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How are Digital Micro-Influencers Driving the Social Commerce?

Completed Research Paper

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Abstract

Digital micro-influencers (DMIs) seem to drive social commerce as they connect with customers in tier-II towns better than others. The extant literature on the efforts and work processes of DMIs is limited. The present study fills the gap through a qualitative study in India. Using the persuasion knowledge model as a guiding framework, nineteen qualitative in-depth interviews with the DMIs were conducted and analyzed using thematic analysis. The study finds that understanding the target (target knowledge) helps DMIs in selecting appropriate brands (topic knowledge) and creating compelling content (persuasion knowledge), leading to social commerce. Also, topic knowledge assists persuasion knowledge. The study further offers insights into the nature of the motivators on the DMIs in the light of organismic integration theory. Theoretical and managerial implications for future research are provided.

Keywords: Digital micro-influencers, Social media, Social commerce, Followers, Instagram, Persuasion knowledge model, Organismic integration theory.

Introduction

Social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube have given ordinary people distinct opportunities to show talent and gain many followers. These people, referred to as digital influencers or key opinion leaders, collaborate with businesses and influence the purchasing decisions of their followers (Bawack & Bonhoure, 2023; Yilmaz et al., 2020). They are broadly classified into two categories based on follower count: celebrity influencers (including actors, politicians, athletes or models) and non-celebrity influencers, namely digital micro-influencers (DMIs) (Gan et al., 2019). The present study focuses on DMIs with a follower count of 10,000 to 1,00,000 (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), and an average engagement rate per post of 25% to 50% (Christodoulaki, 2018).

The rapid adoption of smartphones and increasing internet penetration (Bhargava, 2023) in India have led to enormous growth of the social media ecosystem in smaller towns or tier-II towns. Reserve Bank of India defined tier-II towns or cities as those with a population between 50,000 to 99999 (Shira & Associates, 2022). The small population is often supported by weak economic development and public infrastructure. They are also less expensive and have a vast growth potential (Chandola, 2023). According to Bain & Company (2022), India is the world's third-largest hub of online shoppers, with a count of 180-190 million in 2021. Out of the 40-50 million new online shoppers in 2021, approximately 60 per cent are from smaller towns. The consumer market in these towns is rapidly growing with escalating purchasing power (Bhargava, 2023).

Consumers in tier-II towns primarily rely on recommendations from trusted and reliable individuals (Kumari, 2022). Hence, brands are increasingly approaching DMIs in these towns due to focused niche domains, dedicated followings (Gan et al., 2019), and vernacular content (Vijayraghavan & Philip, 2022).

Most importantly, their followers trust, connect and perceive them as ‘people like me’ (Agarwal, 2020). DMIs seem to influence the shopping preferences of the followers in these towns. The process by which DMIs expose their followers to brand-centric content to influence their purchasing decisions or facilitate their actual purchase is known as social commerce.

Anecdotal evidence indicates the increasing importance of DMIs from tier-II towns in the social commerce context. However, understanding of how DMIs are driving social commerce is limited. Specifically, how they persuade the followers towards a product or service on social media platforms and the consequences of such persuasion are yet to be studied. The present paper attempts to fill this gap. The first research question of our study is: *How are DMIs from tier-II towns driving social commerce, and what are the resulting outcomes?* Building on the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) from the influence agent perspective (Friestad & Wright, 1994), we attempt to show that DMIs leverage their target knowledge, topic knowledge and persuasion knowledge to create meaningful and engaging content. Using such knowledge, they persuade followers towards brand-centric content, resulting in social commerce. While prior studies rooted in PKM have predominantly focused on how consumers cope with the persuasion attempt (Ham, 2017; Kirmani & Campbell, 2004), limited attention has been paid to where consumers (influencers) act as influence agents (Kirmani & Ferraro, 2017).

While understanding how DMIs drive the social commerce, it is also essential to comprehend what motivates them. There could be other reasons apart from financial outcomes (Parisi, 2023). Thus, the second research question of our study is: *What motivates DMIs from tier-II towns to drive social commerce?* Drawing on Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000b), we refer to DMIs' social commerce motivations as external, introjected, identified and intrinsic regulation. Further, we classify them as controlled and autonomous motivations (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004, 2006). Earlier research has used OIT only in the domain of education (Malmberg et al., 2015; Mammonov & Benbunan-Fich, 2017), health care (Gaston et al., 2013), job search (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004) and sports (James et al., 2019). Application in the social commerce domain shall offer new insights.

We collected data through in-depth semi-structured interviews with DMIs from tier-II towns, which have a following of 10,000 to 100,000 on Instagram in India. According to a recent consultancy report (Day, 2022), 94% of influencer campaigns are executed on Instagram, with only 10% running on other platforms. With 180 million users, Instagram is one of India's largest social media platforms and is a significant sales channel (Economic Times, 2021).

Based on the data analysis and existing literature, we propose a conceptual framework showing the process through which DMIs are driving social commerce, their social commerce motivations, and outcomes. Through integrating PKM and OIT theories, we seek to contribute by understanding what motivates DMIs, how DMIs leverage target, topic and persuasion knowledge to persuade followers and the subsequent social commerce outcomes. The study expands the scope of two theories by applying them in the social commerce context. Also, existing literature on social commerce has mainly focused on two perspectives: user perspective (Biucky et al., 2017; Pagani & Mirabello, 2011) and firm perspective (Braojos et al., 2019; Olbrich & Holsing, 2011). The current study contributes by looking through the lens of digital influencers, especially DMIs from tier-II towns. In practice, research findings will assist marketing managers in engaging with DMIs for business growth. Also, by comprehending the needs of DMIs, we will help platforms like Instagram to attract a user base beyond the tier-I or metropolitan cities.

