EPH-International Journal of Business & Management Science

FROM ENDORSEMENT TO ENGAGEMENT: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER MARKETING LITERATURE

Anuradhika Sharma[1], Dr. Vijay Singh[2], Dr. Preeti Raina[3]

[1]*Research Scholar, School of Media Studies, Jaipur National University, Jaipur*
[2]*Assistant professor, School of Media Studies, Jaipur National University, Jaipur*
[3]*Assistant professor, School of Media Studies, Jaipur National University, Jaipur*

Article History
Received : *2026-07-09*
Revised : *2026-08-13*
Accepted : *2026-08-17*
Published : *2026-08-21*

Abstract
Social media influencer marketing started out as a peripheral tactic borrowed from celebrity endorsement and has since grown into a distinct field of its own. This conceptual review follows the underlying academic literature along one organizing line: a shift from an endorsement paradigm, where the endorser is a credible source transferring meaning to a brand, toward an engagement paradigm, where the influencer is a relational actor embedded in an ongoing, interactive exchange with followers. Drawing on source-credibility and meaning-transfer theory, parasocial interaction research, work on authenticity management, sponsorship disclosure, and consumer brand engagement, the review traces how trust, identification, and community have gradually taken over from one-way persuasion as the field's main explanatory mechanisms. It moves through ten themes: the theoretical foundations of endorsement; the rise of the social media influencer as a distinct communicator; parasocial and two-step-flow mechanisms; credibility and trust; the micro- and nano-influencer turn; authenticity management; disclosure and persuasion knowledge; the shift toward consumer engagement; the platformization of the creator economy; and, closing the review, how this theoretical arc plays out in the Indian market, with particular attention to Haryana and the National Capital Region. The review's conclusion is that influencer marketing scholarship has not abandoned endorsement theory so much as built engagement-based, relational constructs on top of it, producing a hybrid conceptual space current theory only partly integrates, and that this hybrid pattern already shows up in emerging Indian evidence even though no study has tested it yet at the level of a single NCR city. Implications for researchers, brand managers, and platform regulators follow, along with an agenda for future regional research.

Keywords: *social media influencers; influencer marketing; celebrity endorsement; consumer engagement; parasocial relationships; source credibility; authenticity; creator economy; Haryana; India*

Vol. 12 Issue 4s (August, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 37-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69980/2fv2zr60

1. Introduction

Marketing has always leaned on borrowed credibility. Long before "influencer" became a job title, brands paid athletes, actors, and other public figures to lend their reputations to products, on the assumption that people's regard for a famous face would rub off, at least a little, on whatever that face was selling (McCracken, 1989). Two theoretical tools grew out of this practice and have outlasted it: the source credibility model, which treats an endorser's perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as what makes them persuasive (Ohanian, 1990), and the meaning transfer model, which frames endorsement as a symbolic process, cultural meaning moving from celebrity to product and then from product to the consumer who buys it (McCracken, 1989). Underneath both models sits the same basic shape: a credible source, a persuadable audience, and a one-way message the audience had no way to talk back to.

Social media did not do away with that shape so much as bury it under something more complicated. People who built audiences through blogs, YouTube, Instagram, and later TikTok took on a role that looked like celebrity endorsement in its commercial function but worked almost nothing like it structurally. Freberg et al. (2011) were among the first to name this directly, describing social media influencers as a "new type of independent third-party endorser" whose authority comes not from institutional fame but from ongoing, self-produced content and the personality that content projects. Abidin (2016) pushed the idea further with the concept of "visibility labour": the argument that an influencer's routine, lifestyle-oriented output, not just the sponsored posts, is what generates their commercial value in the first place, because it keeps them visible and relatable between paid placements. A celebrity endorser shows up in a finished advertisement aimed at an undifferentiated mass audience. An influencer lives inside an ongoing, quasi-personal relationship with a self-selected audience that comments, replies, and shapes the content back in real time.

That structural gap has reshaped the vocabulary scholars reach for when they try to explain why influencers work. Endorsement research asks how a credible source shifts attitudes. Influencer research increasingly asks how a follower becomes engaged: how parasocial bonds take hold and hold up over time (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), how trust and perceived message value build across a stream of content rather than a single ad (Lou & Yuan, 2019), how authenticity gets performed and managed under the strain of commercial disclosure (Audrezet et al., 2020), and how all of this adds up to what Hollebeek et al. (2014) call consumer brand engagement. The title of this review points at exactly that shift. Endorsement theory has not become irrelevant; engagement-oriented, relational ideas have simply been built on top of it, to the point that the literature no longer maps cleanly back onto the source-credibility framework it started from.

