

Research Paper

The Credibility Calculus in Digital Endorsement: Parasocial Proximity, Authenticity Perception, and the Erosion of Traditional Celebrity Influence Among Indian Urban Consumers

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ABSTRACT

Most research on endorsement marketing treats celebrity and influencer endorsement as a straight substitution, with one replacing the other in consumer preference. We argue instead that influencer marketing is reconfiguring the credibility calculus, the process by which consumers decide which endorsers to trust, rather than simply displacing celebrities. Drawing on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), and Parasocial Relationship Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), we show how social media compresses social distance, encourages more effortful processing of endorsement content, and deepens parasocial intimacy between influencers and audiences. We test these ideas with a survey of 100 respondents in urban and semi-urban India, a market underrepresented in existing endorsement research. Influencers outperform celebrities on trust, authenticity, and purchase intention across most product categories, while celebrities hold their own on entertainment value, evidence, we argue, of functional differentiation rather than wholesale displacement. We close by proposing a Dual Endorsement Efficacy Model that captures this division of labour between endorser types.

Keywords: *Credibility Calculus, Influencer Marketing, Parasocial Proximity, Endorsement Efficacy, Dual Processing, Indian Consumers, Advertising Disclosure*

Why do consumers trust some endorsers more than others? Marketing scholars have asked this question for more than four decades, and early answers settled on a familiar set of constructs - source credibility, expertise, attractiveness, and product congruence, formalized in Ohanian's (1990) Source Credibility Model and Kamins's (1990) Match-Up Hypothesis. Both were built around traditional celebrity endorsement and remain influential today, but neither anticipated a new kind of endorser: one whose persuasive authority comes not from institutional celebrity but from the relational capital built up with a digitally mediated following.

The social media influencer has become a commercial force in a remarkably short time: global spending on influencer marketing passed USD 21 billion in 2023 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023), growing faster than most other forms of digital advertising. Scholarship has kept pace in volume but not in design most studies examine influencer

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marketing and celebrity endorsement separately rather than comparing them directly. That approach has produced good descriptive knowledge of each modality on its own, but little theory of why and how the two differ in their persuasive effects.

We propose a different unit of analysis: not the endorser type itself, but the credibility calculus consumers use to decide how much trust and persuasive weight to give an endorsement. Our argument is that social media platforms have changed the inputs to that calculus they shrink the perceived social distance between endorser and consumer, favour content formats that invite closer processing rather than snap judgments, and create unusually strong and durable parasocial bonds. Influencer marketing's persuasive edge comes from fitting all three mechanisms; celebrity endorsement, built for broadcast-era media, fits them less well.

There is a geographic gap too. Most empirical work on endorsement marketing comes out of the US, the UK, and Western Europe, where celebrity culture and social media use carry meanings that don't necessarily travel. India is a useful test case: it has one of the world's largest and fastest-growing social media populations, a celebrity culture deeply rooted in Hindi cinema, and enough demographic and regional variation that a single national average can mislead. Studying endorsement effects here adds a market that existing scholarship has largely overlooked.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. The literature review builds the theoretical argument around celebrity endorsement research, the emergence of influencer marketing, and the three psychological frameworks, social comparison, elaborative persuasion, and parasocial intimacy, behind the credibility calculus. The hypotheses section sets out five testable predictions. The methodology section describes the survey design, followed by results and discussion. We close with the Dual Endorsement Efficacy Model and directions for future research.

Classical Models of Endorser Credibility

Academic interest in the persuasive mechanisms of celebrity endorsement can be traced to Friedman and Friedman's (1979) foundational empirical work, which established that celebrity endorsers generated significantly superior persuasive outcomes compared to non-celebrity alternatives for products associated with elevated social or psychological risk. This finding anchored subsequent theoretical development within a credibility-centered paradigm. The Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) gave this paradigm its most enduring formal expression, decomposing endorser effectiveness into three independently measurable dimensions: perceived trustworthiness, domain expertise, and physical attractiveness. The model's tripartite structure proved highly tractable for empirical investigation and informed celebrity selection practices within the advertising industry for several decades.

The Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) introduced a contingency dimension that the Source Credibility Model had not fully accommodated, demonstrating that endorsement effectiveness is substantially conditioned by the congruence between an endorser's public image and the characteristics of the endorsed product. The persuasive premium associated with well-matched endorsements athletes promoting performance sportswear, musicians endorsing audio technology provided evidence that endorser selection could not be reduced to a search for maximum credibility scores but required attention to fit between endorser

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identity and product positioning. Together, these frameworks constituted the theoretical foundation upon which the field's understanding of endorsement effectiveness was built and upon which it operated, largely unchallenged, until the emergence of social media created conditions that neither model was designed to explain.

Influencer marketing: A relational reconfiguration

The theoretical inadequacy of classical credibility models in the influencer context was not immediately apparent. Early scholarship, including the foundational conceptualization offered by Brown and Hayes (2008) and the empirical characterization of influencer personality attributes provided by Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg (2011), tended to assimilate influencer marketing within existing credibility frameworks, treating influencers as a novel species of endorser whose effectiveness could be assessed through the same tripartite lens. Freberg et al.'s (2011) finding that audiences attributed qualities of innovativeness, being opinionated, and credibility to influencers. These attributes are distinct from those associated with traditional celebrities., suggesting that influencers were credible in a qualitatively different way, but did not yet provide a theoretical account of why.

