

WITH GREAT 'INFLUENCE' COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

On the age of social media influencers and their 'not so responsible' commentary

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The influence of social media does not stop just there with the “you need this useless product”, it is far reaching, so much so, that I have had friends and relatives come up to me and tell me if only I ate “clean” or smiled more often, I

founder of a start-up (which is doing quite well and serves a brilliant purpose) asking his followers whether they are frustrated, upset or 'forever depressed'? All of this, asked with a dazzling million-dollar smile plastered on his face. And if you have answered 'yes' to one or more of the above questions, then fear not, your favorite 'brother' on the internet has some truly riveting tips for you. The influencer goes on to suggest you should try one good deed a day, help out a friend in need without wanting anything in return and voila! You shall be cured. Forget serotonin or the massive amounts of money you have spent on therapy when you have such advice at your disposal.

The thought behind the video may have been innocent—naïve in my opinion—and possibly came from a positive place, but the message comes without any real value, I am afraid.

Clinical depression, generalised anxiety disorder or any other form of mental health illness cannot be cured by 'one good deed a day' and this irresponsible use of one's popularity belittles the real struggles of many who actually live with these illnesses. It takes years of therapy, medication and a real effort to manage mental health problems. Social media influencers just waltzing in with their messages of positivity to simply increase a few likes and their need to talk about a relevant topic simply ridicules and infantilises the struggles of hundreds who suffer from various mental health problems. It is understandable, when someone is at a high standing on a social platform, they feel the need to talk about current topics but is there no accountability to this process?

In a country, where the field of mental-health illness and subsequent support is still constrained and the stigma associated with it, is still so widespread, such ignorant commentary will simply add to the harm. There is the risk of people simply assuming that mental health problems can so easily be resolved without any professional intervention.

When someone makes money off of a social media platform and has hundreds of followers and impressionable young adults looking up to them, I feel it becomes their responsibility to truly educate themselves because they do hold the power to influence. A truly great orator can topple dynasties and I am afraid too many of social media's 'great orators' will simply bombard the impressionable and young with faulty messages.

Social media has also given birth to a whole band of critics, many being sought out by restaurants and clothing brands, and going on to give their seal of approval or disapproval. Many brands reach out to social media influencers for meeting their marketing quotas.

Unlike upfront celebrity endorsements, an influencer posting on social media about a product or service has a veneer of authenticity. With their candid and personal takes, as well as their ability to build and cultivate close engagement, digital influencers have become celebrities in their own right.

According to a study 'Credibility of a peer endorser and advertising effectiveness', the credibility of a peer endorser depends on the factors of trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and similarity.

'Trustworthiness' could be attributed to their number of followers and 'similarity' to a host of other factors. I am going to leave out attractiveness from the equation here, merely because I do not know what the determining factors are.

The question then is, how does a school or university going or a young adult blogger/vlogger/ social media influencer who is on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter or Tumblr have the expertise to comment on the effectiveness of an under-eye cream, critique or endorse the menu put together after years of work put in by a trained chef or give advice on balanced diets?

The other question is how transparent are these endorsements? The non-disclosure of a sponsored post is problematic because the audience is not made aware of the fact that money changed hands.

Social media influencers can also be used as agents of politics. When the product being marketed is a politician or a political message and there is an undisclosed exchange of money, the game completely changes.

Apart from its impact in helping shape public discourse, the use of digital influencers will also have tangible effects on how politicians run their campaigns and campaign spending.

Yes, social media influencers can change the discourse, for better or for worse, and the future of communication as we know it but their influence comes at a cost. They need to shoulder the responsibility of sharing messages with a grain of truth in them at the very least. After all, how can we ever forget the proverb taught in primary school: A little learning is a dangerous thing?



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

My mother very recently jumped onto the internet bandwagon, it is awfully late I know, but our collective distaste for anything new is to blame for this. But late, as she may be, she is not immune to the charm and buzz that is social media. Very recently, she told me she most definitely needs an egg slicer, because someone on the internet convinced her that this is a 'must-have' tool in the kitchen.

would find that I do not need to see a therapist anymore, but would find that my 'depression' has been magically cured by cumulative good deeds or a nutritious diet.

The internet has given birth to a new kind of celeb-dom: social media influencers, start-ups, motivational speakers and the internet superstars.

Some have, in a very novel way, chosen to play video games on the internet and successfully (read shockingly) rake in money, some have launched their start-up careers, some have shot to super-stardom by some 'super' comedy whilst some have just taken their motivational speeches online.

While it is one thing to serve the masses and inadvertently, themselves, with the very versatile medium of social media, it comes with a great responsibility too.

Very recently I have come across videos by a social media influencer and