The stakes here are not just academic. Libai et al. (2025) describe influencer marketing as having grown into a structured value chain linking brands, agencies, platforms, and individual creators, a description that would have made little sense applied to the dyadic, agency-brokered endorsement deals of an earlier era. As platforms compete to hold attention and as influencer spending becomes a routine, budgeted part of brand strategy rather than a novelty, the theory used to evaluate these partnerships has real downstream effects, on how money gets spent, how content gets regulated, and how well consumers are protected from persuasion they cannot easily recognize as persuasion.

Those stakes are especially visible in a market like India's. Internet penetration there is now estimated at 70.0 percent of the population, with roughly 500 million active social media users (DataReportal, 2025), and a small but growing body of regional research, taken up in Section 3.10, suggests the endorsement-to-engagement shift traced here is not confined to the Western, platform-mature settings where most of the founding theory was written. It shows up in emerging, rapidly digitalizing markets too. This review gives that Indian evidence deliberate attention alongside the global literature, since it bears directly on ongoing empirical work looking at how consumers in Haryana and the National Capital Region respond to influencer marketing.

This review has three jobs. First, it traces the line connecting classical endorsement theory to contemporary influencer research, marking where the continuity holds and where the newer literature has genuinely broken new ground. Second, it takes a fragmented, fast-growing literature and organizes it into a manageable set of themes, so that credibility, parasocial interaction, authenticity, and engagement read as parts of one conceptual space rather than as scattered, unrelated findings. Third, it flags where the theory is still thin or contested and points toward where future work, conceptual and empirical, might go. It does not attempt a full census of everything published in the field. Section 2 lays out the narrative-conceptual method used instead; Section 3 presents the findings across ten thematic subsections, moving from classical endorsement theory

Vol. 12 Issue 4s (August, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 37-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69980/2fv2zr60

through to regional, India-specific evidence; Section 4 works through the tensions that synthesis surfaces; and Section 5 closes with implications for research, practice, and policy.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper uses a narrative conceptual review method rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. That choice fits the goal: synthesizing and reorganizing a body of theory around a guiding argument, rather than producing an exhaustive, protocol-driven inventory of every study on the topic. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses answer a different question, they estimate how large and how consistent an effect is across studies, the way Barari et al. (2026) do for influencer-marketing outcomes generally, or they map a field's bibliometric structure, the way Kumar and Jibril (2025) do for influencer marketing research as a whole. A conceptual review asks something else: how do the field's core constructs relate to each other, and how has that relationship changed over time. That question calls for close reading and thematic synthesis, not protocol-driven aggregation.

The literature search proceeded iteratively rather than through a single fixed protocol, which is standard for conceptual reviews in marketing and consumer behaviour. Sources were located through academic databases and publisher platforms, including Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed marketing, advertising, and communication journals, using combinations of terms such as "influencer marketing," "social media influencer," "celebrity endorsement," "parasocial interaction," "consumer engagement," "authenticity," "sponsorship disclosure," "electronic word of mouth," and "creator economy." Foundational sources were kept regardless of age, provided they established constructs still in active use. Ohanian's (1990) credibility scale, McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer model, Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow model, and Horton and Wohl's (1956) original formulation of parasocial interaction are all decades old, the last two by more than sixty years, yet each still gets cited actively in the current literature, so all four were treated as foundational rather than excluded for being old.

Contemporary sources were prioritized where they appeared in peer-reviewed marketing, advertising, or communication journals and spoke directly to one of the review's themes. Recent meta-analytic and bibliometric work, Barari et al. (2026), Kumar and Jibril (2025), and Libai et al. (2025), served double duty here: as evidence in its own right, and as a rough check on whether the themes chosen for this review track the growth areas that bibliometric mapping identifies independently. If they line up, the thematic structure proposed below is less likely to just reflect one reviewer's idiosyncratic reading. Industry white papers, trade press, and unrefereed blog content were left out of the evidentiary base, even where such material circulates widely in practitioner discussions of influencer marketing, to keep the review's academic footing intact.

Sources were read in full and sorted by hand into the ten thematic categories used below. Those categories were not decided in advance; they came out of repeated reading and were adjusted until each source fit under one dominant theme, while the connections between themes were kept visible in the narrative, since few of these constructs actually work in isolation. This is standard practice for a conceptual review, which aims at interpretive synthesis rather than a quantitative tally of effect sizes. As with any narrative review, the selection and framing here reflects one author's judgment about which parts of the literature carry the most theoretical weight. That limitation, and the case it makes for complementary systematic and bibliometric work, comes back up in the Discussion and Conclusion.