Khamis, Ang, and Welling's (2017) concept of 'self-branding' represented a more significant theoretical departure. By demonstrating that influencers construct persuasive authority through the curation and monetization of personal identity rather than through institutional celebrity, Khamis et al. Identified a fundamental asymmetry in the architecture of endorser–audience relationships: whereas celebrity endorsements operate through the logic of association the brand borrows cultural capital from the celebrity's pre-existing social position influencer endorsements operate through the logic of relation the brand is incorporated into an ongoing communicative relationship between the influencer and a community of followers. This relational logic has no structural precedent in traditional celebrity endorsement and calls for theoretical frameworks capable of accounting for its distinctive dynamics.

The Authenticity Turn and Its Paradox

The most extensively documented empirical phenomenon in the influencer marketing literature is the centrality of perceived authenticity as a mediating construct. Gilmore and Pine (2007), writing from a cultural economics perspective, identified the late modern consumer's preference for authentic experience as a defining feature of contemporary market culture a sensibility that manifests with particular force in endorsement contexts. Empirical corroboration at scale was provided by Lou and Yuan (2019), whose large-sample investigation demonstrated that perceived informativeness, entertainment value, and credibility each constituted significant positive predictors of brand attitude and purchase intention among social media users, with these effects being substantially amplified when followers attributed genuine product use and belief to the influencer.

The tension inherent in commercial authenticity was theorized with particular precision by Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020), who demonstrated that perceived authenticity fully mediated the relationship between the disclosure of commercial relationships and follower engagement. Their paradox of commercial authenticity that the visibility of financial motivation constitutes the primary threat to an influencer's persuasive effectiveness has important implications for both endorsement strategy and advertising regulation. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) extended this analysis to the credibility perceptions of young female Instagram users, finding that influencer content was consistently rated as more

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credible than traditional celebrity endorsements, an effect attributed specifically to the perceived possibility of direct personal interaction and the relatability of influencer self-presentation. The compounding insight from this body of work is that authenticity in the influencer context is not merely a static attribute but a relational achievement, constructed and sustained through communicative practices that the architecture of social media platforms is uniquely equipped to support.

Reframing the Problem: The Credibility Calculus

The preceding review identifies a gap that existing frameworks have not fully addressed: the absence of an integrated theoretical account of how and why the credibility calculus the cognitive and relational processes through which consumers assign persuasive weight to endorser claims is differently configured for influencer versus celebrity endorsement contexts. Three bodies of social-psychological theory, taken in conjunction, provide the conceptual resources for such an account.

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) establishes that comparative self-evaluation is most psychologically consequential when the comparison target is perceived as similar to the self. Traditional celebrities, whose socioeconomic elevation and physical idealization place them at considerable psychological distance from the average consumer, function as aspirational comparison targets capable of generating upward comparison and status-signaling motivation, but attenuated in their capacity to generate the personal relevance upon which endorsement trust depends. Influencers, occupying an intermediate social position between ordinary consumer and unattainable ideal, constitute more proximate comparison targets, and this proximity amplifies the personal relevance and, by extension, the persuasive efficacy of their endorsements. The compression of perceived social distance, that is 'parasocial proximity' is the first mechanism through which social media reconfigures the credibility calculus.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) provides the second mechanism. The model's distinction between central route processing attitude change mediated by effortful evaluation of message arguments and peripheral route processing attitude change mediated by contextual heuristics such as source attractiveness or celebrity association maps directly onto the content-format differences between influencer and celebrity endorsements. Traditional celebrity endorsements, typically brief and image-centered, are optimized for peripheral processing; the celebrity's cultural cachet substitutes for substantive product engagement. Influencer content, particularly in longer formats review videos, tutorials, detailed written evaluations is structured to activate central route processing by embedding product information within relatable, experience-grounded narrative. Attitude change achieved through the central route is theoretically and empirically more durable and more resistant to counter-persuasion, generating purchase intentions of greater specificity and longevity.

Parasocial Relationship Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) supplies the third mechanism. The quasi-interpersonal bonds that audiences routinely develop with media figures characterized by the subjective experience of mutual acquaintance in the absence of genuine reciprocity are considerably intensified by the interactive affordances of social media. Influencers cultivate parasocial intimacy through direct address, comment engagement, the disclosure of personal vulnerability, and the sharing of quotidian detail; the cumulative effect is a relational experience qualitatively closer to acquaintanceship than to the admiration that

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characterizes celebrity fandom. Bond (2018) provided empirical confirmation that parasocial bond strength constitutes a significant predictor of endorser persuasiveness, establishing the relational mechanism as a primary driver of endorsement effectiveness in the social media context.

