Influencer Marketing on Instagram: the new era of Social Media Marketing

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Introduction

Ever since the invention of the internet in 1983, it has brought a revolution in communications to such an extent that it is now considered a medium of everyday communication across the globe (Dentzel, 2013). Being such an important medium, it has a major role in the development of countries. The ally and child of the Internet is social media that most of the youth feel most connected. People are switching from traditional mass media to social media to publicize their business, brand, product, etc. Hence factors such as time, cost, accuracy, and trust are contributing towards the exodus inclination towards social media (Lawlor, 2018). Facebook is one of the largest social media platforms followed by YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram also have more than a billion users each (Esteban, 2019). The main reason behind the increased demand for social media is its power to persuade, nurture and engage the audience irrespective of the location. Social media allows the influencers, brands to engage the audience and influence them that further helps them in making the right choice (WebFX, n.d.).

Famous platforms of Social Media

Being a prominent medium either in terms of popularity or its advantages over traditional media, Social media has the power to foster the relationship of brands and services with their customers and thus building trust factor. Other factors such as time, cost, accuracy, and trust have been conducive to the exodus inclination towards social media platforms and thus the rapid popularity of social media has changed our perspective to look at the world, find partners, access information, and demand for a change (Esteban, 2019). According to Kemp (2020), more than half of the world i.e. 3.94 billion people are on some social media platform and over 3.91 billion use their Smartphones to access it. The annual growth rate of social media users is10.5percent, which accounts for over 376 million distinctive users. According to Lua (n.d.) Facebook tops the charts as the most popular platform with more than two billion people using it every month followed by YouTube with 1.9 billion Monthly Active Users (MAUs), WhatsApp (1.5 billion MAUs), Messenger (1.3 billion MAUs), and Instagram with over 1 billion MAUs.

Instagram: The preferred Social Media

Instagram was founded in October 2010 by Kevin Systrom in the US. It is a free photo and video-sharing app available on iPhone and Android (Instagram Inc., 2020). With the growth of Instagram, it is not only known as a platform where people establish relationships with others, but it has become a platform to provide a livelihood to many people, some of these people who earn their living through Instagram are known as **Influencers** or **Bloggers,** who got the opportunity to showcase their talents, gain popularity by the engaging audience, further their brands and influence audience.

Although all the social media platforms have been used extensively around the world, Instagram being the most popular among Gen-Z is successful in driving the attention of marketers towards it. Kevin Systrom founded Instagram in October 2010 in the US. It is a free photo and video-sharing application available for both iPhone and Android users. Anyone 13 or above can create an account by registering an email address or mobile number and selecting a username. People can share photos or videos, like posts, and comment on the content shared by others. (Instagram Inc., 2020). Users can also post visual content with the caption on each post, use hashtags and add a location to make them searchable by other users as well within the app (Rouse, 2017, para2). Users even have the choice of making their profiles private so that only their followers can view their posts.

As of January 2020, the total number of monthly active users on Instagram is over 1 billion and the total number of daily active Instagram users is 550 million+, while the number of photos and videos uploaded per day is 100 million+. As of October 2020, the United States tops the ranking chart of the countries with 140 million users accessing the app. India was ranked second with 120 million Instagram users and Brazil at third with 95 million users. In India, out of the total users, 72.5 percent are male users while 27.5 percent female users (Statista, 2020).

Influencers or Bloggers

With the growth of Instagram and its record-breaking figures doing rounds globally, now it is not just a platform where people establish relationships with others, buy their favorite brands, etc., but it has become a platform to provide a livelihood to a lot of people, and these individuals are known as *Influencers* or *Bloggers*. An *Influencer*, sometimes also known as a blogger or content creator is a trusted individual having an engaged following on social media and shares his/her opinions, information on various topics, products, brands, and services via social media, a website, or blog. Influencers got the opportunity to gain popularity by engaging the audience, further their brands, and influence the audience by showcasing their talent. There are Fitness influencers who inspire us to get up early morning to run or to eat a little bit healthier. There are also Travel Influencers, Food Bloggers, Fashion Influencers, and Mom Influencers who share the reality of the hard work of raising their children or fitness bloggers, and many more.

