



FLEISHMANHILLARD

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INDIA INFLUENCER INTELLIGENCE REPORT

2021

An intelligence report developed by FleishmanHillard India, analyzing shifts in influencer marketing and identifying upcoming trends through primary research conducted with over 500 influencers across India, in partnership with Eleve Media.



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500 INDIAN INFLUENCERS
and industry marcomm leaders
weigh in on influencer marketing
shifts in India in 2021.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The pandemic year has fueled trends and undercurrents that were already underway in the world of marketing and communications. One of the most prominent trends to emerge has been the growing importance of influencer engagement. What was once labeled as an additional leg to a brand's campaign to push engagement on social media (a good to-do) is today driving the communication strategy for many brands (a must-do). Many have observed that the pandemic has only accelerated the growth of influencer marketing. During peak lockdown, users stuck at home turned to cooking, gardening and DIY videos online to increase their own engagement with various social media channels. So, as the pandemic pushed more people to stay indoors and behind their screens, influencers became the sole "opinion makers" who brought brands into consumers' consideration at a time when demand was stagnant. In other words, influencer marketing grew in the mix of communications and in its share of marketing spends.



With this newfound relevance, influencer marketing as a marketing method also persuaded industry self-regulatory organization Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) to take notice of the changing dynamics on social media platforms in India. ASCI then announced the release of its social media advertising guidelines. This is the first-ever formal attribution of influencer marketing "growing up" and looking to take its place at the marketing table through transparency and authenticity.

Given this landmark move, FleishmanHillard India developed the India Influencer Intelligence Report 2021, where we analyzed the shifts in influencer marketing and identified upcoming trends through primary research with over 500 influencers across India, in partnership with Eleve Media.

The India Influencer Intelligence Report 2021 explores the critical role of brand-influencer relationships, key strategies for both marketers and influencers, content shifts, emerging trends, and foreseeable challenges as the ASCI guidelines are put into play. The India Influencer Intelligence Report 2021 is not only based on survey responses from a mix of nano, micro, macro and mega influencers but also includes excerpts of our in-depth conversations with India's leading brand marketers, who shared their take on the next big trends in influencer marketing as an authentic and effective marketing tool. The report explores content creation, creative liberty, sponsored content attributions, experiences on brand collaborations and much more.

With this report, FleishmanHillard India identified five trends that break through the walls of ambiguity in influencer marketing stemming from the key pillars of **Connect, Creativity, Content, Caliber and Contest**. These are meant to guide brands, marketers and influencers to come together and connect with customer needs in a more meaningful way — in this new world that is missing human connection.

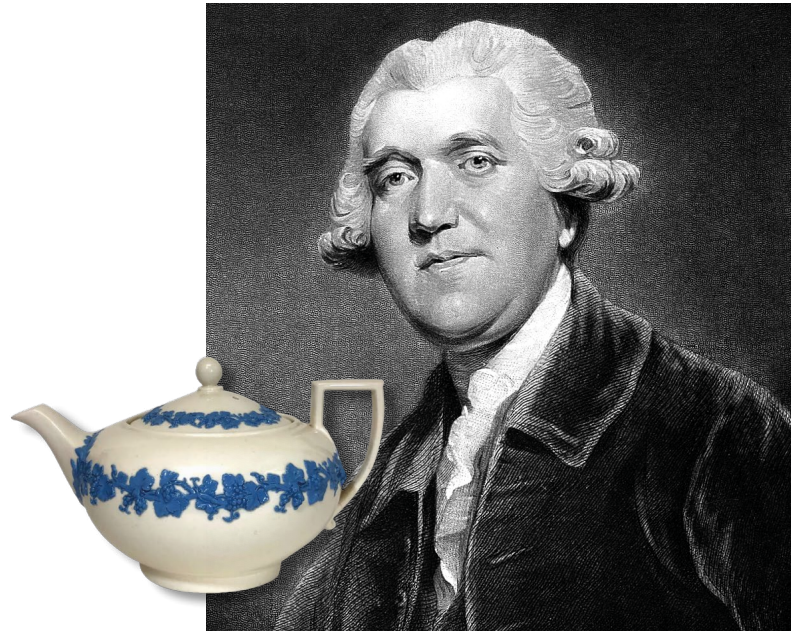


INFLUENCER INTELLIGENCE TRENDS YOU MUST KNOW IN 2021

When we talk about influencers, the first question is: Can this individual drive a call to action? And this has been a role played by many outside the realm of social media.

