

An Integrated S O R Framework of Influencer Marketing in Indian Markets

PRIYANKA TIWARI, DR. CHANDRA BHOOSHAN SINGH

Abstract: *Influencer marketing has become indispensable in brand communication strategy, especially in digitally saturated markets. However, much of the theory and empirical work flows from Western, East Asian and urban Indian contexts. This paper delineates an integrated conceptual framework for influencer marketing in tier II Indian technology markets using the case of Apple and Xiaomi in Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh as the contextual illustration. Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm, source credibility theory, social proof and social identity as well as cross cultural consumer behaviour research, influencer marketing is theorised as a multi stage, socio culturally embedded process, rather than a simple linear effect. The framework indicates that influencer marketing strategy influences through influence attributes-relatability, credibility, expertise; and these are important internal consumer states- reach and engagement, awareness, perception, attitude, that influence purchase decisions for technology brands. It is assumed that socio cultural factors (cultural values, family influence, social norms, lifestyle and community dynamics) moderate the strength and direction of some key relationships owing to the collectivist and family centred being of Indian tier II cities. The learnings from the Bilaspur case, which compares Apple's premium, expertise driven campaigns with Xiaomi's value oriented, relatability focused campaigns, are discussed with reference to brand-context fit and influencer-audience fit. The paper presents a S-O-R framework for influencer marketing in technology brands. It explores consumers and influencers within Bilaspur, a small city in India. The theoretical S-O-R framework relies on social media capital theory and socio cultural theory. It contributes to influencer marketing theory.*

Keywords: Influencer Marketing; Stimulus–Organism–Response; Source Credibility; Socio Cultural Factors

Introduction

The rapid emergence of influencer marketing as a mainstream brand communication tool is evident in many markets, especially those that deal with complex products and a perceived high level of risk, like technology. Reports from global and Indian industries show double-digit growth in influencer spending and brands' strategic dependence on social media creators to build awareness, trust and purchase intent (Luarn et al., 2025). However, a lot of the theoretical and empirical work in this space is geographically and contextually biased (ie, Western economies, East Asian markets, Indian metros). There has not been much work on tier II and tier III cities which today account for a large part of digital consumption and e commerce growth. It is worth noting that the unbalance is quite stark, considering that non metropolitan markets like Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, combine high levels of digital adoption along with unique socio cultural structures that may change the meaning and actions of influencer content (Kumar et al. 2025).

Simultaneously, how people understand the effects of influencer marketing is disordered. Numerous studies have looked at source credibility (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness), parasocial interaction, social proof, engagement metrics and purchase intentions. The systematic reviews reveal that although these constructs are very often cited, few empirical studies conceptualize them as part of a process model that traces the influential stimuli-reaction links of influencers across several stages. Additionally, socio-cultural factors are often acknowledged qualitatively as context or boundary conditions, but not formally in theoretical frameworks or quantitative models, particularly for Indian culturally heterogeneous collectivist settings. Consequently, there is an abundance of constructs in the literature, but they are less theoretically integrated and context sensitive (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

The present paper addresses these gaps by developing an integrated S-O-R framework of influencer marketing tailored to tier-II Indian technology markets, using Bilaspur and the comparative case of Apple and Xiaomi as a substantive illustration. Building on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) paradigm, the framework conceptualises influencer marketing strategies and attributes as stimuli; awareness, perception, attitudes and engagement as organismic states; and purchase decisions as responses. It then layers in source credibility theory (highlighting expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness), parasocial interaction (one-sided but emotionally meaningful relationships with influencers), social proof (normative validation through visible engagement and follower metrics), social identity (community belonging and homophily), and cross-cultural consumer behaviour (cultural values, family and reference-group influence, lifestyle and community norms). The aim is to articulate how these theoretical strands can be systematically combined to explain influencer marketing outcomes for technology brands in a specific, under-studied urban context (Bigne et al. 2020).