Types of Influencers

Instagram Influencers are the early adopters of any new service, product, or brand, thus inculcating desire among their followers to purchase the product or brand. Based on different niches, followings, and ways of content creation, Estay (2020a) has classified Influencers into four major types- Nano, Micro, Macro, and Mega Influencers, to make it easier for the brands to identify the right type of Influencer to create brand awareness for their brands. *Nano-influencers* are individuals like our family and friends. These Influencers have followers in the range generally less than 10,000 (10k). They have gained popularity from brands, since partnering with them does not cost much and they have high engagement rates and lower compensation rates, so brands experience a greater Rate of Investment (ROI).

Micro-influencers are often known as industry experts in a specific niche and have less than 100,000 (100k) followers. Due to their smaller follower base and actively interacting with their followers, they deliver great ROIs for brands. These Influencers account for almost one-third of the Influencer population on Instagram.

Macro-influencers are those having followers between 100,000 (1 lakh) and 1 million. These influencers can sometimes be celebrities as well, but usually, they are just micro-influencers who now have a larger fan base.

Influencers having more than 1 million followers are known as *Mega-influencers*. These are celebrities or major public figures.

Influencer Marketing

Different brands target different influencers for different purposes like- increasing brand awareness, brand image formation, etc. *Influencer marketing* is a marketing strategy that includes the promotion of products, services, brands, or ideas by collaborating with an Influencer. This can be sponsored Instagram posts or stories, sponsored blog posts, other sponsored social media marketing posts on other platforms e.g. Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn.

Influencer Marketing on Instagram

Social media marketing on Instagram has helped many brands or businesses to increase their sales overnight. It is a marketing tactic that eliminates the barriers of traditional advertising strategies because customers are now introduced to various brands from a credible source i.e., an Influence on an authentic social media platform. Even if (Instagram) sits behind Facebook in terms of popularity and user base, it is most popular amongst younger generations. According to Statista (2019) Millennials (ages 24-34) hold the top demographic spot while Gen Z (18-24) takes the second. Gen Z mostly prefers Micro-influencers as they have strong followership and a level of trust and relatability is extremely high. The two age groups (Gen Z and Millennials) together hold 71% of Instagram's active user base. Guttman (2020; as cited in Statista, 2020) found that 84% of influencers creating sponsored posts on Instagram are women.

Influencers with a lesser amount of Instagram followers translate to higher engagement rates and ROI. Though Macro- and Mega-influencers still hold influence but Nano and Micro-influencers have the higher Rate of Investment (ROI). This Engagement Rate or ROI is measured by the number of likes, comments, and shares combined per post, divided by the influencer's following. Guttman (2019; as cited in Statista, 2019.) found that micro-influencer accounts have gained in engagement rates by nine percent.

A survey conducted by Facebook IQ (2019) found that 83% of people discover new products and services on Instagram while 81% use the platform to research products or services and 80% engage

with Instagram content to make purchasing choices for a product or a service. There is 66% of the distribution of sponsored content on Instagram worldwide. Photo content is more popular than video content but with the rise in the use of Instagram story feature and IGTV feature, the usage of video content has skyrocketed. Sponsored content is also one of the most popular ways of collaborating with influencers. Brands work with influencers for sponsored content for their Instagram Stories or Live features. Some brands even hand over their official brand or product accounts to the Influencers for a while to drive traffic and increase engagement (Mediakix, n.d.).

Pandemic and the Rise of Influencer Marketing

During the uncertain times of the Covid-19 pandemic when initially there were restrictions imposed due to the spread of the virus, people were finding ways to indulge in productive work and also keeping themselves entertained. So, more people were turning towards social media, thus, a surge in the usage of social media platforms. There was an 87% increased use of social media during the first week of lockdown imposed in India (Business Today, 2020). People were not only turning towards Social media platforms to distract themselves from what is going on in the world but in the hope to find motivation, information, advice, and support. So there comes the role of *Not so Famous but Famous Individuals* i.e., Influencers or Bloggers. Marketers and Influencers are adjusting to rapid changes in the influencer-marketing industry due to the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Advertisers too are discovering the importance of the Influencer-marketing business model as it will be more viable to shoot ad content within the premises of the home than going out for commercial shoots (Perelli&Whateley, 2020).

With nowhere to go and attend events, most of the influencers were running out of content to post on their social media handles. Initially, during the lockdown, Instagram influencers who earn money through creating or posting sponsored content faced a decline and found it difficult to do work. All the trips and contracts of Travel bloggers were canceled. Although, Obviously (2020) reported that there is a 76% increase in likes on Instagram Ad posts during the first few weeks of the pandemic as well as a 300% increase in Instagram Live usage. With the increased use of social media platforms, several influencers also reported higher engagement levels, as well as an increase in their follower numbers.