Tracing our steps back in time:

In the 18th century, Josiah Wedgwood¹, a British potter whose cream-colored artwork got the approval of Queen Charlotte, was given the official title of “Her Majesty’s Potter.” Knowing that the Queen was the ultimate influencer at the time, Wedgwood leveraged his new status and promoted his pottery as “Queensware,” the world’s first luxury brand. The royal endorsement catalyzed his brand, as people started flocking to his business and clamoring for his work soon after.



The next era saw a trend of fictional characters as influencers. For instance, in the 1930s, Coca-Cola popularized Santa Claus² to emotionally drive consumers’ buying-decision process. Post fictional characters came the celebrity endorsement age—with people who have real preferences, plus mass followings due to their fame – who could convince consumers to buy the products that they personally endorsed. After a long ride, celebrity endorsements are now debated over their effectiveness (read ROI) as consumers could rarely relate with their over-the-top lifestyles and this gradually paved the path for the influencers of today. But as



“Globally, there has been a considerable surge in content consumption over the last few years, accelerated by the pandemic and rise of micro-formats like Instagram reels and TikTok. This rise in consumption is tied to the expansion of social influencers’ role as well — we see different genres, both mainstream and niche, pick up steam and garner massive viewership. The content production has come full circle, shifting from organic, natural, self-made to being heavily produced and now back to the former.”

Shazia Zafar, Head Of Marketing, Chumbak Design Pvt. Ltd

¹<https://thehustle.co/josiahwedgwood>

²<https://www.bigcommerce.com/blog/how-coca-cola-used-santa/>

social media platforms arose, celebrities, reality TV stars, and other personalities garnered attention (read followers) because it allowed for insights into their lives and connectivity on a real, attainable level. In no time, a handful of “regular” people started accumulating large followings as well, due to their highly engaging content and close interactions with their followers — bringing us the first set of non-celeb influencers.

Influencer marketing, therefore, was never supposed to be about the most famous person for a specific brand or message; it is all about whether the individual is relatable and real enough to persuade others to do something specific.

Keeping this in mind, each of our 2021 influencer marketing trends brings about a common theme of breaking out of the mold of Influencer Marketing 1.0 of traditional brand endorsements or push marketing or chasing clout and discovering the future.

Here’s a deep dive into all that we learned while developing the India Influencer Intelligence Report 2021.

KEY FINDINGS AND CORE INSIGHTS

01 CONNECTION IS THE NEW CURRENCY:



Finding: With 40% of votes, a majority of Indian influencers ranked ‘brand recognition or image or perception’ as the most crucial factor in deciding on the brands that they want to work with. This was followed by their ‘personal experience with a branded product/service’ as the second most important factor to associate with brands with 32% votes. What’s key to note is that the majority of Indian influencers voted ‘compensation’ as the least most important factor when deciding on brand associations; ranking third with 24% votes.

REASONS TO ASSOCIATE WITH BRANDS:

40%

Brand recognition
or image or perception

32%

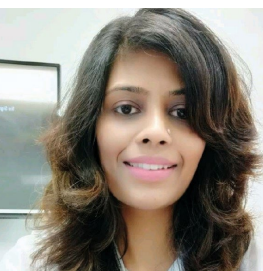
Personal experience with
a branded product or service

24%

Compensation as the
least most important factor



Insight: When the pandemic first emerged, influencers were at risk of being tone-deaf by marketing products while people quarantined at home. This led to a big pivot where influencers saw more success by confronting the situation head-on, adapting to life at home and showing how different brands play into this. This also led to brands evolving their understanding of how their product or service must now fit into a consumer’s daily life in a realistic way — building an authentic connect. So, going forward, rather than traditional product marketing, brands will have to work more closely with influencers to tell a story to an audience. And, creators will feel the need to choose the types of brands they can identify with, narrate a story for and know what their audience is interested in.

