

Influentiality of Social Media Influencers on Purchase Intension of Consumers: A Regional Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Businesses are starting to use social media influencers (SMIs) as a new way to persuade their target audience to buy something. This is because consumer stratification is growing quickly. Social media's pervasiveness, as well as its broad reach and frequency, have made it a thriving advertising strategy, outperforming more traditional forms of advertising. In this study, the researchers focus on divulging the need to employ social media influencers in marketing services and their impact on consumers. The research attempts to trace the effectiveness of social media influencing in comparison to traditional forms of advertising and to promulgate the pros and cons of the emerging advertising strategy through social media influencers. The researchers' findings were based on a mixed method of research that included quantitative and qualitative data collected through surveys and interviews. The researchers discovered that despite influencers have a strong influence on consumer purchasing decisions, the new advertising trend through Social Media Influencers is on the rise in Kashmir Valley. However, the overall findings reveal that influencer marketing holds the upper hand in the market when it comes to influencing target groups effectively.

Keywords: Advertising Strategy; Social Media; Social Media Influencers; Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WoM)

INTRODUCTION

Advertising is an integral part of integrated marketing communication, as are public relations and direct sales. Business firms have many choices about where and how to advertise, and each medium has its benefits and drawbacks (Barbara Bean-Mellinger, 2019). There are different types of mediums for advertisements, like print, radio, and television ads, known as "traditional media", and the current era is using social media advertising to better target and reach consumers. Shanton (1984) writes, "*Advertising is associated with an audio or visual form of promoting communication that simply upholds impersonal messages to provide, service, or convey people's attention on the construct, awareness, needs, and organization exposure.*" Due to the rapid development of digital technology in recent times, social media has emerged as a crucial online tool that significantly impacts various aspects of our lives, particularly marketers. This impact is further amplified by the rise of communication firms and a novel advertising method known as electronic word of mouth (E-wom). E-wom

involves interactive information exchange between enterprises and consumers, introducing new platforms for comprehensive marketing and offering distinct advantages (Yan, Wu, Zhuo, Zhang 2018). Internet marketing, being an online business activity, gradually evolved from portal advertising and search advertising to online electronic word of mouth after the widespread popularity of the Internet (Hu & Kim, 2018).

Dichter (1966) introduced the concept of "word of mouth" (WOM), highlighting its role in justifying past purchases or aiding future decisions. The rise of the internet and social media has given rise to electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) (Silverman, 2011). In influencer marketing, e-WOM plays a crucial role as it relies on the online dissemination of information to other users (Yusuf et al., 2018). e-WOM is defined as "any positive or negative statement about a product or company shared by potential, current, or former customers, accessible to a wide audience through the internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004: 39). While consumers previously relied on WOM from friends and family, social media provides access to approximately 3.196 billion users for sourcing reviews and opinions (Kemp, 2018).

Social media has expedited an unparalleled development in human association in contemporary times. In particular, it has changed consumers' way of thinking (Mir and Zaheer, 2012). Attracted by the rapid penetration of social media into society, companies dynamically use it as part of their advertising and brand-building activities (Gallaughier and Ransbotham, 2010; Georgios and Sergios, 2014). Companies have the opportunity to move with relationships with customers from dialogue to trialogue, in which customers partake in noteworthy relationships with one another and with the companies (Lipsman et al., 2012; Mangold and Faulds, 2009). The rapid growth of social media gave birth to social media influencers, who are currently one of the major advertising tools.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER (SMI)

An influencer is an individual with an active mind and influential activities in networks and surroundings (Keller & Berry, 2003). Social media influencers are individuals who have built a significant following on social media platforms and video streaming platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, through their content and engagement with their audience. According to Brown & Hayes (2008), Influencer is a third party who significantly shapes the customer's purchasing decision. They are typically characterized by their expertise, creativity, relatability, and authenticity, which resonate with their followers and allow them to influence their opinions, behaviour, and purchasing decisions.

The term influencer marketing is explained as marketing activities that are aimed at identifying and building a relationship with those individuals who can influence potential buyers (Wong, 2014). In retrospect, parallel with the development of the Internet of Things, the marketing processes have been significantly facilitated and improved (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Here appeared the room for influencers to reposition, i.e., to define their role in the newly formed influencer marketing field (Kadekova, & Holienčinová, 2018; Ranga & Sharma, 2014). The role and functionality of social media influencers are diverse, ranging from entertainment, persuasion, and inspiration to shaping the buying preferences of their followers.

Influencer marketing began to contribute to the companies in realizing business goals like: (i) increasing brand awareness, (ii) reaching new audiences and potential customers, (iii) generating sales, (iv) bringing products closer to the audience, and (v) affect the masses by opinion-making (Baker, 2019). The growing rate of influencers has divided them into categories which are based on their following on social media. According to (Liu, Jiang, Lin, Ding, Duan, and Xu, 2015), there are four types of influencers: Mega influencers (superstars with more than a million subscribers), Macro influencers (between 100,000 and 1 million

followers), Micro-influencers (between 1,000 to 100,000 followers) & Nano influencers (with fewer than 1,000 followers). According to De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017), mega influencers do not benefit all brands because celebrities do not influence every human behaviour, whereas Khamis, Ang, & Welling (2017) say nano influencers will make too little impact because they don't have enough followers, but they would be best for narrow or specific niches.

Cortland, M. (2017) did research in 11 European countries and found that 2 out of 5 users use software to block ads. This is why influencer marketing is so important for reaching these customers. Influencers' public endorsement brings about increased confidence in the brand; although it is paid for by the brand, it comes under the earned media category (Dahlen, Lange & Rosengren, 2017). According to a recent research study, influencer marketing gives an 11 (eleven) times higher Return on Investment (ROI) compared to that of a traditional form of online marketing (Nielsen Catalina Solutions, 2016).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INFLUENCER MARKETING STRATEGIES: *TWO-STEP FLOW THEORY & PARASOCIAL THEORY*

The birth of the current term "influencer" can be traced back to the two-step model of communication by Elihu Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) in their seminal work titled "Personal Influence." The theory proposes that knowledge is received by the public in two steps—so-called opinion leaders who digest the information flow from the media and then translate these messages for the public (Windahl et al., 2009). Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) discuss the concept of opinion leadership by claiming that it is "not a trait which some people have and others do not, but rather that opinion leadership is an integral part of the give-and-take of everyday personal relationships." In today's digital world, the influencers are the ones who have the power of influence. Thus, it depends on an influencer how well the person can communicate the message. Because of the presumed expertise of opinion leaders, their influence is stronger than direct messages and shapes preferences and behaviours more effectively (Carr, Hayse, 2014).

