



10. Influencer Marketing as a Credibility Building Tool: A Case Study of Indian Ed Tech Platforms

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Abstract

Because of the growing mistrust of customers and rivalry among the fast-growing Indian ed tech industry, trustworthiness is an important determinant of the success of Indian ed tech businesses in winning the confidence and favour of students. To achieve credibility, the Indian ed tech companies are resorting to influencers, ranging through academicians and teachers to movie stars. The present research examines the effectiveness of the well-established Indian online learning platforms such as Testbook, Unacademy, and PhysicsWallah in promoting the credibility of their learners through the use of influencers. The present paper explores how online learning platforms can gain credibility by using subject matter experts, micro influencers, superstars, and learner testimonials to promote online learning. It is anchored on the secondary research and researches on different campaigns and literature available on the ed tech industry. The results indicate that the influencers are very important in online learning platforms as their credibility with regards to relevance, reliability, and authenticity determine the reputation of online learning platforms. Each online learning platform possesses its process of building credibility. Unacademy applies the superstar and teacher branding strategies, and PhysicsWallah focuses on the credibility of the founder and community participation. The Testbook mostly focuses on expert instructors and student testimonials. As per the present study, the compatibility of the influencers with educational philosophy is the attribute, which is most significant to define the credibility of Indian online learning platforms.

Keywords: influencer marketing, Ed Tech India, brand credibility, social media, PhysicsWallah, Unacademy, Testbook, and digital trust.

Introduction

Online learning has over the past decade led to a paradigm shift in the education sector in India owing to its fast development. The online learning materials and support offered through internet based tools and applications are also known as educational technology, or Ed tech. Ed tech companies are online solutions and products which provide teaching and learning content,



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including Physics Wallah, Unacademy, Byju's, and Testbook, to millions of students in India who are pursuing professional courses and entrance exams. The problem of credibility is also present because Ed tech is a highly prospective industry that is used by millions of students, but on the other hand, credibility is the factor that can make or break in this industry.

The shift in the education sector in India due to the use of the rapid growth of online learning has led to a paradigm shift in the last decade. Online learning materials and support offered to Some Indian Ed Tech firms have also adopted influencers as a way of addressing this problem. An influencer is a person with a strong group of loyal and committed followers and the capacity to influence their thoughts and actions. As far as this study is concerned, the definition also entails educators or subject matter experts, micro influencers, and even celebrities that may endorse an educational brand. The concept behind this approach is that a reputable or powerful person, or person, sponsors the particular platform, and hence students will readily accept it.

The concept of influencers is very fascinating in the Indian situation and significantly influences decision making in education. Students make their judgments on the foundation of reels and instructor personality, they rely on reviews of instructors on Instagram and are affected by popular YouTube instructors. The advertisement of influencers appears to be more authentic and natural compared to the standard aspects of advertising.

In this essay, the influence of influencers to the big EdTech companies to gain authority and develop trust in the industry will be analyzed. PhysicsWallah, Unacademy and Testbook will also be analyzed in depth to identify how each of the companies utilises educators and influential voices to further their own status and reputation.

To determine the means of gaining influence and trust with the help of the influencers, the study will include secondary sources of information about campaigns and brand stories only.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the role of influencers as used by Indian Ed Tech brands to create credibility and trust in the minds of learners.
2. To compare and contrast influencer strategies of PhysicsWallah, Unacademy and Testbook by applying case based examples.
3. To determine dimensions of influencer credibility in the Ed Tech branding situation.
4. To investigate the role of language, regional targeting and testimonial based marketing as to perceived brand authenticity.



Methodology

The case based technique and secondary data are used in this study. Every brand has received campaign and content information, such as press releases, news stories, and other publicly available material from the firms' blogs and social media accounts. Where feasible, content from both YouTube and Instagram accounts was reviewed. This research is completely secondary in nature, with no surveys or interviews conducted. The techniques used by each business are demonstrated through examples such as advertising, influencer campaigns, and testimonial videos.