Taken together, the three mechanisms that are parasocial proximity, elaborative activation, and parasocial intimacy, together constitute what this paper terms the ‘credibility calculus’ defined as the configuration of psychological processes through which the persuasive value of an endorsement is determined. The central theoretical claim advanced here is that influencer marketing derives its structural advantage from its alignment with each of these mechanisms, while traditional celebrity endorsement, optimized for a different media environment, engages them less effectively or not at all.

The theoretical reframing proposed above generates several empirical implications that the existing literature has not adequately tested. Most consequentially, if the credibility calculus operates through the mechanisms identified, its outcomes should vary systematically across demographic groups specifically, those whose social comparison orientation, media literacy, and susceptibility to parasocial bonding differ. Younger consumers, whose formation within social media environments makes them particularly attuned to influencer communication styles, should exhibit stronger credibility differentials in favour of influencers. More educated consumers may exhibit more nuanced patterns, given the competing effects of appreciation for niche expertise and skepticism towards undisclosed commercial relationships.

A second empirical implication concerns product category. The Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) would predict that the credibility calculus yields systematically different outcomes across product types: categories in which niche content expertise and personalized recommendation are most relevant – fashion, food, lifestyle – should show the strongest influencer advantage, while categories in which aspirational association and broad cultural visibility are most relevant – luxury goods, consumer electronics, prestige brands – may show smaller differentials or retained celebrity advantage. A third implication concerns the disclosure paradox identified by Audrezet et al. (2020): if the authenticity mechanism is central to influencer credibility, then formal disclosure of commercial relationships should generate a more pronounced trust reduction for influencers than for celebrities, for whom commercial endorsement is a normatively expected activity. The present study tests each of these propositions through its five hypotheses.

The geographic situatedness of the study of an Indian urban and semi-urban sample constitutes an additional and independently significant contribution. The pronounced Western orientation of the existing evidence base constitutes a form of sampling parochialism that materially constrains the generalizability of field-level conclusions. India presents a context in which the credibility calculus may operate through locally specific dynamics: the cultural authority of Bollywood and cricket celebrities has deep historical roots and is reinforced by media structures distinct from those of Western markets, while the rapid expansion of Instagram, YouTube, and short-form video platforms has generated a vibrant and culturally embedded influencer ecosystem. The extent to which the credibility calculus operates similarly in this context, and the ways in which it may differ, represents a theoretically productive empirical question.

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Thus, we provide some hypotheses, each derived from specific mechanisms within the credibility calculus argument and each carrying implications for the comparative endorsement effectiveness of influencers and celebrities in the present sample.

Parasocial Proximity and Credibility Perception

This hypothesis instantiates the core credibility calculus argument at the level of consumer perception. The theoretical logic draws on Festinger's (1954) social comparison framework and its implication that endorsers perceived as psychosocially proximate generate more personally relevant and credibly weighted recommendations. If the compression of social distance is indeed a primary mechanism through which influencers achieve credibility, it should manifest as significantly higher ratings on trustworthiness and authenticity the two components of the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) most directly responsive to perceived relational proximity. The empirical contribution of this hypothesis lies in its simultaneous within-sample assessment of both endorser types, permitting direct differential comparison rather than independent-samples extrapolation.

H1: Social media influencers are perceived as significantly more trustworthy and authentic than traditional celebrities when endorsing products, reflecting the credibility advantage conferred by greater parasocial proximity.

Demographic Conditioning of the Credibility Calculus

The credibility calculus is not posited as a uniform psychological mechanism but as one whose operation is conditioned by the consumer's media socialization, social comparison orientation, and media literacy. Younger consumers particularly those within Generation Z cohorts have been socialized within a media environment in which social media constitutes the primary informational and relational infrastructure, rendering the communicative conventions of influencer content intrinsically familiar and the interactive affordances that sustain parasocial bonds a routine feature of daily experience (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). More educated consumers, characterized by greater media literacy, may show a distinctive pattern: higher appreciation for the substantive, expertise-grounded content that activates central route processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), alongside greater critical vigilance regarding undisclosed commercial relationships. This hypothesis tests whether the credibility calculus is demographically uniform or, as the theoretical framework implies, systematically differentiated.

H2: The credibility differential favoring influencers over celebrities varies significantly across demographic groups, with stronger differentials observed among younger consumers and those with higher educational attainment.

Parasocial Intimacy as a Purchase Intention Predictor

Horton and Wohl's (1956) foundational account of parasocial interaction established that the relational bonds audiences form with media figures exert genuine influence on attitudes and behaviours, even in the absence of genuine reciprocity. Bond (2018) provided direct empirical corroboration of this proposition specifically in the endorsement context, demonstrating that parasocial bond strength significantly predicted endorser persuasiveness. The contrasting mechanism through which celebrity endorsements generate purchase intention aspirational identification, or the motivational desire to associate oneself with figures perceived as occupying superior social positions operates through the peripheral rather than the central persuasion route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and is structurally disadvantaged in purchase-decision contexts because the psychosocial distance that generates aspirational motivation simultaneously attenuates the personal relevance of the

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product recommendation. This hypothesis tests whether parasocial intimacy constitutes a more potent purchase intention mechanism than aspirational identification in the present sample.

