previous articles on SMI marketing have profoundly focused on the influential value model of social influencer marketing that explicates the strength of social media influencers based on the online and offline behaviors of their followers Li et al. (2010). The study by Booth and Matic (2011) designed an algorithm for social media influencers that considers posting frequency, viewers per month, and viewer engagement. Further, Roelens et al. (2015) identified SMIs by examining their potential to successfully refer a product to the consumer.

Another study investigated the influencer-follower parasocial connection and interaction - a relationship between viewers and an influencer in which the viewer forms a strong intimate feeling with the influencer that leads to a conventional relationship (Dibble et al., 2016). Yet, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) concluded in their study that the influencer-follower relationship is not like a conventional parasocial interaction as it is not one-directional as followers now directly message to the influencers who give a response at the personal level. This bi-directional interaction helps in establishing a stronger connection between influencer-follower which affects buying decisions of followers for the products promoted by influencers. The SMIs switch between four avenues of displaying/non-displaying passion for a product and disclosing/non-disclosing products as sponsored (Audrezet et al., 2018).

The qualitative study has also identified differences between conventional celebrities and SMIs, sometimes referred to as micro-celebrities (Marwick, 2013, 2015; Senft, 2008). Marwick (2013, 2015) has found that SMIs take maximum advantage of social media tools to gain attention, popularity, and establish intimacy with their followers through their emotional content and giving direct responses; and this connection, in turn, makes the followers view the SMIs content as more reliable and trustworthy than conventional media, and it has lead influencers having more potential niche groups of followers than traditional celebrities. These groups of followers are easy to convert into customers and brand advocates.

2.1 Objectives

1. To discuss the recent trends in Digital Marketing.
2. To study the conceptual framework of SMIs and their

growth as Influencer marketing.
3. To discuss the role of SMIs in influencing consumer purchase journeys.

3. Research Design

As per the nature of the research objectives, it was determined that for this review paper, the secondary data analysis method would be most suitable to thoroughly understand the recent trend in digital marketing i.e., Social Media Influencer (SMI) marketing and provide a systematic overview of its influence on digital consumer purchase journey. The information and data for the research have been gathered from various articles and online blogs. For maintaining the quality of this research article, the review of the literature was conducted on the research papers and review articles that were published in Elsevier and Sage publications and reputed indexed journals.

4. Discussion

4.1 Recent Trends in Digital Marketing

4.1.1 AI Marketing- Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the most buzzing trend in the global market space and it will rule over every aspect of our future. AI is already ruling the market by communicating with customers through chatbots to resolve their queries without even making them realize it. AI-enabled tools such as machine learning (ML), data representations models, and algorithms help in generating customer insights that marketers use for their content customization, targeting potential customers, enhancing spending, and personifying the customer purchase cycle.

4.1.2 AR Marketing- Augmented Reality (AR) marketing is an emergent trend in the global market space and sales strategies. There are three basic features of AR; it is a combination of the real and virtual world, real-time intercommunication, and accurate 3D registration of virtual and real-life objects.

4.1.3 Voice Search Optimization- Voice Search is a dynamic voice recognition technology that facilitates customers to execute searches by speaking to their smartphones. Voice search optimization focuses on optimizing businesses' Webpages to answer the queries of customers when they perform verbal searches.

4.1.4. SMIs- Social Media Influencer (SMI) marketing is the most popular digital marketing trend which will go to explore new horizons of social media marketing. These people are common people who get popularity on social media because of their content, knowledge, and expertise. Marketers use these micro-influencers for endorsements and product placements on social media as they are the best brand advocates and have a large social influence.

4.1.5 Video Marketing- The information in form of a video is much more influential and attractive than information delivered through text and images. There are various effective and attractive tools for video marketing like; Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, YouTube video content, Metaverse short videos, live streaming on mobile, etc.

4.1.6 SMM- Social Media Marketing (SMM) refers to the use of social networking sites and platforms to market and sell a company's products and services. SMM provides businesses access to make a gateway to engage with their existing customers and reach new ones while allowing them to promote their desired culture, mission, and tone.

4.1.7 SEO Marketing- Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a set of practices that are prepared to improve and optimize the quality and quantity of website traffic. In simple words, SEO is the art and science of preparing a business's Webpage to rank higher organically on a search engine such as Google SERPs.