Bilaspur serves as a particularly useful focus for this theorisation. Being a tier II city in Chhattisgarh, it illustrates many of the structural characteristics that the so-called “non metropolitan” India is said to have on which the future of digital marketing will likely be built: fast-growing smartphone penetration, rising middle class incomes, dense social media use, and hybrid online – offline consumption. The socio cultural environment of Bilaspur is also shaped

by strong family involvement in purchase decisions, collectivist orientations, presence of regional language and identity, local norms around frugality, and status display. According to the thesis examined in this paper, the impact of influencer strategies and attributes on consumer responses to the campaigns of Apple and Xiaomi are significantly moderated by these factors. This suggests that the effectiveness of influencer marketing in such markets cannot be understood unless socio cultural embedding is made explicit (Saxena and Bhojwani, 2025).

Apple and Xiaomi, the focal brands of the Bilaspur study, also serve as contrasting strategic archetypes that illuminate theoretical questions. Apple uses macro influencers who endorse the brand and operate a self-branding campaign. It is thus regarded as a premium and aspirational technology brand with global standards that render itself useful and innovative. On the other hand, Xiaomi is pursuing a value driven strategy with more micro and mid influencer collaborations that deliver testimonial and direct experience content, demonstrate everyday use and speak to price–performance trade offs in relatable language. This difference in influencer strategy and positioning raises crucial theoretical questions: How do premium vs value brands exploit differences in source credibility and social identity? How do aspirational and pragmatic narratives interact with socio-cultural realities of tier II cities? Furthermore, brand-context fit shape the structure and strength of the S-O-R pathway from influencer stimuli to purchase decision (Shafiq et al. 2022).

The goals for the paper are threefold in this context. It aims to build on and refine existing knowledge. The view enunciated by S-O-R, source credibility, parasocial interaction, social proof, social identity, cross cultural consumer behaviour etc., and build a framework for influencer marketing in tier II Indian technology markets. The goal of this study is to suggest a model that explains the different components or stages between influencer marketing strategy and the purchase decision process of the consumer. As specified earlier, the consumer is influenced by various communication sources and uses more than one source. Drawing insights from our third case, we illustrate how this framework can account for brand specific trajectories. Specifically, it shows how Apple and Xiaomi differentially channel influencer activity into consumer behaviour in a shared socio cultural environment.

The structure of the rest of the paper is given next. The next section provides a deeper examination of the relevant theoretical perspectives, announcing functions or roles together with gaps in its application to influencer marketing in non metropolitan contexts in India. The next section discusses the integrated S-O-R framework including the influencer strategy, influencer attributes and socio cultural moderators and the proposed relationships amongst constructs. This paper intends to push influencer marketing research beyond the partial theory model analysis approach toward a more comprehensive, contextual theory perspective. This aims to provide a clearer understanding of how influencer campaigns work in emerging urban technology markets, like Bilaspur.

Theoretical Background

Influencer marketing sits at the intersection of several established theories of consumer behaviour and communication, yet these are rarely synthesised into a unified framework for

non-metropolitan Indian contexts. The starting point for integration is the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) paradigm, which conceptualises consumer behaviour as a sequence in which environmental stimuli trigger internal cognitive and affective states that culminate in approach or avoidance responses. In marketing applications, stimuli include communicative cues such as influencer content, message style and platform context; organismic states comprise awareness, perceptions, emotions and attitudes; and responses encompass behavioural outcomes such as purchase intention, actual purchase and loyalty. This processual view provides a natural backbone for understanding influencer campaigns, which are designed to move consumers from exposure and engagement through awareness and evaluation to purchase and advocacy (Jacoby, 2002).

According to source credibility theory, the effective persuader must be seen as competent and trustworthy, and, in some versions, attractive. This theory overlays the S-O-R process. In the sphere of influencers, credibility is made up of not just professional qualifications or domain knowledge but also consistency, clarity of sponsorships and alignment of the influencer's persona with the brand. Shafiq et al. (2022) said that the credibility of influencer affects attitudes brands and the influencer, which affects purchase intent of consumers. Trust or authenticity are often stronger predictors than popularity. The parasocial interaction (PSI) theory describes how audience members develop a one-sided yet meaningful emotionally relationship with media figures, including the SMI. PSI enhances perceptions of intimacy and identification, leading endorsements to be interpreted as personal advice rather than impersonal advertising. According to a study, PSI and credibility enhance purchase intentions. The impact is also enhanced when homophily- perceived likeness in values and lifestyle- serves to strengthen the relationship.

