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Idolizing False Influencers: - Understanding The Impact Of Toxic Media Influencing On Indian Society

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ABSTRACT

In this new era, there is a high rise of 'Influencers', their main job on the internet is influencing people regarding their lifestyle, clothing, beauty, healthcare, or even which products to consume on the market. Whether it's about promoting toxic masculinity or encouraging teenage marriages, the media has it all. Over the process of influencing, people who watch them religiously tend to follow all that their influencers do, and not all of those habits are healthy for the viewers. India, a country with a population of over 143 crore people, has a boom in media which has its own set of pros and cons. Media is an extremely powerful tool that either sets or breaks people's opinions on particular subjects. Now, it's up to the people on which type of content they want to consume and why.

The problem here isn't that people are following them and have started to act like them, the problem occurs when they show content which is unrealistic but they need to upload it to gain viewers further leading to money, creating a fake lifestyle in a viewer's mind and destroying the rational mindset of our countries' population as the trend of media influencing is on extremely high demand. Here, while not just talking about social media, print media, and television media also produce controversial content after a point. Then if it's about creating bias content regarding a particular religion or normalizing gender roles in the society or even shaping an individuals' political views, people are informally absorbing these ideologies in their daily life and reflecting them in their surroundings.

This paper is divided into three sections, Section one elaborates on the impact on viewers' mindset. Second section discusses the influence on viewer' opinions and the final section focuses on the impact on the future generation. The paper focuses on the negative and toxic side of media influencing through all the forms of societal aspects and how it has an impact on today's population, with the help of primary and secondary data.

Keywords: Toxic, Influencer, Population, Indian society, Media, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Today social media apps are on high demand with endless consumers. According to a study done by The Indian Express, 'approximately 452 million people use social media on a daily basis'. An individual can use social media for various reasons, some can use it for their daily communication while some people's profession is related to social media. In the end it's up to the consumer of social media apps that for what purpose they use these apps. Apps like Instagram, YouTube, X [formerly Twitter], and Snapchat has been on trend in recent years. These apps allow you to upload your pictures or videos on the particular account you have with these apps. The high craze of social media for creating videos or content started with a very famous app called 'Musical.ly.' It was a Chinese app which was introduced in the year 2014. In this app, people could make and upload short videos related to a trending dance, create a new type of skit content or make funny videos. Very quickly it gained extreme popularity in India. In August 2018, TikTok acquired Musical.ly.

After this app was banned in India on June 29, 2020, many other founders tried to get the same features into their apps to grab the plethora of users left behind by TikTok. While being on these social media platforms, few people gained popularity and also had a huge number of followings. These famous people used to set dance trends, comedy skits, beauty videos, or anything random that was catchy for the viewers eyes. Many people also started to recreate and follow things, the famous people on this app did. 'Influencer' was the term given to the famous people on social media platforms. According to Cambridge dictionary the term 'influencer' refers to 'someone who affects or changes the way that other people behave.'

Further, many other apps with features like Musical.ly came up and gained popularity. The type of content shown on these apps varied a lot as they grew. It included categories like beauty, comedy, art, lifestyle, fashion, animals, music, vlogs, cooking, travel, business, education, economics, politics, and many more. India had a huge audience for each and every type of content category that existed. The audience of social media influencers, after watching their creators grow, start to believe most of what the creators have to say, and do not have a rational or neutral point of view. These social media influencers hold a huge power over their audience and have the ability to actually influence them and their actions. Not all influencers are toxic and influence people negatively, but there are some who might cause problems to society and societal ideologies.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To understand the concept of toxic social media.
- To explore nature, causes, and disadvantages of social media and how it can impact today's generation.
- To discuss how social media content can impact the beliefs of the audience.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is social media, how it becomes toxic/negative, and how it has an influence on audience?
- Understanding the rise of cringe content, the need to make such type of content, and what morals it has.
- Understanding the rise of dark comedy and how normalising can affect the society/ or is it affecting the society.
- Understanding Patriarchal thoughts through toxic influencing.