Parasocial Interaction (PSI), a term coined by Horton and Wohl (1956), is an apparent face-to-face interaction between media users and their audiences that creates an illusion of intimacy and a real relationship. The feeling of a parasocial interaction (PSI) is when a person "feels that they know and understand the persona in the same intimate way that they know and understand flesh-and-blood friends" (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Due to this, social media influencers are similar to celebrities, which makes the relationship illusory, as originally put forward (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). On the basis of PSI, the term "Parasocial Relationship" (PSR) emerged as a more accurate description of the dynamic." As a result, social media influencers are often compared to celebrities, despite the fact that such a connection is largely imaginary (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). PSR refers to the "socioemotional bond" (Horton & Wohl, 1956) between a media persona and the audience, or in this case, a fan and an opinion leader.

AN OVERVIEW OF STUDIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER STRATEGIES

The researchers found some useful studies on social media influencer marketing strategies and related areas to assess social media influencer research development. To deepen their study of social media influencers, the researchers identified certain themes after reviewing these studies and categorized them under these themes for the sake of understanding:

THE EMERGENCE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING

According to Petersen (2017), "social media" gave rise to bloggers, vloggers, celebrities, and Instagrammers, all of whom are "influencers" used by corporations to spread information on their platforms. Childers, Lemon, and Hoy (2018) found that influencer marketing has changed how people think about advertising agencies over time. So, advertising agencies need to change their strategies because people in the new world want to hear about a product or service through electronic word of mouth and online reviews. Vidan and Das (2021) revealed that social media gave birth to influencer marketing, which is 11 times more effective than traditional advertising due to the increased number of internet users.

Jayasinghe (2021) talked about social media and influencer marketing strategies by looking at how they are used today. Kadekova and Moliechinova (2018) said that influencer marketing is a modern phenomenon that is opening up a new frontier of online opportunities. The research found that trust in electronic word-of-mouth like recommendations from friends, relatives, acquaintances, and influencers has more impact than any other type of advertising. Lal and Sharma (2021), in their study on social media influencers for online purchase behaviour in Delhi NCR, highlight the influential characteristics of social media for online purchase decisions recommended by influencers in which the involvement of youth is higher. It also assesses the role of social media influencers in brand consciousness to purchase decisions. Khan and Phung (2021) discussed social media influencers and their impact on consumer behaviour, as well as the workings of advertising agencies and their transition to social media, where influencers play a critical role in persuading consumers to buy. Vierman, Hudders, and Nelson (2019) said that the new marketing strategy, called "influencer marketing," is a new way to advertise to children. They put influencers into groups like "macro-influencers," "micro-influencers," etc.

IMPACT OF INFLUENCERS ON MARKETING

Woods (2016) considers influencer marketing with a lot of potential and expects it to be successful and growing in popularity. Dan (2018), while doing a study on the impact of social media influencer marketing on consumers in Ho Chi Minh City, found that traditional tactics are no longer effective and consumers tend to be affected through their own networks. The statistics given by Nielson in 2015 also support the fact that consumers trust recommendations from other people on social media other than advertising firms. The emergence of social media has changed the buying and selling process because nowadays one can share their views about a product or service on their own social media account, which gives them a chance to become an influencer, and marketers found an opportunity to enter the digital world with the electronic word of mouth, says Negi and Pabalkar (2020). Pederson and Larsen (2021) discovered that influencer marketing had a greater impact on consumer purchasing decisions than traditional advertising. As Yuan & Lou (2010) say, the relationship emerging between influencer and follower is called a "parasocial relationship," and also shows that credibility and the parasocial relationship affect the buying decision through influencer marketing. On the other hand, Gupta (2021) argues that influencer marketing's sway over consumer behaviour has grown during the pandemic.

Vyathina (2019) found that the impact of influencer marketing on the global economy is due to the impact of internet users with more followers. As a result, marketers are using different influencers to get their message to consumers instead of direct advertising. Wielki (2020) indicated that influencer marketing is growing at a rapid pace, luring the advertising industry to invest more in this emerging medium of advertising. Dewobroto (2020) stated that the influence of social media influencers also impacts the consumer's buying intention for local personal products, however, one needs to choose the right influencer to promote a

product because the wrong one leads to losing money. There are three dimensions that shape an influencer's credibility: attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise, which eventually create purchase intention in consumers say Jun & Yi (2020). Abdula, Dcarmau, et al. (2020) added how social media influencers impact Instagram users' buying decisions, especially towards fashion products, in connection with the "Ohanian model" (1991), which claims that social media influencers have five positive associations with Instagram users, i.e., familiarity, trustworthiness, likability, similarity, and expertise, all of which affect the consumer's buying decision. Haenlein, Anadol, et al. (2020) found that the manoeuvring era of influencer marketing shows that Instagram and TikTok are more important for influencer marketing than Facebook, Twitter or YouTube firms. This is because Facebook and Twitter users tend to be in their 40s, while Instagram and TikTok users tend to be in their 30s and 20s. So they suggest that it is better and more important to use these social media sites for influencer marketing.

FOCUS AREA: RESEARCH GAP

While delving into the realm of influencer marketing and its impact on marketing strategies through reviewing the literature, it becomes conspicuous that influencers & and their associated marketing strategies hold significant prominence in the contemporary marketing landscape. This condition not only challenges the traditional marketing approaches but also shapes consumer behaviour. However, the reviewed literature circumvents the importance of influencer marketing strategies in the regional context. Therefore, the researchers in the present study will attempt to explore the role and impact of influencers in the regional marketing scenario involving local brands. The researchers tried to attempt the influencer marketing influence from the regional perspective to study the relevance of such strategies in the local context.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To study the role of social media influencers in buying decisions among social media consumers in the Kashmir valley.
- To study the modus operandi of advertisers for using/employing social media influencers.
- To study the pros and cons of using social media influencers over other means of advertising.
- To study the influence of Mega, Micro, Macro, and Nano influencers among the local population.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Are people aware of social media influencers in Kashmir, and how these influencers are helping them in their buying decisions (if at all)?
- Does an influencer's marketing content appeal to users and make them want to check a brand to buy a product?
- Have consumers ever purchased a product or wanted to purchase a product that was promoted by an influencer?
- How effective are these social media influencers individually and in comparison, to earlier or traditional modes of advertising?

