



# A Descriptive Study on the Growing Number of Fake Followers on Social Media with Special Reference to Instagram

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**Abstract:** Instagram, one of the most popular social media platforms is used by around 1 billion people worldwide, this shows the extent of its reach and popularity. People are connected by following each other, sharing creative content, communicating and indulging in relevant dialogues. Content plays a major role to attract like-minded people in order to engage on the content. However, all is not genuine in the digital world. Fake profiles, fake followers, unethical likes, fake comments etc. spams the content, creating a dull digital environment where the emphasis is based on quantity and not quality.

**Index Terms - Influencers, Social Media, Fake followers, Influencer Marketing**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Human kind is staying in an era where they are evolving at a faster pace. Businesses and consumers have come closer than ever before. The communication channels between both have opened, leading to direct feedback, understanding consumer behavior, aligning the values of brands with their target audience and newer ways to communicate through creative content. There are many advantages of this open dialogue, it not only helps brands understand their customers and vice versa, it even assists in generating peer to peer dialogue, an open space for all consumers to share their experiences with their fellow consumers. There are many benefits of new communication channels, but new innovations come with new challenges and hurdles and addressing them is very important.

A new age Social Media Marketing platform, Instagram, provides a channel for brands to directly reach to its targeted audience at reasonable costs and also get first hand metrics on the performance with the help of various Key Performing Indicator's (KPI's). Audiences can also stay in touch with these brands and along the way act as ambassadors for their businesses. It can be organic or paid, depending on the partnership between brands and consumers. These consumers show a tremendous growth on their social media profiles after a certain period of time based on their content and turn into Influencer's, to whom new or potential audiences look up to.

But with this advent, there is an adverse impact as well and one of them is the growth of fake followers on Instagram. As per **Talkwater and Social Samosa, 2019** India ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> in terms of fake followers on Instagram. This is alarming considering brands are now spending a considerable budget on Influencer Marketing on Instagram. The menace of Fake followers is not only limited to Instagram, it is prevalent on all major social media channels, however, for the purpose of this study, the researcher has limited the analysis to Instagram.

Providing fake followers is a very lucrative market, and many small businesses have turned up who provide guarantee of increasing the follower count in hundreds and thousands in exchange for monetary incentives. These offers tempt many new age Influencer's who want to grow fast and show huge number of follower count on their social media profiles in order to attract brands who approach Influencer's for collaboration, by offering their products for free to review or to get into monetary contract for sales promotion. Either way brands, consumer and genuine Influencer's loses the very essence of Influencer Marketing which is in principle to get connected remotely.

This paper studies the concept of various types of followers and focusses on the practice of buying Fake followers on Social Media with special reference to Instagram. The researcher has reviewed various literature available in order to understand and present the many challenges faced by brands because of fake followers. The paper outlines the various measures undertaken by brands to identify the Influencer's with huge fake followers on Instagram.

## II. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Influencing the potential consumers to buy a specific product or brand is a crucial part of Influencer Marketing. Brands spend a huge portion of their annual marketing budget on Influencer Marketing, hence, selecting the appropriate Influencer to collaborate is very important. With the growth of fake followers in order to cut the competition and earn money, many Influencer's are buying these followers and there is no sure shot way to figure out whether the followers on Influencer's social media profile are genuine or no. Hence, this study is very important to first and foremost address the problem of Influencer's with fake followers and then work towards finding a solution in order to gain maximum returns from Influencer Marketing strategy.

## III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the concept of various kinds of followers on social media platforms
2. To assess the increasing number of fake followers on Instagram
3. To examine the measures used by brands to identify the Influencer's with fake followers on Instagram

## IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study on Influencer Marketing is very limited as an independent marketing concept in India. It is still not being addressed as a growing field of Digital Marketing, hence there is a huge scope to examine this term in vast and along with it study the various challenges which are directly or indirectly related to it. Academia has a huge potential to create systematic and dedicated models on Influencer Marketing to understand the various nuances the new age of marketing is going to face in the future.

## V. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This is a Descriptive study explaining in detail the concept of Fake followers on Instagram. A detailed empirical research will help the future marketers to understand the practical aspect of how the system of fake followers work on Instagram. The study is limited to studying the Influencer's with fake followers on Instagram; however, the problem of fake followers is persistent in all other social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat etc.

## VI. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**Purba, Asirvatham, & Murugesan, 2020** has aimed to create a Machine Learning model to identify fake followers on Instagram in order to ascertain the authenticity of various Influencer's. This model helps brands to make an informed choice while deciding on collaborations with Influencer's as part of their Influencer Marketing strategy. The model developed is based on 17 features which includes 4 types of metadata, engagement and media factors, the number of active, inactive and spam users, media similarity etc.

**Mena, Barbe, & Chan-Olmsted, 2020** explores how the credibility of misinformation on Instagram is viewed by audiences. The research justifies that when any type of information or content, whether ethical or erroneous, is endorsed or validated by a reputable source, it lends credibility to such type of material, thus builds up the authenticity of such information. Social Media is a place where misinformation is found in abundance, but when it generates validation from authentic sources, it causes enormous coverage.