Literature Review

Social Commerce

The definition of social commerce is still evolving (Esmaeili & Hashemi G, 2019; Wang et al., 2022) and is considered an e-commerce subset (Liang & Turban, 2011; Sharma & Crossler, 2014), an e-commerce extension (Meilatinova, 2021) or a new online business form (Wang et al., 2022), that combines commercial activities and social media (Liang & Turban, 2011). While some focus on buying and selling (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Linda, 2010), Zhou, Zhang and Zimmermann (2013) argue that social commerce also includes sharing experiences and knowledge about a product or service online. Earlier studies (for instance,

IBM, 2009) underline that social media facilitates electronic word-of-mouth dissemination about a product or service with others by consumers. This makes some consumers key opinion leaders or influencers on social media platforms. In light of the above, we define social commerce as the process by which DMIs persuade followers towards brand-centric content to affect the purchase decision or facilitate the actual purchase. DMIs collaborate, review, promote, engage, and communicate on social media platforms.

Social commerce is studied from two perspectives: users and firms. The former includes user behaviour and user technology adoption. Studies have examined social media user behaviour in the light of seeking information (Bronner & de Hoog, 2014), browsing (Xu-Priour et al., 2014), participating (e.g., reading, comment and forwarding; Chang et al., 2015) and brand loyalty (Hew et al., 2016). User technology adoption studies have focused on the adoption of social commerce in the light of the technology acceptance model and unified theory of acceptance and use of technology models (Biucky et al., 2017; Mamonov & Benbunan-Fich, 2017). On the other hand, the firm perspective includes website design (Olbrich & Holsing, 2011) and digital capabilities such as e-commerce and social media to engage with online users and improve firm performance (Braojos et al., 2019). However, influencers perspective have yet to be studied (Wu et al., 2022). We attempt to fill this gap.

Digital Micro-Influencers

Following Campbell & Farrell (2020), we define DMIs as those with a follower count of 10,000 to 1,00,000. They often operate in niche areas like fashion, beauty and food and may have localized followers with whom they communicate and actively engage (Gan et al., 2019). Social media platform like Instagram provides enormous opportunities for brands to reach their target audience directly via DMIs (Alassani & Göretz, 2019). Unlike celebrity influencers, DMIs are affordable and approachable (Gan et al., 2019). DMIs' personal connection with followers and higher engagement rates (Agarwal, 2020) are also attractive to client businesses. Research indicates that DMIs effectively influence their followers' purchase intention and behaviour (Kay et al., 2020). Despite growing literature, there seems to be a limited discussion on how DMIs persuade their followers' purchasing behaviour to drive social commerce.

Theoretical Background

To explain the process of how DMIs are driving social commerce, PKM is used (Friestad & Wright, 1994). According to PKM, consumers can be a persuasion target or an influence agent. Earlier studies approach PKM mainly to show how consumers cope with the persuasion strategies of marketers (Ham, 2017; Kirmani & Campbell, 2004). Limited attention has been paid to the other perspective, the influence agent (Chen & Kirmani, 2015; Kirmani & Ferraro, 2017). An influence agent is someone who persuades others to take action. In our context, they are the DMIs. To be effective in influencing, PKM assumes agents develop mental models about how to influence others' actions. They rely on three types of knowledge – target knowledge, topic knowledge and persuasion knowledge. Target knowledge is belief about the “people on whom a persuasion attempt is intended” (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p.2). In our case, the target is DMIs' followers. Topic knowledge is “belief about the topic of the message” (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p.3). In our case, it is the product or service of a brand. Lastly, persuasion knowledge influences “someone's beliefs, attitudes, decisions, or actions” (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p.2). In our case, it is DMI's understanding of influencing the target audience. We assume that DMIs persuade followers towards social commerce through compelling brand-centric content.

Moreover, according to PKM, influence agents (DMIs) are motivated to leverage their knowledge to persuade others. However, PKM does not explain the underlying reasons that influence DMIs to seek knowledge. Therefore, we attempt to identify the motivations explaining why DMIs act as influence agents. This is vital as digital influencers as a career option is growing in India and elsewhere (Economic Times, 2022). Apart from financial rewards, motivators to become influencers are varied (Simpson, 2016), including hobby or leisure to altruism (Giardino, 2021). Understanding the influencers' motivations will help businesses formulate better influencer management strategies.

Building on OIT (Ryan & Deci, 2000b), we refer to DMIs' social commerce motivations as external, introjected, identified and intrinsic regulation. We classify them into two types: controlled and autonomous

motivations (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004, 2006). The present study has taken OIT because it considers individual's motivation based on orientation (i.e., different kinds of motivation) rather than treating it as a unitary concept (i.e., different amount of motivation) (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). When individuals perform actions as required by external or partially internalized demands, we refer to it as controlled motivation. It includes two types: external regulation and introjected regulation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). For example, DMIs creating content to gain monetary rewards and/or recognition from the followers. On the other hand, autonomous motivation involves feelings of choice or expressing one's self. It has two bases: identified regulation and intrinsic regulation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). For instance, DMIs are voluntarily coming on social media platforms to fulfil their goals and/or it gives them enjoyment and satisfaction. Consequently, controlled and autonomous motivations lead to similar activities, but individuals approach them with different orientations, such as rewards, recognition and/or enjoyment (Nix et al., 1999).