METHOD

In order to meet the objectives of the study, the researcher employed a mixed method of research, having both qualitative and quantitative data collected through interviews and surveys. Local business owners who market their products through social media influencers were interviewed to understand their reasons for employing social media influencers over other forms of advertising. The researcher used a non-probability sampling technique in which purposive and convenient sampling methods were adopted to select samples for the interviews. The researchers selected four local brands from a preliminary study, on youth, in order to learn the prominence, popularity and goodwill of brands in Srinagar city. Moreover, the researchers conducted an in-person interview using a structured questionnaire.

In the second phase, the researchers conducted a survey on the local population to understand their usage of social media and their perspective of social media influencers. The researchers used convenient and snowball sampling methods from the non-probability sampling technique to choose the sample. In view of the limited time and budget, the sample size was kept to 100 respondents. The respondents from both rural and urban areas were taken into consideration for the survey in order to have a true representative sample of the population under study. The questionnaire consisted of "close-end questions" and questions based on Likert scales using 3- and 5-point scales. Data was collected from respondents, analyzed with Excel formulas, and then presented in the form of graphs and charts.

DISCUSSION

DATA ANALYSIS

QUALITATIVE DATA: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The researcher conducted in-person interviews to collect information about the use of social media influencers from the advertisers' perspective. A detailed interview was conducted with the owners of these brands with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire. The brands chosen for conducting the interviews are as under:

1. Kashur Lehlav
2. Paristaan
3. Saira Trumboo
4. Palwi Duniya.

For the sake of convenience during the interpretation, the researchers gave a code to each brand or owner as follows:

- 'Kashur Lehlav' as KL
- 'Paristaan' as PN
- 'Saira Trumboo' as ST
- 'Palwi Duniya' as PD

Based on relevance and thematic underpinnings, the responses of the interviewers were categorized into various sub-themes and inferences were made using a deductive approach.

TREND OF INFLUENCER INDUCTION

Social media has become a ubiquitous medium for consumers to purchase products online. To ensure frequent traffic on their social media pages, businesses employ social media influencers to promote their products to the masses. According to KL, "No one has time to

visit stores, and everyone wants to buy online products." This highlights the convenience factor that social media provides to consumers, making it crucial for businesses to employ social media influencers for product promotion.

The popularity and fan following of social media influencers make them an attractive choice for businesses. As PN says, "Because social media influencers have a great fan following on their pages, it is better to employ them for advertisement." The use of influencers can also help businesses reach a wider audience on social media, as noted by ST, "The reach and frequency of social media are quite good, and I usually get 10K to 20K likes within 24 hours." According to PD, "Millennials spend more time on social media, it has become a crying need for a business to employ social media influencers to attract the attention of the target audience."

Due to the busy lifestyle of people, social media seems to have become an important medium for consumers to buy products online. Factors like the choice of products, availability, and hassle-free purchase options, ensure frequent traffic towards social media pages. All these factors compel business houses to use social media to promote their products and also attract consumers. Here, social media influencers become an imperative choice for businesses to employ them for their huge fan following, reach and also popularity. The fact that millennials also spend good time on social media becomes a reason for businesses to use social media influencers and pages to attract target consumers.

INFLUENTIALITY OF INFLUENCERS

The researchers aimed to discern the impact of social media on influencing consumers' buying habits. The responses from four interviewees indicate that there is a positive correlation between influencer marketing and increased sales. KL asserts that social media influencers provide access to a wider audience than traditional advertising methods. "So, by hiring just one influencer for the promotion of a product, it proliferates the responses on our social media accounts and results in a boost of sales." PN agrees that the impact of influencers on consumer behaviour is tangible and has resulted in a substantial increase in sales. However, the interviewee did not provide any specific data to support their claim. ST posits that the influence of social media influencers with a large following is undeniable. "Obviously, the influencers with a large fan base leave an indelible impact because the followers are tempted to try the product or service promoted by their ideals." PD echoes the comments of the previous interviewees, stating that influencer marketing has led to increased sales and a growing social media following.

The responses from the interviewees lead to the conclusion that social media influencers have the tendency to create an impact on consumers which may increase the sale of products. However, the measurement of such impact could not be ascertained by the researchers as no data could be retrieved. As per the responses, it seems that this new way of advertising is overpowering the traditional methods of advertising but the extent could not be ascertained by the researcher. Also, it seems evident that the fan following of the influencer may have a direct correlation with the impact he/she creates in the market.

PRIMACY

In contemporary times, social media influencers (SMIs) have become a widely accepted and popular method of digital marketing. In this regard, the researchers sought to divulge the pros and cons of social media influence from proprietors who actively employ influencers to promote their products.

According to KL, "Sometimes the influencer would promote the competitor's product, which creates confusion for the audience, and they are baffled as to where to go and what to

buy." PN highlights the accessibility and frequency of SMIs as a major advantage. However, the interviewee does not see any significant disadvantages associated with using SMIs.

In contrast, ST points out that while social media influence has advantages, such as helping to keep track of social media activity, it can also lead to a royalty issue when rivals copy a product and offer it at a lower cost. The interviewee argues, "The disadvantage is that rivals can copy your piece of product and will provide it at low cost to consumers, which sometimes creates a royalty issue." However, PD acknowledges the advantage of gaining a vast fan base and increased brand awareness through SMIs, however, the interviewee states, "Sometimes consumers have different perspectives on influencers, which leads to a negative impact on consumers."

The 'positives' of using social media influencers are outweighing the 'negatives'. While almost all the interviewees have found social media influencers useful for businesses, there are a few instances when social media influencers may sound confusing especially when the same influencer is promoting products of business rivals. Issues related to royalty demand by the influencer may also arise, but that is completely a legal matter, and many may not encounter much. Otherwise, the responses from the interviewees have given a positive notion of using social media influencers, especially their fan base. However, the image of the social media influencers may matter a lot particularly how the audience sees the influencer either in a negative perspective or positive. The audiences' perspective about the influencers may have a huge impact on the consumers' decision-making.