A third batch of organizational behavior-relevant perspectives concerns social proof and social identity. This concept of social proof, which originates from persuasion theory, posits that when uncertain about appropriate behaviour, individuals observe others. Social proof factors in marketing include visible cues like follower counts, engagement levels and widespread usage, which suggest normative approval and lessen the risk of the choices made. Approach of social identity theory is in line with this view, as it posits that people derive part of their self concept from membership of social groups, and hence go along with norms and preferences of salient in groups. In the context of social media, influencer communities can act as reference groups, with involvement in technology, fashion or local culture allowing for a greater endorsement and conformity of brands. Cross cultural and socio cultural consumer behaviour research shows that how people react to marketing messages is also shaped by their cultural norms, family structures and community orientations. The success of influencer marketing in India is greatly influenced by socio-cultural fit due to its collectivist orientations and strong family involvement in purchasing decision. This is particularly true in tier II cities where aspirational consumption coexists with frugality and community-based decision making.

In terms of the theory, influencer marketing strategies and attributes are structured stimuli, consumer awareness/perceptions/attitudes are organismic states and purchase decisions are responses, while socio cultural factors are explicitly modelled as moderators that condition the strength of key relationships (Luna, 2001). Apple and Xiaomi as technology brands (premium

versus value) provide real examples of how source credibility, PSI, social proof, social identification and sociocultural dynamics work differently in the same S-O-R skeleton. There is a need for an integrative, context-sensitive framework.

Mixed S-O-R Framework for Influencer Marketing in Technology Markets Tier II.

Developing from the various theories and the Bilaspur case, the proposed framework conceptualises influencer marketing in tier II Indian technology markets as a multi stage (S-O-R) process that consists of three main layers namely stimuli, organism, and responses. Socio cultural moderators overlay critical links. At the level stimuli, two kind are expelled. To begin with, the influencer marketing strategy captures brand level design choices content themes, platform choice, frequency of posting, collaboration formats (e.g., endorsement, testimonial, direct experience, self-branding) and disclosure practices . Apple relies on macro influencers and polish endorsement/self branding content while Xiaomi opts for testimonial and direct experience content from creators that are more relatable. This is an example of different IMS. Moreover, influencer attributes are realized as discrete but interrelated stimuli: relatability (perceived similarity and everyday resonance), credibility (trustworthiness, honesty, sincerity) and expertise (domain specific knowledge and competence). According to the framework, the source credibility and PSI theory, have different effects on different roles of the process rather than the same impact.

The internal consumer states of the organism layer are shaped by those stimuli. Reach and Engagement (RE) refers to the first exposure and interaction to viewing liking sharing commenting and information seeking behaviour activated by influencer content. Consumer Awareness (CA) refers to the knowledge about the brand and its products resulting from repeated exposure to influencer posts. Consumer Perception refers to beliefs about the quality, innovativeness, brand image and value for money assigned to a product based on influencer claims and demonstrations. Consumer attitude towards the brand, overall favourability, and preference using cognitive assessments and affective response (Dhun & Dangi, 2022). The purchase decision (PD) at response stage is about purchase intention and actual buying behaviour of technology products promoted by influencers. The framework outlines a primary SOR chain consisting of $IMS \rightarrow RE \rightarrow CA \rightarrow CP \rightarrow CTA \rightarrow PD$. This chain is consistent with the hierarchy of effects and SOR logic, whereby strategies and attributes (S) influence sequences of organismic states (O) that culminate in behavioural responses (R).