- Understanding the rise of Unrealistic Teen Romance.
- How all of it has an impact on the audience and influence the thoughts process of youth/ what impact it can have on the audience.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In today's world, social media has a huge impact on its audience. How? Through the help of classical conditioning. Classical conditioning is when interaction between two variables leads to creation of another variable. This is when an individual slowly gets into a habit of following a particular pattern. Like, how a child learns manners by observing their surrounding and starts to incorporate them in their daily life till their adulthood. Similarly, when an individual is on social media and is scrolling through these apps, the subconscious mind adapts the pattern of going through those apps over and over again further building into a habit, which can lead to doomscrolling or social media addiction.

An article presented by 'Times of India' says that, social media has a significant influence on the audience and the type of content they consume. Many other articles also found out same facts regarding social media influencers. They have unrealistic portrayal of beauty and lifestyle. These influencers while making videos are not aware of the what type of audience they are making content for and how it will further affect them. While being on these platforms, the younger audience tend to forget reality and are totally engaged in the content even if it's not interesting or useful to them. Why is that? After a point they become habitual of watching those few influencers who make them forget about self-perception. According to a study done by 'Network Conference', online personas are creating unrealistic standards. While watching a video online we might not be aware of the influencers' financial or personal situation. They might portray themselves as having a lavish lifestyle but at the end no one will be able to identify if it's actually true. People may portray a different image or character of themselves online but their real life may be totally different. According to a study done by 'CNBC', they found out studios where people can fake their lifestyle by doing a photoshoot of themselves living a rich lifestyle and posting it online, but in reality, they themselves are struggling. There are influencers online with huge number of followers, but majority of their followers are fake because they buy fake followers. A recent article by 'Hindustan Times' found out about a lavish UK couple who faked their lifestyle by stealing customers' credit/debit cards from their lockers at the gym.

Another important point mentioned by a study done by 'Medium', talks about how social media algorithm works. For instance, if we watched a particular influencer's video, there are high possibilities that we will get more video recommendation of that same influencer, this applies to each and every influencer we watch. So, even if we think that we control our social media platforms, in reality, we don't because social media platforms are meant to set our algorithms. According to another study done by 'Medium', social media influencers get paid collaborations to promote a particular product. There is no such harm in doing paid collaborations but there should be some reality and practicality into what type of products an influencer genuinely likes, and we cannot have a hold on it as we don't know at this point what is actually real. Majority of it is just a marketing gimmick which profits both the influencer and the product maker, but if the product is not worth it, then it's the viewers who suffer. These were just the problems that social media apps were causing, further in this paper we will discuss about how influencers become toxic which can create major social problems.

