Beyond Marketing: The Institutionalisation of Influencers within the Public Relations Framework of India

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Abstract

The digital media ecosystem has broadened the definition of public relations beyond conventional press relations and one-way communications. Influencers are no longer simply an add-on to marketing campaigns. Influencers are now an essential role in the way organizations develop awareness, legitimacy, and trust. As cultural intermediaries, influencers co-create brand narratives, express organizational values, and help organizations listen and engage in a two-way dialogue with publics. Due to their perceived credibility and relatability, influencers tend to help bridge a gap between institutions and audiences, and as such, influencers have become even more important in media relations, stakeholder dialogue and community-building. Specifically, Indian brands are institutionalising these practices and embedding influencer engagement into a continuous public relations activity instead of treating it simply as a promotional tool.

This research utilizes a qualitative case study design to examine two prominent brand crises—Nykaa and FabIndia—focusing on both effective and ineffective influencer-driven public relations responses. Official brand communications, social media content, news articles, and trade assessments were gathered and analysed using qualitative content analysis, with coding categories centered on speed, tone, transparency, and digital innovation.

The data indicate that Nykaa effectively utilized influencers as co-creators of narratives and reputation safeguards, but FabIndia's inability to engage influencers rendered its campaign susceptible to cultural backlash. The cases collectively demonstrate that influencer integration transforms public relations from media-relations-focused approaches to networked, relationship-oriented practices, wherein legitimacy is co-managed with digital audiences.

Keywords: Crisis Communication; Public Relations; Influencers; Digital Media; India; Nykaa, Jash-e-Riwaaz

Introduction

Public Relations (PR) has traditionally centered on media relations, reputation management, and the cultivation of stakeholder trust, with journalists and institutional media serving as the principal gatekeepers (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In the digital age, traditional communication channels have been disrupted by the emergence of social media, where brand issues can rapidly grow into significant crises. Viral indignation, exacerbated by hashtags, memes, and influencer discourse, imposes unparalleled pressure on corporations to react swiftly and strategically (Coombs, 2007; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2012).

In India, where there are over 800 million internet users and a digitally engaged youth demographic, virality has emerged as a crucial aspect of corporate communication. Public discourse is both rapid and

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culturally nuanced, rendering crisis management a very intricate endeavor. Although global research has investigated digital crisis communication and influencer marketing, a significant portion of this scholarship is based in Western contexts (Fearn Banks, 2016; Freberg, 2020). Influencers are frequently analysed within the contexts of marketing and consumer behaviour rather than as strategic public relations agents. Consequently, there is limited understanding of the integration of influencers into public relations functions, including media relations, reputation management, and stakeholder engagement. In the Indian context, empirical research on influencer-driven public relations is scarce, despite notable brand crises that highlight the increasing importance of influencers in narrative formation (Dhanesh, 2017; Sriramesh, 2009).

A distinct gap exists: the necessity to investigate how influencers are redefined as central figures in public relations and what this indicates about the evolution of the discipline in non-Western contexts. This study addresses the inadequacies of conventional public relations techniques in crisis management within the context of virality, highlighting the necessity for firms to adapt their strategies by incorporating influencers into public relations practices. The research seeks to examine the motivations, procedures, and changes related to the incorporation of influencers into public relations, utilizing Indian brand crises as empirical examples.

Public Relations has been transformed into real-time, data-rich, multi-platform management rooted in authenticity and direct participation, which supports this shift (Karnavati University paper, 2025). Influencers are stepping into growing responsibilities beyond marketing, as they participate in story creation and become rapid-response agents during crises in such a way that they resemble public relations more than they do advertising.

This study emphasizes public relations and crisis communication scholarship by positioning influencers as catalysts for disciplinary change rather than simply promotional tools. It emphasizes the disciplinary shift from an institution-centric to a networked practice of public relations. It highlights the lack of non-Western studies in the literature, situating the findings in India where digital virality coexists with cultural sensitivity uniquely. It introduces a framework for practitioners engaging with influencers as part of long-term reputation management and crisis communications strategies. It is designed to provide practitioners with practical knowledge about the management of trust, authenticity, and narrative control in volatile digital environments.