Literature Review

The source credibility and persuasion theory has a historical track of influencer marketing. The credibility theory of sources holds that the origin of the message is vital and important in the persuasion process. The disruptive nature of the work of the earlier scholars on endorser credibility by Ohanian (1990) identified expertise and credibility to be the most important elements, which have a critical influence over the persuasion process. In the scale discussed above, distance between the expertise of the endorser and credibility and appeal will dictate credibility of the person making the endorsement. The three factors are justified in the modern day research in the framework of social media. The thesis presented in the article by Chekima et al. (2020) was that in social media, the appeal, credibility, and competence of the influencer play a significant role in the success of the advertisement. Secondly, the dimension of relationship is brought by the social media influence to the members of the group who bear the influence in a unidirectional process with the influencer. The connection formed by the followers towards the influencer is the trust to face to face interaction. According to Horton and Wohl (1956), the above event is argued to play the role of triggering the emergence of credibility and authenticity. Indeed, Jain and Schultz (2024) explained how the above relations in the Indian context led to the establishment of 68% of trust in the opinions compared to the official advertisement. The fact above has thus been used to support the credibility of the influencer is thus most commonly operationalised in the terms of expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness. The concept of attractiveness that we call is gravitas and likeability. These three points are properly selected in the model developed by Ohanian (1990), and originally applicable in the framework of studies of celebrities, which have been common throughout the literature on social media influencer marketing. As illustration, Coutinho et al. of 2023 are quite clear on how they are researching on athlete endorsers on the platform as a form of social media influencer, and have made it clear how a combination of attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise is the reason why the influencer is credible. Chekima et al. of 2020 have also done so, and they have utilized the above three facets to which they have stated similarly the facets are the strongest predictors of the influence power of a given influencer. Recent literature also further branched off of this three dimensional definition and assumes that authenticity or content and influencer congruence also contribute to the definition of this aspect, at least in determining some types or categories of influencer marketing, Wiedmann and von Metzenheim in



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2020. Attractiveness of the influencer is the most commonly used form of credibility and as a matter of fact this is the result of a subsequent path of credibility, it is clear that literature explains the fact that the more attractive an individual, the more people assume he was the more expert.

In addition to this, influencer marketing is being repurposed to other industries, including education and the EdTech industry to generate credibility and accessibility to the target population through recommendation and help of respected representatives of the brand that the target student group recognizes and likes. According to various reports in the market, the most important aspect that needs to be noted in influencer marketing in the education and EdTech industry is that the star campaign of influencer marketing in education is fueled by the authority of the teacher and not gloss of the celebrity. Said differently, influencer marketing in the context of education and education technology is executed by the influencer him/herself that makes authentic content when creating tutorials and testimonies on behalf of the brand that they are promoting and representing. Various researches on the matter determine that influencer marketing use in the social marketing campaign of the EdTech industry is effective in boosting the likelihood of potential student joining the institution by increasing the potential student visibility and familiarity and future contact and emotions with the brand by leveraging the social proof created by the influencer marketing campaign that has significantly increased the intention of the potential student enrolling in the institution by the pro visible power of the trusted educators nod of approval.

The influence induced role of credibility has assumed a special significance in the Indian EdTech sector. Market place in India has been facing rapid digitisation and mobile internet penetration thereby ensuring that the content production process has been democratised. Consequently, at present, the number of students exposed to tutor driven channels and edu influencers on social media increases. Through research, it has been found that the Indian customers are still very much concerned with authenticity. In fact, one such example is that, 68 per cent Indians believe that influencers provide a good source of product recommendations compared to any other source; that includes the company adverts. In this case, an influencer can be reported as being a known teacher either through his or her or other channels. Market analysis shows that EdTech influence driven marketing in Indian setting is not only is a matter of association with celebrities. Rather, in this case, influence motivated marketing is aimed at taking advantage of [selves] of the influence and trust of influencers. Severity and use of believable professionals in this context have been used to provide a reason which can not be sceptical of online courses. In essence, this kind of strategy will have generated an aspect of credibility.



Case Study: PhysicsWallah

Branding as subject experts: PhysicsWallah (PW) is also known to have subject expert branding, which comprises of its founder and its branding expert, Alakh Pandey. Originally, Pandey began his free physics lectures on YouTube in 2014 and its teaching style, which incorporates informal remarks in Hindi and his own stories is what has become part of its branding and differentiation as a business entity. Pertinaciously, the use of celebrities as a business entity does not constitute part of its business entity as identified by one specific analysis: PW marketing is the inverse of what you find in mainstream edtech. No influencers. No celebrity campaigns. No push ads. One teacher, one camera and millions of believers. In this case, however, its founder is its influencer and its expert.