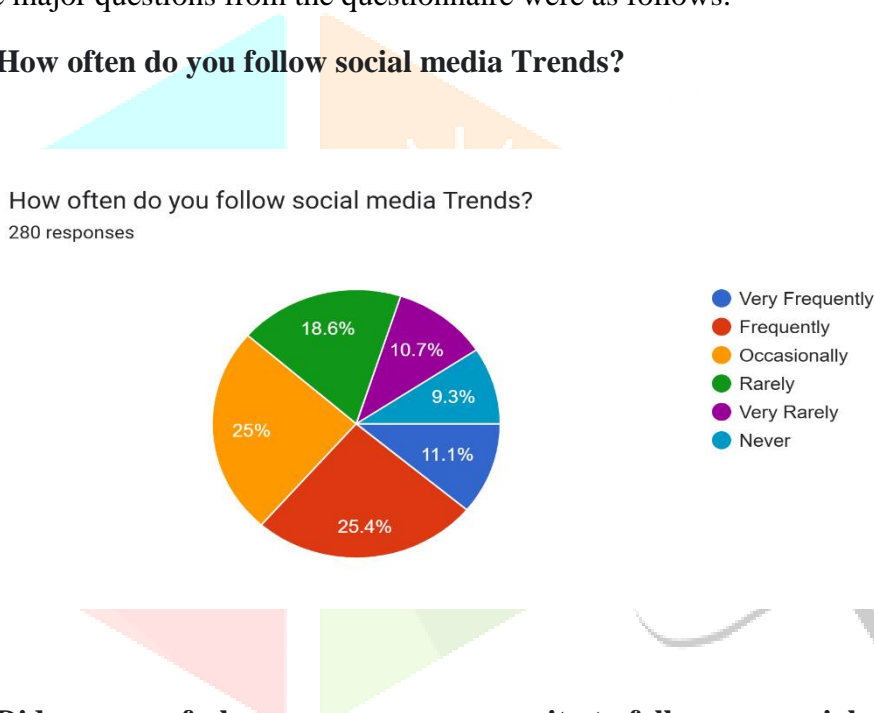
METHODOLOGY

Social media is used by majority of our youth today. To understand how they think about different types of influencers on social media a questionnaire was conducted in KES’ Shroff College of Arts and Commerce. The main purpose of this questionnaire was, to understand the opinion or perspectives of the audience with respect to the content of the social media influencers. This questionnaire has a series of question starting with the general information of the participant, then asking them if they use social media, if they think it has an effect on their choices and lastly asking them to watch a few given videos of selected influencers and asking for their opinion on how they feel about this type of content. The questionnaire received a total of 280 responses and later this whole data was analysed to understand the above hypotheses. For the secondary data, we went through articles, research papers, journals, and websites for our data collection.

FINDINGS

The major questions from the questionnaire were as follows: -

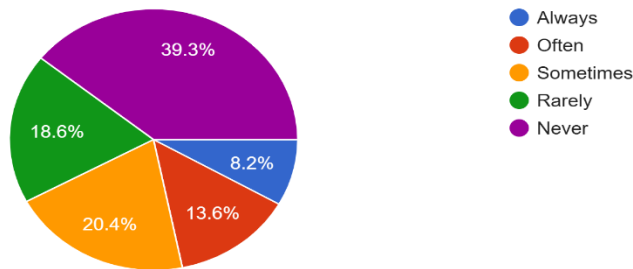
- **How often do you follow social media Trends?**



- **Did you ever feel any pressure or necessity to follow any social media trends or ideology by the people around you who are influenced by such trends and ideologies. Ex. (the chill guy trend, Sigma male trend etc.)**

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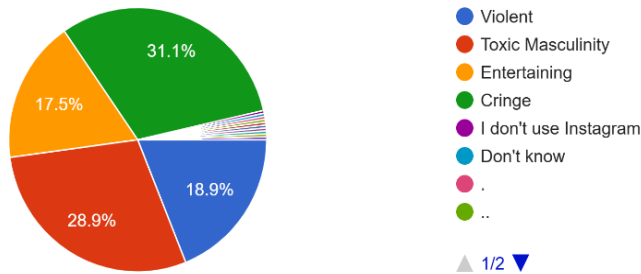
280 responses



- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CH2k6T1BP3Q/?igsh=ejhicDcyMDNvNnoz>
 The above content is of influencer Elvish Yadav. After watching this content, which of the below option would you choose to describe your opinion.

https://www.instagram.com/reel/CH2k6T1BP3Q/?igsh=ejhicDcyMDNvNnoz The above content is of influencer Elvish Yadav. After watching this conten... option would you choose to describe your opinion.

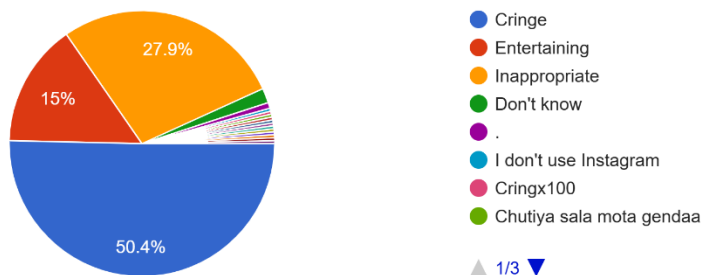
280 responses



- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCounsXtISb/?igsh=MW1rMXcwNXpkMnBsbA==>
 The above content is of influencer Austin Stanly. After watching this content, which of the below option would you choose to describe your opinion.

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCounsXtISb/?igsh=MW1rMXcwNXpkMnBsbA== The above content is of influencer Austin Stanly. After watch... option would you choose to describe your opinion.

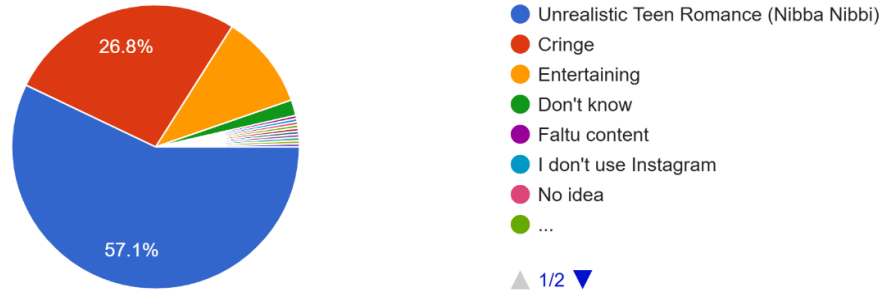
280 responses



- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DALdK4DvepF/?igsh=bmU1czB5OWlwbHdw>

The above content is of influencer Saifeena Kureshi. After watching this content, which of the below option would you choose to describe your opinion.