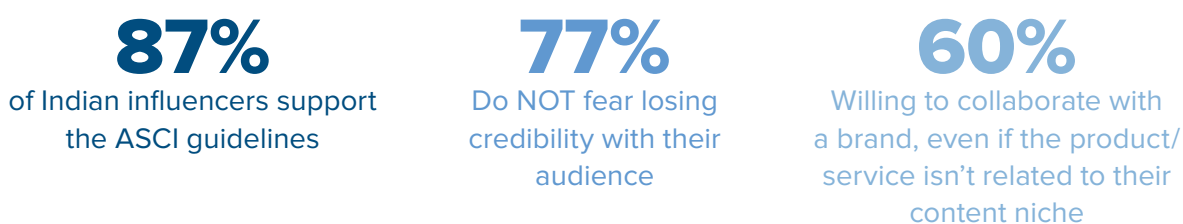


“Brands sometimes fall back on influencers to get them some quick visibility. But that’s not enough. Influencers can help brands reach the right people. But before that can happen, brands need to be clear about what they stand for and what kind of influencers fit their brand’s personality. Influencers need to be used more intelligently and with more discretion, rather than as an easy first answer for quick wins or a desperate last resort when nothing else seems to be working. Also, how you leverage the strengths of different influencers per channel is going to be crucial for more meaningful engagement and conversions.”

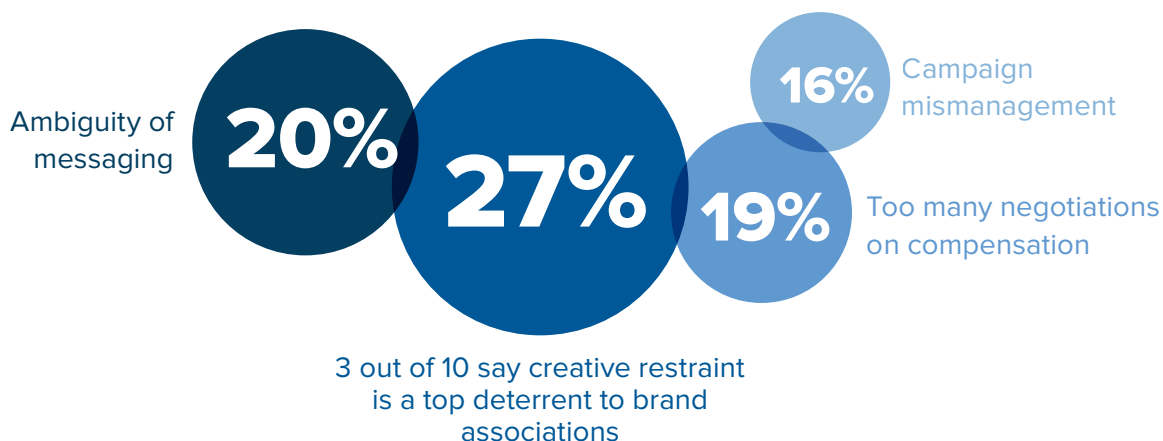
Shikha Gupta, Creative Director at Swiggy

02 CREATOR DIRECTION TRUMPS CREATIVE DIRECTION:

Finding: The beauty of social content creators is their ability to win attention, influence or even convert without a hard sell. That’s why a whopping 87% of Indian influencers said they support the ASCI guidelines of letting followers know when a post is an ad, while 77% said they do NOT fear losing credibility with their audience when working with brand(s). A majority of influencers (60%) said they are willing to collaborate with a brand, even if the product/service isn’t related to their content niche. But when asked what would make them decline a brand association, 3 out of 10 said creative restraints like too many guidelines was chosen as the top reason with 27% votes. The other reasons ranked thereafter include ambiguity of messaging (20%), too many negotiations on compensation (19%), and campaign mismanagement (16%), among others.