Influencer Marketing: The Theoretical Framework

When we talk about influencer marketing via Instagram today and in particular it is overarched reach along with its success rates, we must look at a possible communication theory of persuasion that underpins it most strongly.

Social Learning theory or *Social Modeling theory:* According to the Social Learning theory or Social Modeling theory given by Albert Bandura in 1977, the media are active but subtle educators in teaching readers, viewers, and listeners about the world. An important component of this theory is that it explains how people can learn from observations alone. It is seen that with a huge fan following, Instagram Influencers do have the potential to influence their audience by sharing their videos, testimonials, experiences of doing certain behaviors, or using certain products/services.

Robert Cialdini, in his book on persuasion, defines six "influence cues" that can be used as the techniques of persuasion. Instagram Influencers are seen using these to influence their audiences. These techniques are reciprocity, commitment, and consistency, social proof, liking, authority, and scarcity.

Rationale

Around the world, various platforms have been successful in engaging billions of people, Instagram is one of them. As of January 2020, the total number of monthly active users on Instagram is over 1 billion and the total number of daily active Instagram users is 550 million+. India was ranked second with 100 million Instagram users (refer to Table 1), in the Instagram users ratings (Instagram Inc., 2020).

In India, out of the total users, the social networking site is reported to have around 72.7 percent male users and 27.3 percent female users (NapoleanCat, 2020).

Table 1

Country-Specific Data on Instagram Users in India

Country or region	The population as of 2019	Internet users 30 June 2019	Instagram users November 2019	Instagram users June 2020
India #2	1,368,737,513	560,000,000	72,260,000	103,380,000

Source: https://napoleoncat.com/stats/instagram-users-in-india/2020/06

Given the growing popularity of Instagram as a social media platform, with millions of users within India, this study is sought to understand the Influencer market and in particular focus on the techniques being used by them to influence their audience. Since the majority of the micro-influencers on Instagram are young people with a fan following in thousands, this study will aim at interacting with them to understand the use of effective communication strategies to engage with their audience.

Conceptual framework of the study

Figure 2

Audience engagement by Instagram Influencers
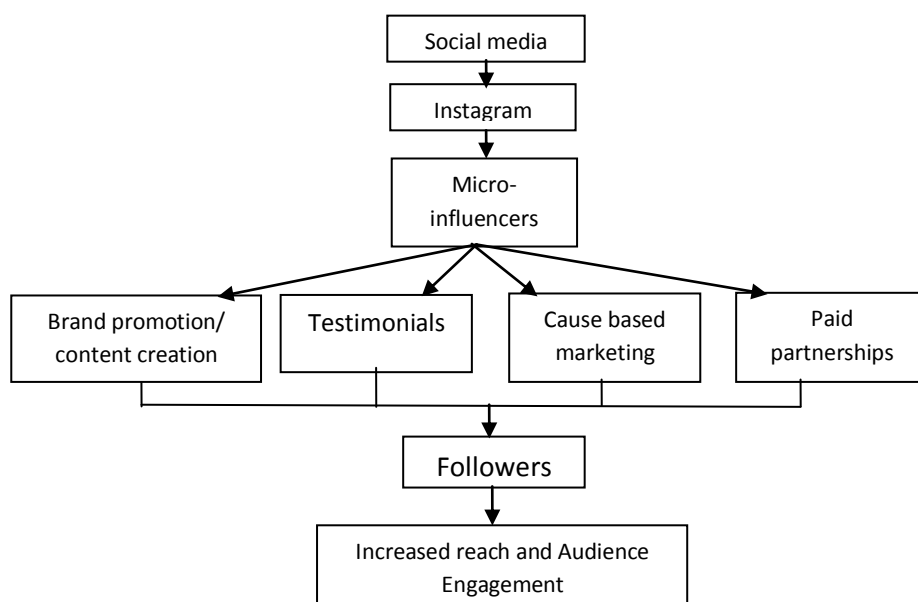
Hence this study aimed at understanding the techniques being used by the Instagram influencers and how they strategize their marketing agendas to make them the most effective channels today in the era of social media marketing.

Methodology

The current study, being descriptive in nature studied the famousfemale micro Instagram Influencers intending to gain insight into the techniques being used by them and how they strategize their marketing agendas to make them the most effective channels today in the era of social media marketing. Snowball sampling was used and in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-five of the successful female micro Instagram influencers. Only those influencers were selected for the study who had an active account for at least two years and had followers in the range of 10k-50k belonging to the age of 18-40 years. Telephonic interviews and Google forms were used to collect the required information from these influencers.

