



## INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ON RURAL CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR OF NORTH INDIA: A STUDY

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### Abstract

This paper examines how social media influencers shape rural consumer behaviour in North India, synthesizing empirical studies, industry reports and regulatory insights up to 2023. The research situates influencer effects within the broader digital penetration of rural India, maps the pathways through which influencers affect awareness, attitudes and purchase decisions, and highlights opportunities, challenges and threats for marketers and policymakers. Using a mixed-methods literature synthesis and secondary-data approach, the study demonstrates that rising internet access, the spread of vernacular and video content, and the credibility transfer from local/micro-influencers to brands have together made influencer marketing a consequential force even beyond urban centres. Real-world examples such as the success of regional YouTube creators in promoting FMCG products, the use of micro-influencers for government campaigns, and viral grassroots stories like “Baba Ka Dhaba” illustrate how rural North India is increasingly mediated by digital voices of trust. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for ethical, measurable, and context-sensitive influencer strategies in rural North India and proposes directions for primary research.

### Introduction

The last decade has seen India undergo a remarkable digital transformation, reshaping both economic and social structures. Internet penetration has steadily expanded into non-urban spaces, aided by cheaper smartphones, falling data costs, and infrastructural growth. A watershed moment occurred with the entry of **Reliance Jio in 2016**, which democratized access by lowering data tariffs to one of the world’s lowest levels. By 2023, rural India had emerged not merely as a consumer base but as a digitally active participant in India’s online ecosystem. According to IAMAI–Kantar’s ICUBE 2023 report, rural India accounted for **442 million active internet users**, representing around **53% of the nation’s total online population**.

This structural shift has profound implications. For decades, marketers considered rural India primarily through the lens of distribution—ensuring last-mile product availability in fragmented markets. Communication strategies relied heavily on mass media (radio, television) or interpersonal channels (shopkeepers, community leaders). But digital access and social media have created new pathways of influence that are less top-down and more network-driven.

One of the most prominent outcomes has been the rise of **social media influencers**—individuals whose credibility, relatability, and content creation skills allow them to shape consumer perceptions and behaviour. While influencer marketing initially developed in India’s urban, aspirational youth markets through Instagram and YouTube, the format has rapidly adapted to rural and semi-urban contexts. The rise of **short-form video platforms (YouTube Shorts, Moj, Josh)** and the dominance of messaging networks (WhatsApp) have made influencer-driven communication both accessible and scalable in North Indian villages.

This paper explores how influencers affect **rural consumer behaviour in North India**, focusing on states such as Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Uttarakhand, and Himachal Pradesh. These states present a mix of high agricultural income pockets, aspirational youth populations, and conservative consumption dynamics, making them a fertile ground for studying digital influence.



Cover Page



## Objectives

The paper is structured around four key objectives:

1. **To synthesize secondary data** (industry reports, academic studies, regulatory documents) on internet and social media penetration in rural India up to 2023.
2. **To review empirical literature** on influencer effects in rural markets and the consumer behaviour of North Indian households.
3. **To identify opportunities, challenges, and threats** for influencer-driven marketing in rural North India.
4. **To propose actionable recommendations** for marketers and policymakers, while outlining avenues for future research.

## Review of Literature

### Digital penetration and consumption in rural India

The rise of rural digital users is not a marginal phenomenon—it represents a structural rebalancing of India's online demography. The **ICUBE 2023 dataset** reported that rural India contributed the majority share of India's internet users, with rural online populations surpassing urban for the first time. Daily usage patterns have also converged with urban India, with video streaming, messaging, and short-form content emerging as dominant behaviours.

Reports from **WeAreSocial/DataReportal (2023)** reinforce that YouTube remains the most widely used platform in India, with rural areas consuming increasing amounts of vernacular video content. Messaging apps such as **WhatsApp** are now ubiquitous even in small towns and villages, often serving as the primary gateway to the internet. This infrastructure shift provides the fertile ground for influencer effects to operate.

### Influencer marketing: Theory and Indian context

The theoretical basis for influencer effectiveness is grounded in **source credibility theory** (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), **parasocial interaction theory**, and **two-step flow models of communication**. Influencers act as intermediaries between brands and consumers by leveraging trust, relatability, and perceived expertise. Global studies indicate that authenticity and niche relevance often outweigh celebrity appeal in influencing purchase intent.

In the Indian context, **EY-IBEF reports (2022–23)** documented that the influencer industry has grown rapidly, with brands increasingly shifting budgets from celebrity endorsements to influencer-driven campaigns. A particularly notable trend is the emphasis on **micro-influencers (10,000–100,000 followers)** who deliver higher engagement rates and localized trust compared with national celebrities.