While PKM focuses on DMIs' knowledge creation to persuade followers, OIT examines preceding motivations. OIT contributes to PKM by understanding the motivations that encourage DMIs to leverage knowledge to influence followers towards brand-centric content, enabling social commerce.

Methodology

The study used in-depth qualitative interviews to collect data. As India is vast and diverse, we attempted to have heterogeneous data regarding gender, geographic location and type of content. We used maximum variation sampling, which captures uniqueness and shared patterns by cutting across cases (Patton, 2002, p.234). DMIs were identified using a portal on influencers¹, which serves as a directory and hub for influencers and brands to connect. Using the website's features, including options to sort by country, city, influencer reach and social media account, we created a list of DMIs from tier-II towns. This list was the starting point for using the 'suggested accounts to follow' feature on Instagram to discover similar accounts that could serve as potential respondents. Subsequently, a master list was prepared using the specific criteria for inclusion, like the range of followers (10,000 to 1,00,000), platform use (Instagram), and brand collaborations (at least three brands). To ensure that DMIs are from tier-II towns, the location feature from the portal was used. Secondly, profile bios were read, and content was checked to see whether the location was tagged or given in a hashtag. Lastly, confirmation was sought from the respondents before the interviews. The DMIs were approached through direct message on Instagram, explaining the purpose of the study, by the first author. A total of sixty-eight DMIs were approached. Of these, twenty-three initially agreed to participate. Four of them didn't respond after agreeing to participate. Finally, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with nineteen DMIs (Table 1).

Before primary data collection, a pilot study was conducted with two DMIs. Based on the literature review and pilot study, an interview guide was prepared with adequate space for improvisation and flexibility (Myers & Newman, 2007). The sample interview questions were: How long have you been on Instagram as a content creator or influencer, and why? What inspired you to create content? How do you feel about creating content? What are you trying to achieve through content creation? How do you create content? How much time it takes to make a particular content? What is the content your followers are likely to consume? Why do you think people consume local language or certain kinds of content? How do you choose a brand? What are the things you consider before selecting a brand, and why? Is there any process you follow before posting brand content online? What are the things the brand offers you, in general? Can you share some of your brand collaboration experiences? And what is your experience with Instagram as a platform?

The interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes and were conducted via telephone or video conference application Zoom, during April-May 2022. The conversation was held in English and Hindi. All interviewees provided informed consent for the interviews and recording. We promised to protect their identity, and pseudonyms are used in this study. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An online version (Microsoft 365 Office) of Microsoft Word was used for data transcription. To ensure that no information is overlooked, authors personally listened to the recording while simultaneously referring to the corresponding transcription.

¹ https://influence.co/influencer_searches/advanced

Basis	Characteristics (number of respondents)
Gender	Male (10); Female (9)
Experience	Up to two years (11); More than two years (8)
Cities	Chandigarh (1); Lucknow (6); Orissa (3); Visakhapatnam (1); Bhopal (2); Haryana (1); Ayodhya (1); Amritsar (1); Ludhiana (2); Kanpur (1)
Content type	Fashion, lifestyle and beauty (3); Beauty (1); Fashion and lifestyle (7); Entertainment (3); Fashion and travel (1); Beauty, lifestyle and health (1); Lifestyle and travel (3); Fashion (1)

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Note: Experience shows how long respondents have been active on Instagram.

To analyze and interpret our data, we employed a manual thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) conducted in three significant steps, as given by Gioia et al. (2013). Table 2 represents an excerpt of the data analysis process. After reading and getting familiarized with the interview transcripts, we started with first-order analysis by generating initial codes based on the dataset. Then, we looked for similarities, differences and patterns across first-order codes and merged the first-order categories to have second-order codes. Finally, we looked at the links between second-order categories and aggregated these into more concise or overarching aggregate themes using prior literature. We moved back and forth between codes throughout the process. To ensure data credibility, the analysis was carried out by both researchers. When conflicting interpretations were discovered, the authors re-read the data, conducted in-depth discussions, and established understandings to reach an agreement. Post-analysis, we validated our themes by seeking feedback from some respondents. Themes that are related to the research questions are presented in the paper. Other concepts like trolling, hate comments, and experience with offline store collaborations are not discussed.

First Order Codes (Bolded) and Sample Quotations	Second-order codes	Theoretical Aggregate Dimensions
<i>Platforms keep on coming up with some new features. It's all about keeping that content game STRONG! These features excite me as I get a chance to level up and showcase different facets of my creativity (Priya)</i>	Platform Requirement	External Regulation (Controlled Motivation)
<i>I sometimes do barter collaborations if the product excites me (Rohini).</i>	Material Reward	
<i>I choose a brand according to its relatability with my content. If it is related to beauty, I select it (Simran).</i>	Content Type	Topic Knowledge
<i>I recently promoted X company product and gave my followers proper knowledge about it. I read about the product features and discussed with them the pros and cons (Pia).</i>	Due Diligence	
<i>When I receive a product from a brand, I usually take some time to personally try and test it and provide reviews detailing how it works for me (Zia).</i>	Experiential Knowledge	

Table 2: Excerpt of Data Analysis - Sample

Findings

Drawing upon OIT and PKM and data analysis, we developed a conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrating the back-end (motivators) and front-end (drivers) mechanisms performed by DMIs. The framework summarizes how DMIs leverage their knowledge (topic, persuasion and target) to persuade their followers to brand-centric content, social commerce outcomes, and social commerce motivations (controlled and autonomous) behind such persuasion. Table 3 explains the concepts used in the framework.