H3: The strength of parasocial bonds with social media influencers is a stronger predictor of purchase intention than aspirational identification with traditional celebrities.

Product Category as a Moderator of the Credibility Differential

The Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) established endorser–product congruence as a determinant of endorsement effectiveness and provides the theoretical basis for predicting systematic variation in the credibility differential across product categories. Influencers are typically defined by specific content niches fashion, culinary content, fitness, technology and their credibility is grounded partly in domain expertise that is legible precisely because it is demonstrated through sustained, niche-specific content production. For lifestyle-oriented product categories, this expertise-based credibility advantage reinforces the parasocial proximity and authenticity mechanisms already identified, generating a compounded credibility differential. For technically complex or aspirationally framed categories, however, the calculus may shift: celebrity endorsements may retain advantage through the associative prestige they confer and through the broader cultural visibility that renders celebrity-brand associations legible across heterogeneous consumer segments. This hypothesis tests whether the credibility calculus is category-invariant or whether its operation is meaningfully moderated by product type.

H4: Influencer endorsements are perceived as more credible than celebrity endorsements for lifestyle-oriented product categories, including fashion and beauty, food and beverage, and health and wellness.

The Disclosure Asymmetry

The fifth hypothesis derives from the paradox of commercial authenticity identified by Audrezet et al. (2020) and constitutes the study's most directly policy-relevant proposition. The credibility calculus argument implies that the trust premium associated with influencer marketing is predicated upon and hence uniquely vulnerable to disruption by the perception that endorsement recommendations are experientially genuine and financially disinterested. For traditional celebrities, commercial endorsement is a normatively expected and institutionally established dimension of public professional activity; the revelation that an endorsement is commercially motivated constitutes low informational novelty and generates correspondingly attenuated attitudinal consequences. For influencers, by contrast, whose persuasive authority rests precisely upon the perception of disinterested authenticity, formal disclosure constitutes a direct challenge to the foundational premise of the credibility claim. The predicted asymmetry in disclosure effects across endorser types has significant implications for the design of mandatory disclosure frameworks and for the ongoing debate about whether such frameworks adequately balance consumer protection with the preservation of the authenticating conditions upon which influential endorsement depends.

H5: Formal advertising disclosures (e.g., '#Ad' or 'Paid Partnership' labels) generate a significantly more pronounced reduction in consumer trust for influencer endorsements than for traditional celebrity endorsements.

METHOD

The present study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, employing a self-administered online questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. This design was

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selected for its capacity to generate standardized, comparable measurements across a demographically diverse sample at sufficient scale to permit exploratory subgroup analysis, and for its compatibility with the study's positivist epistemological orientation. The survey was administered via Google Forms.

Survey distribution was conducted through social media platforms (Instagram and WhatsApp), institutional communication channels, and targeted email outreach. Data collection was conducted over four weeks. Participation was voluntary throughout; respondents received a complete explanatory preamble detailing the study's academic purpose.

Sample

The final analytical sample comprised 100 respondents recruited through a convenience sampling strategy supplemented by purposive selection to ensure adequate representation across key demographic dimensions - age cohort, gender, and educational attainment. The age distribution spanned three cohorts: Generation Z (18–25 years), Millennials (26–40 years), and older adults (41 years and above), with the modal cluster in the 18–25 range. Gender representation included male, female, and non-binary respondents. Educational attainment ranged from secondary school completion to postgraduate qualification. Geographically, the sample was drawn primarily from urban and semi-urban centers in India, with the highest densities of respondents located in the Delhi-NCR region, Mumbai, and Bengaluru.

The limitations of convenience sampling most notably, the over-representation of younger, more educated, and more digitally engaged respondents relative to the broader Indian population are acknowledged and addressed in the study's limitations section. Notwithstanding these constraints, the sample's demographic composition renders it appropriate for the study's primary theoretical questions, which concern the credibility calculus as it operates among digitally active consumers for whom both traditional celebrity and social media influencer content constitutes a routine feature of the media environment.

Measures

The questionnaire was organized into four thematic blocks rather than labelled sections. The survey captured demographic details such as age, gender, educational attainment, city of residence, and average daily social media use in hours. Further, media consumption, including platform usage frequency and active followership of influencer and celebrity accounts was also captured. Credibility perceptions were captured through forced-choice comparison items in which respondents indicated which endorser type - traditional celebrity or social media influencer - they judged more credible, relatable, entertaining, persuasive, and trustworthy; these items map onto the trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness dimensions of Ohanian's (1990) Source Credibility Model and were supplemented by five-point Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to capture finer-grained attitudinal differences between endorser types. Purchase intention was measured with a four-item scale adapted from Lou and Yuan (2019), asking respondents to rate, on a five-point scale from 1 (Very Unlikely) to 5 (Very Likely), how likely they would be to purchase a product endorsed by each endorser type across four categories: fashion and beauty, food and beverage, consumer electronics, and health and wellness.

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The primary independent variable is endorser type, operationalized as a binary categorical variable (traditional celebrity versus social media influencer). Primary dependent variables are perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity, overall credibility, and purchase intention.