### Rural consumer behaviour and local dynamics in North India

Academic literature highlights that rural consumers in India often rely on **collectivist decision-making**, price sensitivity, and **heuristic cues** (brand familiarity, shopkeeper recommendations). In states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, family elders and peer networks continue to play crucial roles in household purchase decisions. Yet, younger cohorts, especially those exposed to mobile internet, show increasing independence in their decision-making, guided by digital discovery.

A **ResearchGate study (2020)** on FMCG decision-making in rural North India observed that digital media exposure reshapes awareness and trial but must be supported by physical availability in kirana stores. Similarly, **IJSRA studies**



Cover Page



(2021–2022) noted that social media interactions influence rural consumers’ aspirations, particularly for personal care, apparel, and lifestyle categories.

### Evidence of influencer effects in rural contexts

Emerging studies between 2020 and 2023 have consistently shown that influencers affect rural consumer behaviour through:

- **Awareness creation:** vernacular YouTube videos demonstrating product usage.
- **Trust transfer:** community influencers lending credibility to new products.
- **Trial stimulation:** content linked with local retail availability.

For example, the “**Moov Pain Relief**” campaign (2021) collaborated with regional YouTube creators in Uttar Pradesh who demonstrated usage in daily farming contexts, leading to a measurable sales spike in local districts (reported in INCA/e4m). Similarly, **government vaccination drives during COVID-19** utilized micro-influencers and village-based YouTubers to spread awareness in Bihar and UP, proving that influencer communication could extend beyond commerce into public health.

### Real-World Examples

1. **Baba Ka Dhaba (Delhi outskirts, 2020):** When food bloggers amplified the story of an elderly couple running a roadside stall, the content went viral across rural-urban digital networks. Though based in Delhi, the story’s reach into adjacent rural North India illustrated the **power of emotional relatability and grassroots amplification**—a template later used by rural micro-entrepreneurs.
2. **FMCG campaigns in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (2021–22):** Brands like **Dabur and Patanjali** used regional YouTube influencers to demonstrate personal care products in vernacular languages. These campaigns emphasized authenticity (demonstrations in rural households) and resulted in **higher engagement rates than traditional TV ads**.
3. **Agricultural product endorsements:** Startups in agri-tech (e.g., DeHaat, Gramophone) collaborated with local influencers to promote apps that connect farmers with input suppliers. By 2022, short video explainers in Bhojpuri and Awadhi dialects had become common tools to drive app adoption.
4. **Short video platforms (Moj, Josh, ShareChat):** Post-TikTok ban (2020), these Indian platforms gained traction in Tier-3 and rural markets. Influencers producing content in Punjabi, Haryanvi, and Bhojpuri dialects created **vernacular ecosystems** that brands tapped into for promotions of low-ticket consumer goods.

### Opportunities, Challenges, and Threats

#### Opportunities

1. **Mass Reach + Local Relevance:** Vernacular content enables both scale and cultural fit. For example, **YouTube creators in Bhojpuri** can reach millions while resonating with local cultural idioms.
2. **Micro-Influencer Effectiveness:** Local influencers with modest followings often enjoy higher credibility than urban celebrities. Their recommendations align with rural community trust models.
3. **Platform Fit:** The dominance of short video and WhatsApp forwarding facilitates organic virality in rural networks.
4. **Behavioural Change Campaigns:** Influencers have successfully promoted government programs (e.g., Swachh Bharat messaging in UP, digital payments adoption post-2016).



Cover Page



## Challenges

1. **Infrastructure Gaps:** Despite growth, device sharing within families and uneven connectivity still limit uniform reach.
1. **Measurement and Attribution:** Tracking conversions originating from influencer campaigns in rural retail ecosystems (kirana stores, barter economies) is difficult without integrated POS or dealer-level tracking. Industry reports in India repeatedly highlight measurement as a core pain point. Offline retail environments lack systematic tracking. Brands struggle to attribute influencer-led awareness to actual sales in kirana ecosystems.
2. **Cultural Nuance:** Generic influencer content that ignores local norms, language and consumption contexts risks rejection or backlash; authenticity is essential. For instance, urban-styled beauty campaigns often fail in conservative rural contexts.
3. **Regulatory Risk:** Since 2021–2022 regulators and self-regulatory bodies (ASCI) increased scrutiny on material disclosures and misleading influencer claims—brands can incur reputational and compliance risk if endorsements are opaque.
2. **Threats**
  1. **Misinformation:** WhatsApp forwards of influencer-like content often spread unverified claims (e.g., fake COVID remedies), undermining trust.
  2. **Trust Erosion:** High-profile non-disclosures or misleading claims erode trust not only for the influencer but for brands active with creators—risking long-term damage in close-knit rural communities. ASCI reported over 500 complaints related to misleading influencer content.
  3. **Unequal Benefits:** If only a subset of creators or brands access rural audiences profitably, local micro-entrepreneurs and traditional retailers may be disadvantaged, leading to friction.

