



# An Exploratory Study on Stimulators in Influencer Marketing: A Critical Review on Content and Audience Engagement

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**Abstract.** Social media influencer (SMI) marketing is reshaping the mainstream of the digital world. Scholarly work indicates the significance of relevant and effective SMI content to ensure audience engagement and a trustable profile of the influencer. Based on an exploratory research design, the present study proposes to explore stimulators in influencer marketing in the context of audience engagement and content creation. It expects to enhance the conceptual understanding of factors driving the content creation process of rapidly booming SMI marketing arena. The findings indicate that source credibility, content authenticity, informative value, entertainment value, content sponsorship, interactivity, technological design quality, and creativity are important determinants that shape the favorable attitude of audience towards influencers' content. While the previous studies mainly focused on persona-driven attributes, this study explores the dimensions of SMI content to enhance consumers' engagement. This study offers marketing implications for SMI to become an effective promotional and branding strategy. Incorporating these dimensions may facilitate improvement in the content value and the followers' mindset. Finally, theoretical and managerial implications are provided to various stakeholders for redefining their approach towards influencer marketing.

**Keywords:** Social Media Influencer Content · Source Credibility · Authenticity · Sponsorship · Technological Design Quality · Influencer Marketing

## 1 Introduction

In the era of digitalization and technological advancement, tremendous changes have emerged in the field of marketing. The digital world and the marketing industry both are transforming at a speedy pace. From the marketing perspective, the significance of social media is growing day by day. Where social media is providing a way to grab the opportunity to appeal to a large chunk of the audience, unfavorable electronic word-of-mouth, and irritating online brand presence are a few challenges shaped by digital marketing [10]. To hold the ground in the stiff competition and to create and maintain a positive perception of the brand in the customer's mind in this world of hashtags,

innovative and sticky content need to be delivered to the customers. Engaging and influencing consumers through traditional marketing has become grueling due to increased skepticism tendency. An effective solution to the traditional monotonous form of putting the product forward to customers is Social Media Influencer (SMI) marketing [15].

Influencer marketing is a popular mechanism adopted by SMIs or content creators to influence the purchasing decision of their thousands or even millions of followers through endorsement or recommendations on different social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. based on their experiences [42]. The introduction of Instagram and TikTok as well as apps like Snapchat or Twitch have created a new revolution in SMI marketing industry in the recent past [12]. Nowadays, the trend of influencer marketing is being adopted by small and large business enterprises too. An influencer can identify the feelings of customers and influence the decision-making process of the audience by using their expertise and knowledge in particular fields. The “stickiness” of followers’ connection is crucial for a digital influencer’s capacity to turn them into paying consumers [14].

Influencer marketing has proved to be a successful approach for companies to promote their product or brand [40]. Between 2016 and 2022, the influencer marketing industry had a CAGR of 46.9% [31]. Surprisingly, in India also, the growth rate of influencer marketing sector is projected to increase by a compounded annual growth rate of 25% from Rs 900 crore in 2021 to Rs 2200 crore in 2022 [41].

Social Media Influencer (SMI) marketing is getting popularity in the field of marketing and promotional strategies because previous studies reveal that as compared to consumers who are exposed to traditional celebrity brand posts, those who are exposed to the posts of influencers, perceive the source as more reliable and have a favorable attitude towards the brand image, feel more confident in their social presence, and act responsively to the source [17]. Thereby, SMI marketing is responsible not only for changing the customers’ perception towards marketing but also for having a substantial effect on the promotion mix of the marketers. Companies, these days, join and collaborate with social media influencers to attain more traffic to their websites and to increase their market shares. Brands are approaching the influencer after considering the volume of followers, target audience of the influencer and mainly by considering the content quality. Influencer marketing (IM) has transformed into a critical part of firms’ marketing efforts, but marketers are still poorly informed on its breadth, efficiency and possible risks involved [24].

There is wider scope for business firms to leverage their promotion mix by collaborating with social media influencers. Influencer marketing helps big companies by attracting more customers and attempts to contribute to the growth of SMEs through digital word-of-mouth advertising on social media platforms. But these companies, while considering this marketing tool for their promotional efforts, should ensure beforehand that quality posts and relevant content must be delivered to the audience.

There are certain factors propelling the appeal of social media influencer content. More comprehensive knowledge of customer needs and market practices is required to craft attractive content and engage the audience. This study examines various factors of SMI marketing with a holistic perspective which would help the content creator to attract the audience and influence their decisions. This study provides the company with

the essential attributes of the influencer content which are required to be assessed to measure the quality and maximize an influencer's marketing effects.