Findings

Demographic profile of respondents

Distribution of Respondents by Age

The sample of the study included thirty female micro Instagram Influencers between the ages of 18-40 years, who had an account on Instagram for at least two years and having 10k (10,000)- 50k (50,000) followers on Instagram. For this study, data from only twenty-five female micro Instagram

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Influencers was collected. Seventeen respondents were between the ages of 18-25 years (i.e., 68%). Eight respondents were between the age group of 26-33 years (i.e., 32%), while no respondent was between the age group of 34-40 years.

Table 3

Distribution of respondents by age

Age (in years)	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
18-25 years	17	68%
26-33 years	08	32%
34-40 years	00	0%
Total	**25**	**100%**

Distribution of Respondents by Educational Qualification

Out of twenty-five female micro Instagram Influencers, fourteen were graduates (i.e., 56%), ten of them were post-graduates (i.e., 40%), while only one of the respondents had a Ph.D. degree (i.e., 4%).

Table 4

Distribution of respondents by educational qualification

Educational Qualification	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
Graduation	14	56%
Post-graduation	10	40%
PhD	01	4%
Total	**25**	**100%**

Distribution of Respondents by their Prior Occupation

Out of twenty-five respondents, before being an Instagram Influencer, eleven respondents (i.e., 44%) were into service, six of them were self-employed (i.e., 24%), while the other six were students (i.e., 24%).

From the other responses of all the respondents, it can be ascertained that the majority of female micro Instagram Influencer under the current sample continued to be into different service sectors or were self-employed alongside being an Instagram Influencer.

Table 5

Distribution of respondents by their prior occupation

Prior occupation	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
Service	11	44%
Self-employed	6	24%
Student	6	24%
No response	2	8%
Total	**25**	**100%**

Distribution of Respondents by the Number of Years of Having an Account on Instagram

Out of twenty-five respondents, twenty respondents (i.e., 80%) had an account on Instagram for 2-6 years, while five respondents (i.e., 20%) had their account for 6-10 years.

Table 6

Distribution of respondents by the number of years of having an account on Instagram

No. of years	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
2-6 years	20	80%
6-10 years	05	20%
10 years or more	00	0%
Total	**25**	**100%**

Distribution of Respondents by the Number of Years it took to become a Micro-Influencer (10k-50k) From Nano-Influencer (10k Or Less)

Out of twenty-five respondents, twenty-two respondents (i.e., 88%) took 2-6 years to become a micro-influencer 10k-50k follower) from a nano-influencer (10k or fewer followers), while three of them cited that it took them only 5 months, 7-8 months, and 1 year respectively to become a micro-influencer (i.e., 12%). Thus, the data reported above explicitly highlights that the majority of the respondents took between 2-6 years to increase their followers count to become an Influencer having followers in the range of 10k- 50k.

Table 7

Distribution of respondents by the number of years it took to become a Micro-influencer (10k-50k) from Nano-influencer (10k or less)

No. of years	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
2-6 years	22	88%
6-10 years	00	0%
No. of years	**Total (N=25)**	**Percentage (%)**
10 years or more	00	0%
Others	03	12%
Total	**25**	**100%**

Distribution of Respondents by the type of content they create for Influencer Marketing

Out of twenty-five respondents, 52% preferred creating and posting content related to Fashion, 12% preferred Socio-political content, 8% preferred Memes, while 4% mentioned Comedy related content. None of them preferred Satirical content for their Instagram handles as modes to create content for influencer marketing.

The other preferred categories of content mentioned by the majority of respondents (i.e., 72%) were food, lifestyle, make-up and beauty, fitness, parenting, and hair care. The respondents affirmed that the majority of their content creation is governed by partnerships they had with different brands, products, and services.

Distribution of Respondents by their most Successful Promotion

Brand promotion on Instagram is one of the pertinent tasks taken up by Instagram Influencers for social media marketing. All the influencers selected here were actively involved in influencing their followers as they marketed different brands, products, and services. Reasons for engagement primarily included: brand promotion, monetary benefits, fame, and an increased number of followers. Out of twenty-five respondents, the majority had experienced a successful promotion with a brand (i.e., 32%),

seven of them promoted a product most successfully (i.e., 28%), five of them had tasted success in promoting an idea (i.e., 20%), three of them promoted a service very well (i.e., 125), while two had experienced success in promoting a campaign (i.e., 8%).