Review of Literature

Crisis communication research has typically been about understanding the strategic relationship between the type of crisis and the response. Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is a primary model that suggests organizations should adapt their actions according to the crisis type, victim, accidental or preventable. The model highlights the importance of assigning blame and provides possible options like deny, apologize, or take corrective action depending on the context.

Excellence Theory, developed by Grunig (1992), articulates two-way symmetrical communications that favor dialogic engagement and not only one-way messaging to create credibility and durability. However, both theories were created within the scope of the defining media, where crises happen at a slower pace and institutions had more dominance over the narrative.

Newer theories such as Relationship Management Theory, take public relations away from a reactive task toward practitioner activity associated with maintaining long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders. Originating from Ledingham's 2003 study, the concept depicts organizational public relations encompassing more than message sending to managing relationships that shape public perceptions and behaviors.

In the digital age, these interactions are being facilitated by social media influencers, who serve as trust brokers and cultural intermediaries. Theories of the Digital Public Sphere, as proposed by Habermas (2006) and Papacharissi (2010), highlight the co-creation of discourse by networked publics, rendering legitimacy reliant on dialogic involvement instead of unidirectional communication. These concepts collectively indicate that influencers and networked publics now undertake functions traditionally dominated by journalists, including issue framing, agenda building, and legitimacy authentication.

Global studies highlight the rapidly evolving nature of crisis communication in the digital era. Research indicates that the velocity and tone of brand replies frequently influence audience views more profoundly than adherence to SCCT techniques. Influencers are generally analyzed from the perspectives of marketing and

consumer behavior, primarily as brand endorsers or content amplifiers, rather than as strategic public relations agents. While Western crisis communication research increasingly acknowledges the role of digital publics in exacerbating indignation, few studies have incorporated influencers into the fundamental frameworks of public relations and crisis management.

Scholarship focused on Asia has consistently advocated for the contextualization of public relations theories to reflect cultural, political, and economic realities (Sriramesh, 2009; Dhanesh, 2017). In India, crisis communication is compounded by cultural sensitivities, religious identities, and political polarization—elements that can exacerbate reaction and hasten consumer boycotts, particularly in the context of social media virality. However, Indian public relations academia has predominantly overlooked influencer-driven crisis communication. The majority of research on Indian influencers is confined to marketing and advertising, overlooking their strategic significance in areas such as media relations, reputation management, and crisis readiness.

Three primary gaps arise from the aforementioned.
1. Theoretical Gap: Conventional frameworks such as SCCT and Excellence Theory insufficiently address the temporal pressures of virality and the intermediary function of influencers in contemporary public relations dynamics.
2. Empirical Gap: Although influencer marketing has been thoroughly examined in Western contexts, there is a scarcity of research investigating the reclassification of influencers as strategic PR stakeholders in non-Western settings such as India.
3. Practical Gap: There is insufficient guidance for Indian brands and practitioners on the systematic integration of influencers into reputation management and crisis communication strategies, despite prominent cases demonstrating their importance.

This paper examines how Indian firms, notably Nykaa and FabIndia, are transitioning influencers from marginal marketing instruments to pivotal public relations individuals, and how this shift alters disciplinary boundaries and practices in the digital age.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The primary research question directing this study is: *What motivates Indian brands to transition social media influencers from marginal marketing instruments to pivotal figures in public relations, and how does this transformation alter fundamental PR practices such as media relations, reputation management, and stakeholder engagement in the digital age?*

Objective 1: To examine the factors prompting Indian firms to include social media influencers into their public relations campaigns.
H1a: Indian brands largely utilize influencer-led public relations due to diminishing trust in traditional media. The perceived genuineness of influencers compels firms to integrate them into public relations efforts.
Objective 2: To analyze the methods by which social media influencers are utilized in public relations operations.
H2a: Influencers are progressively utilized as co-creators of brand tales instead of mere endorsers.
H2b: Influencers are strategically utilized in crisis management, frequently augmenting trust more successfully than official communications.
Objective 3: To examine the impact of influencer integration on the disciplinary boundaries and fundamental functions of public relations within the Indian setting.
H3a: The incorporation of influencers transitions public relations from a media-relations framework to a digital relationship management paradigm.
H3b: Influencer-driven public relations conflates the distinctions among public relations, marketing, and advertising, resulting in hybrid methodologies.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative case study methodology to examine how Indian firms are adapting public relations and reputation management practices in the digital era. (Yin, 2018).