Theorists claim influencer characteristics influence at a certain stage in the chain. Relatability suffused with homophily and social identity is expected to enhance primarily RE and CA. Consumers are likely to follow and attend to influencers that engage with them through language, lifestyle and socio economic realities. That has defined in the source credibility theory, credibility is said to have the most impact on CP as it creates the interpretive lens through which claims and features are read, which in turn reduces uncertainty (Jacoby, 2002). Expertise matters a lot in a high involvement category like a smartphone. This would mostly affect CTA to a great extent. Knowledgeable explanations and comparisons will help in strengthening favorable attitudes. This is done on the basis of perceived performance and value.

The difference covers the call by authors in the literature to go beyond generic treatment of influencer attributes and to map their functional roles in process models of persuasion.

Essentially, the framework incorporates socio cultural factors (SCF) which include cultural values, family influence, social norms, lifestyle, and community dynamics, as moderators in four relationships which are; $IMS \rightarrow RE$, $IR\ REL \rightarrow RE/CA$, $IR\ CRD \rightarrow CP$, and $CTA \rightarrow PD$. In settings like collectivist, family oriented tier II, campaign styles that are democratised to local contexts (modest aspiration, family benefit and responsible spending) are expected to generate higher engagement than campaign styles that stress pure individualist or conspicuous aspects, thus moderating $IMS \rightarrow RE$. Relatability effects on RE and CA are contingent on socio cultural proximity; as regional language speaking, lifestyle reflecting, community affiliated influencers are better placed to convert relatability into sustained engagement and awareness than distant cosmopolitan personalities. The effect of credibility on CP is moderated by trust in online sources and reference group endorsement (family and peer support). In high endorsement environments, influencer credibility is most effective when also backed by perceived community usage and collective validation. Finally, the relationship between positive attitudes and the purchase decision is moderated by consultation with family, norms related to status and frugality, and retail experiences in the offline environment, reflecting cross cultural findings that attitudes are not sufficient on their own to predict behaviour in a collectivist context (Yu et al. 2024).

The framework when applied to the Apple–Xiaomi case predicts and elucidates divergent trajectories in the same space. Apple's focus on high-end products and its IMS impacts people attitude which is then interacted with social and cultural factors. Apple brand saw high attitudinal development among aspirational segments but limited conversion. The price value norms and family prioritising high price brands limit these purchases. Xiaomi's value focused, testimonial IMS and relatable influencers work with SCF together for broad reach, good awareness and pragmatic purchase decisions among price sensitive consumers especially when community usage brings social proof . As a result, the integrated SOR framework not only synthesises multiple theoretical strands but also provides a structured lens for analysing brand–context fit and heterogeneity of influencer effects across premium and value technology brands in tier II Indian markets.

Implications and Directions for Empirical Research

The combination of S-O-R framework and Bilaspur case has implications for theory and practice and offers a wide range of opportunities for empirical research. Synthesizing S O R, source credibility, parasocial interaction, social proof, social identity, and cross cultural consumer behaviour theoretically suggests that it would make sense to model influencer marketing as a multi-layered system, which is comprised of linked stimuli, organismic states and responses, linked by stage-specific mechanisms rather than undifferentiated constructs. The different characteristics of influencers in the process – relatable at exposure/awareness, credible at perception, expert at attitude – allow us to have some insights into what particular dimensions of influence may do when and what they would interact with. In addition, deliberately incorporating socio-cultural factors, as moderators rather than mere background variables,

enhances cross-cultural influencer marketing theory by showing that cultural values, family influence and community norms influence the translation of online stimuli into offline behaviour in tier II cities.

To practice this framework, it implies influencer strategies for technology brands operating in an emerging urban market should specifically facilitate movement along the S O R path. This means to focus on that and not on merely reach or engagement. Premium brands like apple must strike a balance between expert centric content and aspirational copy, with messaging that addresses local concerns around price fairness, long term value and family endorsement through potential hybrid executions using macro influencers and trusted regional creators. Value-driving brands such as Xiaomi ought to keep allocating media budgets towards relatable, hyperlocal influencers and community integrated digital tactics, and also think about how to systematically build higher order brand associations (innovation, reliability) –all without diluting their core value offering. Brands and agencies working with tier II and tier III markets can also use the framework as a diagnostic tool. They can map out where the campaign is strong or weak, whether at the level of the stimulus design, the generation of organismic states or the translation of attitudes to purchase choices under local socio cultural constraints.