3. Findings / Results

The Endorsement Paradigm: Theoretical Foundations

Two models anchor the endorsement paradigm, and both are still cited, tested, and adapted in current influencer research. Ohanian (1990) built the first: a scale measuring three dimensions of an endorser's perceived credibility, expertise (perceived relevant knowledge or skill), trustworthiness (perceived honesty), and attractiveness (perceived physical or social appeal). The claim behind it is simple and has held up well over time: the more credible an audience finds an endorser along these dimensions, the more persuasive that endorser tends to be. Part of why this framework caught on is practical. It is measurable, it generalizes across different kinds of endorsers, and it gives practitioners something actionable when choosing a spokesperson, since its three dimensions let researchers isolate exactly which part of an endorser's appeal is doing the work in a given campaign.

McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer theory is the second foundation, and it frames endorsement as a cultural process rather than a purely psychological one. In this account, a celebrity accumulates a distinct set

Vol. 12 Issue 4s (August, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 37-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69980/2fv2zr60
of cultural meanings over a public career, drawn from roles played, narratives told about them, and public associations built up over time. An endorsement deal moves those meanings onto a product; buying and using the product then moves them again, onto the consumer. Meaning transfer theory matters for influencer research because it explains why endorser-product "fit" is not just a nicety: a mismatch between what an endorser already means and what a product category represents breaks the transfer at its first step, a concern that later work on product-endorser fit picks up directly (Schouten et al., 2020).

Both models were built for an era when the endorser's relationship with the audience ran entirely through controlled, professionally produced content, and when there was no channel for the audience to talk back, question, or shape what the endorser said next. The consumer's job was to receive and judge a finished message; nothing about their reaction fed back into the endorser's next move. What social media disrupted is exactly that asymmetry, one-way transmission versus interactive, audience-shaped content, and that disruption is behind most of the theoretical innovation covered in the sections below. None of it, though, fully displaces the credibility and meaning-transfer logic that still explains part of why an influencer works.

From Celebrity to Micro-Celebrity: The Emergence of the Social Media Influencer

Freberg et al. (2011) gave one of the first systematic academic treatments of the social media influencer as something distinct from the traditional celebrity endorser, defining influencers as independent, third-party endorsers who shape attitudes through blogs, tweets, and similar content rather than through paid mass-media placement. Their study of public perceptions found that audiences described influencers using traits, trustworthiness and likability among them, that track closely with Ohanian's (1990) credibility dimensions for celebrities. That overlap suggests some real continuity between the two literatures, even as the underlying figure changed from an institutionally famous public person to a self-made, platform-native one.

Abidin's (2016) "visibility labour" concept takes the argument a step further by treating an influencer's everyday content, not just the sponsored posts, as the actual source of their commercial value. On this reading, ordinary lifestyle content, outfit photos, travel posts, casual commentary, functions as a continuous performance of relatability that keeps an audience's attention between the moments when an ad actually runs. It is that sustained, cumulative visibility, more than any single sponsored post, that brands are really paying for. This shifts what researchers need to study: where endorsement research typically looks at a single ad's effect on attitude or purchase intent, influencer research increasingly has to track an ongoing content practice and the relationship it builds over months or years, something classical single-exposure experiments are not well suited to capture.

Jin et al. (2019) picked up a related thread empirically, comparing Instagram celebrities to Instagram influencers and finding that the two provoke different psychological responses, including differences in perceived credibility and parasocial interaction, even when the content looks similar on its face. Their study also surfaces affective responses, aspirational envy among them, that have no obvious counterpart in classical endorsement research; a traditional celebrity's remote, extraordinary life rarely invited the sense of achievable aspiration that an influencer's relatable, "ordinary-but-successful" persona can. Taken together, these studies point to a simple conclusion: an influencer is not just a cheaper, smaller-scale celebrity. Their pull comes from ongoing, self-disclosive content and cultivated relatability, not from pre-existing institutional fame.

Mechanisms of Influence: Parasocial Relationships and the Two-Step Flow

Two communication theories that predate social media by decades have been revived to explain how influence actually travels from an influencer to a follower. The first is the two-step flow model, which Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) developed to explain how mass-media messages reach the public indirectly, filtered and reinterpreted through opinion leaders before they hit anyone's immediate social circle, rather than landing on every individual uniformly. Influencer researchers now treat social media influencers as a digitally scaled version of those opinion leaders: figures whose endorsement gets filtered through personal credibility and then redistributed, through comments, shares, duets, and ordinary word of mouth, well past the original post, in a structure that mirrors the two-step logic even though nothing like today's platforms existed when Katz and Lazarsfeld proposed it.

