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## Online Influencer Marketing – An Effective Marketing Technique for Strategic Branding, Resonating Communication and Customer Engagement

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### Abstract

The power of word-of-mouth is all omnipresent, but with the advent and proliferation of social media with its speed of spreading the word, it's more significant than ever before. Online influencer marketing is bringing fashion brands and customers specifically to the millennials – closer than ever before. Personality and content are what social influencers provide to the prospective customers of a fashion brand. Having created their online niche and their follower base these influencers are often probably like-minded individuals. Recommendations from influencers have become more effective and can hold more weight than various impersonal forms of advertisement. A business partnership with the right influencer could better connect the business' product to the millennials. The study dwells upon the influence of online influencer marketing on millennials when it comes to buying fashion products and why the world of vogue is embracing influencer marketing for reinforcing the brand identity and driving customer engagement. For fashion brands and retailers, online influencer marketing is increasingly becoming a necessity to engage with customers through bloggers and vloggers with an audience that is tailor-focused to their brand.

### Keywords

Social media marketing, influencer marketing, Key Opinion Leader, fashion marketing, content marketing, brand engagement and customer engagement etc.

# Online Influencer Marketing – An Effective Marketing Technique for Strategic Branding, Resonating Communication and Customer Engagement

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## Abstract

The power of word-of-mouth is all omnipresent, but with the advent and proliferation of social media with its speed of spreading the word, it's more significant than ever before. Online influencer marketing is bringing fashion brands and customers specifically to the millennials – closer than ever before. Personality and content are what social influencers provide to the prospective customers of a fashion brand. Having created their online niche and their follower base these influencers are often probably like-minded individuals. Recommendations from influencers have become more effective and can hold more weight than various impersonal forms of advertisement. A business partnership with the right influencer could better connect the business' product to the millennials. The study dwells upon the influence of online influencer marketing on millennials when it comes to buying fashion products and why the world of vogue is embracing influencer marketing for reinforcing the brand identity and driving customer engagement. For fashion brands and retailers, online influencer marketing is increasingly becoming a necessity to engage with customers through bloggers and vloggers with an audience that is tailor-focused to their brand.

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## 1. Introduction

A famous proverb, “a picture is worth a thousand words” is true for major retailers/brands and small businesses in the fashion and apparel industry. Because the notion of fashion is built on the view that aesthetics is instrumental in building a fashion brand and hence the marketers are highly reliant on visually appealing and aspirational content. That's where influencer marketing through social media also comes into the picture. Influencer marketing is also called Key Opinion Leader (KOL) marketing by the experts and marketing professionals. It is continuously rising alongside the rising relevance of social media, live streams, VR communities and online video games, Metaverse, AR (Augmented Reality) and VR (Virtual

Reality) gadgets and cloud computing capabilities Etc. (Godinho, 2022).

Influencer marketing is designed to engage with an existing community of followers that often are the target audience, on a social media platform. It's a type of social media marketing that uses endorsements and product mentions from influencers, which are individuals who have a dedicated social following and are viewed as experts within their niche. Hence Influencer marketing is a form of business collaboration of brands/organisations with influential personalities to promote their offering. The feedback from end users and influencers of end users is essentially acting a source of valuable insights for the brands (Joshi, Singh, Kakkar, Kaur, & Kukreja, 2018).

Influencers are typically specialists in their niches. These people have dedicated and engaged groups of

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followers on social media. They are known simply as “social media influencers.” These individuals who act as influencers typically influence an audience that a brand/organisation might be trying to reach, and can be helpful in marketing to those buyers (Chen, 2019; Newberry, 2019; Raiyani, 2016). Today, social media is allowing apparel brands to not only showcase their products in a visually appealing and compelling manner but to interact with their favourite personalities/brand advocates as well (Chaudhary, 2016).

Fashion plays an important role in lifestyle and many people spend a significant proportion of disposable income on fashion-related products and services. The fashion industry is a commercial behemoth with the sphere of activity of selling apparel, accessories, fragrances and cosmetics etc. with the attached stature of each coveted brand. Before the digital revolution, designers, retailers and fashion businesses were highly dependent on television commercials and magazines to help them reach customers and endorse their vogue collections and private label brands (Chaudhary & Sharma, 2022).

