

Chapter 1

Smart Technology For Addressing Pandemic Disruption: Impact of Social Media Influencers on Brand Awareness During the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Social media's emergence as a communication platform for consumers to interact with or about brands has significantly altered brand-consumer relationships. Companies are increasingly investing in influencer marketing, or hiring digital influencers to endorse their brands, as social media marketing becomes more advantageous. Influencers are changing the way brands create content, as well as how users consume and share it. The role of social media influencers in raising brand awareness, particularly during extraordinary times such as pandemics, is still in its early stages. Despite technological advancements and an increase in the number of online influencers, many challenges remain for businesses to connect with consumers during pandemics. The impact of social media influencers on brand awareness during a global pandemic is discussed in this chapter.

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INTRODUCTION

As a growing number of consumers shop online, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant growth for internet-based businesses (Abidin, C. 2015). The global e-commerce market is expected to grow by 27.6 percent to \$4.28 trillion USD by 2020 (Al-Debei 2013). In recent years, organisations have been subjected to the introduction of digital technologies, which have transformed organisations, interactions with consumers, and value creation (Aral S et al., 2014). Online shopping has made it easier for consumers to compare products, and they can easily select the products that best meet their needs (Awad et al.,). Young consumers have largely shifted to online shopping, influencing how businesses must operate because young consumers are more likely to shop through social media (Bailey et al.,). At the same time, the global pandemic has shed light on the power of so-called social media influencers (SMIs), also known as “micro-celebrities.” Influencers have been identified as an effective and strategic marketing channel for products and ideas (Klassen et al., 2018). In 2019, it was predicted that by 2022, brands would spend \$15 billion on influencer engagement globally. (Schomer, 2019)

As countries around the world went into lockdown, businesses cut back on operations, and marketing budgets were drastically cut, some observers predicted that the social media influencer industry would be ‘killed off’ (see e.g. Hamdan, 2020; Tsapovsky, 2020). COVID-19 appeared to have signalled the end of influencer marketing as we know it, as the emphasis shifted from economic prosperity and personal gratification to public health and, to a lesser extent, environmental protection. However, as the world adjusted to life in the midst of a pandemic, it became clear that many commercially driven influencers would thrive, implying that because people are hungry for online content, influencers have become even more important as a channel for the marketing of ideas and products (Stephens, 2020). According to statistics, social media use has skyrocketed during the lockdown, with engagement increasing by 61 percent over normal usage rates in a survey of 30 markets (Holmes, 2020). While some influencers have clearly struggled to adapt to changing market conditions and rapidly shrinking commercial opportunities (Elliott, 2020), others have capitalised on public confusion and disorientation to increase their power, reach, and, ultimately, post-COVID marketability and market share (Ewens, 2020).

With the vast majority of the world’s people staying at home, social media platforms have evolved into a communication channel to remain in touch with friends and family, as well as for interaction with brands (Dias et al., 2020). Brands have chosen social media to remain relevant during this time. Social media was also used to raise brand awareness and to assist the consumers in coping by providing positive messaging in order to overcome the current difficulties (Dias et al., 2020). In order to adapt, many brands have had to change their marketing and communication

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