The second import matters even more for explaining what a follower actually experiences. Parasocial interaction theory, first put forward by Horton and Wohl (1956), describes the one-sided but psychologically real sense of intimacy audiences can build with media figures they have never met. Horton and Wohl noticed that repeated exposure to a performer's direct, conversational style could leave the audience with a felt relationship, "intimacy at a distance," carrying some of the emotional weight of an actual friendship despite

Vol. 12 Issue 4s (August, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 37-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69980/2fv2zr60
there being no reciprocal awareness at all on the performer's end. Influencer research has picked this up almost directly. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) applied the framework to Instagram and found that young female users' purchase decisions tracked the perceived credibility of online celebrities' profiles in ways that looked more like a parasocial bond than a straightforward evaluative judgment. That matters theoretically because it identifies a mechanism, felt closeness and imagined reciprocity, that operates alongside, and sometimes independently of, the expertise-trustworthiness-attractiveness logic classical endorsement theory relies on.

Social media's interactive features, comments, direct messages, stories, live video, duets, make this parasocial relationship considerably more reciprocal-feeling than it was in Horton and Wohl's (1956) broadcast-era version, even if the reciprocity is still asymmetric. A follower who comments and occasionally gets a reply, however brief, experiences a kind of intermittent, unpredictable reinforcement that a 1950s television audience simply had no access to. That technologically enabled quasi-reciprocity may be part of why parasocial bonds with influencers can feel, and function, more intensely than the bonds classical mass-communication research documented with film and television personalities. Source credibility theory asks whether an endorser is qualified to speak. Parasocial theory asks whether an endorser feels like someone you know. Social media made the second question answerable, persistently, for ordinary audiences in a way it never quite was for mass-media celebrity endorsement.

Credibility, Trust and the Influencer-Follower Bond

Credibility did not vanish from the literature once parasocial and engagement-based ideas showed up; it got reconceived for a context where credibility judgments build cumulatively, across many posts, instead of forming from a single ad. Lou and Yuan (2019) proposed and tested a model where an influencer's perceived credibility and the perceived informativeness of their branded content jointly shape follower trust, which then predicts purchase intention and brand attitude. What stands out in their work is the choice to treat trust, not attitude change, as the pivotal mediator, a choice that anticipates the field's broader move toward relational, engagement-based outcomes and treats trust as something built up gradually through informative, non-manipulative content rather than granted upfront on the strength of an endorser's résumé.

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found something similar, credibility operating through trust-like mechanisms specific to Instagram, while Schouten et al. (2020) compared celebrity and influencer endorsers directly and found that identification, a follower's sense of similarity to and desire to emulate the influencer, explained persuasive outcomes that credibility alone could not. That identification pathway is theoretically distinct from both classical source credibility and parasocial interaction, though related to each: it suggests followers treat influencers partly as aspirational peers, people similar enough to themselves to be plausible role models, rather than as distant experts or purely personal friends. Put these findings together and "credibility" stops looking like a single unified construct. It fragments into several overlapping mechanisms, expertise-based credibility, trust built through repeated informative content, parasocial closeness, and peer-like identification, each treated in the literature as a potentially independent driver, and each likely to matter more or less depending on the influencer's niche, the product category, and the platform.

The Micro- and Nano-Influencer Turn

A related stream of research looks at how influencer effectiveness changes with audience size, and it produces one of the field's more counterintuitive findings. De Veirman et al. (2017) tested the effect of an Instagram influencer's follower count on brand attitude and found that, past a certain point, more followers actually meant lower perceived likability, an effect they linked to a sense of reduced exclusivity and to a kind of tacit persuasion knowledge in which a very large following reads as deliberate, professionalized self-promotion rather than organic popularity. That finding gave empirical backing to what marketing practice had already started calling micro- and nano-influencer strategy: choosing influencers with smaller but tightly bonded audiences on the bet that intimacy and perceived authenticity make up for the smaller reach, sometimes more than making up for it.

This sits in real tension with classical endorsement theory, where more fame and visibility were assumed to help, not hurt, persuasive credibility, since a bigger celebrity was generally the more valuable endorser. It also reinforces the shift this review is tracing. If a smaller, more engaged following can outperform a larger, more distant one on outcomes brands actually care about, then engagement, depth and reciprocity of relationship, is doing explanatory work that reach or celebrity-style visibility cannot do alone. Reach and engagement may even trade off against each other in some cases, rather than reinforcing one another the way classical endorsement logic would predict. Barari et al.'s (2026) recent meta-analysis adds nuance here: the

Vol. 12 Issue 4s (August, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 37-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69980/2fv2zr60
mechanisms and boundary conditions linking influencer characteristics to marketing outcomes turn out to be far more moderated and context-dependent than early single-study findings suggested, which means follower count, credibility, and engagement interact with product category, platform, and audience rather than adding up independently to one universal "influencer effectiveness" score.