This article analyses the impact of social media and influencers on buying behaviour of millennials towards these products. The advent and swift proliferation of social media and technology have led to a growing inclination among millennial consumers towards diverse fashion influences and they tend to dress either to fit in with their peers or to articulate self-identity and conform to society (Naser Valaei & S.R. Nikhashemi, 2017).

## 2. Current business scenario and growth of influencer marketing

Today, social media is firmly anchored in consumers changing habits in keeping themselves updated with the latest fashion trends. The evolution of technology and social media has allowed all consumers to have a voice (Chaudhary & Pandey, 2021, pp. 1–21; Pandey, Chaudhary, & Darda, 2021). Fashion is now far more democratic, there is a marked shift in the way people buy fashion products and these trends have got huge impetus post COVID-19 (Shukla, Tomer, & Singh, 2021). Customers are following numerous Instagrammers and bloggers who appeal to their aesthetic, and many dedicated magazines are challenging the status quo of traditional fashion publishing and setting a different agenda for diverse audiences. (Kay & Corner, 2017, July 9).

In 2018, Facebook had over 2 billion monthly users, with YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter trailing

behind with 1.5 billion, 800 million, and 330 million users respectively. With these numbers, it's comprehensible that social influencers can reach large followings (Ravish, 2022). (Refer to Fig. 1).

According to the report published by GroupM INCA and exchange4media Group, expenditure on influencer marketing in India is growing at a CAGR of 25 per cent and it is expected to reach ₹ 2,200 crores by 2025 (Kumar & Padmanabhan, 2021; Ambwani 2022). The social media platforms collectively have exerted a strong influence on society, the way people interact, changing people's communication habits, shaping their perceptions, redefining the meaning of the word “friend” and in turn, altering their buying behaviour as well. For instance, the micro-influencers – typically having a following of less than 25,000 – are bringing better results as compared to the macro-influencers owing to their abilities, skills, expertise and unique appeal (Hutchinson, 2021).

According to Neilson (2015, September 28), the millennials consume media differently than their older counterparts, exercising greater control over when and where they watch, listen and read content—and on which device. But even if they rely less heavily on traditional channels, their trust and willingness to act on these formats remain high. While an integrated, multi-channel approach is best across all generations, it carries even more importance when reaching Millennials (Chaudhary, Singh, & Sharma, 2021).

Today, it is observed that the dependence of millennials on social media is growing the leaps and bounds, and it is increasingly being integrated into their lives. They are becoming more influenced by what they see online than ever before—especially when it comes to fashion. There was a time when social media didn't exist and during those days fashion insights were mostly consumed through catwalks, movies and magazines. Fashion was kept exclusive through these controlled channels and spheres, managed by fashion designers and magazine editors.

While glossies and catwalks remain an integral part of today's fashion world, fashion has been democratised and being more fluid and interactive. Because of the proliferation of various social media portals/pages, the world of fashion retailing is free and larger than it has ever been. They are not only engaging with friends and family members but also following the influencers. These influencers now have the power to influence their buying decisions and fashion is the area where it is happening extensively. With fashion influencers in every fashion type, millennial consumers have a huge