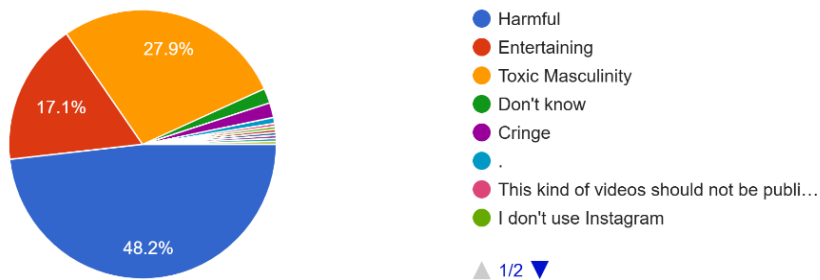
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DALdK4DvepF/?igsh=bmU1czB5OWlwbHdw> The above content is of influencer Saifeena Kureshi. After watching this... option would you choose to describe your opinion.
280 responses



- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7WfwA1vtEM/?igsh=MWJlbGVzMDhwYjM1ZQ==>

The above content is of influencer Ilyas Khiladi. After watching this content, which of the below option would you choose to describe your opinion.

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7WfwA1vtEM/?igsh=MWJlbGVzMDhwYjM1ZQ==> The above content is of influencer Ilyas Khiladi. After watchi...w option would you choose to describe your opinion.
280 responses

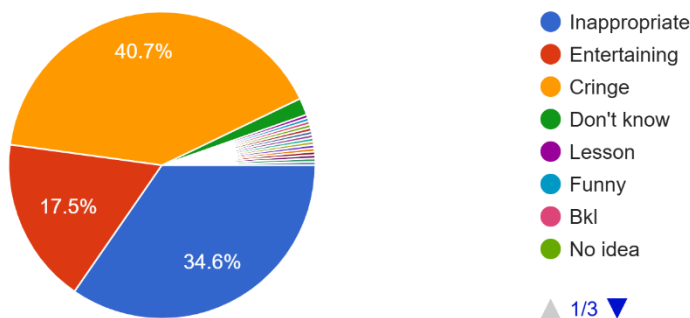


- https://youtube.com/shorts/ELGX2sUVBMw?si=Fb_JbY4u0gD0aGuX

The above content is of influencer Kajal Pandey. After watching this content, which of the below option would you choose to describe your opinion.

https://youtube.com/shorts/ELGX2sUVBMw?si=Fb_JbY4u0gD0aGuX The above content is of influencer Kajal Pandey. After watching this conte... option would you choose to describe your opinion.

280 responses



- https://youtube.com/shorts/-2UXLcG78VE?si=sb95iscxub0_0Zmn
The above content is of influencer and comedian Samay Raina. After watching this content, which of the below option would you choose to describe your opinion.

https://youtube.com/shorts/-2UXLcG78VE?si=sb95iscxub0_0Zmn The above content is of influencer and comedian Samay Raina. After watchi...ption would you choose to describe your opinion.

280 responses



DISCUSSION

According to Cambridge Dictionary, ‘cringe content’ means showing something embarrassing or bad. From the above data, the audience might not actually ask for cringe content but it does get a lot of views and followers, promoting them into making more such videos. In an interview of ‘Puneet Superstar’ conducted by ‘Misfit Human’ channel on YouTube, Puneet mentioned that he used to make rational and appropriate videos but those videos never got views hence he started making cringe videos which received significantly more views than his regular videos. Because if we view cringe content, they don't have any morals to it but can lead and provoke the audience into irrational behavior. The above videos in the finding contains videos about influencer Elvish Yadav, Saifeena Kureshi, Austin Stanley, Ilyas Khalidi, Kajal Panday and Samay Raina. In the recent times, these influencers are grown to be problematic on social media, majority of their content has no positive value to them but they have a huge following.