Back End

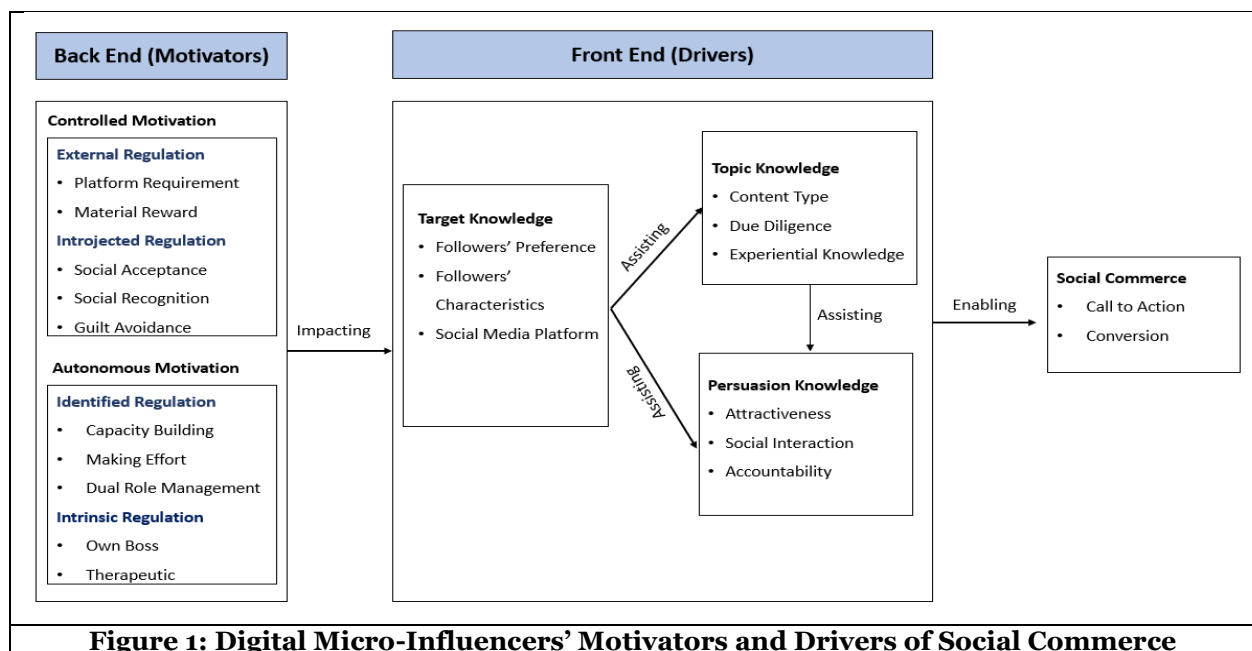
From data analysis, we found out DMIs' different types of motivations at the back end. Drawing on OIT, we refer to such motivations as external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation and intrinsic regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Furthermore, we categorized them into controlled and autonomous motivations (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004, 2006).

Controlled Motivation

Controlled motivations are fully or partially controlled by external forces and classified into external regulation and introjected regulation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

a. External Regulation

It is typically performed by DMIs to satisfy external demands by the platforms and to get external material rewards. Respondents discussed how they continue to learn more about the platform's requirements, such as its new features, algorithms, advertising disclosure regulations, etc. Relevant quotes are presented below:



"On Instagram, when we are inactive, our reach decreases. When I post something, it is getting the reach to only 20% of my followers. Earlier, when I was active, my post reaches to 60-70% of non-followers. If this happens that means my post has been shadow banned. So, there is a constant pressure to post regularly." (Kabir)

"Instagram algorithms keep on changing. There is a lack of transparency on how it works. I used to post at 8 p.m. as I observed that I got good reach at that time with trending hashtags. But the moment I realize I have decoded it, the algorithm changes, and my videos won't do well." (Simran)

DMIs get compensated in two ways: barter collaborations and paid partnerships (Yilmaz et al., 2020). The latter type motivates most of the respondents. It gives additional income to the part-time DMIs and is a main source of income for full-timers. Two relevant quotes from the respondents are:

"I prefer paid collaborations because I have bills to pay." (Anshi)

"I opt 70% to 80% now because I have a studio also. I always take the paid one, but there are still 20% to 30% brands whom I just collaborate with because we have a very good connection now." (Simran)

Though influencers prefer monetary compensation, not all get them in the nascent stages. Earlier research (Shekhar, 2022) indicated that non-metro city creators are sometimes exploited and undervalued by the brands operating in metro cities due to their lack of guidance and exposure.

b. Introjected Regulation

From the data analysis, we found that DMIs also create content and interact with followers on social media platforms to gain internal rewards - social acceptance, social recognition or sometimes guilt avoidance.