INTENDING EFFECTUALITY

In recent times, social media influencers have gained significant attention as a means of promoting products. To investigate the effectiveness of social media influence in contrast to other means of promotion, the interviewees were asked corresponding questions to which KL stated, "Till now, I can say that social media influencers are the most effective way for promoting a product as we are reaping huge benefits from them." PN argues that social media influencers are a cost-effective solution for product promotion, stating, "It is quite pocket-friendly and is the only way which has a major effect for promoting a product." ST adds that social media influencers are particularly effective for local brands trying to establish themselves in the market, "I feel that it is the best and most effective way for promotion, especially for local brands, to create their fame in the market." According to PD, social media influencers are effective in increasing reach and frequency, making them a superior method of promotion compared to other advertising mediums.

In contrast to the traditional means of advertising, social media influencers were found quite effective by the businesses because of the cost-effectiveness factor, reach, frequency and also more significant for the promotion of local brands to create their fame in the market. In the era of digital marketing, promotion through social media may attract more customers because of its reach, availability and cost-effectiveness, however, the influence and reach of the traditional media platforms cannot be altogether overruled because still, a major chunk of the population is using traditional media for their entertainment and information purpose. However, due to some limiting factors, such estimations are beyond the scope of this study or researcher.

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

The analysis of the interviews with local brand owners reflects that influencer marketing is becoming a general covalent approach to advertising, as nowadays both local and national/international brands are using this new approach to target consumers. The technique of using social media influencers is boosting local businesses tremendously, and it is

becoming an effective marketing strategy for advertisers. Also, it is a pocket-friendly strategy for local brands to create their names in the market and make them more accessible to consumers. Due to the huge fan base of influencers, it seems that the strategy has helped brands multiply their customer base every day. The new things come with both advantages and disadvantages, but as per the interviewees, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages as it helps to track the activity of social media pages to know about the consumer's opinion about their products or services through likes, dislikes, and comments. As a result, social media is a more interactive and effective tool than traditional forms of advertising. Therefore, based on the opinions of these industry experts, it may be concluded that social media influencers appear to be a highly effective means of promoting products due to their cost-effectiveness, ability to increase reach and frequency, and potential to establish local brands.

QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

The researchers analysed the quantitative data collected through a survey of the respondents in order to ascertain and establish the perspective of consumers about the effectiveness of employing social media influencers.

Respondents' Demographics Details

Table 1. Gender

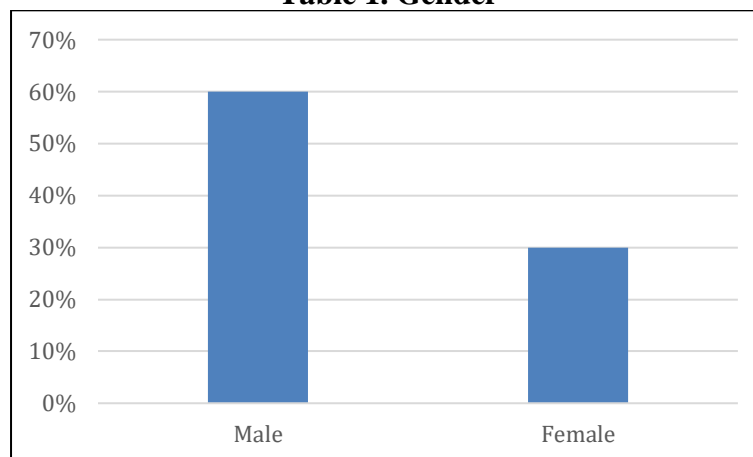


Table 2. Age of Respondents

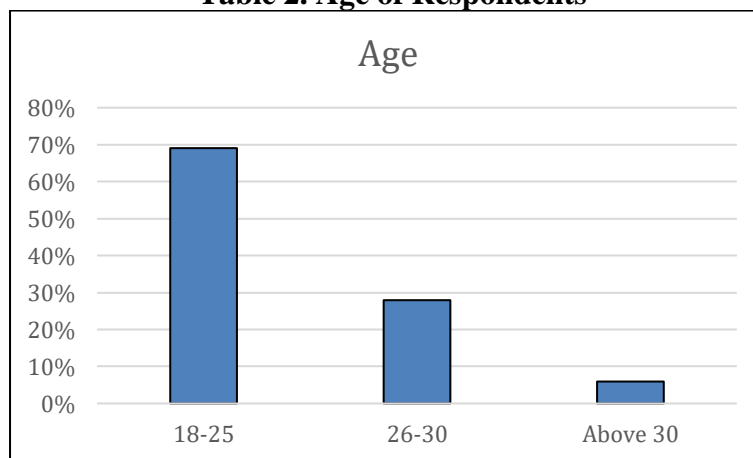


Table 3. Educational Qualification

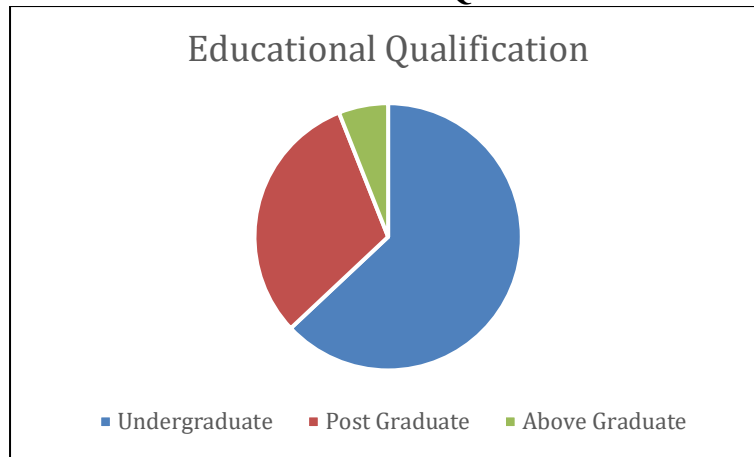
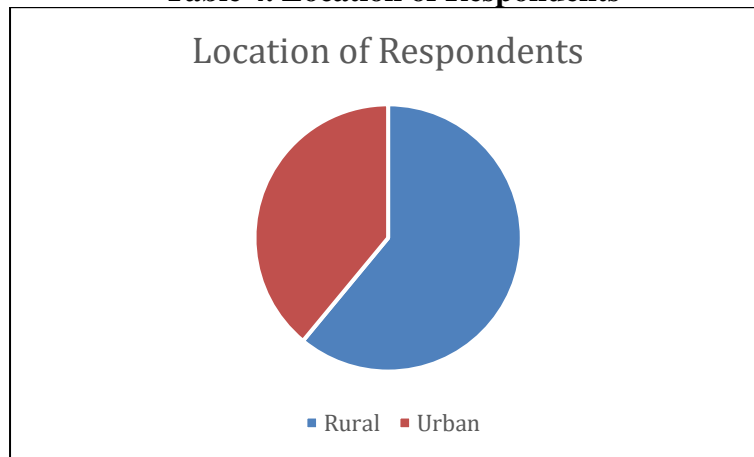