4.2 The Social Media Influencer Marketing Revolution

Conventional public relations and product promotions have been operated via news media and ads on television, radio, and newspapers are now no longer enough to build awareness and attract sales drive. Brands all over the world are very well aware of the popularity of social media and people's perceptions of social media activities. The brands have optimized and capitalized on the use of their social networking sites, such as Twitter, Metaverse, and Instagram (Statista, 2017). Contemporary marketing operators are required to create their digital identities to establish unwavering relationships with their targeted consumers (Papasolomou and Melanthiou, 2012). Social media is the most effective and fastest emergent tool to construct digital relationships via making use of Social Media Influencers (SMIs), who are local common people with a large number of followers on their social media platforms in which they share text, audio, image, and video posts related to a wide range of topics of their self-interest, which build up their online personality which influences the people of similar interest (Freberg et al., 2011; Senft, 2008; Tan, 2017).

These influencers generally post the highlighted and fancy side of their lives which covers varieties of ranges like the fashion they carry, the lifestyle they follow, their traveling life and even their pets and children wear, to their kitchen, to diet and health, to the furniture, and every other viral digital topic (Abidin, 2013; Niederhoffer et al., 2007; Wissinger, 2015). The companies are taking maximum leverage of such influencers to promote their products and services directly from the people who appear to be just like everyone else but had the potential to generate a sales drive. (Audrezet et al., 2018). Traditional celebrity endorsers create their influence via conventional channels, such as TV, radio, and print magazines, and such types of advertising making include writers, TV personalities, film stars, and sports icons. And on the other hand, contemporary digital advertising includes famous internet bloggers, vloggers, and celebrities who have gained stardom via social media platforms (Lee, 2018). This emergent tool of social media has built a bridge of communication between marketers and their potential consumers where they connect directly and individually with each other.

4.2.1. SMIs- Social Media Influencers

SMIs are virtual personalities or internet sensations that are popular on social media platforms. These micro-celebrities exhibit opinion leadership by building and spreading eWOM for the brands and products to influence consumers' attitudes and purchasing decisions (Casalo? et al., 2020a). The SMIs are the third-party stakeholders and significant intermediaries (Kazadi, Lievens, & Mahr, 2016) between the brands and consumers in contemporary Omni-channel marketing (Audrezet et al., 2020). They collaborate with the brands and their marketing activities and co-create and communicate the value of the products to the consumers (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

SMIs are different from ordinary opinion leaders (Casalo? et al., 2020a), as they can establish a larger network of followers and develop high-quality dynamic and intimate connections with their followers (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). These virtual influencers also built their status and reputation by gaining expertise in specific domains and attaining their fame and popularity as 'microcelebrities' (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021).

SMIs are different from conventional celebrities as these influencers are the common people who are just like everyone else and they don't keep themselves at a distance from their followers like mainstream celebrities do (Jerslev, 2016). Consumers consider SMIs as more accessible, reliable, and personal to them (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). Consumer's regard SMIs as more trustworthy and authentic than celebrities (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). The research says that social media influencers significantly impact millennial consumers' purchase behavior more than celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

4.2.2. Influencer Marketing- The New Trend in Digital Marketing

Word-of-mouth has always been the most effective strategy, and influencer marketing is often in the form of praises and reviews. Influencers are key people who are

considered to be pundits with a highly engaged audience. By selecting the right influencers, a company can directly address its target audience, which will result in high conversions. According to a report from RhythmOne (2018), companies earned an average of $12.21 for every $1 they spent on an influencer marketing program in 2017. Moreover, influencer marketing benefits several marketing activities, from the improvement of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to product launches and content promotions (eMarketer, 2016).

The collaboration of brands with influencers has shown positive and profitable implications on the brand's image and sales drives, the influencers have observed this as an opportunity for them and they boldly express their monetary expectations to the brands (Archer and Harrigan, 2016). This kind of communication between influencers-followers and influencers-brand has effectively contributed to public relations which was conventionally a major critical and uncertain marketing activity. The SMI marketing tool is a combination of conventional public relations which operates to manage image via non-paid, positive outreach and building awareness while practicing other marketing operations, which establish relationships via paid advertisements (Harris, 1993; Papasolomou and Melanthiou, 2012).