Authenticity as Currency and Its Management

If parasocial closeness and identification are the psychological mechanisms that build relational bonds between influencers and followers, authenticity is what makes those bonds seem plausible to begin with, and how the field has come to treat authenticity marks one of its clearest breaks from classical endorsement theory. Audrezet et al. (2020) offer the most developed conceptual treatment of the issue, arguing that authenticity is not a fixed trait an influencer simply has or lacks but an ongoing performance under constant threat, one that needs active management as commercial pressure builds up across a growing volume of sponsored content. They distinguish passive strategies, leaning on a pre-existing reputation for honesty built through mostly non-commercial content, from active strategies, where influencers openly negotiate the tension between sponsorship and self-presentation: being selective about which brands to endorse, acknowledging a post's commercial nature in their own voice rather than through a boilerplate disclaimer, or keeping a consistent tone and aesthetic so sponsored content does not feel visually or tonally out of step with everything else they post.

This work on authenticity sits right at the seam between the endorsement and engagement paradigms this review traces. From an endorsement angle, authenticity looks a lot like a component of trustworthiness in Ohanian's (1990) credibility model, it makes the source seem sincere, and sincerity has always been understood to boost persuasion. From an engagement angle, though, authenticity works more like an ongoing relational currency that has to be earned and re-earned with every post, story, and interaction. Followers who feel a parasocial bond with an influencer (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) notice, and can feel alienated by, perceived inauthenticity or overt commercialization; a follower experiencing something close to quasi-friendship may read a poorly handled sponsored post not just as an unconvincing ad but as a small social betrayal, a reaction that has no real equivalent in how audiences relate to a distant celebrity endorser (Abidin, 2016; Audrezet et al., 2020). Authenticity is, in other words, one of the clearest places where endorsement logic and engagement logic operate at the same time rather than one simply giving way to the other.

Disclosure, Persuasion Knowledge, and Regulatory Tension

The commercial nature of influencer content raises problems that classical endorsement research barely had to think about, mainly because traditional ads were rarely mistaken for organic content; audiences already knew, going in, that they were looking at an advertisement. Boerman et al. (2017) studied sponsorship disclosure on Facebook and found that disclosure activates persuasion knowledge, a consumer's learned sense of how marketing tactics work and what they are meant to do, which then shapes how the content gets evaluated and how likely someone is to talk about it online. Disclosure cuts both ways here. It satisfies regulatory and ethical obligations, and probably protects the long-run health of the influencer-follower relationship by heading off a more damaging discovery of hidden sponsorship later on, but it also signals commercial intent in a setting where engagement often depends on content feeling personal, spontaneous, and unprompted by any brand deal.

This connects directly to the authenticity-management literature above, and to the broader electronic word-of-mouth tradition Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) established, identifying the motivations, a platform for self-presentation, economic incentive, concern for other consumers, a wish for social interaction, that push ordinary people to share opinions online in the first place. Influencer marketing essentially industrializes that behaviour: a post is both a personal expression of taste and a commercially motivated message at once, and audiences have to keep doing the interpretive work of sorting out which frame applies at any given moment, work that Boerman et al.'s (2017) findings suggest disclosure both helps and complicates. The persuasion-knowledge lens gives the field a way to think about audience skepticism, a practical problem source credibility theory alone does not really address, because classical endorsement research could always assume its audience already knew it was watching an ad.

From Persuasion to Engagement: Conceptualizing Consumer Engagement

The theoretical endpoint this review's title gestures toward is consumer brand engagement, a construct that reframes what marketers and scholars are actually trying to measure. Hollebeek et al. (2014) define consumer brand engagement in social media as a state with three parts: cognitive processing (attention and reflection directed at a brand), affective bonding (emotional connection to it), and behavioral activation

Vol. 12 Issue 4s (August, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 37-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69980/2fv2zr60
(effort spent interacting with it), and they build and validate a scale to measure all three together. This differs from classical endorsement outcomes, usually attitude change or purchase intent measured after one exposure, in two ways. First, engagement is ongoing rather than episodic, a standing disposition toward continued interaction rather than a judgment made once and set aside. Second, engagement is behavioural as well as attitudinal: commenting, sharing, joining a brand-related conversation, none of which has a real equivalent in a mass-media model where the audience's only structurally available role was to watch, and maybe later buy.