TOP REASONS TO DECLINE A BRAND ASSOCIATION:



“Any fledgling industry is always regulated, and responsible advertising will go a long way to ensure transparent expressions. The agencies involved must play a balancing act, ensuring compliance and delivering brand wins. There will be a brief period of adjustments, and while it's too soon to speculate on any adverse impact, we welcome this move, as these mandatory disclosures stand to bring in an unprecedented level of transparency. While the onus of good advertising lies on all stakeholders involved, brands should adhere to this as it benefits the consumer at large.”

Prince Khanna, Founder and CEO of Eleve Media



Insight: Until very recently, when social media influencers would review consumer brands through the ‘freebie in exchange for a post’ model, marketers would be tracking mainly for brand mentions. As the relationship evolved, brands started providing a creative brief and direction, but many times the old habits of masterminding a brand message and ensuring it was implemented consistently could get disguised as creative direction.

Now with changing times, as creators need to bring more transparency, they will have an upper hand in content direction. They will want to develop messages that both engage and entertain while moving away from product-led activations. This means while marketers may know their brand the best, when it comes to connecting with the audience, it will be best left to the influencers.

“For brands, going forward, the focus will be developing keen relationships with the influencer community. It is essential to know each of your partner’s quirks, preferences and strengths to maximize the relationship and the resulting impact. There’s a thin line to ensure a brief captures the collaboration’s essence without overstepping into the creator’s space. Sometimes the collaborations are approached from a transactional perspective, reflecting negatively on the content.”

Shazia Zafar, Head Of Marketing, Chumbak Design Pvt. Ltd

03 INFLUENCERS ARE AMBASSADORS:



Finding: Over 72% of Indian influencers said long-term engagement is the best way for brands to engage with them and their community, while 14% prefer co-creations and only 12% would prefer to associate for topical campaigns alone. Barring a few outlier brands who already have been doing this, this is a long-awaited shift in India’s influencer marketing landscape.



Although celebrities were termed as early influencers, the arrival of social media platforms ushered the wave of early self-made influencers. This evolution of content creators on various platforms has helped many brands connect with a like-minded audience. But marketers have remained more focused on the influencer statistics like follower count and engagement rates, while they need better campaign tracking options to understand how the content associated with their brand is consumed and therefore, how success can be measured.

Saurabh Saini, Head of Digital Marketing and Communications, Havells India Ltd.

INFLUENCERS' PREFERENCE FOR BRAND ASSOCIATIONS:

72%

Prefer long-term engagement

14%

Prefer co-creations

12%

Prefer associations
for topical campaigns



Insight: 2020 made many businesses realize the power of content creators and social media platforms. Influencers and creators also returned to delivering content that added genuine value, building the much-needed sense of community when the world was living in isolation. For marketers, this was a momentous shift from looking at influencer marketing as a one-off engagement to a more long-term association. This led many Indian marketers to think about influencers in ways that go beyond just 1-2 posts collaboration and join the larger purpose of the brand and imbibe its identity.

Brands that have been investing in short-lived influencer campaigns are finally looking at investing time and effort to achieve long-term success, much like ambassador programs' which include brand fans who promote them in a genuine, believable way. As the relationship deepens, so will their loyalty; as content increasingly becomes personal, so will the intensity of their attention and engagement.

04 CONTENT EQUALS CLOUT:



Finding: Consumers are now going to be increasingly aware and understand what sponsored and organic content looks like. So, could the #ad disclosure be flipped into a mocking comment from those who recognize an obvious endorsement and honest conversations be more appreciated? Most influencers, therefore, are already aligned with this change, as 84% said content quality tops as the key factor that they believe brands should consider when choosing to partner.