Selection of Cases

Two prominent Indian brand crises were chosen using purposive sampling: 1. Nykaa (2022–2023): India's premier cosmetics shop, recognized for its strategic incorporation of influencers in brand development and reputation management. Nykaa exemplifies a successful scenario in which influencers were utilized as pivotal public relations agents. 2. FabIndia (2021): The ethnic fashion retailer whose Jashn e Riwaaz festive ad incited cultural backlash, illustrating a failure example where the lack of influencer mediation exacerbated vulnerability.

These cases were chosen because they (a) generated significant viral discourse, (b) involve documented brand responses, and (c) illustrate contrasting outcomes—offering strong potential for cross-case comparative analysis. The temporal parameters for each example were clearly delineated. The Nykaa case spans 2019-2025, and includes the launch of Kay Beauty with Katrina Kaif and ongoing influencer strategies (i.e., Nykaa TV, affiliate program, PR kits), while the FabIndia case is strictly bounded in October 2021, from the launch of the Jashn-e-Riwaaz campaign until it was withdrawn within two days. The more extended time horizon captures the institutionalization of influencers as an ongoing PR strategy, whereas the extremely narrow time horizon reflects FabIndia's orientation episodically in the moment on crisis containment. Defining temporal boundaries creates consistency from which to analytically compare.

Analytical Unit

The unit of study consists of each official brand communication artifact during the crisis episode, including press releases, CEO remarks, verified social media postings, explanatory videos, and influencer partnerships.

Data Sources

Data are derived solely from secondary sources, including:
- Official brand statements and press releases (e.g., Nykaa's influencer partnerships; FabIndia's corporate communications)
- Authenticated brand social media content (Twitter, Instagram, YouTube)
- Posts from influencers and the community pertaining to the crises
- Coverage from national media outlets (e.g., The Hindu, The Economic Times, Indian Express) and public relations trading platforms (e.g., Exchange4Media, PRMoment India, Adgully)
- Archival materials include screenshots, hashtags, and timelines of trending posts Protocols for Data Acquisition

Analytical Framework

Enhancing transparency was achieved via a coding matrix to situate the communicative artefacts with the analytical categories as seen in Table A1, using raw data examples for coding under velocity, tone, transparency or digital innovation. This enhances credibility because we are able to illustrate how we applied our interpretive judgements across the four lenses consistently (Yin, 2018). The data were examined through qualitative content analysis, employing coding across four categories derived from crisis communication theory and digital contexts:
1. Response Velocity (e.g., instantaneous, deferred, extended quiet)
2. Tone of Communication (e.g., empathetic, defensive, neutral, values-oriented)
3. Transparency (e.g., complete, partial, ambiguous/evasive)
4. Digital Innovation (e.g., hashtags, influencer mediation, video apologies, campaign reframing)

These categories were mapped to the study's objectives and hypotheses (H1, H2, H3), enabling both within-case analysis and cross-case comparison, and illuminating convergences and divergences between Nykaa and FabIndia. A coding matrix is presented to demonstrate the classification of raw data into categories (refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Illustrative Coding of Communication Artifacts

Artifact (Source)	Extract / Description	Code Assigned	Analytical Category
Nykaa PR kit launch press	"Innovative influencer	Digital innovation	Innovation

release (FSN E-Commerce Ventures, 2025)	PR kits designed for virality"		
Nykaa CEO interview (Reuters, 2023)	"Our influencers are the voice of authenticity"	Relational / Trust	Tone
FabIndia official statement (Times of India, 2021)	"This is not our Diwali collection; Jhilmil si Diwali is our festive line"	Defensive clarification	Tone + Transparency (Partial)
FabIndia campaign withdrawal (Indian Express, 2021)	Campaign deleted within 24 hours	Rapid response	Velocity

Source: Authors

Validity and Reliability

To ensure rigor, triangulation was employed—verifying each communication artifact across brand sources, media reports, and archival social media data. Only verified accounts and reputable outlets were included. Although relying solely on secondary data limits insights into internal decision-making, it provides a robust record of publicly visible strategies. Furthermore, not including practitioner interviews aligns with the study's aim to analyze how brand strategies were publicly performed during crises.