## Findings through Secondary Data

1. **Rural internet user base:** Approximately 442 million active internet users in rural India in 2023 (~53% of national active users), per IAMAI/Kantar ICUBE datasets. This is the base condition that enables influencer reach.
2. **Content preferences:** OTT and video are top internet use-cases; messaging and short video formats have high daily usage and shareability—important for influencer dissemination.
3. **Regulatory activity:** From 2021–2023, ASCI and consumer bodies increasingly processed complaints around influencer non-disclosure and misleading content—evidence that influencer marketing gained visibility and regulatory attention.
4. **Impact in FMCG:** Regional influencers increased unaided brand recall by 20–25% in certain categories (EY-IBEF report, 2022).
5. **Demographic split:** Younger, digitally literate users respond faster to influencer campaigns, while older cohorts remain reliant on interpersonal influence.

## Findings on influencer impact in rural North India

1. **Awareness & Consideration:** Influencer content—especially vernacular short videos demonstrating product usage—improves unaided brand recall and consideration compared with zero-touch digital baselines. Micro-



Cover Page



influencers who demonstrate product use in local contexts (kitchen, farm, shop) resonate better than aspirational celebrity content.

2. **Trial & Purchase:** For low-involvement FMCG products, influencer endorsements paired with local availability and demonstrations often result in immediate trial via local kirana shops. The decision heuristics in rural North India (price, trial, shopkeeper recommendation) get nudged by influencer validation that reduces perceived product risk.
3. **Information Search & Trust Transfer:** Influencers function as information intermediaries where formal advertising or retail staff are absent. Trust transfer models show that follower trust in local influencers frequently extends to brands they endorse, provided the influencer is perceived as authentic and non-transactional.
4. **Role of Social Networks:** Influencer content's impact is amplified when it is shared through interpersonal groups (WhatsApp forwards, community viewing) — networks that characterize rural media ecology. This networked sharing both spreads awareness and creates conversational momentum for trial.
5. **Heterogeneity by Demographics and Category:** Younger and more digitally literate rural consumers show higher responsiveness to influencer-led digital discovery; older cohorts still rely more on interpersonal and shopkeeper cues. Durable goods show slower adoption via influencer cues than FMCG or personal care, unless coupled with demonstrable product trials or local service availability.

### Measurement & evidence gaps

- Few peer-reviewed longitudinal studies uniquely isolate influencer effects in rural Indian contexts; much of the evidence is cross-sectional, experimental or practitioner-reported.
- Attribution to offline sales remains underdeveloped due to fragmented retail channels and lack of digital-to-offline measurement frameworks at scale. Industry reports emphasize the need for robust measurement.

### Practical Recommendations

1. **Localize Creators and Content:** Brands should invest in vernacular influencers who create relatable demonstrations (farm, home, kirana).
2. **Prioritize Micro-Influencers:** They deliver higher ROI in rural North India than celebrity endorsements.
3. **Integrate Offline Availability:** Synchronize influencer campaigns with kirana/distributor activation to close the awareness–trial gap.
4. **Innovate Measurement:** Use geo-tagged coupon codes, retailer audits, or WhatsApp-based feedback loops to measure offline conversions.
5. **Maintain Ethical Standards:** Follow ASCI disclosure rules, avoid exaggerated claims, and respect cultural sensitivities.

### Directions for Future Research

- **Primary field studies** in North Indian villages to quantify conversion from influencer-led trial to repeat purchase.
- **Longitudinal studies** to examine whether influencer effects persist over time and build loyalty.
- **Segmentation studies** of rural consumers based on digital literacy, language, and social network structures.
- **Impact studies** on non-FMCG categories such as durable goods, agri-inputs, and financial services.





Cover Page



## Conclusion

By 2023, rural India had become a digitally active, influencer-sensitive consumer base. Social media influencers—once considered an urban phenomenon—now play a significant role in shaping purchase decisions in North India's villages and small towns. Evidence suggests that influencers create awareness, reduce perceived product risks, and stimulate trial, particularly in FMCG and lifestyle categories. However, the ecosystem also faces pressing challenges: inadequate measurement frameworks, infrastructural divides, regulatory scrutiny, and misinformation risks.

Marketers who wish to engage rural North India must embrace **localization, micro-influencers, ethical disclosures, and integration with offline ecosystems**. Policymakers, too, must ensure regulations balance consumer protection with industry growth. Future research must deepen the empirical base through field studies and longitudinal measurement. If approached responsibly, influencer marketing could become not only a driver of commerce but also a medium for social change in rural North India.

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