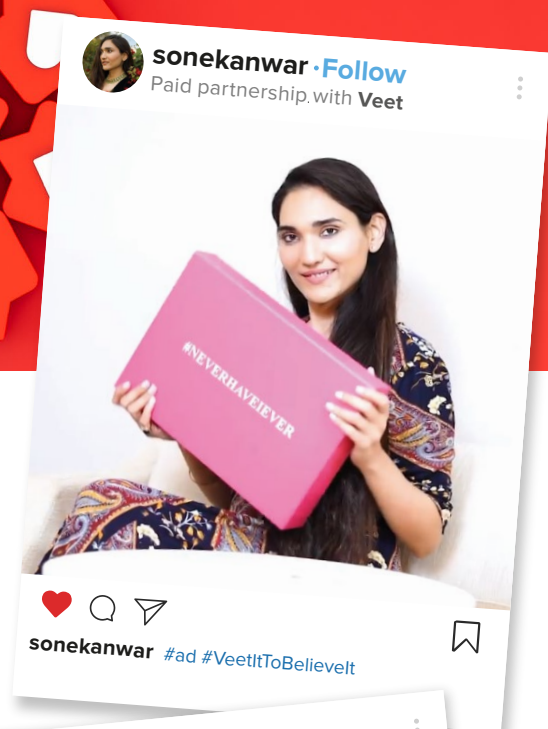
Insight: As long-term influencer associations become the means to bring authentic advocacy, brand associations will have to go just beyond clout chasing — falling for a popular trend without considering the fit. Especially now, with the ASCI guidelines being adopted, branded influencer content must be aligned, or it can lose its authenticity.

This means marketers need to adopt a nuanced outreach strategy where brands will need to be embedded into communities and lifestyles where their influencer talent resonates. Otherwise consumers will see through the misalignment of values that makes the transactional nature of the influencer relationship and therefore create an ineffective campaign.

FACTORS BRANDS SHOULD CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING TO PARTNER:

84%
Content quality

42%
Engagement rate



Influencers have managed to build trust among their followers, and they know ways to gain their attention online. That is why, for brands, influencer marketing is one of the easiest and effective ways to reach out to their target audience, while not pushing skip-worthy ads!

Abhishek Bhasin, Senior Brand Marketing Manager, MakeMyTrip



Influencer marketing, if used well, can help brands reach a wider, more meaningful audience. This is especially true for smaller brands that may not necessarily have the means to speak to a mass audience via ATL media. As platforms continue to evolve rapidly, it'll work in the favour of brands to use influencer marketing to create more platform-specific content. While a stand-up comic may have a large following on Instagram for slightly longer-form content, they may not necessarily be as good with a few words on Twitter. Conversely, your audience on Twitter may be looking for a two-way conversation instead of passively engaging with content on their feed. So, how you leverage the strengths of different influencers per channel is going to be crucial for more meaningful engagement and conversions.

Shikha Gupta, Creative Director, Swiggy

05 MICRO IS THE NEW MEGA:



Finding: Influencer marketing is a digital form of traditional “word-of-mouth” marketing, with a relatability factor that celebs often lack. So, although an influencer’s follower count is important, the level of engagement with their audience is more crucial. As was foreseeable, with 42% of votes, a majority of Indian influencers ranked engagement rate above profile reach and follower base as a key factor that brands should consider while choosing to associate with influencers.



Insight: What this means for brands that are measuring the reach and sales impact of influencer marketing is that the benchmark of success will be higher on the talent end. And micro-influencers may prove to be vital as they can penetrate markets easily with a higher engagement rate and can be more valuable than enlisting A-list stars who may have a higher follower base. In other words, brands will have only scratched the surface when it comes to the power of micro-influencers as opposed to macro- or mega-influencers, especially as engagement rate becomes the benchmark.

ASCI GUIDELINES: WHAT CHANGES?