Ethical Considerations

As the study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary data, ethical risks are minimal. Care was taken to accurately attribute all material, adhere to APA 7th edition referencing norms, and avoid misrepresentation of brand communications.

Transition

This methodological framework provides a rigorous foundation for examining how Nykaa and FabIndia navigated viral crises—enabling both detailed within-case analysis and meaningful cross-case comparison of influencer integration in PR practice.

Data Collection & Analysis

Case Study 1: Nykaa (2019–2025)

Established in 2012 by Falguni Nayar, Nykaa (officially FSN E-Commerce Ventures Ltd.) has become India's premier beauty and lifestyle retailer. Since its inception, Nykaa has established itself not just as a transactional e-commerce site but also as a content-centric community. The strategy amalgamated retail with media-oriented narrative, incorporating beauty lessons, expert insights, and user-generated content to cultivate trust in a sector where credibility is essential (Business of Fashion, 2019). By the late 2010s, Nykaa commenced the formalization of influencer collaborations as a strategic cornerstone. This encompassed Nykaa TV (YouTube), inaugurated as a specialized channel showcasing instructional, celebrity partnerships, and influencer-driven content.

The Nykaa Affiliate Programme established formal partnerships with more than 5,000 creators by providing PR kits, product previews, and revenue-sharing opportunities. The introduction of Kay Beauty in 2019, co-developed with Bollywood actress Katrina Kaif, exemplified a hybrid strategy wherein celebrities functioned not merely as external endorsers but as co-architects of brand narratives (Reuters, 2023).

Nykaa's IPO in 2021 highlighted the significance of influencer-driven public relations, with investor presentations specifically citing "content-led marketing" and "influencer virality" as primary growth catalysts (Nykaa, 2023). This institutionalization illustrates how Nykaa has converted influencer engagement from sporadic marketing into a fundamental public relations strategy, redefining the communication methods of beauty businesses in India with consumers.

Episode Demarcation and Data Origins

Nykaa exemplifies the institutionalization of influencer ecosystems within public relations practices. The case encompasses the timeframe from 2019 to 2025, commencing with the introduction of Kay Beauty in

collaboration with actress Katrina Kaif and continuing through current influencer-led initiatives, including Nykaa TV and the Nykaa Affiliate Programme. Data triangulation validates this trajectory. Investor presentations and annual reports constantly identify "content-led marketing" and "influencer marketing" as fundamental strategic pillars (FSN E-Commerce Ventures Ltd., 2024, 2025). The Q1 FY26 Investor Deck specifically enumerated "Innovation PR Kits for influencer-led virality" (FSN E-Commerce Ventures Ltd., 2025). Nykaa TV on YouTube, boasting over 1.5 million followers, operates as an ongoing platform for tutorials, collaborations, and campaigns (Nykaa, 2024). The Nykaa Affiliate Programme comprises a well-organized network of over 5,500 influencers who receive PR kits, early product access, and co-creation chances (Nykaa, 2024). The celebrity-brand partnership Kay Beauty further illustrates Nykaa's incorporation of influencers into public relations. AGM publications underscore the debut as a key event ("Launched Kay Beauty in collaboration with Katrina Kaif"), while coverage from Business of Fashion (2019) and Reuters (2023) emphasized its importance as a co-created brand. Collectively, these artifacts delineate Nykaa's unit of analysis as investor presentations, affiliate program documents, and proprietary media outputs; the temporal boundary encompasses the ongoing institutionalization of influencer public relations from 2019 to 2025.

Motivations (H1)

Nykaa's motives are grounded in the necessity to cultivate authenticity, trust, and relatability among digitally native beauty consumers, especially Generation Z. In contrast to conventional public relations, which depended significantly on mainstream media coverage, Nykaa intentionally integrated influencers to supplant traditional gatekeepers with community validators. Official filings consistently indicate that influencer integration has been institutionalized inside Nykaa's governance framework, rather than being merely a tactical marketing initiative (FSN E-Commerce Ventures Ltd., 2024, 2025).