Mapped onto the influencer literature, engagement works as the place where the mechanisms from earlier sections converge, rather than as a separate or competing idea. Parasocial closeness (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), trust built through message value (Lou & Yuan, 2019), identification (Schouten et al., 2020), and well-managed authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020) can each be read as antecedents that push a follower's engagement with content, and by extension with the brands that content promotes, up or down. This is the shift the review's title names: the outcome of interest moves from a single persuasive question, was this message convincing, to a standing relational state, is this audience engaged over time, and the explanatory variables shift correspondingly, from static, once-measured source attributes toward dynamic, interactive processes measured across an ongoing relationship.

Platformization and the Creator Economy

A more recent thread situates influencer marketing inside the broader structural shift of platforms and what people now call the creator economy, moving the analysis from the individual follower's psychology to the infrastructure that decides which content even gets seen. Libai et al. (2025) map the value chains now connecting brands, influencers, platforms, agencies, and audiences, arguing that influencer marketing can no longer be understood as just a dyadic relationship between an endorser and a consumer. Platforms actively decide which content and which creators get visibility, through algorithmic curation, monetization tools, and native commerce features that simply did not exist in the era of classical celebrity endorsement. An influencer's persuasive power, on this account, is produced jointly, part individual relational skill, part platform-level systems deciding, largely invisibly, how far their content actually travels.

Annabell et al. (2026) extend this structural view through TikTok LIVE shopping, where platform affordances, governance rules, and user practices combine into a new commercial format, part entertainment, part parasocial performance, part real-time selling, that neither classical endorsement theory nor early influencer research anticipated. In live shopping, an influencer performs, discloses, and sells inside one continuous broadcast; a viewer can watch, comment, and buy, and get a real-time response, all within the same interaction. That compresses what earlier scholarship treated as sequential, build the relationship first, persuade the purchase later, into a single, simultaneous event. This platform-level view adds something to the endorsement-to-engagement story: engagement is not only the psychological state Hollebeek et al. (2014) describe inside a follower, it is also a metric platforms measure, reward algorithmically, and use to decide which influencers get amplified. A follower's felt engagement and a platform's measured engagement are related but not the same thing.

Kumar and Jibril's (2025) bibliometric mapping backs this trajectory up, showing steady growth in research attention toward engagement, authenticity, and platform-specific dynamics, relative to the more static, credibility-centred questions that dominated the field early on. Engagement, in other words, operates at two levels at once, the psychological level Hollebeek et al. (2014) examine and the infrastructural level Libai et al. (2025) and Annabell et al. (2026) examine, and a full account of influencer effectiveness increasingly has to hold both together rather than treating either as sufficient by itself.

Regional Application: Evidence from India, Haryana, and the National Capital Region

Almost everything in Sections 3.1 through 3.9 was built from Western, platform-mature, or otherwise undifferentiated global samples. A smaller, growing line of Indian research suggests the same arc, credibility to trust to engagement, and, at times, to impulsive behaviour, shows up in the Indian market too, alongside frictions the global literature does not fully account for. Bhardwaj et al. (2024), reviewing ninety studies on social media influencers and consumer behaviour, find that consumer attention, brand admiration, self-expression, and purchase intention dominate the field internationally, which lines up with the engagement-centred shift traced here. Within India specifically, Shamim and Azam (2024) show that influencer, message, and media credibility jointly build follower trust in branded content, that this trust drives impulse-buying urges, and that consumers with lower persuasion knowledge are more susceptible to those impulsive purchases, extending Lou and Yuan's (2019) credibility-to-trust pathway into an Indian sample directly.

Vol. 12 Issue 4s (August, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 37-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69980/2fv2zr60
Deepha et al. (2024) find something similar in an Indian consumer sample: authenticity and audience alignment, not reach, distinguish the influencers whose recommendations people actually act on, which echoes Audrezet et al.'s (2020) authenticity-management framework.
At the state level, research from Haryana lends more localized support to the same pattern. Singh (2025), studying consumer behaviour across Haryana, found young consumers responding strongly to influencer marketing, user-generated content, and interactive brand communication on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, and identified micro-influencer partnerships and culturally relevant, localized messaging as particularly effective, a finding that parallels the micro- and nano-influencer effects De Veirman et al. (2017) documented globally. Singh also flagged the urban-rural digital divide, content saturation, and authenticity concerns as ongoing constraints specific to Haryana. A separate multi-district study of consumer buying behaviour in the state, based on 600 respondents, found product knowledge and advertising exposure to be the strongest drivers of purchase decisions, with generalized trust the weakest predictor, which suggests Haryana's consumers respond more to concrete, informative content than to appeals resting on source fame alone.
Faridabad, one of Haryana's largest industrial cities and part of the Delhi National Capital Region, sits inside exactly the population these regional studies describe, combining fast digital adoption with the urban-rural unevenness Singh (2025) points to. Yet no study located for this review examines Faridabad, or any single NCR city, as its own unit of analysis using the parasocial, authenticity, or engagement constructs laid out in Sections 3.3, 3.6, and 3.8. That is a real gap. The theoretical apparatus this review has assembled, credibility, trust, parasocial closeness, authenticity, identification, multidimensional engagement, has not been tested empirically at the level of a single Indian NCR city, even though the state- and national-level evidence reviewed here gives good reason to expect it would apply. Closing that gap with primary, field-based research looks like a natural next step, and a well-motivated one given what the existing evidence already suggests.