Table 4. Location of Respondents



To avoid monopoly and to record pluralistic responses, questions about topography were divided into rural and urban categories. Due to its high internet penetration level, accessibility, and exposure, the urban section of society topped this category with 61%. In comparison, the respondents from rural areas comprised 39%.

Table 5. Number of respondents searching about the product before buying it online

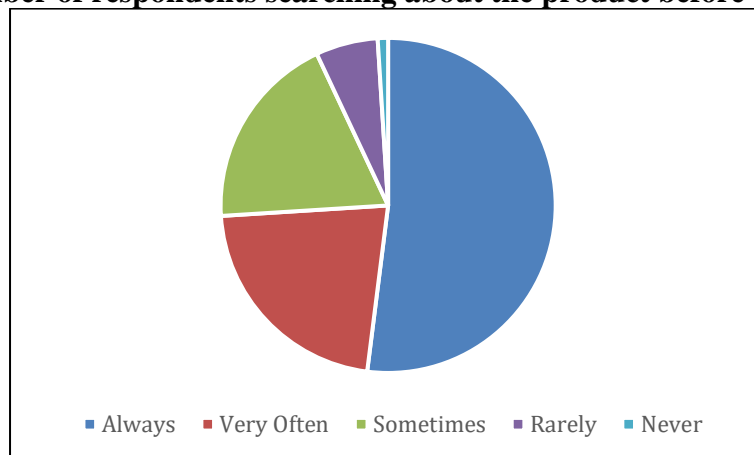
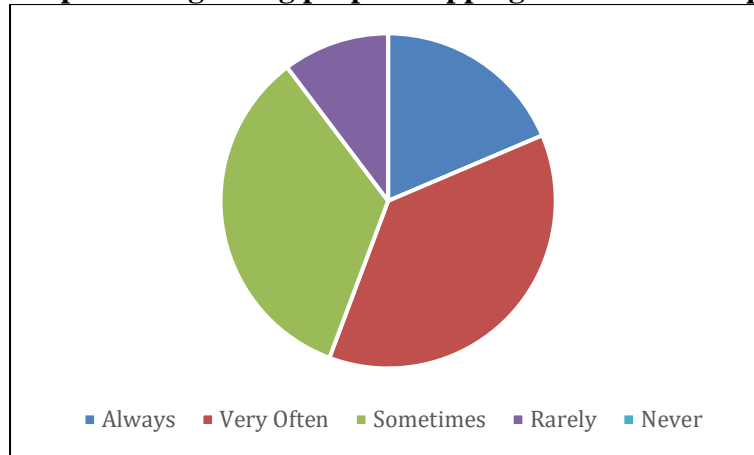


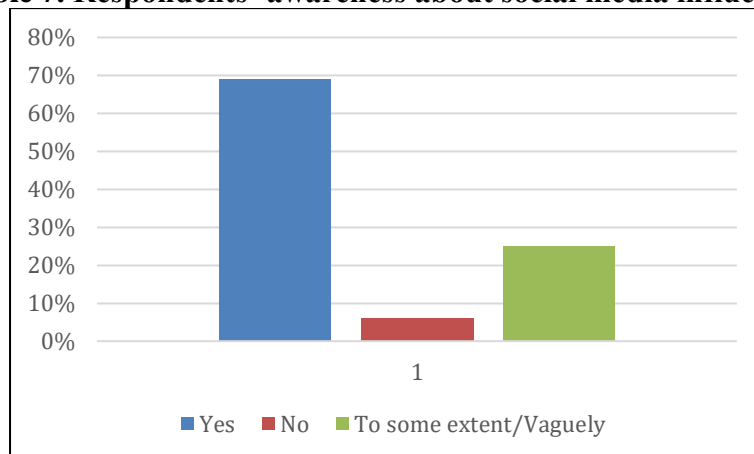
Table 6. Responses regarding people shopping from online shopping sites



As per the data available, 52% of respondents 'always' prefer to search for the product before buying it, whereas 22% "very often," and 19% said that they "sometimes" would search for the product before buying it. In contrast to it, 6% of respondents "rarely" do so and only 1% of the respondents have never searched for the product online. This implies that the majority of social media users would search for products online before making a purchase decision. As far as shopping online is concerned, among the total number of respondents who make online purchases, 18.6% said they "always" shop online, whereas 37.1% do it "very often", and 34% said they "sometimes" shop from online shopping sites. While only 10.3 per cent of respondents rarely shop online, no one has ever shopped on an online shopping site.

From the above data, it can be understood that people nowadays search for products online to see their availability, pricing and features before making a buying decision. It seems the trend is towards searching online for information about the products as the combined responses are towards a positive side of it. Also, as evident from the above data, a lot of people do shop from online sites and again the combined percentage of the responses is more towards the positive side of it. However, the researcher could not ascertain the frequency of online shopping of each respondent per day or in a particular period.