The present study is structured into the following sections: Sect. 1 provides the essence of the study; Sect. 2 discusses the theoretical background of the study. Section 3 provides a detailed discussion of the factors driving the appeal of social media influencer content. Section 4 elaborates on the theoretical and managerial implications along with key recommendations.

## 2 Literature Review

Leung, & Palmatier [24] focused on examining a firm's marketing communication effectiveness among consumers. Based on social capital theory, the study explicate that Online Influencer Marketing may be considered as leveraging influencer resources like influencer positioning, delivered content, follower networks and confidence which would help them to produce more engaging and authentic content than they would otherwise achieve. Strategies suggested for alleviating the dark sides of OIM consist of an effective selection of influencers, monitoring the process of content delivery, measuring the performance, and repurposing the content, which would catalyze effective marketing communication and better brand positioning.

Kay, Mulcahy, Sutherland, & Lawley [18] explain the relevance of disclosure of sponsored content, content cues, emotions, and credibility in influencer marketing. The results show that in addition to the disclosure, influencer marketing content cues can also help people in recognizing the advertisements. Additionally, influencers are perceived to have credibility and knowledge related to digital platforms and product categories of marketers.

Sands, Campbell, Plangger, and Ferraro [36] studied how the virtual influencer in SMI marketing signifies the effect of influence on consumers. A comparative study of AI-based influencers and human influencers is also conducted. The researchers found that there are some interrelationships between AI influencers and human influencers and also those relationships never affect the consumer purchase intention.

Stubb, & Colliander, [40] analyzed how followers' engagement behavior is determined by different attributes of influencers' content and engagement strategy on Instagram. Based on an online influencer database, the study considered a data set of Instagram influencers. To collect the data about Instagram influencers, 243 influencers from Saudi Arabia and Riyadh were targeted. The study discovered that follower engagement is negatively affected by content volume and number of followers, while the number of followers is positively related to follower engagement.

As firms involved in the fashion, beauty, travel, food, or beverage industries are frequently collaborating with influencers popular on widely used platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook etc. [12] evaluated the predominant platforms used in SMI marketing. The authors introduce various platforms and guide the firms to identify the right influencer for collaboration. Authors reveal that the Strategies that act effectively for companies in the past, may no longer provide the same results today.

Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim [20] focusing on the attachment development mechanisms, analyzed persona and content-related attributes which results in enhancing the

follower attachment towards the influencer. The study attempts to find out how disclosure of emotions and content cues are crucial in influencer marketing. The results unveil that persona-related attributes like enjoyability, inspiration and similarity and content curation abilities like informativeness shape the followers' perception towards SMIs.

Saima, & Khan [35] investigated about the contribution of digital media influencers in shaping customer behavior through posts, videos, etc. Authors identify the impact of various determinants on source credibility and purchase intention of the followers. Based on Structural Equation Modelling, authors propounded that (trustworthiness, entertainment value and quality of information) these attributes have a significant direct impact on the influencers' credibility and an indirect effect on customers' purchase intention.

Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Esteban-Millat, Torrez-Meruvia, D'Alessandro, & Miles [26] studied the commercial orientation, brand control and post-credibility of Influencer marketing. The focus of the study was to investigate the effect of perceived commercial orientation and brand control on followers' trust on the influencers and their content. The study concluded that if the post is more commercially oriented, it reduces the perceived brand control and trust of followers which further reduces the propensity of followers to look for more information.

Wiedmann, & Mettenheim [47] analyzed about the importance of the influencers' expertise, attractiveness and trustworthiness in online influencer campaigns. The study finds that influencing marketers need to create more engaging content in an influencer marketing campaign in order to seek trustworthiness and attractiveness. The study discloses that price premium and purchase intention have an indirect relation with the attractiveness and trustworthiness of influencers.

Jin, & Ryu, [16] studied how effectively Instagram influencers use Instagram posts and their content in order to increase customers' trustworthiness, and purchase intention, and affect consumer perception towards influencers. They concluded that in order to increase customers' purchase intentions, improvement in source authenticity is an important aspect.

Pöyry, Pelkonen, Naumanen, & Laaksonen, [33] revealed that authenticity is an important asset in SMI marketing. When it comes to the communicating results of SMIs, the authenticity of influencers is perceived differently by various social media users. The authenticity of sponsored photographs on social media platforms may impact the people reaction towards the images. In the context of the body-positive movement, a viewer may become less engaged with content creators if viewers have a negative attribution toward the content creator's intent for posting. So, posts must reflect the values that the content creators believe in, to make posts effective.