Regional targeting also enhances the socially relevant nature of the persona created by Pandey. PhysicsWallah has particularly created the site and material in a Hindi First and regional style. They include; as an example, PW launched Regional language classes and Tier 2-3 city Offline Pathshalas to accommodate the non English speaking masses. This is a strong evidence of cultural relevance. The story of PW expanding by free classes on YouTube to 20 million downloads of its app and a 10,000 crore valuation without flashy ads or celebrity endorsers has also been put in the spotlight, as has been discussed in one of the analyses.

Community and Testimonials: On top of being in a niche market, PW uses its community of learners, rather than influencers, as well. Marketing strategy of laying stress on user generated content, word of mouth is remarkable. The leader of PW, Pandey has huge Telegram channels of more than 200,000 learners and there, learners share their notes and success stories. According to a marketing success story, user generated success stories and testimonials can be used to generate organic traffic in PW. Essentially, the content clients at PW are paid influencers via word of mouth and sharing. It goes as far as to be a policy at PW that implements the no influencer rule, though it did not pay influencers, instead empowering students to be micro influencers. Indicatively, the best students at PW share their experiences of how they achieved the best positions and access resources at PW via social media.

To the point, the influencer marketing strategy of PhysicsWallah is organic and founder led. It uses the person of Alakh Pandey as the main influencer; he is credible in reason of being a real person and because of his teaching abilities. The brand does not use any outside agent; it creates an open community and educates in the language of the region to create more credibility.



Case Study: Unacademy

Celebrity & Educator Partnerships: It is the opposite of this case with Unacademy which has entered into a chain of celebrity and educator partnerships. In 2022, the brand released a brand film in association with one of the most successful cricketing stars, M.S. Dhoni, in a campaign called Lesson No. 7. The 85 second advertisement involved an allegorical use of life story of Dhoni where Dhoni broke through a train and a meteor to demonstrate breaking through exams. Nevertheless, as explained by the Chief Marketing Officer of Unacademy, the inclusion of Dhoni is an indicator of perseverance in a brand as he supports our learners and we are very proud of this film and Dhoni who helped us to accomplish our mission. Once more, in 2024, another promotion was done with Sachin Tendulkar in an Unacademy Learning Centre. The advertisement campaign was an illustration of Sachin and Unacademy teachers celebrating a learner prior to the examination and a title of The Power behind You. The campaign presented the fact that Tendulkar would contribute perseverance to the brand, who also added that the applause of his fans is the one motivation he needs to deliver, or in the case of Unacademy, the students. This iconic campaign by this celebrity advertises the iconic qualifications of Tendulkar and Dhoni as a way of establishing confidence to the brand.

Influencers & Educators: Mega influencers comprise the majority of their existing collaborations, but Unacademy also has educational influencers, who are a niche genre of their own. In one of their educational programs in CA (Chartered Accountancy) courses, in this case, they collaborated with a total of 24, middle-tier micro influencers on the platform of Instagram. These influencers were CA qualified educational influencers, memes and educational influencers with followers in the accounting and finance students among others. They shared stories, reels and posts of an interactive nature in a period of four weeks that created an unceasing buzz around the new CA batch in the market. (As an example, one of the trending educational influencers, Commerce Memes, was caught dancing in a pink saree, boasting of their CA course which was released by Unacademy)

Targeting to regional languages: Unacademy was able to reach more audiences with regional language content as well. It offers live courses in the Hindi and Marathi as well as Bengali and Punjabi and Gujarati and Telugu and Bhojpuri and more. Using the platform and online social networks, Unacademy presents the best teachers who teach to students in their native language. They were under teacher Dhvani Gandhi who taught Business Studies in Marathi on Unacademy. Accountancy classes in Gujarati were led by another teacher, CA Jaydip Thakkar. These contribute to the inclusiveness of learning; they indicate respect of regional cultures. Although not all regional teachers can be called as influencers in the pure sense of the word, the fact that Unacademy



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promotes the classes in regional languages shows that the model is not indifferent to the needs of different students and even can appeal to more individuals who like to learn the content in the regional language.

Altogether, it is evident that the strategy used by Unacademy to use celebrity endorsement, teacher brand influencers, and local languages content can assist it to become credible and gain trust among users and customers. The high profile endorsement exercises that need prominent celebrity like MS Dhoni and Tendulkar are used to attract masses and get the attention of the media that is needed to create hype and reach the biggest audience possible, but engagement with influencers in local subject matter areas are used to maintain engagement and reach among smaller audience segments on the social media sites like YouTube and others.