Some of the brand(s)/service(s)/product(s)/idea(s)/campaign(s) names indicated by the respondents were- MCaffeine, Bioderma, Indulgeo, Plum goodness, Booyah India, Myntra, Amazon, J&J, SONY TV, Khadi Global, Rey naturals, Flatlay Designs, Mom and Baby series, Pampers campaign, etc.

Table 8

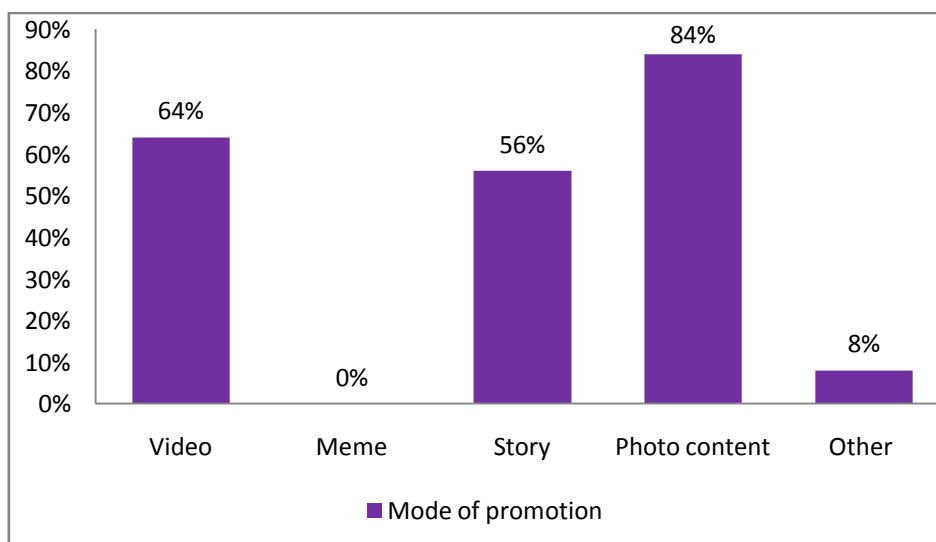*Distribution of respondents by their most successful promotion*

Most successful promotion	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
Brand	8	32%
Service	3	12%
Product	7	28%
Idea	5	20%
Campaign	2	8%
Total	**25**	**100%**

Distribution of Respondents by the Most Used Mode to Promote a Brand/Service/Product/Idea/Campaign

Promoting a brand isn't an easy task. With the ever-evolving field of Instagram and competitive influencers around each Instagram Influencer who was a part of this study confirmed that they had to be innovative and try different means and strategies to do brand promotions. The most preferred mode to promote a brand/service/product/idea/campaign was by posting a Photo (i.e., 84%), 64% of respondents also preferred Videos, 56% preferred Stories, while none of the respondents preferred Memes as a mode of promotion.

8% of respondents asserted that Reels are among the other preferred modes of promotion for a brand/service/product/idea/campaign.

Figure 9

Distribution of respondents by the most used mode to promote a brand/service/product/idea/campaign

Distribution of Respondents by the Promotion of Fellow Influencers

An interesting revelation of this study was that, unlike physical businesses where competition and rivalry do exist, influencers on Instagram seem to be promoting and interacting with fellow influencers as well. Out of twenty-five respondents, sixteen always promote the content of their fellow

Influencer's from their own Instagram accounts (i.e., 64%), eight rarely promote their fellow Influencers (i.e., 32%), while one of them never do any kind of promotion for other Influence (i.e., 4%). The above figures indicate that the majority of the respondents believed in healthy competition and supported other women's fellow influencers. Probably, the same gender and same cause on the same platform led them to support each other.

Table 10

Distribution of respondents by the promotion of fellow Influencers

Promotion of fellow influencers	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
Always	16	64%
Rarely	8	32%
Promotion of fellow influencers	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
Never	1	4%
Total	25	100%

Distribution of Respondents by the Most Used Instagram Feature

Out of twenty-five respondents, four preferred using Reels the most (i.e., 16%), four preferred using the Story feature (i.e., 16%), while the feature of posting content (photos, videos, etc.) on Instagram was the most popular and preferred by seventeen respondents (i.e., 68%). None of the respondents preferred live sessions and IGTV features. Thus, the findings above clearly reflect that most influencers believed in the tried and tested methods of photos and videos which were easier for them to create, yet at the same time gave them ample opportunity to experiment with their content.