Hence following them can be the reasons why these cringe influencers can have a false and negative impact on the audience.

In many videos of Ilyas Khiladi he shows himself doing aggressive workout with a gas cylinder which portrays 'Toxic Masculinity.' The idea of hitting a cylinder to one's chest and accepting and portraying it as a 'manly' workout is dangerous for anyone who tires it. According to Cambridge dictionary, 'toxic masculinity' means men who behave in a way which makes them look harmful. Majority of men in our country are conditioned in a traditional way of thinking which includes, men to be the provider and protector of their family, they need to have a good physical stamina, needs to be muscular, should never cry and should always be strong. Accepting and following these stereotypes just because the society wants men to be in a certain way is almost like taking away an individual's identity. How men want to be is their own decision. Encouraging and placing unrealistic pressure on them is harmful as the future generation will also watch and grow in the same way. When asked about how they feel about this type of content, 48.2% of audience found it harmful while 27.9% audience found it as Toxic Masculinity.

According to UNICEF's report of 2020, 'At least 1.5 million girls under the age of 18 get married in India every year.' The main reason that these child marriages take place in India even after having strict laws against them is illiteracy, patriarchy, and lack of empowerment of women in some sections of our society. The population in some areas has absorbed the idea of child marriage to the point that they don't think that it's a problem anymore. Child marriage is a tradition that has been passed on to today's population from generation to generation. Even today, the family of kids who are unable to pass grade 10th or 12th gets those kids married within their neighborhood. After marriage some of these kids have become social media influencers who make daily life vlogs, reels, and shorts on social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube. They have a huge fanbase, and young teens as their audiences. Teenage marriages shouldn't be portrayed on social media for youth, as it can influence them to get married to their childhood romantic crush in their teens, leave their education, and start their family at the age of 16. There has been a significant increase in teenage couples on social media platforms and it is emerging as a popular trend where more and more people are joining. Influencer 'Riddhi Sehwa' and 'Saifeena Kureshi' are one of the growing teen romance content influencers. The problem occurs when, young teens are getting married and starting a family in their teenage, where they have no educational qualification to provide for their family and on the other hand, they are also normalizing child marriage which promotes a patriarchal mindset within young teens, also promoting gender roles. When asked the audience about how do they feel about this type of content, 51.7% audience found it as 'Unrealistic teen romance' while 26.8% of the audience found it to be cringe.

'Kajal Pandey' and 'Sejal Ex' are recently rising influencer with a huge number of followings. The type of content they produce is cringe and dark. When asked the audience about how they feel about their content, 40.7% of the audience found it to be cringe and 34.6% of them felt that it's inappropriate. According to Cambridge Dictionary, 'black humor or dark humor' means looking humorously at serious or unpleasant situations. This can include joking about gender issues, rape, violence, aggression, domestic violence, murder, vulgarity, sexual assault and many such similar serious issues. The above influencers also share the same type of content creation. Normalizing this type of content which jokes about serious issues can be problematic to the society. If people start to joke about this, none of the above problems will be taken as a serious issue and will never be solved. Even if the audience isn't supporting or asking for this type of content, dark content is still being produced, which is controversial within itself.

CONCLUSION

All social media platforms are extremely varied and have a lot of different types of content. It is up to the individual regarding which type of content they want to follow and engage with. While certain types of influencers are influential in a good way which helps an individual grow positively, other types of influencers can have a negative impact on the audience. Through this research we were able to understand a genre of cringe influencers and how the morals of their videos can be problematic for the society. While being on the internet and following/promoting cringe, inappropriate, violent or toxic masculine content, one also needs to be actively aware of what type of learning this content is providing to the today's generation. Not because any type of content on social media platforms is always harmful but one should know the difference between right and wrong. From this research, we were also able to understand that majority of today's generation has been engrossed in irrational content and normalized it, while also wanting to demand and promote the same. There has been a significant rise in all types of cringe content creators because the audience is promoting them. An influencer becomes toxic when they try to normalize and routinize violence, child marriage, dark comedy, aggression, promote patriarchy or any other type of serious societal issue, knowingly or unknowingly. It is also an influencer's responsibility to be aware of how their content can affect people and should make content accordingly. The audience should be vocal about toxic or negative content, if they are not, more and more such content creators will emerge, further normalizing more irrational morals.

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