Mechanisms (H2)

The methods by which Nykaa implemented influencers demonstrate a systematic framework:

- Systematic co-creation: Within the Affiliate Programme, influencers served as continuous public relations narrators, generating tutorials, reviews, and testimonials instead of singular endorsements (Nykaa, 2024).
- PR kits as strategic instruments: The Q1 FY26 presentation formalized PR kits as essential tools for influencer engagement, specifically crafted to facilitate virality (FSN E-Commerce Ventures Ltd., 2025).
- The introduction of Kay Beauty exemplified the utilization of celebrity credibility as a sustained public relations foundation, merging influencer allure with institutional legitimacy (Business of Fashion, 2019; Reuters, 2023).
- Proprietary channel enhancement: Nykaa TV incorporated influencer-generated content into its owned channels, guaranteeing sustained circulation and enduring visibility (Nykaa, 2024).

Transformation (H3)

Nykaa shows the redefinition of public relations into digital relationship management. Influencer integration is not confined to single campaigns but is incorporated into governance papers, indicating a transformation:

- Transitioning from media relations to creative relations.
- Transitioning from episodic advertising to continuous influencer communities.
- Transitioning from media coverage to community-driven legitimacy.

This affirms that influencer integration in India can evolve into a fundamental component of public relations practice, integrated inside company strategy and governance.

Case Study 2: Fabindia – "Jashn-e-Riwaaz" (Diwali 2021)

Fabindia, founded by John Bissell in 1960, is recognized as a pioneer of ethnic wear and handmade crafts in India. Fabindia's positioning is based on cultural genuineness, where it attempts to connect traditional Indian craftsmanship with contemporary design. Historically, Fabindia has cultivated an image of ethical

consumption and cultural genuineness, often associated with the urban middle class of India and also its global diaspora (The Hindu, 2017).

In October 2021, Fabindia launched a festive campaign called Jashn-e-Riwaaz as the Diwali holiday approached. The campaign presented an idea of inclusivity and sophistication using the Urdu language and restrained imagery. However, before the end of the day, it came under attack on social media, with critics saying the brand misrepresented Hindu holiday practices. The hashtag #BoycottFabIndia went viral on social media, turning this campaign into a cultural flashpoint of sorts (Economic Times, 2021; Indian Express, 2021).

Episode Demarcation and Data Origins

The Fabindia case scrutinizes the October 2021 Jashn-e-Riwaaz festival marketing, which incited controversy under the hashtag #BoycottFabIndia. The drama commenced with the campaign's launch and concluded within two days, when Fabindia retracted the promotion and provided clarifications.

Artifacts that have been triangulated comprise:

- Official brand statements: A representative informed The Times of India and The Economic Times that Jashn-e-Riwaaz "is not our Diwali collection; our Diwali collection is titled 'Jhilmil si Diwali.'" (The Times of India, 2021; The Economic Times, 2021).
- Prominent coverage: National publications (Indian Express, Moneycontrol, New Indian Express, ET Brand Equity) and international media (Quartz, The Independent) chronicled the sequence of backlash, tweet deletions, and strategic repositioning (The Indian Express, 2021; Moneycontrol, 2021; New Indian Express, 2021; Quartz, 2021; The Independent, 2021).
- Influencer aspect: No evidence of influencer mobilization was identified during the crucial initial response period across these sources. The absence, validated by systematic review, is analytically substantial.

Motivations (H1)

Fabindia's primary motivation was risk mitigation. The clarifications indicating that Jashn-e-Riwaaz was not a Diwali collection, together with the launch of Jhilmil si Diwali, demonstrated a defensive rather than a proactive stance, emphasizing safety over the defense of pluralism (The Economic Times, 2021; The Times of India, 2021).

Mechanisms (H2)

The tactics utilized indicate a conservative public relations stance:

- The campaign was retracted within 24 hours, and corrections were disseminated through national media (The Indian Express, 2021; Moneycontrol, 2021).
- Lack of influencer integration: No influencers were engaged to contextualize or advocate for the marketing message, highlighting the dependence on traditional containment strategies.

Transformation (H3)

Fabindia's strategy exemplifies a legacy containment model of public relations:

- Speed: Expedited (withdrawal within 24 hours).
- Tone: Corporate and neutral, focused on elucidation.
- Transparency: Partial—clarification about nomenclature, however lacking comprehensive process disclosure.
- Innovation: Lacking—no influencer collaborations or endorsements.

This starkly contrasts with Nykaa's establishment of influencer ecosystems, indicating that in culturally sensitive environments, Indian firms may revert to conservative, traditional public relations approaches.