Case Study: Testbook

Advanced coaches and authentic communication: Testbook, a Govt exams preparations ed tech startup has bent the rule. They have been more concerned with faculty features and an exam group, than face forward communication. In the first digital brand campaign (2021), Testbook featured typical students who needed a quiet sitting place to take exams, then presented an introduction to the app solution of Testbook and the live coaching service by our qualified coaches. One of its founders clarified that we wanted to demonstrate the comfort of the learning process and our live classes with the best faculty, one-on-one guidance, and exam tips by our professional coaches. Testbook has in this context laid more emphasis on value proposition in terms of professionalism (qualified instructors). They have adopted the audiovisual method, but these ads do not feature any external and glamorous influencers such as Super Stars, but ordinary and company mentors.

Testimonial based content: Testbook also builds on the trust by being filled with success stories of their students. On its testbook, Testbook boasts of success stories of real candidates who have used the services of Testbook to succeed in competitive exams. The blog publication on Testbook has a series called Testimonials that indicates actual names of students who have successfully broken competitive examinations using the services of Testbook. As a clear example, in 2019, the Testbook publishing website posted a blog post to congratulate as many people as possible in terms of the IBPS Clerk/PO exams and added the following: the words of their sincerity are going to help many of the aspiring candidates look up and follow Testbook in their exam preparation. These successful stories are posted by Testbook with photos and interviews of such successful students; example of this is Testbook superstars which are video interviews with top scoring students. Testbook continuously releases these success stories to provide potential students with social proof



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by letting these successful students refer potential students to the services of Testbook to get real life results in the form of pieces of peer testimonial content which wonders when placed online to create online trust and increase app downloads.

Collaboration with influencers (to a smaller degree): Testbook does collaborate with influencers in some degree, but in a more subtle way. The YouTube series of Testbook Superstars is reduced to the level of engaging brand ambassadors among successful students (they may or may not have a name beyond the testing environment but still have a fan following). Testbook also sells courses in Hindi language (e.g. videos of Hindi language by faculty Aviral Vishwakarma) so that it can serve the masses. The method that Testbook takes in this case is more of engaging the real voices inside the field, the top coaches and real students.

To summarize, legitimacy of Testbook is founded on the development of quality content and user-generated evidence, including smart and qualified faculty, known as top faculty, and real-user reviews of students, unlike utilization of external influence with celebrity endorsement.

Cross Case Comparison

In these three instances we find points of difference and points of similarity:

Type of Influencer: PhysicsWallah has the type of influencer of founder or the teacher. The influencer type in Unacademy is the superstar and teachers of the platform and the site has both Dhoni and Sachin as superstars or influencers.

Content Platforms: PW uses many platforms such as YouTube and community platforms to trust and establish trust. Unacademy embraces numerous platforms of marketing operations and sets digital content creators and celebrities hand in hand. Testbook is primarily focused on video testimonials and social/digital media advertising without having a high profile of celebrity involvement.

Language/Location Targeting: PhysicsWallah and Unacademy have a very good localised strategy. The Tier 2/3 India can easily be targeted by PW approach of Hindi first. These two platforms also hold classes in a number of local languages. Even though Testbook is also offered in Hindi language, it has mainly focused on national market.

Use of community: All of them use word of mouth to some degree. On PhysicsWallah, as well as Testbook, there are success stories of students. Whereas Unacademy uses the instrument of communal backing, as in the instance of teachers backing a student, as Sachin, what Unacademy has could contribute was a community of teachers, which exists within an influencer community, composed of tens of thousands of teachers on its site.

Mechanisms of trust: The PW puts trust in authenticity and consistency, Pandey has been conducting lectures over the years and has established a trust-based atmosphere. Trusts social authority in The Unacademy by placing in cricket stars and thousands of teachers. The Testbook



believes in testimonial evidence and didactic power, posting results of success and good methods of examinations.