**Khaled, Mokhtar, & El-Tazi, 2018** studies the rise of online social media networks which comes along with high risk of online web attacks, imposters, storage of personal data, sharing of false news etc. The researchers intended to develop Machine Learning Models which aims to draw a distinction between genuine and fake accounts and followers on social media with special reference to twitter using a new algorithm called Support Vector Machine – Neural Network (SVM-NN). The models previously developed used a wide variety of feature points to detect fake accounts, but the researchers newly proposed SVM-NN algorithm takes into account fewer features which generates more authentic results.

**Ross, 2019** accentuates the importance of 'Likes' on Social Media platforms and how online users perceive the success of their presence on the number of likes they generate on content or increase in the follower count on Social Media. The paper studies young women residing in US and understanding their perception on being authentic while publishing on social media platforms and generating likes and followers. The researcher has also revealed the other side of Influencer's who indulge in buying likes by creating multiple dummy accounts or paying third party to increase the number of followers on their profiles. The researcher has based this paper on one of the most common factor used to determine success on Instagram, which is, the number of likes a post garners and how Influencer's try to show their world as picture perfect to achieve this objective.

## VII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher has conducted a Descriptive study on various types of Followers present on Influencer's profile on Social media platforms with special reference to Instagram. The data collected for this study is from various secondary sources which includes Instagram handles of Influencer's, corporate brands, published articles in various national and international journals, thesis, industry reports, online blogs and news coverages.

## VIII. ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

### 8.1 Social Media Platforms and Instagram

Digital platforms which were developed with the aim of social engagements are known as Social Platforms and when these platforms are used as a medium for marketing and advertising, they are referred to as social media marketing platforms. There are many such mediums which has grown in the past decade, namely; Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat etc. For the purpose of this study, the researcher has limited the scope to Instagram only.

Instagram, a photo/video based platform launched by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010 in San Francisco, US (**Instagram, 2010**) and currently owned by Facebook Inc., is one of the most popularly used social media channel by brands to showcase their products or services to the target audience in a customized way.

## 8.2 Influencer's on Instagram

In general, Influencer's refer to any individual who has the power to influence a group of people to undertake a particular task. The people on Instagram who have more than 10,000 followers are considered as Instagram Influencer's in their particular niche. There are many Influencer's below 10,000 followers but they have a good reach and impact on their small number of followers, they are known as micro Influencer's. Advertisers basically select these Influencer's to promote their products or services either as a barter exchange or a paid promotion. Since there is a consideration involved, it becomes indispensable for brands to make sure the Influencer's they're collaborating with are authentic and genuine, and aren't involved in the practice of purchasing fake likes and followers.

## 8.3 Factors determining success on Instagram

Instagram has grown in leaps and bounds since its inception. Every new update comes with new features, hence making it a fast-adapted social media channel. There are certain important features on Instagram which helps in evaluating the success of any particular marketing strategy or content. These include but are not limited to;

- a. **Number of Followers:** The Follower count on Instagram is one of the basic indicators regarding the reach of the particular Influencer.
- b. **Number of Likes:** The number of likes generated on the Influencer's content is also very important indicator of their engagement metrics. These likes when purchased from fake accounts, becomes a cause of concern for advertisers.
- c. **Number of Comments:** The comments posted on content which enhances the value of the content, is considered to be important. But when these comments are used as a medium to spam, it leads to questionable practices.
- d. **Content Sharing:** This feature is not visible to general public on the Instagram; hence it is difficult to measure this metric. However, as part of insights, this feature helps Influencer to be visible on the feeds page and improve their ranking.
- e. **Number of Views:** This is very important for video-based content, whether a long video or a short one, the Views count determines the interest of people in that content and their preferences of content as well.
- f. **Number of Saves:** Audiences get an option to save the content of fellow Influencer's through this feature. Again, this is not visible on the general view of profiles, however, Influencer's can check it on their insights tab in order to gauge the success of a particular content.
- g. **Story Mentions:** Stories are an additional feature on Instagram where content is visible for 24 hours and can be saved for future under 'highlights'. Brands, Influencer's, audience mention and share on each other's profile in order to expand their reach.
- h. **Account Tags:** Tagging or mentioning the connected accounts gives a sense of authenticity and a wider scope for reach.
- i. **Collaborations:** It can be either barter or paid collaboration. Brands and Influencer's collaborate in order to reach each other's audiences and increase their engagement. Since Influencer's have like-minded people following them, collaborations help brands to reach their target audience and also have a spokesperson in the form of Influencer.
- j. **Quality of Content:** The quality of image or video posted, the text content written, the style of conveying message is important because if people don't understand the intended meaning, it won't serve the purpose of generating that content.
- k. **Verified Profile:** The verified profiles are given a blue tick by Instagram, after a thorough background check of the profiles. This tag gives a renewed authenticity to the accounts.