Concept	Explanation (Reference)
<p>Controlled Motivation</p> <p>a. External Regulation</p> <p><i>Platform Requirement</i></p> <p><i>Material Reward</i></p> <p>b. Introjected Regulation</p> <p><i>Social Acceptance</i></p> <p><i>Social Recognition</i></p> <p><i>Guilt Avoidance</i></p>	<p>It demands individuals to think, behave or feel certain ways (Nix et al., 1999).</p> <p>Behaviours that are performed to comply with external demands (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).</p> <p><i>Prerequisites that all social media platforms expect their users—in our case, DMIs—to exercise to use the platform to its actual capacity.</i></p> <p><i>Compensations received by DMIs from brand collaboration- barter or paid.</i></p> <p>Behaviours are performed to adhere to internal demands or pressure (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).</p> <p><i>DMIs’ desire to be accepted and approved by other people or group.</i></p> <p><i>DMIs’ desire to be socially known and admired by others.</i></p> <p><i>When behaviours are performed by DMIs’ to prevent the feeling of being guilty and to uphold their sense of value.</i></p>
<p>Autonomous Motivation</p> <p>a. Identified Regulation</p> <p><i>Capacity Building</i></p> <p><i>Making Effort</i></p> <p><i>Dual Role Management</i></p> <p>b. Intrinsic Regulation</p> <p><i>Own Boss</i></p> <p><i>Therapeutic</i></p>	<p>Autonomous motivations involve feelings of choice and volition (Ryan & Deci, 2000b).</p> <p>Behaviour is performed due to its importance in one's life or self-selected goals (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).</p> <p><i>Gaining of knowledge and skills by DMIs to fulfil their objectives.</i></p> <p><i>The amount of time or energy used by DMIs’ in completing a particular task to achieve own goals.</i></p> <p><i>DMIs’ practice of managing two roles simultaneously due to its relevance in their life.</i></p> <p>When behaviour is performed with full liberty (Ryan & Deci, 2000b).</p> <p><i>DMIs’ autonomy to act independently and make all decisions for own self.</i></p> <p><i>DMIs’ feeling of peace and joy through creating and sharing content.</i></p>
<p>Target Knowledge</p> <p><i>Followers’ Preferences</i></p> <p><i>Followers’ Characteristics</i></p> <p><i>Social Media Platform</i></p>	<p>Beliefs about the target audience on whom persuasion is attempted (Chen & Kirmani, 2015).</p> <p><i>DMIs’ understanding of the form of social media content the audience prefers to consume, such as videos, images or audio.</i></p> <p><i>Traits exhibited by the audience of DMIs such as age and gender.</i></p> <p><i>DMIs understanding of the type of platform and its functionalities for target persuasion.</i></p>

Topic Knowledge	Know-how about the topic on which content needs to be created (Chen & Kirmani, 2015)
<i>Content Type</i>	<i>Topic or area around which DMIs create and share content such as beauty, fashion, and food.</i>
<i>Due Diligence</i>	<i>Thorough research and assessment process that DMIs undertake before sharing brand-specific content on their social media profile.</i>
<i>Experiential Knowledge</i>	<i>DMIs' understanding of a product or service by using and testing on themselves.</i>
Persuasion Knowledge	Presenting, recommending or promoting products or services in a way that affects the purchasing behaviour of specific niche consumers (Wu et al., 2022)
<i>Attractiveness</i>	<i>Oral expressions, local language or visual tools are used by DMIs on social media platforms to make the product aesthetically appealing to followers.</i>
<i>Social Interaction</i>	<i>DMIs' communication with followers on social media platforms, explicitly responding to or answering queries to enhance brand visibility and credibility.</i>
<i>Accountability</i>	<i>DMIs' understanding of being responsible, authentic and answerable to the followers.</i>
Social Commerce	<i>Process in which DMIs strategically leverage their persuasive knowledge to engage and captivate their followers to affect their purchase decision or facilitate actual purchase.</i>
<i>Call to Action</i>	<i>Specific requests or instructions that DMIs provides to their followers to encourage them to take a particular action.</i>
<i>Conversion</i>	<i>It means when followers purchase the products or services recommended by the DMIs.</i>
Table 3: Findings Concept Explanations	
Note: 1) The concepts that are presented in italics are emerging from data. 2) All italic explanations are given by authors.	

Though intangible, social acceptance gives individuals a feeling of self-worth. Some respondents expressed their desire to be socially accepted by their followers. The approval fosters confidence in creating content. To quote: *"It takes 24 hours to make a 30-second reel, a few hours of travel, scripting, shooting, editing, voiceover and still people think it is easy. I just want them (followers) to appreciate me and my content."* (Soniya)

Social recognition also drives the DMIs to create more content. When DMIs are recognized outside the virtual world, their connection and relationship with their followers are validated. Some supporting quotes are highlighted below:

"... so, there was this dancing workshop that I was conducting, and I met a few girls who were like, oh my God, we've seen you on Instagram, you work on Instagram, and we've seen you on the Lakme (brand) page. So, yes, there have been a few instances where my followers have met me when I am, you know, roaming or going from there." (Piya)

"I was on a trip in Agra and had no idea that someone would recognize me... So, I was at Fatehpur Sikri (Agra) when someone approached me and said, "I've been following you for quite some time, and we really like your content..." So, I was surprised when someone recognized me outside of my city." (Zia)

Guilt avoidance is one more reason for posting online regularly by the respondents. Jiya recalled her experience of not being active on Instagram for twelve days and how she felt guilty about it. Then, she posted

an explanation on Instagram to inform her followers. To quote: *"I was feeling worse for not shooting fresh videos. The constant fear and pressure (created by myself) had made me feel so bad"*.