All of them make use of testimonial or proof based signals despite the differences. All is pervaded with the student success story. The PhysicsWallah and Testbook rely on the user stories, whereas the Unacademy ad draws a metaphor of student success through the examples of famous personalities. Important factors are summarised in Table 1:

Aspect	PhysicsWallah	Unacademy	Testbook
Main influencer(s)	Founder Alakh Pandey and teachers (internal)	Celebrities (Dhoni, Sachin), educators, micro influencers	Educators (in house), successful students
Strategy style	Content first, organic	Multi tier influencer + celeb	Testimonial and product focused
Example campaigns	Free YouTube lectures, no ads	Brand films (“Lesson No. 7”), Instagram CA series	“Indian Dad vs Exam” videos, student interviews
Language focus	Strong Hindi and regional	Classes in 10+ Indian languages	Hindi and English courses
Testimonials	Student videos, Telegram shares	Social media chatter, centric ads	Blog posts, YouTube success stories
Community use	Telegram/WhatsApp groups	Unacademy educator network	Discussion forums, coaching chats

Table 1: Cross case comparison of Unacademy, PhysicsWallah and Testbook

Discussion: Credibility and Trust Building

Examples above reveal general principles of the trust development under the influencer marketing strategy in the EdTech sphere. According to a research paper on influencer marketing, the influencer marketing theory states that the perceived competence and authenticity of the influencer is crucial to creating credibility. But in the previous cases it is imperative that there has to be some congruence between the influencer and product. The fact that PhysicsWallah has made it known that Pandey sir is a lecturer in one of these classes makes his promotion of the site genuine since he is inseparably associated with the product. The application of Dhoni or Sachin in the video



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about the Unacademy makes the site true to itself because it has character traits such as perseverance and success, which a student desires to accomplish.

It is also indicated by research that explicit paid endorsements can also reduce trust in influencers. In the environment of EdTech, such behavior of paid influencers might render them look insincere. Unacademy does not have this problem since they connect the experience of the celebrity with learning (Lesson 7" is a reflection of learning exam perseverance). Moreover, at Unacademy the paid influencer endorsement is integrated with on site teacher views so as not to give the impression of commercialisation. PhysicsWallah achieves this without the need to take into account the possible impact of paid influencers since it does not contain any paid influencers. This is basically evaded by Testbook since the opinions on the students are marketed as very natural. Language and community based targeting also assist in the development of trust. The fact that learning is done in their local languages means that they learn about their local cultures and they are likely to respect them and thus, the vernacular speakers will find it more plausible. The policy of Hindi first adopted by PW made PW more acceptable to lower income students with low English proficiency. In fact, this strategy can create some type of trust to Unacademy as well, as it provides educational material in a variety of languages. Conversely, credibility to students who prefer regional languages may be jeopardized should it only provide the learning opportunities in English or Hindi.

Finally, these illustrations demonstrate that the kind of influencer once again is a factor. Experts in the field (teachers and coaches) are more credible in the educational community than glamour influencers. The tutors of the Unacademy themselves, most of which are ex toppers or high achievers in their respective subjects, serve as a trust anchor over a more extended time; students are used to names like established CA or IIT aspirant tutor and will opt to subscribe to them. The strategy of PhysicsWallah once again is based on faith on the teacher (Pandey) and his students. The fact that Testbook has once again said that the faculty is top, sounds like an authoritative speech. Whichever way, the most effective endorsements are those of the experts or persons who have hands on experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Indian EdTech start ups employ the variable of influence differently to develop brand legitimacy. Although PhysicsWallah stresses on the aspect of the authentic founder, the influence element here involves only the founder and his peer group, but does not include the influence of the celebrity. Although Unacademy focuses on the concept of Synergy between Celebrities and Creators, it unites the national brands such as Sachin and Dhoni, education



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influencers specialised in certain fields, and language based professors. In the same manner, the element of Testimonial/Expert Coaches Credentials is defined by Testbook.

They all share the purpose of a mix of credibility of the influencers and instructional value. Perceived competence, sincerity and relevance provide credibility. By accessing an influencer that aligns with their educational value (engaging teachers, doers, and famous leaders) these firms can use the influencer to access an avenue of transfer of trust to their own brands. The above is in contrast to the fact that in Ed Tech platforms, influencer marketing is not necessarily similar to a normal commercial campaign; it also blunts any boundaries that might exist between the instructors and the influencers. The video of PhysicsWallah, No influencer, shows that a company can also practice trust transfer without hiring any influencers.

A lesson that can be learned by educators and marketers is that sincerity is a lot. It could be the best educator in video classes, a message of a great cricketer, or a successful individual telling his/her story. There are credible learning messages that convince potential learners. The topics of future research could be actual statistics of the effectiveness of the tactics mentioned here (such as the growth of enrollment) or futuristic ones (TikTok influencers). Alternatively, credibility can require the true interaction of professionals who are knowledgeable of, and have interest in, learning.

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