RESULTS

Sample Profile and Digital Engagement

The sample was characterized by high digital embeddedness. The modal age cohort was 18–25 years, yielding strong Generation Z representation a group whose formation within social media environments makes its credibility perceptions of particular theoretical relevance to the present study's questions. Daily social media usage was reported in the range of three to six hours by the majority of respondents. Instagram (used by over 90% of respondents) and youtube (approximately 77%) emerged as the dominant platforms, confirming sustained and substantial exposure to influencer-generated content. Active followership of influencer accounts was widespread, and exposure to branded or sponsored content was reported as occurring occasionally to frequently by the majority of respondents. These characteristics establish the sample's deep immersion in the influencer-mediated digital media environment and confirm the relevance of their perceptions to the study's central theoretical questions.

The Credibility Differential

Across all credibility-relevant psychological attributes, social media influencers were rated more favorably than traditional celebrities by a consistent and, in most cases, substantial majority of respondents. With respect to trustworthiness, 60.5% of respondents attributed greater credibility to influencers, while 52.6% rated influencers more favorably on perceived authenticity. Influencers dominated the relatability dimension, though a notable minority perceived no meaningful difference between the two endorser types. On perceived expertise, influencers again outperformed celebrities with a narrower margin. Overall endorser credibility was assigned to influencers by 44.7% of respondents compared to 21% for celebrities. These data provide robust empirical support for H1, indicating that the credibility differential consistent with the parasocial proximity mechanism operates reliably within the present sample.

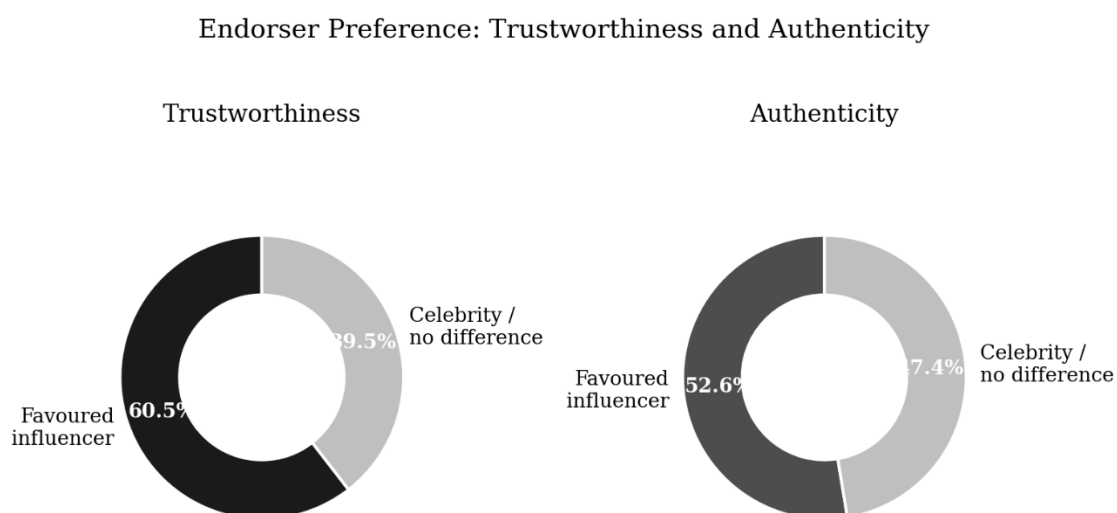


Figure 1. Share of respondents rating influencers more favourably than celebrities on trustworthiness and authenticity.

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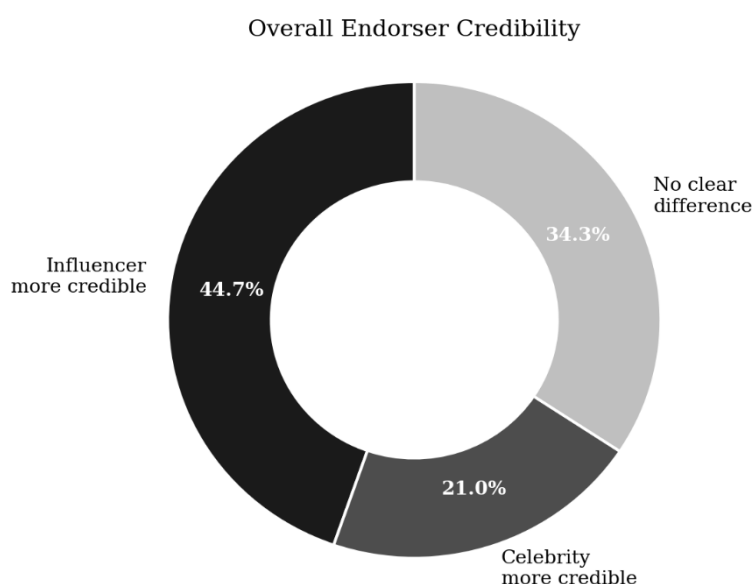


Figure 2. Overall endorser credibility: which type respondents judged more credible.