Stubb, & Colliander, [39] investigated by using a model of sponsorships how impartiality in influencer posts can change consumers' reactions and how brand hyperlinks in content creator posts interact with sponsorship disclosures and webpage style to form the brand outlooks and increase the purchase intentions of the customer. The study discloses that compared to sponsored product posts, impartial posts are less likely to be considered as advertisements by followers. Thus, non-sponsored posts positively influence the credibility of the content.

Influencer marketing is a new form of marketing trend. Previous studies conducted on SMI marketing are concentrating on elucidating the importance of influencer marketing,

promotion campaigns and impact of influencer marketing on the company's performance and customer's purchase intention. Some researchers analyzed the influencer's content based on credibility and trustworthiness. But to our best knowledge, there is a paucity of theoretical work focusing on the content of influencer marketing. To fill this gap, this study is conducted which aims to examine factors affecting influencer marketing content and customer engagement.

## **2.1 Objective of the Study**

This study aims to identify various factors which should be considered by social media influencers while creating content. Along with identifying these factors, the study postulates useful insight into how should SMIs change their content to enhance the trust, reliability and engagement of the audience in their posts. To achieve the objectives of the study, an exploratory research design is adopted. Previous literature has been analyzed qualitatively by the researchers to drive the factors affecting the appeal of SMI content. Secondary data is collected in the study from different sources i.e., books, magazines, news articles, previous studies, websites, etc.

## **3 Discussion and Findings**

SMI demands stronger emotional bonds with their followers to get the endorsed message accepted by them. Here, the authors explicate a number of factors (Fig. 1) which can confirm the effective transmission of recommendations and endorsement and enhance the audience attachment towards SMI content.

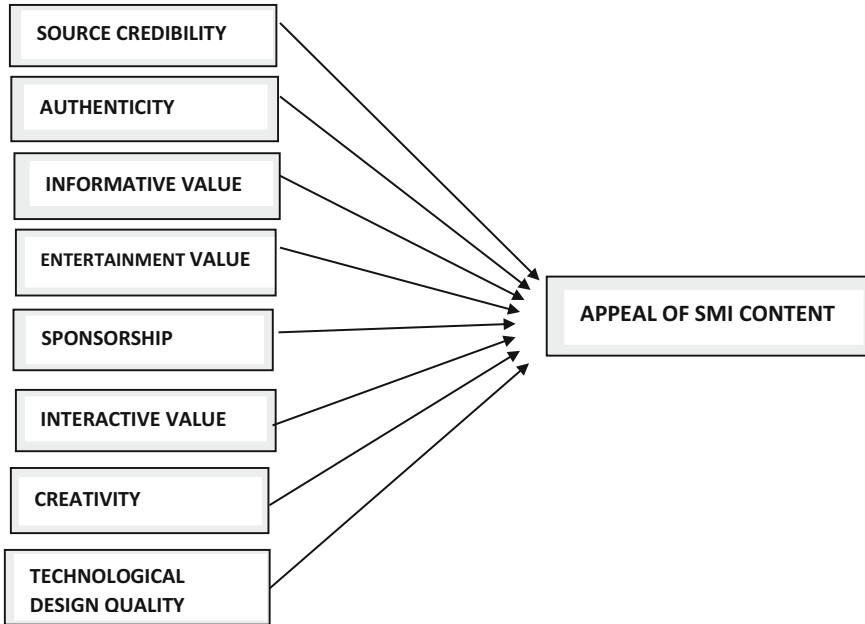
### **3.1 Factors Driving the Appeal of SMI Content**

#### **Source Credibility**

Source credibility refers to how deeply followers trust or believe in a particular source and information which is provided by a third party or influencer. It is the perceived quality of the content through which the audience distinguishes genuine information from fake content [43]. In case of SMI marketing, source credibility improves the effectiveness of a persuasive message. Past studies advocate four determinants of credibility of content namely; expertise, trustworthiness, similarity and attractiveness [25]. Trustworthiness is considered as the most significant construct of determining source credibility [48]. However, Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, [20] posit that SMI who delivers content exhibiting his/her expertise is perceived as a human brand by the followers. Whereas, posts which followers can relate to their lifestyles improve the engagement of the audience. Communication justice and credibility of the sources strengthen the relationship between influencer and followers to a large extent [49]. Thus, trustworthiness, similarity, expertise and attractiveness are the major dimension that ensure the credibility of the SMI content.