Table 11

Distribution of respondents by the most used Instagram feature

Most used feature	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
Reel	4	16%
IGTV	0	0%
Stories	4	16%
Live sessions	0	0%
Posting content (photos, videos, etc.)	17	68%
Total	25	100%

Distribution of Respondents by the Most Effective Feature to Persuade Audience

Out of twenty-five respondents, fourteen asserted Reels to be the most effective feature to engage or persuade the audience (i.e., 56%), three considered Stories as an effective feature, while posting content like photos, videos, etc. was considered to be an effective feature by seven respondents (i.e., 28%). One respondent also indicated that all features are equally good (i.e., 4%), while none of the respondents considered Live sessions and IGTV features as an effective feature to persuade the audience.

The different reasons cited by the respondents for indicating Reels as the most effective feature **to** persuade the audience were- being a new feature they are most popular after the ban of TikTok, simple, entertaining, higher engagement rate, can trend very quickly, they are of short duration so people like to see content which is less time-consuming. Some of the reasons mentioned by the

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respondents for considering posting content such as videos and photos, as an effective feature were- this is the essence of Instagram, much more in detail than reels and relevant.

Table 12

Distribution of respondents by the most effective feature to persuade the audience

Most effective feature	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
Reels	14	56%
IGTV	0	0%
Stories	3	12%
Live sessions	0	0%
Posting content (photos, videos, etc.)	7	28%
Others	1	4%
Total	25	100%

Distribution of Respondents by Difficulty in Influencing the Audience to go for certain Brands/Products/Service

Out of twenty-five respondents, ten found it difficult to influence their audience to go for certain brands/ products/services which they are promoting (i.e., 40%). They felt so, because people expect something unique every time, so until it is not out of the box, the audience does not get influenced, and it is the audience's personal choice to use any product, service, or brand. Some also said that the audience feels this is just a paid promotion and not an honest review.

Eight did not find it difficult at all to influence their followers to go for brands/products/services (i.e., 32%), while five were not sure whether they found it difficult to persuade people or not (i.e., 20%). Two also indicated that it is dependent on the audience choice (i.e., 8%).

Table 13

Distribution of respondents by difficulty in influencing the audience to go for certain brands/products/service

Difficulty in Influencing audience	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
Yes	10	40%
No	8	32%
May be	5	20%
Depends on the audience	2	8%
Total	25	100%

Distribution of Respondents by the Best Technique to Persuade or Engage the Audience

Out of twenty-five respondents, according to the experience of three micro Influencers, the best technique to persuade or engage the audience was interaction with the audience (i.e., 12%), seven of them said that being real is the best technique to engage the audience (i.e., 28%), twelve mentioned that quality of content matters the most (i.e., 48%), while two said following good promotion practices can help in engaging the audience (i.e., 8%).

Table 14

Distribution of respondents by the best technique to persuade or engage the audience

Best Persuasion technique	Total (N=25)	Percentage (%)
Interaction with audience	3	12%
Being real	7	28%
Quality content	12	48%
Good promotion practices	2	8%
No response	1	4%
Total	25	100%

Conclusion

The above study is reflective of the hard work and hardships of the female micro Instagram Influencers who were trying enough and beyond to innovate and create content using varied media on the platform of Instagram to promote brands, products, and services. Brand promotion on Instagram is one of the pertinent tasks taken up by Instagram Influencers for social media marketing. All the influencers selected here were actively involved in influencing their followers as they marketed different brands, products, and services. Reasons for engagement primarily included: brand promotion, monetary benefits, fame, and an increased number of followers. These influencers asserted using novel and out-of-the-box content to ensure they met the targets of the paid partnerships they have with different brands. The ripple effect of following an influencer was evident through this research as many of them affirmed that they were able to convince their followers with their influencing strategies to go for a particular product or service that they promoted. Although most influencers believed in the tried and tested methods of photos and videos which were easier for them to create, and time gave them ample opportunity to experiment with their content, they did confirm that the REEL feature was the most effective way to persuade the audience with their idea. The majority of the respondents believed in healthy competition and supported other women's fellow influencers. Probably, the same gender and same cause on the same platform led them to support each other. Influencer marketing is not just the present but the future too. And with innovation in content creation, healthy competition, and support of fellow influencers, this form of marketing will be the new norm for the biggest to the smallest of the brands across segments for commercial marketing in the years to come.

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