iJournals: International Journal of Social Relevance & Concern (IJSRC)
ISSN:2347-9698, ijournals.in/ijsrc
Volume 12 Issue 10, October 2024

Impact of Social Media Influencers on Food Safety in India

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DOI: 10.26821/IJSRC.12.10.2024.121002

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine how social media and influencers are impacting food safety and standards in India. I have looked at a category of food supplements earlier marketed as 'health beverages', and how the issue of sugar content in these was flagged off via social media, eventually leading to a change in corporate behavior.

Keywords: food safety, Bournvita, Mondelez, Nestle, Sugar, Social Media, Influencer

1. INTRODUCTION

Malted drinks such as Bournvita and Horlicks have been marketed for decades as 'health drinks' in India. The advertising for drinks has been traditionally targetted at children. These drinks are a staple part of breakfast in many Indian households, largely for children. I and my siblings, cousins and friends have been fed these supplements by our parents, in the belief that they are good for us. The whole controversy around the sugar content in these drinks made me revisit this long held belief. The role played by social media in bringing up this important public health issue has been my motivation to research this topic, and understand how new media can bring about a positive change in our lives.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

India has witnessed a digital revolution in the past two decades, and now has the second largest online population in the world. India now has 1.2 billion telephone subscribers and 924 million broadband internet users (TRAI). As a result of this online penetration, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp and X (formerly Twitter) now have a reach that exceeds traditional media such as newspapers and television channels.

Influencers in social media are users who have been able to create a following and an audience, based on the content that they create. Popular influencers on social media platforms can have an audience running into millions, or even tens of millions. For instance, Ajay Nagar, also known as carryminati, has 42.2 million subscribers on Youtube and 21.3 million subscribers on Instagram (27 June, 2024). Another well known influencer, Bhuvan Bam, has 26.4 million subscribers on Youtube and 19.3 million followers on Instagram. Videos put up by these creators are routinely viewed tens of millions of times on these platforms – giving them a reach similar to top media houses.

Similar to mainstream media, where there are multiple specializations such as general news, entertainment, sports, business etc, influencers also specialize in niche segments such as finance, travel, politics and fitness. For instance, Pranjal Kamra, a finfluencer (finance influencer) puts out videos on topics such as mutual funds, investing in the stock market and share trading. Pranjal has 6.1 million subscribers on Youtube and 920,000 followers on Instagram – larger reach compared to traditional business media such as newspapers, magazines and television channels.

This has also created a shift in the way Indian audience gets and consumes information. Instead of traditional media, younger people often rely on social media channels to get their information. Indian companies will spend an estimated $282 million in 2024 in marketing via influencers, which is projected to increase to $400 million by 2026

(EY). The large and growing advertising spend on Influencer Marketing underlines their reach and impact.

3. Packaged Food Industry in India

3.1 Size and growth

The packaged food industry had a size of $38.5 billion in FY22, and the annual growth is projected at 11% (BDO India). This includes products such as snacks, biscuits, confectionaries and noodles.

Multiple factors that account for this growth:

1. **Rising purchasing power of Indian consumers:** The Indian economy has grown strongly over the past decade, with the per capita income going up from $1,438 in 2013 to $2,485 in 2023, as per the World Bank. The trend is expected to sustain as India remains the fastest growing large economy in the world, with a projected growth of 6.8% in 2024, as per the IMF.
2.
3. **Rising Ecommerce:** Ecommerce platforms such as Flipkart, Amazon and Snapdeal account for a large and growing share of the Indian retail market. Packaged food is easier to store and handle compared to fresh produce, and forms an important chunk of the sales of these firms.
4.
5. **Social Changes:** Rising urbanization, larger number of nuclear families and rising participation of women in the workforce is a driver for sales of ready to eat foods, and for other ingredients. As per the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2022-23, processed foods accounted for 4.19% of rural household spend and 6.35% of urban household spending in 1999-2000. This had risen to 9.62% for rural and 10.64% for urban households by 2022-23.