4. Discussion

Taken together, the ten themes above support one central claim: the social media influencer marketing literature has not replaced endorsement theory, it has built a relational, interactive, platform-embedded set of constructs on top of it that the classical model was never designed to hold. Source credibility (Ohanian, 1990) and meaning transfer (McCracken, 1989) still show up throughout the newer literature, in the persistence of expertise and trustworthiness as measured constructs (Lou & Yuan, 2019), in continued attention to endorser-product fit (Schouten et al., 2020), and in how practitioners still think about matching influencers to brand identity, an instinct that echoes McCracken's (1989) meaning-transfer logic almost exactly. But these classical constructs now sit alongside, and are often outweighed by, mechanisms that assume an ongoing, two-way relationship: parasocial bonding (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), identification (Schouten et al., 2020), authenticity management (Audrezet et al., 2020), and, as a measurable outcome, multidimensional engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014).
That layered structure leaves at least three tensions unresolved. The first is the authenticity-commercialization problem covered in sections 3.6 and 3.7. Influencer marketing needs audiences to see content as genuine, but its entire economic logic depends on that content being commercially motivated, and disclosure rules meant to protect consumers can undercut the perceived authenticity influence depends on (Boerman et al., 2017). Classical endorsement theory never had to deal with this, because mass-media advertising never pretended to be spontaneous in the first place.
The second is the scale tension from section 3.5. Bigger audiences mean more reach but can mean less perceived intimacy and authenticity (De Veirman et al., 2017), so engagement and reach can end up trading off against each other instead of reinforcing one another, something classical endorsement theory, built around undifferentiated exposure to an undifferentiated audience, has no way to model. This has practical teeth: brand managers optimizing purely for reach may be undervaluing what smaller-scale influencer partnerships actually deliver on engagement, a reading partly backed by the moderated, context-dependent effects Barari et al. (2026) report in their meta-analysis.
The third is a level-of-analysis problem from section 3.9. Psychologists and consumer researchers study engagement as an individual attitudinal and behavioural state (Hollebeek et al., 2014); economists and platform scholars increasingly study it as a structural feature of algorithmic systems and value chains (Libai et al., 2025; Annabell et al., 2026). The literature has not really connected these two levels. A follower's felt

Vol. 12 Issue 4s (August, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 37-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69980/2fv2zr60

sense of parasocial closeness (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) is not the same thing as the likes, comments, and watch time a platform's algorithm uses to decide how far to push a piece of content, yet both get called "engagement" in different corners of the field, and that overlap in vocabulary risks hiding real differences in mechanism.

There is a broader methodological point buried in all this. Much of the work reviewed here, especially the earlier studies, was done on a small number of platforms, mostly Instagram and Facebook, during a period when those platforms' features were relatively stable. Newer work on TikTok LIVE commerce (Annabell et al., 2026) suggests newer formats are reshaping the influencer-follower relationship again, squeezing endorsement and engagement into real-time, transactional interactions that blur promotional and social content even further than before. Barari et al. (2026) offer a related caution: influencer-effectiveness findings are heavily moderated by context, product category, platform, and follower characteristics, so single-study effects throughout this literature should read as context-bound, not universal. A conceptual review like this one is better suited to mapping how the field's theory has evolved than to making claims about effect size, which is a job better left to the meta-analytic and bibliometric work it draws on (Barari et al., 2026; Kumar & Jibril, 2025).

The regional evidence from Section 3.10 adds one more layer here. The moderated, context-dependent effects Barari et al. (2026) find globally seem to have a regional echo: Singh's (2025) finding that Haryana consumers respond more to informative, demonstrably credible content than to generalized appeals to trust hints that the relative weight of credibility, trust, and engagement mapped in this review might itself shift with market maturity and with how urban or rural a given audience is. Since no study reviewed here isolates a single Indian NCR city, Faridabad included, as its own unit of analysis, that remains a plausible reading of state-level evidence rather than a confirmed finding, and it marks one of the more concrete openings for empirical work extending this synthesis into a specific regional market.