With its growing significance in the marketing mix, India is setting new rules for influencer marketing. The self-regulatory industry body, Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) recently collaborated with stakeholders, including both digital and social media influencers to bring fresh guidelines. So, we weighed in on what changes from here on for influencer marketing in India.



“The ASCI guidelines are a welcome move that will help the industry be more organized. Although these guidelines will set a precedent and make it more transparent for each party involved, it won’t change much for creators; they will continue to create organic, engaging content. Letting the audience know it is a sponsored post won’t impact much on the engagement aspect if the content resonates with them.”

Viraj Sheth, Content Creator

01 From sponsored posts or promotional content to influencer ads:

Although most platforms did have the option to disclose and label “sponsored posts” or “branded content,” these regulations will let average consumers identify promotional posts as ads and better distinguish them from editorial and independent user-generated content.

02 Responsible advertising ecosystem:

This addresses the long-pending need for guidelines to implement ethical practices in influencer marketing in India. It promotes fair and transparent practices.



“As a creator, nothing much changes with the ASCI guidelines. We continue to create content the way we used to earlier. The difference is that the accountability that was only in our consciousness before, is now out there in the open. The ASCI guidelines allow us to have a more transparent ecosystem, and I believe things going forward are going to be much simpler.”

Sone Kanwar, Content Creator

03 In case of a malpractice:

The mechanism remains the same for any complaint ASCI receives regarding an advertisement. ASCI will communicate to both the influencer and advertiser (brand), saying this which has come out is not as per ASCI guidelines, and they are either expected to withdraw it or modify it.

04 Monitoring influencers:

ASCI confirmed monitoring around 3,000 digital platforms currently. The attempt now is to educate influencers on their need to be responsible and the other is to educate anyone involved in the making of the ads on the sense of responsibility. ASCI also mentioned that the idea is not to trap influencers or their creativity but to inform and educate them so that the industry becomes more responsible as it evolves.

05 Fundamental areas to be taken care of:

- a. Advertising shouldn't be misleading
- b. Posts should not promote something harmful
- c. It cannot cause widespread offence
- d. Should be fair to the competition



“The brand-led content we create is not just transactional, so although these guidelines make it much more transparent now, nothing much changes as a creator. We must continue to make engaging and relevant content that connects us to our audience. Our content will have to stay creative whether it is a sponsored post or not.”

Abhi and Niyu, Content Creators

06 Increased due diligence:

Apart from influencers ensuring to follow the guidelines, brands will also need to ensure that the promoted/sponsored posts abide by the same. For example, claims like something being “2X faster” or “2X better” or comments on how long a product lasts etc. can now be tested.

The ASCI suggests this will be done through correspondence with advertisers or brand owners to find scientific substantiation for such claims.



“Guidelines are crucial now since brands are investing so much marketing money into influencer marketing rather than traditional marketing methods. Content creators need to continue making content that is not just creative and entertaining but talks about the product with a lot more legitimacy and credibility, while brands need to keep in mind that their briefs should align to this.”

Sakshi Sindwani, Content Creator

WAY FORWARD

Several years ago, influencer marketing emerged as one of the major breakthroughs in digital marketing. Its biggest strength was how brands could solve the toughest marketing challenge they faced — winning people’s trust. Over the years, influencer marketing has become indispensable, but the equation of influencers’ relationships with brands is changing. And here’s what the crystal ball sees:

- **More brand-led conversations, less branded conversations:**

Creators are moving away from feeds that look like luxury magazine editions to partnerships with brands that share their values. The gravity of 2020 has reshaped influencers’ ideas of what it means to have influence — what you talk about, the issues you care about and the brands you partner with. This means we can expect shared values to play a much larger role in brand and influencer partnerships going forward. And agencies will be expected to mindfully thread the needle between influencer interests and brand needs.

- **Influencer marketing will move closer to driving purchase activity directly:**

As social media integrates more of livestreaming and video-on-demand with products showcase, one-click purchases and a stable integrated mobile payment system, it opens the avenue of social commerce. This means influencers will open a new revenue stream based on affiliation fees and transform social media from mere entertaining platforms to actual e-commerce.