Some of the top Indian companies, such as ITC, Britannia Industries, Nestle India and Hindustan Unilever are in the packaged foods business, selling products ranging from biscuits, noodles, chocolates, chips and staples such as flour.

“Fortified/Functional” is a category within the beverage segment of the Indian packaged food market. These are non-alcoholic drinks with added nutrients such as protein, vitamins and other minerals. The size of this market was pegged at $5 billion in 2022. This includes well known brands such as Horlicks and Boost (both Unilver) and Bournvita (Mondelez, formerly Cadburys). These drinks are commonly advertised for children, and are typically added to milk.

3.2 Public Health Concerns

Diabetes is a condition that occurs when a person’s blood sugar level is too high. Over time, high blood glucose can cause damage to the heart, kidney and the eyes, along with other health issues. Causes of diabetes include obesity, consumption of excess sugar, salt and refined carbohydrates.

Diabetes is a large and growing health problem in India. As per the International Diabetes Federation estimates, 74 million Indians suffered from diabetes in 2021, a number projected to increase to 125 million by 2045.

The increasing incidence of diabetes in India is due to more sedentary lifestyles, and changes in dietary patterns – including greater consumption of packaged foods high in sugar and carbohydrates. In the Indian context, concerns have been raised about the safety/health-impact of popular packaged foods in the past.

3.3 Cadbury’s Bournvita

Cadbury’s Bournvita is a malted drink, first launched in India in the 1948. The product has long pitched itself as one with health benefits for children, with assorted nutrients. Advertisements going back to the 1980s have used children in advertising to drive home this message. Many of the television advertisements have been explicit about Bournvita being good for young/growing children. Some examples:

1. Advertisement featuring a young boxer, with the mother’s voiceover explaining Bournvita’s benefits
2. Advertisement featuring a young gymnast, with the mother’s voiceover pitching for Bournvita
3. Advertisement featuring movie actor Kareena Kapoor explaining Bournvita’s role in a young child’s development

As a result, Bournvita has been amongst the most popular and trusted Indian brands for decades. A list of 100 most trusted Indian brands published in 2020 by India's largest business newspaper, The Economic Times, placed Bournvita at number 22. A similar list of 100 most trusted brands published in 2010 by the same newspaper placed Bournvita in the same position.

3.4 The Foodpharmer Controversy

On 1st April 2023, a social media influencer Revant Himatsingka posted a video on his Instagram account discussing the high sugar content in the drink 'Bournvita.' and the claims made by the company about the product's benefits. He alleged that the company falsely advertised the product as a health drink despite its high sugar content and commented on its tagline *tayyari jeet ki* (preparing for victory) instead suggesting that Bournvita was preparing children for diabetes.

The original video was put up on 1st April, and was taken down shortly after. On 13th April, Himatsingka received a legal notice from Mondelez, the company that owns the Bournvita brand. Himatsingka took the video down after receiving the notice – this was widely reported in Indian media at that time by leading news outlets including NDTV, Moneycontrol, Times Now, Business Today and ABP, amongst others.

However, by this time, the video had already gone viral. It had been viewed over 12 million times on Himatsingka's social media feeds, and was reshared by a number of other users across various platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Youtube, Instagram and elsewhere. For instance, X user @risheebagree shared this video on his handle, where it was viewed over 1 million times. The video was shared by a number of other prominent handles including well known actors and sportspersons. On 26th April, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) issued a notice to Mondelez International to withdraw 'misleading' advertisements and labels for its product Bournvita.

Nearly 8 months after this event, around 25th December 2023, Mondelez reduced the sugar content in Bournvita by 14.4%. The company did not issue a press release on this matter, but this topic was widely covered by mainstream news media outlets, as well as the influencer himself on his social media handles.

Subsequently, in April 2024, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry issued an advisory to e-commerce platforms such as Amazon and Flipkart to remove Bournvita and other similar beverages from the "health drinks" category on their platforms. This directive came after an investigation conducted by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), which concluded that there is no category called "health drinks" in the Food Safety and Standards Act.