Autonomous Motivation

Autonomous motivations are partially or fully driven by internal forces and classified into identified and intrinsic regulations (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

a. Identified Regulation

Identified regulations are voluntary. We found that DMIs perform different activities like capacity building, making effort and dual role management because of their relevance in life. Regarding capacity building, some respondents want to be actors, models, dancers, or digital stars and use social media platforms like Instagram to hone their abilities. The platforms are used as a practice ground where they learn how to communicate in front of the camera, engage with the audience, etc. To quote: *"I just want people to enjoy my videos, constantly grow and get more exposure so that I can become a big digital star and make a career out of it."* (Ved)

DMIs make significant efforts to create content, review products and perform live on social media platforms. DMIs work longer hours to make good content for their audience or brands.

To quote: *"So, I generally have to plan my day accordingly, and sometimes I do not get time even to breathe because I have to shoot and edit, then there are other brand promotions. There is a lot of work behind those videos. Even if we have to shoot a 30-second reel, we have to do makeup for one hour, and it takes such a huge amount of effort for which you have to have a lot of passion and time, and sometimes there are sleepless nights because I have to submit it to a product committee on time."* (Priya)

DMIs continue to manage the dual roles – reel and real. Some of the respondents are students or full-time working professionals. They keep on switching their roles as per their requirements. Even though managing two roles is challenging, most respondents said they are doing it willingly and balancing them. To quote: *"I always try to be more well-dressed whenever I go to the office. Earlier I just used to wear jeans and a colour top, very casual. But now, when I get up in the morning, I plan my day. I decide what to wear, and I dress myself so that if I get some free time, I can make some Instagram content from the office."* (Anita)

b. Intrinsic Regulation

Intrinsic regulation implies when one's own internal rules decide one's actions. Some of our respondents create content for personal enjoyment, happiness or satisfaction. There are two intrinsically motivated behaviours – being own boss and therapeutic.

Respondents enjoy being on Instagram because it gives them the feeling of being own boss. To quote: *"So, I always belonged to the camera and did modelling for two years in Lucknow till May (2014-16). So, it was my opinion that either in front of the camera or behind the camera seemed right to me. I'm the only boss here."* (Zia)

For some other respondents, being on social media platforms, making content, applying products and engaging with followers are therapeutic as it gives them the outlet for creativity, self-expression and connection with their followers. To quote: *"It's like I am pursuing my heart. It feels so great, so peaceful. Even though a lot of my time goes into content creation only, it gives me peace in the end."* (Hardeep)

Our findings about the back end indicate that controlled and autonomous motivations are important for DMIs and stimulate them to perform social media content-related activities. Controlled motivations give them internal or external reward for their work or efforts, while autonomous motivations call for actions that are totally driven by their own self. Nonetheless, both motivations, controlled and autonomous, leads to similar activities, and DMIs continue to engage in those activities with different orientation (Nix et al., 1999).

Front End

DMIs persuade their followers towards brand-centric content by performing different activities, which we call a front end or driver. Building on the PKM from an influence agent perspective, we refer to the drivers as target knowledge, topic knowledge and persuasion knowledge. We found that target knowledge assists with topic knowledge and persuasion knowledge. Moreover, we found persuasion knowledge is also being enhanced by topic knowledge.

Target Knowledge

Target knowledge is DMIs' understanding of their followers' characteristics, preferences, and the social media platform. These parameters help them in selecting and creating appropriate content.

Followers' preference is crucial as it determines the level of engagement with the content. Most respondents stated that they create content according to the needs and wants of their followers. Presently, short form videos, *reels*, are in high demand (Sprout Social Index, 2023). Reels are more interactive (Stubb & Colliander, 2019), engaging (Ki & Kim, 2019), entertaining (Lou & Yuan, 2019), convenient and save reading time for the users. So, DMIs are primarily creating content in the form of reels. A respondent, Jiya, highlighted how well she knows her target audience. Once, she had submitted a script for approval to a brand. The brand was dissatisfied and attempted to modify it. She argued that her audience would dislike the modifications which were not heeded. The content validated her predictions and received relatively few likes and comments compared to her previous posts.

Followers' characteristics influence the DMIs' decisions in selecting a brand. Characteristics such as gender or age category are highlighted often. Respondents talked about how cautiously brands are chosen for promotion as they are concerned about their audience. To quote: *"I choose brands according to my audience type. The brand should resonate with my audience, like when I got offers from gambling or alcoholic brands. I decided not to do that because my audiences are usually of below 18 categories. It might hamper their life, so personally, I take care of it."* (Ved)

Knowledge about the social media platforms is vital for the DMIs. Respondents not only assess their target audience while selecting a brand, but also understand the social media platform they are serving. They stated the varied functionalities of social media platforms, such as Instagram, where they can add brand page links to their stories or shop icons to their posts. As a result, they also segment their branded content based on platform features.

Topic Knowledge

Topic knowledge is having information about the product or service of a brand on which DMIs create content. DMIs use their knowledge to enhance product information and to shape their target audience's opinions (Kay et al., 2020). We identify three parameters that will help DMIs exercise their topic knowledge: content type, due diligence, and experiential knowledge.