“Influencer marketing grew more rapidly as compared to other forms of marketing. And with this growth and the self-regulation guidelines, I feel that the overall quality of the content will improve, which will be in the best interests of the consumer.”

Saurabh Saini, Head of Digital Marketing and Communications, Havells India Ltd.

- **Transparency will make talent trump over everything else:**

Following the essential disclosures and transparency, for social media influencers, authenticity is the best recourse. As an influencer, making sure you believe in and can stand behind not only the product but the brand you promote is crucial to trust and credibility with an audience that will only become more skeptical.

In other words, people will increasingly be able to tell if you’re just making a post for a paycheck.



“Credibility and honesty in storytelling needs to take precedence, without taking away the ability of legitimate influencers to earn and without taking away the ability of brands to reach the kind of audience they need. After clear disclaimers, the next step should be to distinguish between fake/paid social engagement and real engagement.”

Hitesh Raj Bhagat, Global Director of Corporate Communications, Truecaller

So, influencers and brands will need to enter arrangements where there is mutual trust and belief in the same mission if it's going to work and work well because to maintain fiercely loyal fans, they will have to believe in what they're endorsing.

From targeting mass audiences to pin-point precision targeting of certain niches, from platform-centric to conversation-centered and from a good-to-do to a marketing must-do, influencer marketing has evolved by eons in a single year. And going forward, as people continue to weigh things from the pandemic lenses, rethink what really matters every now and then — honest voices are going to be a marketing tool most brands would continue to keep handy and leverage.

“The next big thing for this industry has already started — more transparency and authenticity. With this industry growing at a tremendous speed, it is necessary to identify content creators who are working hard to promote exceptional content to their followers; content that’s engaging, authentic and adds real value to a consumer’s life.”

Abhishek Bhasin, Senior Brand Marketing Manager, MakeMyTrip

ABOUT FH INFLUENCER INTELLIGENCE REPORT:

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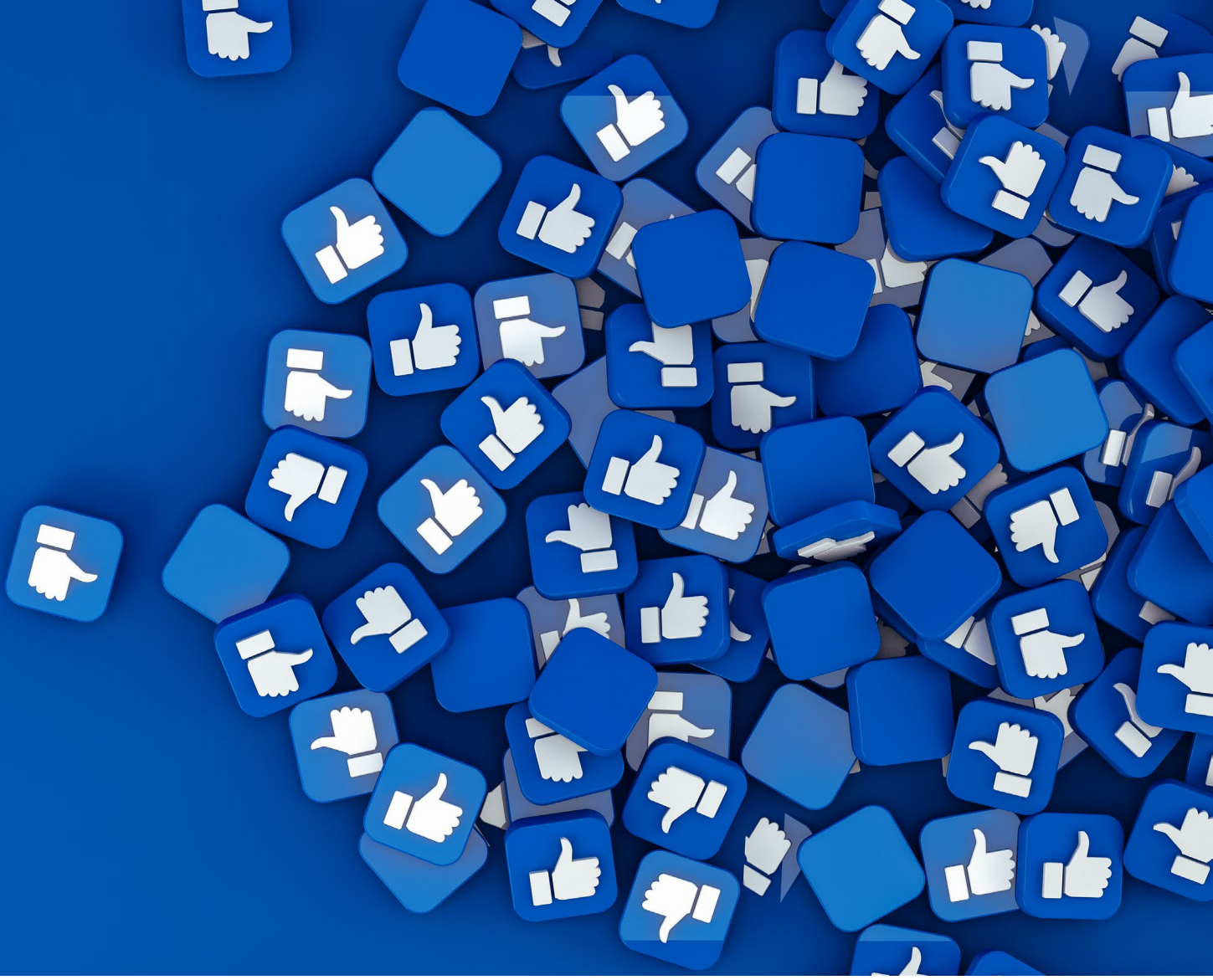
FleishmanHillard specializes in public relations, reputation management, public affairs, brand marketing, digital strategy, social engagement and content strategy. FleishmanHillard was named 2019 PRWeek U.S. Outstanding Large Agency; 2019 Holmes Report North America Large Agency of the Year; ICCO Network of the Year – Americas 2017-2020; PProvoke Media Greater China Consultancy of the Year 2020; PRWeek UK Best Places to Work 2020; Human Rights Campaign Best Places to Work for LGBTQ Equality 2018-2020; and NAFE's "Top Companies for Executive Women" 2010-2020. The firm's award-winning work is widely heralded, including at the Cannes International Festival of Creativity. FleishmanHillard is part of Omnicom Public Relations Group and has 80 offices in more than 30 countries, plus affiliates in 50 countries.

ABOUT OmnicomPublicRelationsGroup

Omnicom Public Relations Group is a global collective of three of the top global public relations agencies worldwide and specialist agencies in areas including public affairs, marketing to women, global health strategy and corporate social responsibility. It encompasses more than 6,300 public relations professionals in more than 370 offices worldwide who provide their expertise to companies, government agencies, NGOs and nonprofits across a wide range of industries. Omnicom Public Relations Group delivers for clients through a relentless focus on talent, continuous pursuit of innovation and a culture steeped in collaboration. Omnicom Public Relations Group is part of the DAS Group of Companies, a division of Omnicom Group Inc. (NYSE: OMC) that includes more than 200 companies in a wide range of marketing disciplines including advertising, public relations, healthcare, customer relationship management, events, promotional marketing, branding and research.

ABOUT **eleve**

Eleve Media is one of India's largest brand advocacy companies operating in the digital space for the past eight years. Headquartered in Gurgaon, with regional offices in Mumbai and Bangalore, Eleve's powerful solutions and services enable brands and agencies to leverage the power of word of mouth through influencers on social media platforms and streamline their influencer marketing initiatives.



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