3.5 Discussion

The chain of events described above is perhaps the first instance in India of a single individual using social media to bring about a significant change in food safety norms, and in the behavior of a multi-billion dollar company. The change in product classification, as decreed by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, applies to multiple brands that were earlier sold as 'health drinks'. This includes Horlicks and Complan, brands owned by global multinationals Unilever and Heinz respectively.

The controversy around Bournvita and the subsequent fallout is one of the first instances in India of a social media user, rather than the government regulator, forcing a large corporate to change its product. In its initial response to the controversy, Mondelez stood by the ingredients of Bournvita, highlighting that the sugar content was within prescribed limits. However, the company subsequently reduced the sugar content of the product on its own. While Mondelez did not cite a reason this reduction, it is not common for companies to change the formulation of decades old products all of a sudden. The fact that this change comes a few months after the sugar issue was highlighted indicates a link between the two.

The impact made by Mr. Himatsingka has been made possible by the change in dynamics of information due to advent of social media, which can give an individual a wide reach – this is evident

from the 12 million views that the first video received on the influencer's own social media handles, and millions of views on reshared videos. There has also been a change in the way people get information – instead of mainstream media, there is an increasing reliance on social media. Influencers/creators/vloggers no longer have to rely on traditional media platforms to reach a large audience. This medium also allows the content-creator to reach a niche audience, which may be too dispersed for a traditional media outlet, but is nevertheless large. These mechanisms for spreading and sharing information are recent phenomena, enabled by rise of social media platforms (Youtube, Instagram, Twitter/X) and rising internet penetration in India.

Traditionally, it has been the role of mainstream media to play the role of a watchdog, keeping oversight on the government and corporates on behalf of citizens and consumers. However, there are rising concerns on the neutrality of mainstream media. Advertising, rather than subscription revenue, accounts for the bulk of the revenues of many news outlets. Consumer goods companies (including packaged food) are amongst the largest advertisers in India. There may be an element of distrust about the mainstream media in the public mind due to this percieved conflict of interest.

At the same time, the consumer landscape in India is also changing. In the past twenty five years, the Indian economy has grown and India has graduated from being a lower income country to a lower middle income country, with a rising class of affluent consumers. This class of consumers has greater awareness, greater spending power, and more options to choose from. As processed foods now account for a large (and growing) share of the spending basket, they are facing increased scrutiny. For instance, a recent report alleging that food giant Nestle adds more sugar to baby food sold in developing countries, while selling similar products in European markets with no added sugar, received wide attention in India, forcing the company to issue a clarification. This issue existed for a long time, but may have flared up now due to the combination of factors – more consumers using these products, and more aware consumers concerned about food safety. While a detailed discussion of the baby food issue is beyond the scope of this paper, the example illustrates how Indian consumers are evolving.

3.6 Conclusion

There are two parallel changes taking place in India. The first is the growing Indian economy and the increasingly affluent Indian consumers. This is visible in growing sales of items/services that were earlier considered luxuries – automobiles, air-conditioners and foreign travel – and are now necessities for a large class of affluent Indians. These consumers are better informed than in the past. They want, and can increasingly afford better quality products. This push will increasingly push corporates to provide better quality products, at par with the best in the world.

The second change is in the Indian media landscape, where traditional media is being increasingly replaced by social media – in terms of reach as well as revenues. In the earlier era, people relied on newspapers and television news channels for information. This has changed. A lot of information first comes out on social media, hours ahead of mainstream media. Social media channels are also able to provide commentary/opinions faster because of their smaller structure. These changes mean social media is going to play a larger role – with influencers/content-creators/vloggers increasingly acting like traditional media and playing the role of informing consumers, and playing watchdog in crucial areas such as food safety. The Indian government recognizes these changes and is in the process of creating regulations for social media influencers. However, this is still an evolving landscape, and it is not possible to forecast its future trajectory.

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