Cross-Case Synthesis

The two cases corroborate the research hypotheses. Nykaa illustrates that influencer integration can serve as a systematic and institutionalized public relations technique included inside company governance. In contrast, Fabindia exemplifies how brands may revert to classic confinement techniques in politically and culturally sensitive environments, eschewing influencer mobilization.

- H1 (Motivations): Endorsed by Nykaa (authenticity and trust); deprioritized by Fabindia (risk mitigation).
- H2 (Mechanisms): Confirmed in Nykaa (co-creation, PR kits, celebrity collaborations); lacking in Fabindia.
- H3 (Transformation): Nykaa discloses the reconfiguration of public relations into a networked, influencer-centric activity; Fabindia exhibits inconsistent acceptance across several Indian sectors.

Major Findings

Nykaa

- Influencers have evolved from supplementary marketing components to integral assets in modern public relations practices.
- The #NykaaArmy initiative and other co-branded partnerships with beauty vloggers and micro-creators embrace an influencer-led storytelling methodology for marketing communication.
- Influencers are invited to post not only to sell products, but to also establish legitimacy, authenticate knowledge, and protect the brand.
- Nykaa successfully replaces traditional media gatekeepers with an apolitical formalized influencer network that plays an interpretive and reputational protective role, and thus reinforces the argument that in an increasingly self-generated world of meaning, influencer audiences are increasingly supplanting traditional media institutions in terms of brands owning the narrative.

FabIndia

- The campaign "Jashn-e-Riwaaz" (Celebration of Tradition) was developed to showcase inclusivity and heritage, which ignited fierce outrage on the internet.
- FabIndia relied upon official statements or their retraction of the campaign, and no advocacy from the influencers left their brand narrative not challenged on the digital landscape anymore.
- The lack of influencer participation only further charged the outrage and solidified perceptions of corporate retreat. This finding challenges the assumption that a heritage-driven cultural position alone will provide reputational immunity and suggests that legacy, institutional-focused PR approaches appear reactive and fragile amid the global digital context.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of Nykaa and Fabindia demonstrates the evolution of crisis communication and influencer engagement within the public relations landscape in India.

- Nykaa shows the movement from a media-relations central approach to a digital relationship management process, in line with Relationship Management Theory (Ledingham, 2003), which favours an ongoing approach over an episodic dialogue. The introduction of PR kits, affiliate programs, and creator amplification demonstrates the evolution of Excellence Theory (Grunig, 1992) two-way symmetrical communication in the digital age.
- For Fabindia, there was also the evolution of a heritage containment model that aligns closely with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007), that favours quick withdrawal & neutral clarification rather than dialogic repair.
- The results enhance international research on crisis communication in three aspects:
  a) Initially, although previous studies indicate that speed and tone frequently outweigh categorical alignment (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2012), the Nykaa scenario illustrates that digital innovation and influencer networks can serve as equally critical factors.
  b) The study corroborates Freberg's (2020) assertion that influencers serve as trust brokers, while further positioning them as structural public relations stakeholders rather than mere marketing agents.
  c) Fabindia's inability to engage influencers underscores that the implementation of influencer-driven public relations is not ubiquitous, challenging Western-centric assertions that influencer integration has become a standard practice.

- The Indian context intensifies these dynamics. Cultural sensitivities related to religion, tradition, and national identity can transform brand promotions into divisive controversies, as exemplified by the Fabindia incident (The Times of India, 2021; The Indian Express, 2021).
- Political dynamics and social media indignation can necessitate swift containment, constraining opportunities for narrative restoration.
- India's digitally native consumer demographic—especially Gen Z—exhibits a strong responsiveness to influencer-driven content, as evidenced by Nykaa's success.
- The study emphasises the need for Indian public relations to operate in a hybrid environment, balancing traditional conservatism with digital modernity.
- The findings suggest a theoretical paradigm shift in public relations research. Although SCCT and Excellence Theory are beneficial, they fail to effectively address the demands of virality and the intermediary function of influencers.
- The evidence presented corresponds more accurately with Relationship Management Theory (Ledingham, 2003) and Digital Public Sphere frameworks (Papacharissi, 2010), wherein legitimacy is collaboratively established through dialogic interactions with influencers and the public.
- The study emphasizes the imperative for Indian firms to formalize influencer partnerships inside their public relations efforts. Nykaa illustrates that the incorporation of influencer ecosystems into governance frameworks enhances resilience. Fabindia exemplifies the dangers of neglecting these networks.
- For practitioners, this entails transitioning from sporadic influencer campaigns to establishing enduring partnerships, integrating influencer outreach into crisis management strategies, and educating corporate communication teams to collaboratively manage narratives with creator communities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The two cases demonstrate that influencer integration has become fundamental to public relations practice in India, rather than a supplementary marketing component.