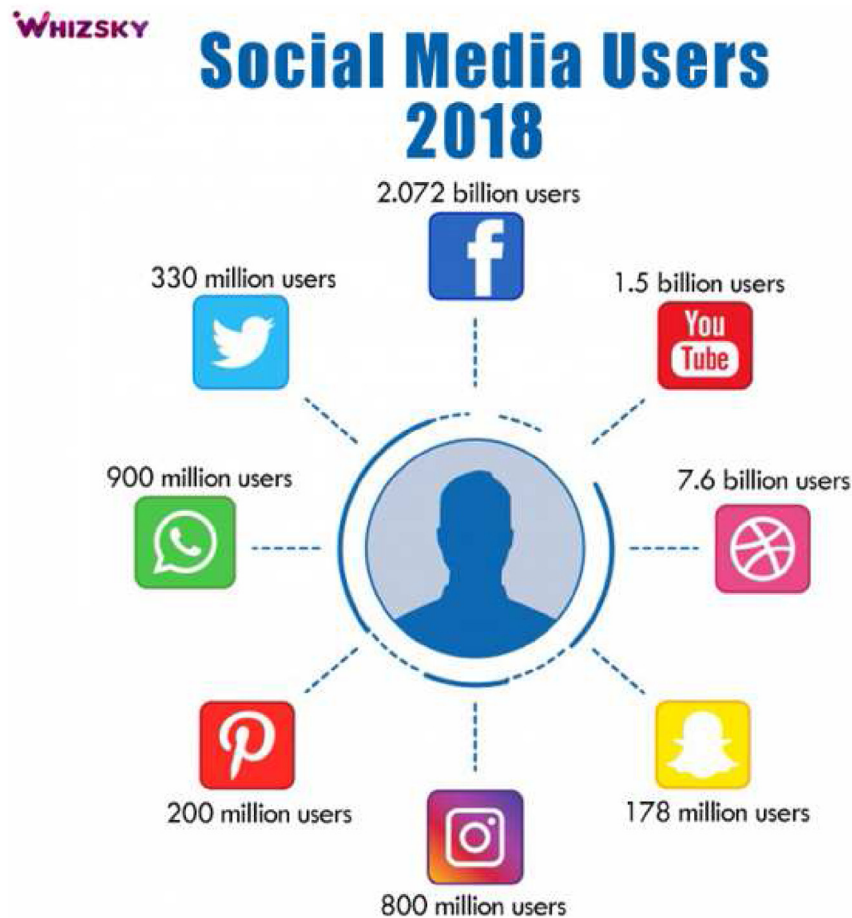


Fig. 1. Social media users (Ravish, 2022). Source of the Image – <https://www.whizsky.com/amazing-social-media-statistics-and-facts/>.

amount of fashion inspiration available on the social media channels like Facebook, Instagram and the likes. This scenario has changed the way fashion brands connect and engage with their core audience (Chaudhary, 2016).

Another form of social media that is very popular with fashion-conscious millennials is blogging. Fashion blogs have grown to be one of the most effective ways of sharing insights, experiences and recommendations through various platforms and forums. Blogs are one very effective way of marketing products straight to the target customer at a low cost. Today, word of mouth can be launched at scale with user-generated content (UGC) platforms. It's all about bringing real people to the forefront of marketing, as an essential part of the marketing media mix that can help to advertise overcome its trust deficit. Influencers have emerged as one of the effective marketing tools as they are perceived as authentic and unbiased by their followers (Panwar & Khan, 2020; Rawat, 2021).

The trust between influencer and audience can likely sway purchase decisions to a business' benefit.

This means that magazines, advertising campaigns and other outbound marketing tools don't have the influence that they once had. Instead, the user-generated content, influencers' views, reviews and insights and peer recommendations are resonating with the millennials and are more accessible than they once used to be. This article adopts a managerial perspective to get insights on how influencer marketing is playing an instrumental role in branding and retailing fashion-related products and hence enhancing customer engagement, with reference to millennials. This article delves deep into how the world of vogue is embracing influencer marketing for reinforcing the brand identity and driving customer engagement.

### 3. Views and opinions of experts and practitioners

In today's digital era it has been found that millennials are seldom influenced by advertising and other traditional promotional tools and techniques. These traditional channels are often perceived to be well-

planned, biased and sometimes even misleading. Today, buyers are continuously bombarded with countless cold calls, spam emails, and pop-up adverts, so they're increasingly feeling to get disconnected from irrelevant and un-personalised marketing. Millennials are less likely to respond to impersonal marketing campaigns and activities. As savvy users of social media, they are expecting informative content and marketing that is personalised to them (O'Leary, 2018).

Social media marketing typically uses social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, Google+, etc.) to market a product or service, the strategy is called Social media marketing. It is a process wherein strategic content is produced and broadcasted to draw in traffic for a website or to gain the attention of buyers over the web using different social media platforms. It is also called "content marketing", which can be briefly described as, delivering the content that your audience is seeking or delivering the content that will resonate with your target audience, in an integrated way. This also involves influencer marketing, wherein "key nodes" are identified and the content generated by them is leveraged within related communities, known as influencers (Kalakata, Anand, & Saxena, 2021). (see Table 1).

Influencer marketing can be defined as a process of identifying and activating individuals who have expertise in the subject area and hence hold an influence over a specific target audience who can influence potential buyers. With these capabilities, the influencers become a part of a fashion brand's marketing campaign, essentially aimed at increasing reach, sales, engagement and loyalty.