Prior literature has considered DMIs as experts in a specific area (Gan et al., 2019), as they share professional knowledge on social media. These shared knowledge and experiences are perceived by followers not merely as DMIs' personal opinions but also as an indicator of their competence (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014). As a result, brand selection is crucial for DMIs. The more the brand aligns with their area of expertise, the less likely followers are to decamp (Gan et al., 2019). Many respondents stated they exclusively select brands specific to their content types, such as beauty, fashion, travel, or food. To quote: *"I deliberately choose those brands that fit well with what I talk about. My followers like my fashion content. It would be unjust to them to show them some other type of content. They may not like it, and honestly, it might affect their trust in my content. Oh, God! It gives me nightmares. Each of my followers is important to me"*. (Arun)

DMIs revealed that they conduct due diligence before posting any brand content online. They research the brand and comprehend its product and attributes so that they can communicate well with the followers and

discuss the products' features along with their pros and cons. By showcasing the knowledge, they persuade followers towards brand-centric content (Loureiro et al., 2017). For instance, one of our respondents, Aasha, is regarded as a famous influencer in Ludhiana. She makes fashion content specifically for short-height girls. Before sharing brand-related content, she learns about the brand and decodes its offerings and sizing options. Her posts not only showcase outfits but also provide styling tips and know-how.

DMIs also enhance their topic knowledge through experiential knowledge. They use the product or service on themselves as a testing ground and post testimonials describing its attributes or 'how to use' videos (Kay et al., 2020). This direct feedback is more relatable and credible to followers than celebrity influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Respondents said they usually take a week to use the product and give honest reviews to their audience. Sometimes, product usage causes adverse reactions to their skin. However, these reactions don't affect their loyalty to their audience. A respondent, Priya, shared her experience: *"... it was this latest collaboration with a company. I'm not going to name it. But this was the latest collaboration just one or two weeks back, and I received their face wash and serum, and I applied it; it gave rashes all over my face. I could not shoot for like one and a half weeks. So, I choose the option of refunding the payment to them because then again, I'm not going to lie to my audience."*

Persuasion Knowledge

Our data analysis identified three parameters of persuasion knowledge- attractiveness, social interaction, and accountability.

Earlier research (Pereira et al., 2014) indicates that attractive posts by DMIs generate a higher engagement and response rate than traditional ads. DMIs understand their target audience well and present more candidly and authentically (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). Most respondents mentioned that they use video plug-ins such as voice effects or comical and funny expression tools for making the content more amusing, interesting and engaging. To share a quote: *"My videos are mostly based on entertainment. I get good engagement on those posts where I integrate brands' products in my content, like using some fictional characters and voiceovers rather than just simply saying about the features of brands product". (Jiya)*

DMIs play the role of communicator between a brand and followers by responding to individual queries of followers, thus stimulating the purchasing decisions. This social interaction is essential. Followers could simply observe the DMIs' facial expressions and behaviour while using the product, making it feel like a casual conversation with a friend (Wu et al., 2022). Respondents said that they interact with followers and respond to queries related to brands' products either in the comment section or through direct messages. To show their responsiveness to other users, respondents sometimes take screenshots of their followers' queries, post them in their stories, and tag the brand pages. To quote: *"There was a hair-related product, so people message me how's it? Does it help in controlling hair fall?... also, some people ask questions about skin products, like, I have pimples. Can I use this product?" So, people keep asking for suggestions, and I reply to them." (Saad)*

DMIs know that they are accountable to followers as they trust them, and their actions affect their purchasing decisions. So, while recommending the brand, DMIs first reviewed the product and then talked about both the pros and cons of the same. A respondent opined that *"it doesn't look like we are promoting the brand blindly. We are answerable to them (followers). They trust us, and that is why they are connected to us." (Hardeep)*

Overall, our findings in the front-end section highlight the importance of DMIs' target knowledge (whom and where to target), which determines what to say (topic knowledge) and how to say (persuasion knowledge) to their followers related to a product or service in enabling the social commerce. Specifically, understanding their followers' tastes and preferences helps DMIs to work with appropriate brands and create compelling content that resonates with their audience. Moreover, persuasion knowledge is also enhanced by understanding the topic of content.

Social Commerce

In the above section, we discussed how DMIs leverage their understanding of the target audience, topic expertise and persuasion knowledge to create persuasive content. This content resonates with the followers and persuades them towards a brand, enabling social commerce. This section will discuss the resulting outcomes of social commerce enabled by DMIs, call to action and conversion.

Call to action involves suggesting followers to click the link, like, share or comment on the brand-related posts (Oltra et al., 2021). Basically, influencers encourage followers to participate and interact with brand posts by making engaging content. Respondents shared some insights about their followers' call to action behaviour. To share an example: *"If 800 or 1000 people are seeing my story. So, I get around 30% to 40% click on the brand page link"*. (Aasha)

Another related parameter we identified is conversion. This tangible outcome showcases the impact of DMIs' persuasive ability and their capacity to sway consumer behaviour. Some respondents revealed that they get extra incentives when somebody buys using their discount or coupon codes. Vicky disclosed that he received a direct message from a follower saying, *"Because of your review, I bought this product"*. This interaction not only reaffirms the DMIs' credibility but also highlights the influence they hold in driving social commerce. To quote: *"I'm telling you, from my insight, it shows that 50% and 60% of the people go for the link and they use my discount code."* (Anshi)

Overall, our findings reveal that DMIs social commerce motivations stimulate them to acquire knowledge. Each of the knowledge systems is helping DMIs in driving the social commerce outcomes - click to action and conversion.

Discussion

We attempted to contribute to the existing knowledge on how DMIs in tier-II towns drive social commerce and what motivates them. Our findings and conceptual framework showed that DMIs use their target, topic, and persuasion knowledge to persuade the followers' purchasing behaviour, thereby enabling social commerce. Further, we explained the different types of motivations, categorized into controlled and autonomous motivations, that encourage DMIs to acquire knowledge and drive social commerce.