#### **Authenticity of Content**

According to Peterson [32], authenticity is a social concept that refers to "a claim made



**Fig. 1.** Factors affecting the Appeal of SMI Content. *Sources: Authors' Compilation*

by or on behalf of someone, or performance of something which can be either accepted or rejected by relevant individuals.” Intrinsic motivation and non-commercial orientation of influencer are appreciated by SMI followers. These days, brands are constantly approaching influencers to promote and recommend their products. When producing the sponsored content, authenticity works as an integral part in ethical framework. Ethics related to authenticity are based on two core principles: being true to yourself, and being true to your audience [46]. Authenticity also contributes a lot of benefits towards influencer competitiveness and presentation patterns. Authenticity of the celebrities and their content develop a favorable perception of audience regarding the brand and message [1, 28, 33], enhance the message receptivity [21] and shoot up the purchase intentions [30]. Literature proposes intrinsic motivation, factual presentation of opinion and disclosure of contractual terms as authenticity symbols [2]. Sharing the original photographs, messages and texts, unedited blogs, stories linking the brands with the influencer’s life, demonstration of emotions and feelings, sharing unbiased and honest judgement and expression of integrity are the essential characteristics that define the authenticity of the content.

### **Informative Value**

Informative value is related to presenting the reliable knowledge and information to the target audience in a clear and understandable manner. Influencer who constantly disseminates relevant information on the social media, positively attracts the attention of his/her followers [27]. Studies reveal that informative value of SMI content significantly affects the trust of the audience ultimately results in positive influence on the brand

awareness and purchase intention of followers [25, 44]. Thus, it is imperative for the content creators to provide valuable and user-friendly information to their followers. Influencer providing the facts about origin of the products, experience of influencer and ancillary information related to products etc. catalyzes the process of influencing the audience decision [23, 44]. [23] accentuate that informative content, when provided in the combination of persuasive attributes, enhances the engagement of the followers.

### **Entertainment Value**

Based on the usage and gratification theory, [27] propounds that entertainment is the principal factor which motivates the audience to follow the influencer. When influencer releases the content in an entertaining manner it attracts the attention of followers towards the content of opinion leader. Social consumer interaction, entertainment value and rewards are the main factors that control audience engagement behavior [8]. Entertainment value has a significant positive impact on the customer perception regarding the product [25] and the purchase intention of the followers [19]. Presenting the content with entertainment value improves the brand memorization and enhances the brand attitude and brand choice [2]. Different forms of SMI contents whether it is a live or short video, pictures or blogs should contain entertainment value in the form of stories, activities, thrilling, exciting and delightful elements. Thus, influencer should have the ability to embrace the entertainment values in his/her content.

### **Sponsorship Disclosure**

Federal Trade Commission (FTC) suggests that Influencers should display a clear sponsorship statement outlining their affiliation with a company or brand. However, consumers find it challenging to distinguish paid influencer postings from advertisement [11]. The disclosure of sponsored content affects the value of social media influencers contents. Sponsored content is usually considered unreliable by the audience. But studies revealed that indicating the sponsored advertisement can increase customer confidence in influencers [3] and effectiveness of SMI content [20]. However, sponsorship disclosure in influencer posts does not affect consumers' desire to make a purchase [29]. When sponsored brand is related to expertise field, audience believe in the influencer opinion and recommendation [19]. On the contrary, [25] find that influencer expertise does not necessarily develop audience trust in the sponsored content.

Sponsorship disclosure is an important factor of influencer marketing. It is essential to figure out how the audience perceives the sponsored content, because SMIs these days, are more and more common on social media platforms and approached by different brands [45]. The impact of various disclosure signals varies based on different type of SMI (celebrity or micro influencer) and the cultural background of a supporter in the paid recommendation [9]. Some products demand rejection of commercial interest (arisen from the sponsorship) and follow the intrinsic motivation and passion in the SMI content. So, recommendations and endorsement should be publicized considering the demand of product and audience in order to avoid any misleading among consumers, to ensure ethical concern, to curb deceiving practices and to gain the followers' trust.

### **Interactive Value**

A meaningful and interactive communication is needed for developing the audience

engagement in social media influencer content. Audience are the key element of influencer marketing in every aspect. The audience engagement gives positive motive to create more attractive and informative content. The influencer recognizes the feelings and emotions by the inter relation between the influencer and audience communication. Interaction with the audience not only improves the credibility of the content and influencer but it constructs the followers' opinion [48]. Interaction through live videos, quick response to the comments or direct messages of the followers engage the audience as well as strengthen the relation with them. According to [4] by improving the bonds of influencers with followers, and professionals in the advertising sector and other collaborative techniques broaden an influencer's ability to acquire celebrity status. Content credibility is improved by creating interactive content which boost the positive attitude of followers towards brand and the content [48].