Influencer marketing involves working with influential personas, for instance, a blogger or user with a high social following. The objective is to increase awareness of a brand or influence the purchasing patterns of a target audience. It is a form of marketing and relationship building activity, which rests on the content that drives value through reach, relevance and resonance. An influencer doesn't need to be a big celebrity; it can be any profile that can add value to a brand. Generally, this value is

measured in terms of the volume of followers (Das, 2022).

This is becoming an important concept in digital targeting, which also involves affiliate marketing. This involves earning a commission by promoting and/or recommending products/brands of a company, organisation, seller or merchant. The affiliate, also known as the publisher, typically promotes one or multiple affiliate products and tries to attract and convince potential customers of the value of the merchant's product so that they end up buying it. While celebrities are usually public figures with a massive number of followers and fans, influencers are creating advertorials on social media or blogs. Sometimes they earn monetary benefits in exchange for writing or promoting products and/or services, which is also called "affiliate marketing". (Lisichkova & Othman, 2017; Neil Patel, 2019).

Influencer marketing works as it is like getting a fashion tip from a buddy. Seeing the people admire or look up to wearing a particular outfit or using a certain product is a vote of confidence in a brand that makes the potential customers more likely to purchase the particular product or interact with the brand in the future. This sense of community is something that brand accounts struggle to deliver; a third party is needed to validate the products for consumers. (Poncelin, 2021; Brahma, 2022).

The young, professional and passionate new generation of bloggers and vloggers has emerged from social media. Social media with tens of thousands of users provides a platform for these influencers to create and share content, which enables them to make an impact on their audience/followers. It also allows them to analyse the audience's response to their content and hence modify it accordingly. Influencing even a small fraction of these users can make a big difference for the fashion brand that is being endorsed by the influencer(s). Beauty, fashion, make-up and lifestyle brands are also using vloggers' power to engage in social campaigns. The bloggers and vloggers typically know the pulse of their audience and give insights/inputs about the product that resonates with them (Chakraborty, 2016; Saptarshi, 2016).

According to Suchi Mukherjee, founder of LimeRoad, one of the biggest USP (Unique Selling Proposition) of LimeRoad is the active participation and engagement of its target audience. Women use the platform in making it more personalised for themselves. LimeRoad has more than 40,000 users across India, who upload thousands of styles per month on the portal. These women users are shoppers themselves and they tend to create numerous "ensembles and looks", which are called

Table 1. Leading social media platforms generally used for fashion-oriented businesses (Peterson, 2018).

Facebook	For targeting men and women of all ages
Pinterest	For targeting women in their mid-twenties to mid-forties
Tumblr	For targeting teens and young adults
Instagram	For targeting men and women ages 18-40
Polyvore	For targeting young women with having an interest in art and fashion

“stories” by Limeroad. This kind of engagement gives them a feeling of expressing their creativity and also leads to community building (Mukherjee, 2019).

Autumn Wilberg in the article/blog titled, “How Social Media and its Influencers are Driving Fashion” has stated that, out of Instagram's total users, almost 200 million follow at least one fashion account. The writer further affirms that 45 percent of Instagram users in Britain pronounced that they follow these fashion accounts to obtain inspiration for new looks they can buy or create for themselves. They also tend to share their looks with #fashion and #ootd (outfit of the day) featuring in millions of posts often. The writer of this article further mentions the findings of a research study and reiterates that 71 percent of people were more likely to make an online purchase if the product or service has been recommended by others (peer recommendation). In addition to this, 84 percent of millennials were likely to be influenced into making a purchase based on the user-generated content by strangers who have experienced the product or service before (Wilberg, 2018).

Fashion retailer ASOS invites its fans to upload their pictures using the hashtag #AsSeenOnMe. The selected or the best ones go up on the ASOS website, inspiring millions of people with their looks. Similarly, fashion e-tailer KOOVS runs a trendy “style ambassador programme” where participants get exposure to the glamorous world of fashion, which also includes a chance to study in London. In return, these young ambassadors give the brand a share of their precious and happening timelines, which eventually leads to a Win–Win for both.

Hence, User Generated Content (UGC) is not just a fad, since millennials prefer to refer to it and Instagram's remarkable growth is testimony to the fact. It has been found that millennials trust UGC a whopping 50% more than any other media. Hence, to make your message resonate with the millennials, it's not just sufficient to brief your creative agency, but also to brief the targeted audience through the influencers (Raiyani, 2016). For instance, Instagram-influencers bring fashion inspiration for the millennials, in every fashion type.