- Nykaa's ongoing, governance-level engagement with creators (such as content-driven strategies, PR kits, and documented creator programs in investor materials) illustrates the evolution of public relations into dialogic, distributed relationship management, wherein legitimacy is co-created with networked publics (FSN E-Commerce Ventures Limited [Nykaa], 2024, 2025).
- Fabindia's swift retraction and clarification amid the Jashn-e-Riwaaz controversy—lacking evident influencer intervention—reveals the vulnerability of a centralized, containment-focused strategy within a fast-paced, culturally sensitive media environment (The Indian Express, 2021; New Indian Express, 2021). This concept aligns with modern crisis communication research emphasizing fit, speed, tone, and perceived responsibility (Coombs, 2007, 2022), as well as public relations theories that prioritize two-way, symmetrical engagement and relationship management within networked publics (Grunig, 2008; Papacharissi, 2010).

Recommendations

- Establish influencer relations as a component of public relations. Establish networks of map makers (macro, micro, and domain specialists), formalize briefing and due diligence procedures, and integrate creators into crisis playbooks to enable swift and credible responses when crises arise. Nykaa categorically positions content-driven and influencer-driven initiatives as strategic foundations—utilize this as a standard for operational frameworks (Nykaa, 2024, 2025).
- Expand representation for cultural mediation. In culturally sensitive contexts, micro-influencers, community leaders, and expert commentators can offer contextual legitimacy that corporate statements seldom attain—an asymmetry evident when contrasting Nykaa's ecosystemic approach with Fabindia's solely corporate response (The Indian Express, 2021; New Indian Express, 2021).
- Expand Excellence Theory and Relationship Management frameworks to include multi-actor, platform-based publics and influencer mediation; incorporate digital public sphere principles to elucidate the

processes through which legitimacy is (re)negotiated amidst virality and contestation (Grunig, 2008; Papacharissi, 2010). SCCT remains fundamental; nevertheless, the findings indicate that temporal pressure and mediation by influencer publics should be explicitly theorized inside crisis response models (Coombs, 2007, 2022).

- India possesses a twin layer of regulation: the ASCI's Influencer Guidelines (disclosure labels; due diligence) and the CCPA's 2022 Endorsement Guidelines (statutory obligations for endorsers). Practitioners must establish explicit and conspicuous disclosures (e.g., #ad/#sponsored) and creator due diligence protocols to comply with ASCI and CCPA mandates (ASCI, 2023; CCPA, 2022). Enforcement is inconsistent—ASCI's 2025 scorecard revealed extensive non-compliance among leading creators—therefore, companies ought to implement verifiable compliance assessments and internal approvals (ASCI, 2025). Professional organizations (e.g., PRSI) might enhance this by formalizing standards for PR-influencer collaborations, including disclosure, substantiation, and grievance procedures.

Limitations and Future Research

This research uses the logic of analytical rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018). The findings are not designed to be representative of all Indian firms but rather build the theoretical propositions—SCCT, Excellence Theory, and Relationship Management Theory—into the non-Western context. This means that Nykaa and FabIndia are illustrative of broader dynamics, not complete representations of all Indian brands.

This study employs secondary public artifacts that record strategies but not internal discussions. It also examines two situations, hence restricting generalizability across industries. Future research may: (a) interview public relations and creator teams to elucidate underlying decision-making processes; (b) execute cross-industry comparisons across fast-moving consumer goods, technology, and entertainment sectors; (c) undertake audience-focused experiments or ethnographies examining credibility, immediacy, and tone in influencer-mediated crisis responses; and (d) conduct cross-national analyses to contextualize India's dynamics in relation to other emerging markets (Coombs, 2007, 2022).

Disclosure and conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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