### **Technological Design Quality**

Quality content is not limited to the beautification of the content or exhibition of designed infographics and posts which represents the aesthetics of an idea, a product, or company but it is about presenting what they want to know and offering that knowledge for free. While considering content of influencer marketing, the design is paramount important factor. Influencers content characteristics including technological design quality affect the online Consumer brand related activities (COBRAs) like consume, contribute and create [7]. Companies want to collaborate with influencers who provide well design content for audience [13]. The growth of multimedia technologies, comprising visual and entertainment improvements, as well as other modern technological and creative advancements, have tremendously increased human imagination and creativity [38]. Innovative uses of Internet technologies are made possible because of social media, which can be utilized by marketers and businesses for producing and disseminating value and appealing contents to acquire, and engage a precisely defined target audience in order to promote profitable consumer behavior [34].

Creative content is something that is novel, original and unique. In the context of SMI marketing, creativity offers entertainment value and the value that are useful for highlighting the distinctiveness of SMIs [5]. Creative content improves consumer intent to interact with the uploaded material by encouraging consumers to follow and engage with the posted information [6]. Creative ads increase motivation to process the information and attitude towards the ads [37]. Creativity in content is subject to perceived differently by different influencers based on the post and audience. When content is presented by the influencer in front of audience in an innovative form, it gains more popularity and audience engagement [8]. Another thing is that creative performance brings an element of excitement and entertainment among audience. Advertisement creativity is strongly associated with the effectiveness of advertisement [23]. [22] defines how mobile devices and rise in social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat have redefined creativity, revolutionized the way creative content is formatted and shared. Creativity (or the skill of creation) plays a crucial role in making meaningful and attractive communication. By the inserting fascinating images, short videos, GIFs and emojis in the posts, creativity in its own form can arguably replace pure text and monotonous content and provide more favored and representable material at our fingertips.



## 4 Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The study comprehensively provides theoretical explication about the attributes which may improve the appeal of social media influencer marketing. Number of factors in the form of recommendations are proposed that may be implemented by social media influencer to engage the audience and shape a positive attitude in their mind towards SMI content. Where the previous studies are mainly focused on the persona related attributes, this research revolves around the content affecting attributes. The study also serves as a base for future empirical research to be conducted in the domain of influencer marketing.

From the managerial prospective, this study proposes relevant recommendations. Firstly, the study reveals that credibility is essential attribute that determine the effectiveness of persuasive message. Four constructs deciding the credibility of content are presented. Brands, before selecting the influencer for endorsing the message, must ensure that provided content exhibits the trustworthiness and expertise of influencer. Influencer who are technologically savvy and updated should be picked as they can easily grab the attention of audience. Audience get more engaged and influenced by those influencers which provide content similar to their lifestyle. To endorse the brand, Influencer, who provides the content to which people can relate with, should be chosen. Managers should not assess the influencers only by quantitative aspects like number of likes, followers etc. but qualitative features like informativeness, entertaining and creative value of content should also be evaluated. Brands should provide appropriate freedom to the influencers to determine the content of endorsed message.

Next, some significant recommendations for influencer include: to ensure the credibility and authenticity of the content, influencer should refuse commercial opportunities if the contract does not fit his or her profile. To enhance the followers' trust and engagement in his or her post, influencer should include informative value, entertaining and interactive videos, creative and authentic content in the post. Informative value should be embraced without compromising the entertaining elements in the content. Uploading behind the scenes, quick response to the comments and DM, live video shoots and revealing the extended information about sponsored content can also help in augmenting the trust and engagement of followers. If these attributes are not considered by influencer while developing the content, there is a possibility that in near future audience will have a suspicious mindset towards his or her recommendation.

## 5 Conclusion

The study attempts to conceptualize the factors driving the content of social media influencer marketing. This study explains eight essential factors namely credibility, authenticity, informative value, entertainment value, sponsorship, interactive value, technology & design, and creativity which should be ensured by the content creators while determining the SMI content. Ultimately, these kinds of factors will enhance the audience's trust and reliability towards the content and thus influence their decisions. This study is of foremost importance from the marketing perspective as SMI marketing, these days, has become an effective promotional and branding strategy.

The scope of the future study lies in empirically testing the impact of these factors on the reliability of influencer marketing content. Further, different factors have varying

roles in the content determination of SMI marketing based on the social media platform chosen, so a comparative study of two or more social media platforms can be conducted to determine how the role of one factor is changing in determining the content of SMI marketing when the social media platform changes.

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