4.3 SMIs and their Role in Consumer Purchase Journey

Global contemporary marketing professionals started using social media decades back for all their marketing activities and building effective public relations. Marketing is a dynamic function of an organization that has to be always upfront and adaptive to all the opportunities and changes happening in global technology. Businesses make use of all the recent trends in social media to attract more and more potential consumers. The SMIs have now taken over social media with their curative content which they create with the help of images, videos, and content writing.

SMIs make optimum use of all social media tools and other image and video editing tools to post their content, their digital personalities and content play a significant role in influencing consumers' behavior and their purchase journey. These influencers are the local common people who are now getting recognition globally because of their thoughts, attitudes, opinion, and specific talent and knowledge. These influencers establish engagement on their posts and create e-WOM which all together develop trust and help consumers in their overall purchase journey starting from pre-purchase to post-purchase experience and lead consumers as brand advocates.
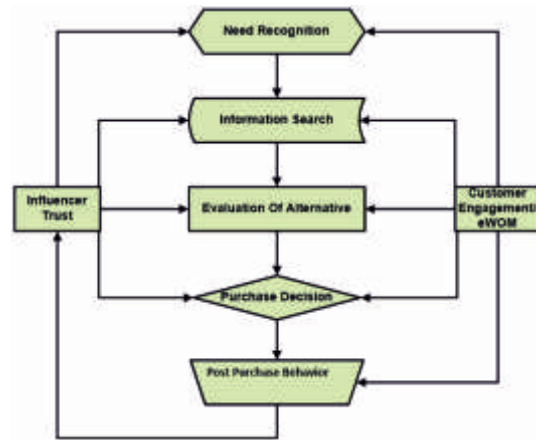

Figure 1- Conceptual framework for the role of SMIs in consumers' purchase journey

Source: The author

- Need recognition stage- In this stage, the SMIs develop an urge and desire in the mind of consumers for the specific brand and product by posting their unique content whit the help of images, videos and even they put the content in which they are showcasing the brand and product and share posts in which they are demonstrating the product on themselves. Nowadays, short videos are in trend which is only 15 to 60 seconds such as Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and Metaverse short videos. This attractive and informative content coming from SMIs who are among one us are highly influential and seem trustworthy to potential consumers. In this stage, the influencer tries to engage the potential segment of the group by educating them about the brand and product.

- Information search- In this stage, the consumer starts doing his/her research and tries to gather all the possible information regarding the product and its brand, for this purpose he/she searches for the products and brand on different social media platforms where these SMIs have already posted and shared huge information along with the demonstration of the product and also its comparison with the other brands and products with the help of their blogs and vlogs. In this stage, the influencers' only motive is to develop trust in the minds of consumers in which positive e-WOM plays a significant role.

- Evaluation of alternatives- In this stage, SMIs provide information about all the best possible alternatives of the products to their followers and also make sure that they don't look biased in their content. They also mention if they are doing paid collaboration or

promotion with brands. After evaluating all the alternatives, the consumer goes with the suggestions or choices of the influencer because of the credibility and likeness. The consumer also evaluates the likes and comments in this stage, which helps shape his/her perception and attitude towards influencers and their content.

- Purchase decision- At this stage, consumers go with the choice and suggestions of their favourite influencer as they get influenced by the content and personality of the influencer, and subsequently purchase the product from the specific brand which was posted and recommended by the influencer on social media.

- Post-purchase behavior- After purchasing the product from the recommended brand by the influencer the consumers post it on their social media account and tag and share the same with the brand and influencer, and here to develop more engagement and close long-term relation the specific influencer and brand re-post the post of the consumer's post and also tag and feature them on their social media accounts. The consumers also share their experiences by giving reviews and writing comments which develop and generate engagement.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Marketers can leverage these emergent trends of digital marketing to generate maximum sales drives as it is cost-effective and more efficient when they have to target specific product-based segments. These influencers are growing "from local to glocal', this means that these local SMIs are getting popularity at the global level, and marketing managers can use this opportunity to promote their product globally and also expand their sales drive in their local marketing area just by collaborating with these local influencers. These social media influencers are incredibly influential on the internet and they have larger outreach, it is evident after reviewing so many research papers that these social media influencers, YouTubers, and digital micro-celebrities play a significant role in the contemporary consumer buying journey which is only a day-dream without digital marketing. Future research can be conducted empirically to analyze the impact of local SMIs on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions in their purchase journey.

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