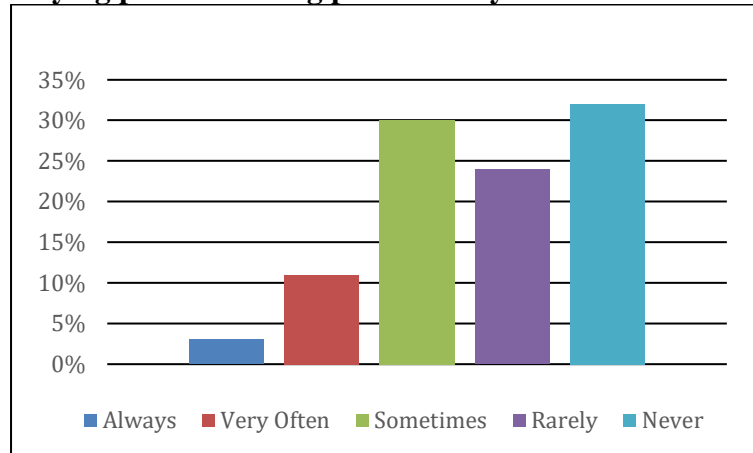
Table 7. Respondents' awareness about social media influencers



People are aware of social media influencers as 69% of respondents said that they are aware of SMIs. Besides, 25% of respondents have an understanding about them. Only 6% of the respondents are unaware of the existence of social media influencers or their marketing. From the above data, it could be concluded that people are aware about the influencers and

influencer marketing concepts, maybe because of the fact that influencer marketing is expanding due to the involvement of local influencers who are promoting local brands.

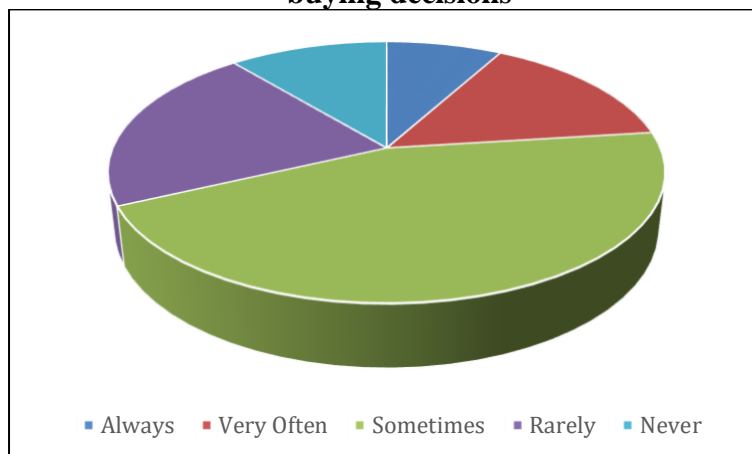
Table 8. Trying products being promoted by the social media influencer



From the above data, the combined percentage responses towards the positive and negative side of the statement seem somewhat similar. Out of the total respondents, 3% said they 'always' try products promoted by SMI whereas, 11% and 30% do it 'very often' and 'sometimes' respectively. If we look at the combined positive responses which is 44% ($03+11+30=44$) have positively responded to it. However, 24% and 32% of respondents have done it 'rarely' or have 'never' tried any product promoted by social media influencers.

This leads us to the fact that social media influencer marketing strategies are making their way into consumer buying behaviour. Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation theory seems to hold true as innovations take some time to be adopted by the people. SMI strategy is like an emerging concept in marketing strategy and it may take some time more for the people to accept this completely.

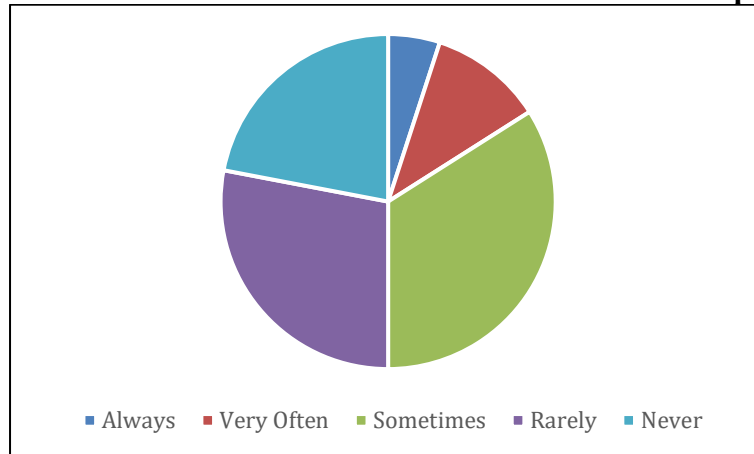
Table 9. Whether Influencers used by shopping sites are helping people in making buying decisions



From the above responses regarding whether influencers are helpful for people making buying decisions, 8% of the respondents believe that influencer recommendations are "always" helpful, whereas 15% believe they are "very often" and 45% believe they are "sometimes" helpful in making purchasing decisions. The remaining 21% and 11% of respondents said that the recommendations were 'rarely' and 'never' useful, respectively.

Due to emerging social media influence marketing strategies, businesses are adopting this strategy to influence people. People seem to rely on the information provided by social media influencers about the product/s. The way social media influencers talk about the product/s, will depend on how people would find it useful or not. From the above data, the trend is towards the positive side of it as according to the combined responses (68%) people are finding the information given by the social media influencers as useful or helpful.

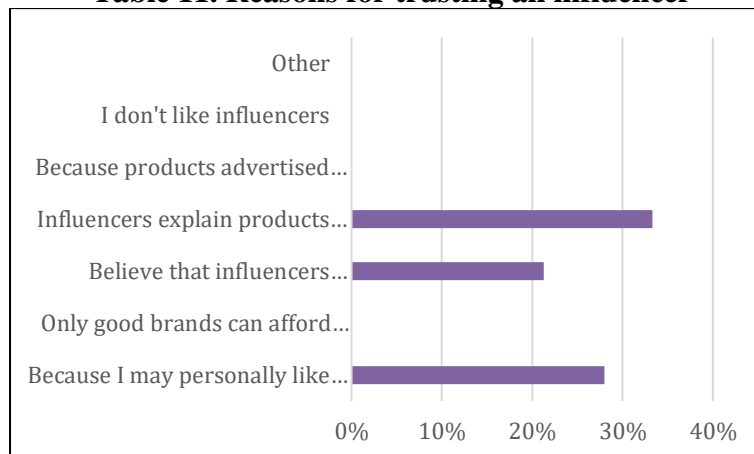
Table 10. Consumers trust an influencer's recommendation about a product or service



From the above data, 5% of the respondents said they 'always' trust the recommendation of influencers while 11% and 34% of respondents said they 'very often' and 'sometimes' respectively' trust influencers' recommendations about a product or service. However, 28% of the respondents 'rarely' trusted them, and 22% categorically said that they 'never' trusted influencers' recommendations about a product or service.