The Entertainment Anomaly

The assessment of entertainment value generated a pattern notably divergent from those observed on credibility-related attributes, and theoretically significant for that reason. A majority of respondents (60.5%) reported perceiving no meaningful difference between celebrities and influencers on this dimension, with the remainder approximately equally distributed between the two endorser types. This finding is not, from the perspective of the credibility calculus framework, anomalous: entertainment value engages neither the social comparison mechanism nor the elaborative processing mechanism that underpins influencer credibility. It does, however, indicate that traditional celebrities retain genuine equivalence with influencers in their capacity to generate attention and cultural engagement a finding compatible with the Dual Endorsement Efficacy Model developed in the discussion section, which distinguishes between the awareness function, in which celebrities retain relevance, and the credibility function, in which influencers now dominate.

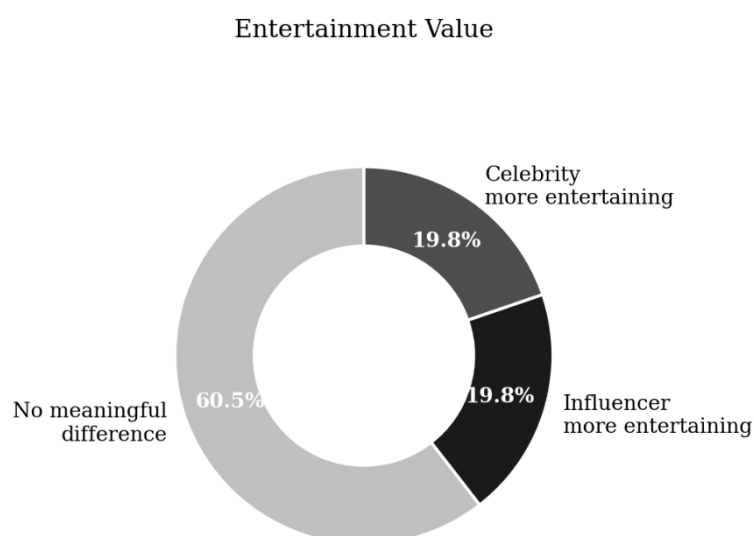


Figure 3. Entertainment value: most respondents saw no meaningful difference between endorser types (remainder split approximately evenly).

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Product Category

Purchase intention data revealed a consistent preference for influencer endorsements across all four assessed product categories, with the magnitude of the differential varying in theoretically interpretable ways. The most pronounced preference for influencer endorsements was observed in fashion and beauty and food and beverage categories precisely those domains in which niche content expertise, personalized recommendation, and sustained community engagement are most structurally salient, and in which the parasocial proximity mechanism would be expected to generate its strongest effects. The credibility differential narrowed for consumer electronics, a category in which aspirational brand association and broad cultural visibility retain comparative relevance, and in which celebrity endorsements may benefit from the match-up logic identified by Kamins (1990). Health and wellness showed an intermediate pattern. These results provide support for H4 and establish product category moderation as an empirically confirmed feature of the credibility calculus.

The Disclosure Asymmetry

The disclosure finding constitutes perhaps the study's most theoretically and practically consequential result. When influencer content was formally labelled as commercial (#Ad or Paid Partnership), approximately 48% of respondents reported a reduction in trust, while 26% reported positive appreciation for the transparency and a smaller group reported no attitudinal change. The magnitude of this trust reduction is consistent with the predictions of H5 and with Audrezet et al.'s (2020) paradox of commercial authenticity: mandatory disclosure, while essential for regulatory and consumer protection purposes, directly challenges the authenticating premise upon which influencer credibility is constructed. The pattern of responses suggests that the disclosure asymmetry posited in H5 operates in the expected direction, though the study's cross-sectional design precludes a direct statistical test of the differential between endorser types.

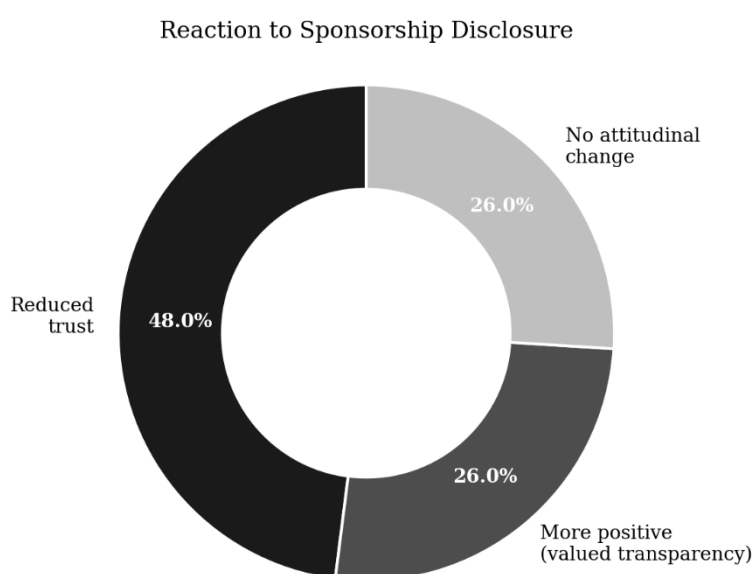


Figure 4. *Change in trust after formal disclosure of a sponsored/paid partnership.*