The above-mentioned factors are just a mere benchmark to perceive the success, however they don't guarantee the authenticity of Influencer's or success of brands. Selecting the appropriate Influencer is very important based on genuine factors and insights in order to achieve higher Return on Investment's (ROI's) from Influencer Marketing strategy.

## 8.4 Followers on Instagram

The audience or consumers who follow a particular Influencer or brand is known as their followers. They share similar interests or likes, or are fascinated by a particular brand or Influencer. There are majorly two types of Followers on Instagram, they are;

- a. **Organically-grown Followers:** The followers who genuinely share the Influencer's likes, preferences, mindset, views and insights. They follow certain Influencer's, because they feel connected to them and like their content as well. They resonate with them on personal level.
- b. **Fake or Purchased Followers:** These are the followers who are created and paid to follow the accounts. This can be done either by creating dummy accounts, or impersonated accounts to spam or just random accounts with no followers or content. This is used just to increase the follower count.

## 8.5 Role of Followers on Instagram

The major role of followers on Instagram is to engage with brands and Influencer's. Engagement on Instagram can be in the form of liking and sharing the content, commenting views or appreciation or criticism on the content freely, mentioning the brands, using the brands and providing a review, getting intrigued by Influencer's content and strive to recreate it. Influencer's are nothing without an active participation of their genuine followers, they provide a motivation factor to Influencer's in order to work harder at creating valuable content.

## 8.6 State of Fake Followers in India

India ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> in the world in terms of number of fake profiles on Instagram as per (Talkwater and Social Samosa, 2019). A recent investigation undertaken by Mumbai Police revealed that there are more than 50 companies in India who deal into providing more than 5 lakh fake profiles (Kala, 2020).

With the increase in Influencer's influence on Instagram, the menace of fake profiles has increased tremendously. Instagram is no longer just for content; it has become a status symbol especially for profiles with high number of followers.

## 8.7 Measures used by brands to identify Fake Followers on Instagram

There are many ways to perform a due diligence on Influencers before collaborating with them. It can be in the form of observing the content and insights on Instagram or analysing it with the help of online tools.

1. **High follower count, low engagement rate:** When the Influencer's profile has more than 10,000 followers, but the engagement on their content is very small such as around 100-200 likes, this raises a red flag, indicating the followers are purchased or dummy.
2. **Irrelevant Comments:** If the comment section on posts mentions unrelated statements or spam words like 'Follow me', it is an indicator that the followers are paid or are spammers.
3. **Followers Profile:** (Kala, 2020) mentions that if majority of the individual accounts are just empty or ghost profiles without any content, followers, display picture etc., it may indicate that the profiles are dummy.
4. **Audit Tool:** An online Instagram audit tool by (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020) known as 'Fake Follower Checker', helps to isolate fake profiles on Instagram.
5. **Suspicious Profiles:** If any profile seems suspicious even at first glance, such accounts should be blacklisted at the onset in order to save precious time.
6. **Paid Promotions only Profile:** When Influencers profile only boast of sponsored or paid promotions, it highlights the intention of Influencer is not to create worthy content but increase their follower count and get paid in kind or monetary form.

Every brand has their own way of carrying out profile check on Instagram to dig over the fake profiles, however, there is no sure short way of achieving this. The brands need to be extra careful before collaborating with Influencers and learn from their experiences. The small brands usually face this problem, since they don't have huge resources to spend on carrying out profile checks, however, they should undertake measures to make sure they are spending their limited resources on genuine Influencers.

## IX. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Brands lose money just because they didn't perform a proper due diligence on the Influencer's they chose to collaborate with. There are many brands who earned double the money spent, but majority of small brands didn't get the desired results because they didn't research the Influencers well before collaborating with them. The growing number of fake followers creates a nuance and are not good for either of the parties involved, which includes genuine followers, Influencer's and brands. There are many simple as well as online tools available to identify Influencers with fake followers, or even a small suspicion is enough for brands to understand the intention of Influencers. The desired result of Influencer Marketing can be achieved only if proper research goes before investing money for collaborations. Although Instagram does have its own Terms of Use policy to fight against such menace on its platform, however it is not enough to put a stay on such practices. It is the responsibility of individuals to stay away from such systems and brands to carry out the research thoroughly.

## X. SUGGESTIONS

1. Influencers should not indulge into unethical ways to increase their reach just to show their short-term success. Growing organically results in valuable long-term fruits.
2. Online presence should not be viewed as an individual's success. This is a mere medium to communicate and not the epitome of success.
3. Brands should be conscious before collaborating with Influencers, they should lay down their objectives clearly and work together to create a successful marketing strategy.
4. There are many Influencers who have grown organically for years, their efforts should not go into vain just because of unethical practices of new fast-grown Influencers.
5. Instagram needs to make their policies more stringent to weed out fake profiles by undertaking a thorough analysis of accounts on their platform.

Businesses are investing more and more on these new digital channels due to its vast and targeted reach, but they should not forget the risks involved and make informed decisions based on the experience and data available.

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