The above data gives us the reflection that whether trusting or not trusting an influencer may have many reasons. Still, we can conclude that people are responding their trust in social media influencers however the magnitude of trust cannot be ascertained.

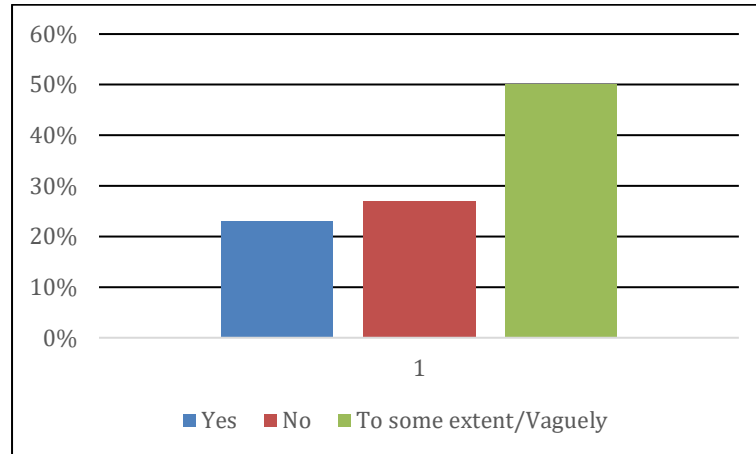
Table 11. Reasons for trusting an influencer



There can be a number of reasons as to why people may trust an influencer, however, researchers from a pilot study could find some important reasons for trusting an influencer. According to the above data, 34% of respondents are of the opinion that influencers explain the product/s in detail whereas 23% of the respondents think that personal liking for an influencer could be another reason. Around 23% of respondents believe that an influencer

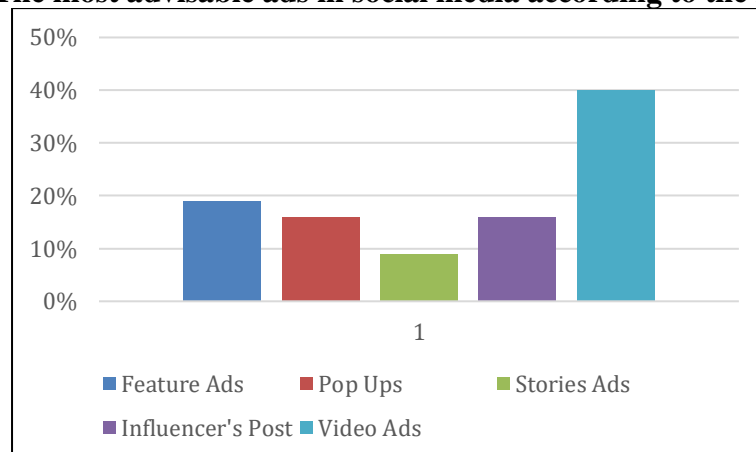
would recommend good products and others are of the opinion that products advertised by influencers are visible on social media platforms or feel that only good brands can afford to hire an influencer. There could be some other reasons as well like the popularity of an influencer, his/her credibility among people etc. Overall, it seems that the combined factors would be more pivotal in determining whether to trust an influencer or not.

Table 12. Influencers of national/international brands are more trustworthy than local brand influencers



From the above data, it seems immaterial whether the influencer is of national/international repute or local. Almost half of the respondents don't see much difference, however, their inclination may be more towards the influencers of national or international repute but it's still not clear. Against the above, 23% of the respondents are of the opinion that influencers of national/international repute are more trustworthy than the influencers of local brands whereas 27% think the contrary. Therefore, it can be inferred that the majority of consumers have a neutral stance towards the influencers' trustworthiness, irrespective of whether they belong to national or international or local levels. The reason could be that consumers treat influencers like any other advertising and promotional tool or strategy used by corporations.

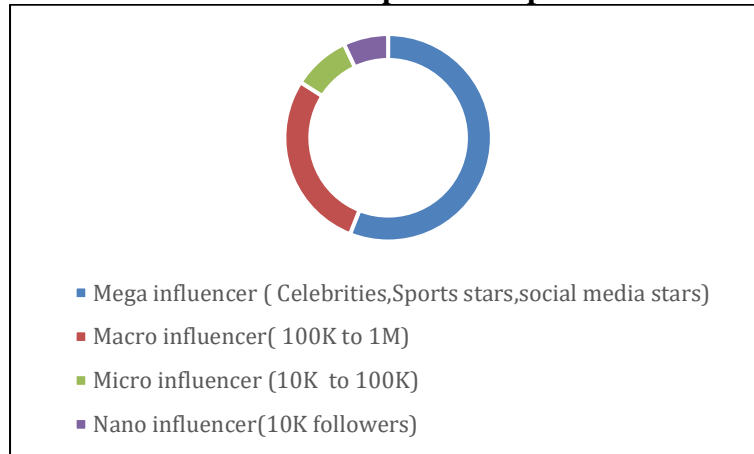
Table 13. The most advisable ads in social media according to the respondents.



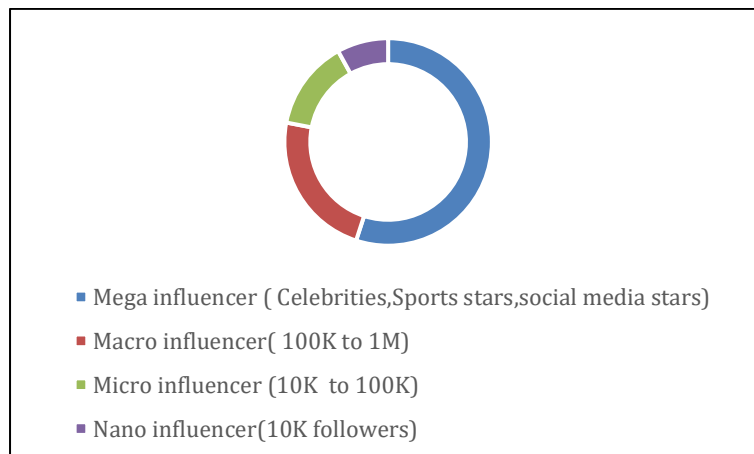
Social media have added another set or categories of advertisements as against the traditional pattern of advertising on radio, television or newspaper. Being multimedia in nature, social media can provide a platform to host a number of such ads either in video, audio, text format or mix or multimedia. The researchers tried to understand the popular category of social media ads in order to see how people respond to the different content on social media. Out of

the total respondents contacted during the survey, 40% are of the opinion that Video ads are the most advisable way of promotion among social media ads whereas 19% think feature ads are the most suitable ads. The remaining 16% of respondents gave their opinion in favour of influencer posts as ads. This shows that compared to other types of ads on social media, influencers' posts catch the least attention of consumers.