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Consumer Skepticism and Behavioral Outcomes

The majority of respondents exhibited moderate rather than high levels of generalized advertising skepticism a calibrated, critically informed orientation rather than blanket distrust. With respect to actual purchasing behavior, the majority of respondents reporting influencer-driven consideration indicated that they had been tempted but had not yet converted to purchase, while a smaller proportion reported completed purchases. For celebrity-driven endorsements, a comparatively higher proportion reported completed purchases, suggesting that traditional celebrity endorsements retain residual behavioral impact at the point of purchase possibly through accumulated brand equity and cultural familiarity built over extended celebrity–brand partnerships. These findings suggest that the credibility differential favoring influencers operates most powerfully in the consideration phase of the consumer decision process, while celebrities retain a degree of conversion efficacy that the present data do not fully explain and that future research should investigate.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of the present study are, in broad terms, consistent with the credibility calculus framework developed in the literature review, but they also generate theoretical refinements that were not fully anticipated by that framework. The core finding that influencers substantially outperform celebrities on trust, authenticity, and purchase intention across most product categories confirms that the three mechanisms identified (parasocial proximity, elaborative activation, parasocial intimacy) operate in the predicted direction in the present sample. The entertainment value finding, however, constitutes a theoretically productive anomaly that invites a more differentiated account of endorser function.

The Dual Endorsement Efficacy Model proposed here distinguishes between two analytically separable functions that endorsers perform in brand communication: the awareness function, which concerns the capacity to attract attention, generate cultural resonance, and maintain brand salience; and the credibility function, which concerns the capacity to generate trust, authentic recommendation perception, and purchase-relevant attitude change. The present data indicate that these two functions are differently distributed across endorser types: celebrities retain comparative effectiveness in the awareness function, as evidenced by their entertainment value parity with influencers, while influencers have achieved clear dominance in the credibility function across most product categories and demographic groups. This differentiation implies that the optimal endorsement strategy is not a zero-sum choice between celebrity and influencer marketing but a function-specific allocation of endorsement investment a conclusion with direct strategic implications for brand managers.

The Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) interpretation of the trustworthiness and authenticity differential is supported by the data, but requires qualification in light of the product category findings. The parasocial proximity mechanism appears most potent in lifestyle categories where the relevant comparison is personal taste, experiential recommendation, and community belonging precisely the contexts in which an endorser's perceived similarity to the consumer is most persuasively relevant. In technically complex or aspirationally framed categories, the credibility calculus appears to incorporate additional considerations that proximity alone cannot address, and in which the associative prestige logic of celebrity endorsement retains some currency. This suggests that Social Comparison

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Theory's application to endorsement effectiveness is itself product-category contingent, a nuance that existing theoretical accounts have not fully developed.

The disclosure finding constitutes the study's most directly policy-relevant contribution. The trust reduction reported by nearly half of all respondents in response to formal advertising disclosure labels and the theoretical interpretation of this response as a manifestation of the commercial authenticity paradox identified by Audrezet et al. (2020) raises a structural tension that regulators, brands, and influencers must all navigate. Regulatory frameworks in multiple jurisdictions, including India, are increasingly mandating clear labelling of sponsored content, a development motivated by legitimate consumer protection concerns. The present findings indicate that mandatory disclosure, while ethically essential, may simultaneously erode the psychological conditions upon which influencer marketing's primary persuasive advantage depends. This tension does not constitute an argument against disclosure requirements but does suggest that the field requires more sophisticated thinking about the design of disclosure mechanisms specifically, about whether and how disclosure can be implemented in ways that fulfil transparency obligations without systematically activating the authenticity threat that underpins the commercial authenticity paradox.

The Indian context of the study yields findings that are broadly compatible with those reported in Western samples, but the specific cultural dynamics at play merit acknowledgement. The persistence of entertainment value parity between celebrities and influencers in a context where Bollywood and cricket celebrities occupy a uniquely prominent cultural position suggests that the aspirational celebrity culture is not simply being displaced but is coexisting with a rapidly expanding influencer ecosystem. The credibility calculus, in the Indian urban context, appears to be differentiating rather than consolidating: consumers are, in effect, learning to use different endorser types for different cognitive and relational purposes rather than substituting one for the other wholesale.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several methodological limitations qualify the conclusions that can be drawn from the present study. The use of convenience sampling with recruitment concentrated through university networks and social media channels introduces a structural selection bias towards younger, more educated, and more digitally engaged respondents. This limits the external validity of the findings with respect to older consumers, those with lower digital engagement, and those located in rural or peri-urban contexts where the relative cultural authority of traditional celebrity may remain considerably stronger. The achieved sample size of 100, while appropriate for exploratory descriptive analysis and directional subgroup comparisons, does not provide the statistical power required for robust inferential testing of interaction effects including the product category moderation predicted by H4 and the disclosure asymmetry predicted by H5. These hypotheses should accordingly be treated as theoretically motivated propositions warranting dedicated future investigation rather than as definitively tested empirical claims.