According to experience, multiple method, multiple site research is called for the testing and refinement of the propositions. A direct approach is to implement the constructs (IMS, IR REL, IR CRD, IR EXP, RE, CA, CP, CTA, PD, SCF) across different brands and regions, and use structural models to estimate larger samples of various tier II and tier III cities. Investigating whether these roles and these moderating effects hold across products (e.g. fashion, finance, education) and platforms (e.g. Instagram, YouTube, short video apps) and whether brand–context fit shapes path strengths systematically can be an important direction of influence research. Longitudinal studies could track how repeated exposure to influencer campaigns changes movement along the S O R chain, capturing dynamics around new product launches, other upgrades and switching between brands in markets where consumers wade through premium and value brands.

Qualitative and mixed-methods studies could further enhance our understanding of sociocultural mechanisms. For example, conducting interviews, focus groups and ethnographic observation in places like Bilaspur could show how family discussions, community peer norms, and local community narratives shape influencer content. The article suggests that a body of comparative work could be undertaken to investigate how tier II creator ecosystems differ from metropolitan ecosystems in respect of trust, relatability, ROI and so on. This observation is in response to the recent industry evidence of regional influencers delivering better engagement and conversion for certain segments. Ultimately, future studies may delve into new phenomena such as artificial intelligence powered influencer matching, virtual influencers and cross platform algorithmic amplification. Specifically, this research will examine how these technologies interact with the human and socio cultural dimensions of the framework.

In conclusion, the integrated S O R framework proposed here, building on the the Bilaspur experience of Apple and Xiaomi, provides an excellent basis for theorizing influencer marketing in tier II Indian technology markets. The model sees influencer campaigns as

structured, multi-step processes situated in specific socio-cultural contexts invites systematic empirical testing, and provides actionable insights that may help brands design more effective, culturally-aware influencer strategies in the digital age.

References

- Bhojwani, N., & Saxena, S. (2025). Systematic literature review and future research agenda of influencer marketing-based behaviour. *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)*, 7(5).
- Bigne, E., Chatzipanagiotou, K., & Ruiz, C. (2020). Pictorial content, sequence of conflicting online reviews and consumer decision-making: The stimulus-organism-response model revisited. *Journal of Business Research*, 115, 403-416.
- Dhun, & Dangi, H. K. (2022). Influencer marketing: Role of influencer credibility and congruence on brand attitude and eWOM. *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 22(sup1), S28–S72.
- Jacoby, J. (2002). Stimulus-organism-response reconsidered: an evolutionary step in modeling (consumer) behavior. *Journal of consumer psychology*, 12(1), 51-57.
- Kumar, R., Prabha, V., & Singh, P. K. (2025). Influencer marketing: A review and research agenda using VOSviewer. *Abhigyan*, 43(2).
- Luarn, P., Chen, C. C., & Chiu, Y. P. (2025). Fashion influencers' credibility on Instagram: the stimulus–organism–response (SOR) perspective. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 33(2), 191-204.
- Saxena, S., & Bhojwani, N. (2025). A bibliometric analysis of influencer marketing research: Current trends and future directions. *Cogent Business & Management*, 12(1), 2541040.
- Shafiq, M., Qureshi, M. A., & Imran, M. (2022). Digital transformation in supply chain management: A review and bibliometric analysis. *Transportation Research Part E: Logistics and Transportation Review*, 164, 102779.
- Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2020). Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions. *Journal of retailing and consumer services*, 53, 101742.
- Yu, S., Zhang, H., Zheng, Q., Chu, D. D., Chen, T., & Chen, X. (2024). Consumer behavior based on the SOR model: How do short video advertisements affect furniture consumers' purchase intentions?. *BioResources*, 19(2), 2639.