Betty Gordon (2018) in the article titled, “What part does social media play in the fashion industry?” states that Instagram has now become the hub of fashion and has opened a whole new world for fashion marketers. It encourages brands to think more about “real” people, with different bodies, skin tones and fashion preferences. For instance, GAP's Styld. by campaign featured several influential social media personalities showing how they incorporate GAP clothing into their wardrobes. This successful campaign had enormous

reach obtained by involving multiple influencers from different spheres and niches (Leonard, 2017).

The content created by these influencers in the form of blogging and/or vlogging is being referred to by the millennials before the purchase of fashion-related products for validating their purchasing decisions. They go online to find reviews posted by bloggers about the product they might be interested in buying and by using these forums/platforms, they ask for opinions from the blogger and other readers, hoping to get help with their decision making (Sudha M. & Dr Sheena K, 2017).

Video can also be used at all stages of the buying process. Videos on social media are increasingly used as an effective tool for gaining attention, holding interest, arousing desire and obtaining engagement and action. Videos can offer potential customers further insight into what a fashion brand does while answering a pain point for them. Customers often refer to case-study videos to make more informed buying decisions, as videos demonstrate exactly what a fashion brand is all about and how customers perceive it (O'Leary, 2018).

#### 4. Final conclusion

Because of the advent of various social media portals, the content generated by influencers and recommendations by peers is more valuable and accessible to millennials. Millennials are increasingly following the “fashion accounts” on various social media sites like Facebook and Instagram to get inspiration for looks and ensembles, which they can buy or create themselves. These social networking sites are helping to broadcast fashion-related buzz with the click of a button. The photographs taken with selfie frames and shared on social media pages are increasingly becoming more appealing than the professionally shot image. Throughout the buying decision-making process, millennials tend to get attracted to relevant content, visually striking advertisements, such as blogs, videos, infographics, and peer recommendations.

The fashion industry is increasingly being driven by influencer marketing than any other industry and becoming more democratic. Influencer marketing executed through various social media portals is offering many ways of collaboration between bloggers, vloggers and fashion brands. This is not limited to just blog and social media posts, but it can include, Instagram takeovers, event hosting, modelling or even product/ensemble designing. Involving influencers early in the creative process can pay off, as the influencers offer ideas and insights that are relevant and resonate with the targeted audience.

The proliferation of fashion and lifestyle blogs leads to the building of strong relationships between bloggers and followers/readers and eventually with the brand as well. A fashion blogger is a more approachable, accessible and personal style icon than a celebrity/model walking on the ramp or featuring in vogue magazines. Hence, social media marketing and influencer marketing are leading to the formation of a direct relationship between brands and their consumers. Taking cognizance of this shift in consumer behaviour, fashion brands and fashion retailers are increasingly focusing on social media marketing to reach out to the millennials. Even the luxury brands that once eschewed social media out of fear of brand dilution are embracing digital marketing.

## 5. Implications for decision makers

Influencer marketing – specifically in the case of fashion – is essentially “content-based” and “content-driven” activity. Adoption of influencer marketing has increased during and post-pandemic and today is an integral component of the media mix and brand communication and marketing strategy. Here the fashion brands and retailers need to think about whom they are going to target, what are the expectations, needs and preferences of their target audience, what they care about, and which media/channels they consume and then make informed decisions about which content to produce. The virtues like trust, credibility, expertise and authenticity that influencers command can be leveraged by the brands to resonate with their audiences. It attracts the prospect, expands the reach of the brand among the right audience, helps improve brand positioning, and enhances customer engagement.

Hence, when it comes to the content strategy, firstly, it should be persona-driven which means it should resonate with a specific audience the fashion brand/retailer want to reach and target. Secondly, it should be focused on at least one pain point the customer is having, about that fashion product. The more focused the content is, the better-quality download could be achieved.

Finally, the content should be articulated, designed and conveyed, creatively and innovatively, in a friendly and appealing manner. It should be insightful, appealing, resonating, memorable, engaging and shareable. All this collectively assists users in their buying decisions, resulting in improvement in customer engagement and revenue for the business.

In the nutshell, the content from the influencers is enough to have their followers keeping them on their streams and timelines. Fashion brands need to

work coherently with these influencers to plug their product or service somewhere within the influencer's content, as the millennial followers are allowing influencer generated content.

## Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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