The exclusive reliance on self-reported attitudinal data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias: respondents may have reported preferences for influencer endorsements because such preferences are culturally coded as more discriminating or media-literate, regardless of whether their actual purchasing behavior reflects greater influencer sensitivity. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference and cannot disentangle the competing explanations that changing consumer attitudes have driven the structural growth of

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influencer marketing, or that the structural growth of influencer marketing has shaped consumer attitudes which longitudinal research designs would be required to address. Finally, the operationalization of endorser type as a binary categorical variable imposes a theoretical simplification on an empirical landscape characterized by increasing boundary blurring: established celebrities increasingly inhabit influencer-adjacent social media identities, while some influencers have achieved cultural visibility broadly comparable to that of conventional celebrities. Future research should develop more granular, theoretically grounded endorser typologies that account for the multidimensional nature of this continuum.

The theoretical framework proposed in this paper the credibility calculus and its constitutive mechanisms generate several specific research agendas that would substantively advance the field. The most pressing methodological need is for longitudinal panel designs capable of tracking changes in the credibility calculus over time as platform architectures evolve, as influencer fatigue accumulates, and as the cultural meanings attached to both celebrity and influencer endorsement shift. The Dual Endorsement Efficacy Model proposed here generates a directly testable prediction: that the awareness-credibility functional distinction between endorser types is stable across temporal and cultural contexts, and that the conditions under which this distinction becomes more or less pronounced can be specified theoretically and measured empirically.

Platform-specific research constitutes a second important agenda. The present study treated social media influencers as a homogeneous category, a simplification that obscures potentially consequential variation across platform ecologies. The parasocial intimacy mechanism, for instance, is likely to operate differently on tiktok where short-form video generates rapid but shallow audience relationships than on youtube, where long-form content creates conditions for deeper parasocial bond formation. The elaborative activation mechanism similarly depends on content length and format in ways that vary systematically across platforms. Mapping the operation of the credibility calculus's constituent mechanisms across platform-specific content formats represents a theoretically rich and practically consequential research agenda.

The disclosure paradox identified by Audrezet et al. (2020) and confirmed in the present study requires dedicated experimental investigation. Specifically, research is needed to determine whether the trust-diminishing effect of disclosure can be attenuated through the design of disclosure formats, contexts, or accompanying communications and whether more conversational or transparent approaches to disclosure (for instance, influencers voluntarily and personally explaining their commercial relationships) generate different attitudinal responses than regulatory-mandated label formats. Cross-cultural comparative research, employing the credibility calculus framework across samples from culturally distinct markets, would permit rigorous assessment of the extent to which the mechanisms identified here operate universally or are culturally conditioned. The conjunction of India's institutionalized celebrity culture and rapidly expanding influencer ecosystem makes it an especially productive comparative case for such work.

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for social science research involving human participants. Full informed consent was obtained prior to participation; respondents were provided with a complete description of the study's purpose,

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scope, and intended use of data, and were explicitly assured of response anonymization and of their unconditional right to withdraw at any point.

The authors acknowledge the ethical complexity inherent in academic research that contributes to the understanding and, by extension, the optimization of commercial persuasion practices. The commercial authenticity paradox, and the broader dynamics of parasocial intimacy that this paper has analyzed, are phenomena whose psychological implications for vulnerable populations including adolescents and individuals with heightened social comparison susceptibility deserve sustained scholarly and regulatory attention alongside the commercial questions that have dominated the field. The present paper's contribution to a more theoretically rigorous account of these dynamics is offered in the conviction that evidentially grounded understanding serves both the consumer interest and the development of effective policy and disclosure frameworks.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that celebrity endorsement and influencer marketing are best understood not as substitutes but as a reconfiguration of the credibility calculus consumers use to evaluate endorsers. Drawing on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), and Parasocial Relationship Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), we identified three mechanisms parasocial proximity, elaborative activation, and parasocial intimacy through which social media has reshaped endorser credibility in ways that favor influencers over celebrities.

Our survey of urban Indian consumers supports these propositions. Influencers outperform celebrities on trust, authenticity, and purchase intention across most product categories; the size of that gap varies sensibly by product type; and disclosure labels reduce trust, consistent with the commercial authenticity paradox. But celebrities hold their own on entertainment value, which is why we propose the Dual Endorsement Efficacy Model: celebrities and influencers serve different functions awareness and credibility, respectively rather than competing head-to-head for the same job.

India adds a data point outside the Western settings where most endorsement research is done, and the credibility calculus appears to operate similarly here, alongside the coexistence of a strong existing celebrity culture and a fast-growing influencer scene. Comparative work across more markets would test how far this generalizes. The disclosure paradox remains unresolved as a policy question: how to design transparency rules that protect consumers without undercutting the authenticity that makes influencer marketing work. We don't think that gets solved by tweaking existing regulations at the margins it needs the kind of empirical grounding the credibility calculus framework is meant to provide.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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