Theoretical Contribution

The current study makes three contributions. Firstly, it contributes to the PKM research by determining the elements of target knowledge, topic knowledge and persuasion knowledge in the social commerce context. Although many researchers have applied PKM, the influence agent (DMIs) perspective has not been examined (Kirmani & Ferraro, 2017) as extensively as persuasion target perspective (Ham, 2017; Kirmani & Campbell, 2004). We showed that target knowledge assists topic and persuasion knowledge, overall enabling social commerce. Further, persuasion knowledge is also being enhanced by topic knowledge. As topic knowledge implies DMIs knowledge about the product or service to be promoted, this would help them make their content more understandable and representable (persuasion knowledge).

Secondly, we contribute to the OIT literature. While existing studies on OIT have focused only on the domain of education, job search, sports, and health care (Gaston et al., 2013; James et al., 2019; Malmberg et al., 2015; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). We advanced OIT by understanding the DMIs' orientation of motivations to exert persuasion in a social commerce context. We categorized the motivations into two broader types: controlled and autonomous. We argue that under controlled motivation, DMIs are motivated because of external regulation, such as material reward and/or introjected regulation, such as social acceptance. On the other hand, in autonomous motivation, DMIs are motivated due to identified regulations such as capacity building and/or intrinsic motivation, such as being own boss. Our study highlighted that both motivations influence DMIs to acquire and apply knowledge, thereby persuading followers towards social commerce. In doing so, the orientation of motivation may be different, such as they may be doing it for reward, recognition, or/and being own boss. Therefore, both controlled and autonomous motivations lead to similar activities, inferring individuals approach them with different orientations (Nix et al., 1999).

Lastly, this study has bridged the gap between two streams of literature- social commerce and digital influencers, specifically DMIs. Social commerce has mostly been viewed from the user (Biucky et al., 2017) or firm perspectives (Braojos et al., 2019). Further, by integrating PKM and OIT in a social commerce context, we learnt how DMIs leverage their knowledge (target, topic and persuasion) to persuade followers towards brand-centric content, leading to social commerce. Also, understand the social commerce motivations that encourage DMIs to engage in such processes. We also found the outcomes of social commerce that DMIs enable- call to action and conversion. While PKM helps us understand how DMIs influence followers, OIT extends our understanding of DMIs' orientation of motivations behind such persuasion. Thus, both theories contribute to our collective understanding of this emerging phenomenon – DMIs and social commerce.

Managerial Implications

Our findings have practical implications for marketing managers and social media platforms like Instagram. Managers attempting to connect with customers in tier-II towns could employ DMIs whose primary motivations are not predominantly financial. DMIs understand the followers well and also create aligned content in the local language. Furthermore, since DMIs dedicate much of their time to Instagram, they become well-versed in its features. Consequently, managers could give them creative autonomy to produce content to persuade followers, thereby enabling social commerce. The study also provides insights into what DMIs seek from platforms like Instagram. Firstly, Instagram should offer transparency regarding how its algorithm works, ensuring that DMIs understand how their content is ranked and displayed to users. Secondly, it should specify the duration of inconsistency that leads to a shadow ban for DMIs' accounts. Understanding the needs of DMIs is crucial for Instagram, as they play a significant role in attracting, engaging and retaining the users who identify with them and their content, eventually expanding its user base beyond metropolitan cities.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study has a few limitations that could be addressed by future research. Firstly, our focus was limited to DMIs from tier-II towns. Future research may validate our framework in other influencer contexts and with different persuading tactics like cultural capital and perceived expertise (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Secondly, the study focuses on DMIs' brand collaborations and how they lead to social commerce. Future research may investigate emerging social commerce market segments called giveaways or blog sales. Influencers receive many products during brand collaborations. Sometimes, they sell these products to their followers at a discounted price or have a lucky draw. Thirdly, DMIs may negatively affect followers while driving social commerce.² However, we didn't consider this effect. Future studies may explore this. Fourthly, through qualitative data, we argued that motivations (controlled and autonomous) result in similar activities, but DMIs have different orientations. Future studies through quantitative data could measure which kind of motivation has greater importance for DMIs that impact their actions when driving social commerce. Lastly, this study has been conducted in India, where social commerce is at a nascent stage. Future research may validate our framework in other geographical regions or countries.

Conclusion

Social commerce has been gaining popularity in India. With the increase in internet penetration in tier-II towns, consumers are active on social media platforms where they tend to receive information on products or services from trusted individuals. Evidence indicates that people trust DMIs as they perceive them as 'people like me' and connect with them (Agarwal, 2020). However, understanding on how DMIs are driving the social commerce is limited. We proposed a conceptual framework explaining the process through which DMIs are driving the social commerce, their social commerce motivations, and outcomes. Based on qualitative data collected from DMIs of tier-II towns on Instagram, the present study demonstrates that DMIs leverage their target knowledge, topic knowledge and persuasion knowledge to persuade followers towards brand-centric content. While target knowledge helps DMIs to select appropriate brands and create compelling content. Understanding the topic of content also enhanced persuasion knowledge, thereby

² We thank one of the reviewers for pointing this out.

enabling social commerce like call to action and conversion. Furthermore, we also found that DMIs' social commerce motivations that is controlled and autonomous, affect their knowledge seeking behaviour.

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