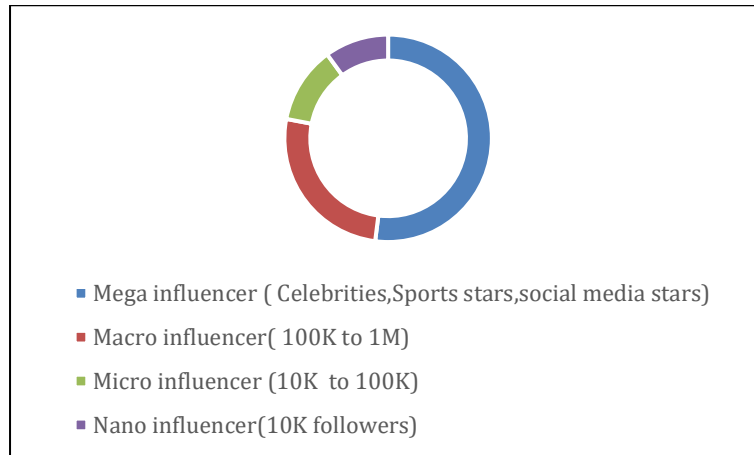
Table 14. The most sought-after influencer in terms of style, credibility, and trustworthiness as per the respondents.



The majority of respondents look for influencers (Celebrities, Sports stars, Social media stars) as the most sought-after while making a buying decision, followed by 28% Macro-influencers (100K to 1M followers), and the least number of respondents would prefer Micro-influencers (10K to 100K followers) and nano (10K followers).



Out of all responses, 55% of respondents believe Mega influencers (Celebrities, Sports stars, Social media stars) are the ones who according to them seem more genuine in every aspect of lifestyle, 23% believe macro-influencers (10K to 100K followers) while as 14% of the respondents believe in Macro influencers (100K to 1M followers) and only 8% said Nano influencers (10K followers) seem genuine.



According to 52 per cent of 100 respondents, mega influencers (celebrities, sports stars, and social media stars) are the most trustworthy, while 26% believe macro-influencers (with 100K to 1M followers) are more trustworthy than other types of influencers.

It is evident from the above three tables 7.2.14,15 and 7.2.16 that the more prominent an influencer is, the more he/she would have an impact on the consumer in terms of style, trustworthiness, and genuineness. This could change the way people buy things after being influenced by the influencer.

MAJOR FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

Social media is an integral part of today's advertising world, in which marketers also find new ways to target consumers. Social media has opened up new ways of promoting and advertising, which helps consumers make their buying decisions. The emergence of social media influencers is one way that social media helps advertisers reach their target audience. Social media influencers have opened up a new way to reach and persuade people, but it may take a while longer for this new idea to spread to everyone and have a big effect on buying decisions. The survey results also show that social media influencers are in their early stages in the Kashmir region, where the majority of people are aware of them, but their impact on changing consumers' purchasing decisions is limited. There could be many reasons why the impact of social media influencers on consumers is little, and one such reason could be the unpopular faces employed as social media influencers by local brands. Furthermore, the associations and partnerships of social media influencers, as well as the content created by them to influence people, play a significant role in creating an impact on consumers. It was found that the use of celebrities like film stars, sports stars, etc. could make an impact on audiences due to people's trust in them because of their credibility, trustworthiness, and style statements. However, the future assessment statement showed that advertising through social media influencers could be the best way to advertise and that social media influencers could be the future of the advertising industry.

CONCLUSION

Influencer marketing is now one of the most popular ways for advertisers who make real content and connect with a highly relevant audience to get their message out. Influencers could be seen as current-day opinion leaders, provided they have a large follower base. In a

way similar to what Katz and Lazarsfeld showed in their two-step model, both an influencer and an opinion leader get their power from the people who choose to be persuaded by the messages they send. This creates a bond between an influencer and the followers, termed a Parasocial Relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956). From the available literature, one could find how content creators rose to fame and became influencers during the pandemic. It became the new trend on social media and benefited plenty of companies that needed a way to continue business during a rather dormant period. However, the researchers got a mixed response as far as influencers in regional market scenarios/perspectives are concerned. While most respondents including businesses thought that using influencers was a good idea, but the results on the ground were not as good as could have been expected at the beginning of the research. Although the majority of the participants seem aware of influencer marketing and, the future assessment statements also reveal that it can have a significant impact on consumers; however, the impact on the ground at present is not seen much in the regional market sphere of Kashmir. A lot of consumers who are also avid social media users agree on account of being exposed to influencer marketing content every day and hence becoming an indirect target of various advertisements all over social media, which has, in turn, resulted in either a purchase or a thought for purchase in the future. From the advertisers' perspective, social media influencers have significantly impacted sales by leveraging their reach and endorsements to target consumers. This form of marketing has not only resulted in many consumers becoming regular buyers of the products marketed through influencer marketing but it has also been considered the most effective marketing strategy to capture the hearts and minds of consumers. These consumers may intend to continue purchasing products endorsed by influencers if the recommendations meet their needs and the influencers are deemed more trustworthy and genuine in their style statements.

To conclude, it would be appropriate to say that influencer marketing, in general, holds deep ground in consumers' purchase decisions and makes them aware of many brands, products, and options, and therefore, holds an upper hand in the market when it comes to influencing target groups, however, this strategy of employing SMI is in its emerging stage in the markets of Kashmir and needs more focus from the advertisers. This strategy could be very successful and keep growing if more money is put into it to work with well-known people like celebrities and social media influencers with a large following.

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