5. Conclusion

This review has traced how social media influencer marketing scholarship grew out of, and eventually partly broke from, classical celebrity endorsement theory. The field started with source credibility (Ohanian, 1990) and meaning transfer (McCracken, 1989) as its founding vocabulary. But the interactive, ongoing, self-disclosive nature of social media content pushed scholars to bring in and adapt parasocial interaction theory and the two-step flow model (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), to treat authenticity as an actively managed performance under commercial pressure (Audrezet et al., 2020), to work through what mandatory disclosure does to persuasion knowledge (Boerman et al., 2017), and ultimately to shift the field's central outcome variable from persuasion to multidimensional consumer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014). The newest scholarship situates that psychological engagement inside a structural, platform-mediated creator economy, where algorithms, monetization tools, and new formats like live shopping shape who becomes influential and how that influence gets monetized (Libai et al., 2025; Annabell et al., 2026).

For researchers, the practical upshot is that future studies should say explicitly which layer of the endorsement-to-engagement continuum they are actually testing, classical source-credibility effects, relational and parasocial mechanisms, or platform-structural dynamics, since blurring these layers together may explain some of the inconsistency the meta-analytic literature has picked up on (Barari et al., 2026). A study measuring attitude change after one sponsored post, and a study measuring cumulative parasocial attachment over a year of following an influencer, are answering related but genuinely different questions, and the field would benefit from being clearer about which question a given design can actually answer.

For brand managers, the takeaway is that selecting influencers purely on reach or celebrity-style credibility is theoretically incomplete. The literature here points to perceived authenticity, identification, and platform context as forces that shape outcomes in ways a simple audience-size or credibility metric will not catch, and De Veirman et al.'s (2017) micro- and nano-influencer findings in particular deserve more attention from practitioners defaulting to reach-first selection. For platform designers and regulators, the ongoing tension between disclosure and perceived authenticity (Boerman et al., 2017) suggests transparency rules should be judged not just on regulatory adequacy but on their downstream effects on the relational dynamics that make influencer marketing work, and stay trustworthy, in the first place.

This review carries the limitations any narrative conceptual synthesis carries. It reflects a structured but ultimately interpretive selection of sources built around one guiding argument, not an exhaustive or

Vol. 12 Issue 4s (August, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 37-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69980/2fv2zr60

statistically weighted account of the field, and a different reviewer working through the same literature might organize it around a different set of themes. Systematic and bibliometric approaches, the kind Kumar and Jibril (2025) used, would be a useful check on whether the ten themes proposed here really capture the field's range. Longitudinal or platform-comparative empirical work would help too, particularly for testing whether the endorsement-to-engagement shift traced here holds up across newer, less-studied formats such as live shopping (Annabell et al., 2026), which already seem to be compressing the very distinction between endorsement and engagement this review has used to organize the field's history.

The regional literature in Section 3.10 points to one especially concrete next step. Evidence from India, and more specifically from Haryana (Bhardwaj et al., 2024; Shamim & Azam, 2024; Deepha et al., 2024; Singh, 2025), lines up with the global endorsement-to-engagement arc traced here, while also making clear that no existing study has tested these constructs at the level of a single Indian NCR city. A primary, field-based study applying the credibility, trust, parasocial, authenticity, and engagement constructs synthesized here to a defined urban population, Faridabad, Haryana, for instance, would extend this review in a direction the literature has not yet reached, and would let the state-level patterns Singh (2025) identifies be tested with the precision a single-city sample allows.

References

1. Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with Influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. Media International Australia, 161(1), 86–100. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16665177
2. Annabell, T., Aade, L., & Goanta, C. (2026). Live shopping as a participatory spectacle: The intersection of user practices, platform affordances and governance regimes in the repurposing of TikTok LIVE for e-commerce. Platforms & Society. https://doi.org/10.1177/29768624261457280
3. Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G., & Guzmán, J. G. K. (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. Journal of Business Research, 117, 557–569. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.008
4. Barari, M., Eisend, M., & Jain, S. P. (2026). A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of social media influencers: Mechanisms and moderation. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 54(1), 28–48. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-025-01107-3
5. Bhardwaj, S., Kumar, N., Gupta, R., Baber, H., & Venkatesh, A. (2024). How social media influencers impact consumer behaviour? Systematic literature review. Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/09722629241237394
6. Boerman, S. C., Willemsen, L. M., & Van Der Aa, E. P. (2017). "This post is sponsored": Effects of sponsorship disclosure on persuasion knowledge and electronic word of mouth in the context of Facebook. Journal of Interactive Marketing, 38, 82–92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2016.12.002
7. DataReportal. (2025). Digital 2026: India. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-india
8. Deepha, V., Amritha, R., Anvitha, D., Akshaya, A. N., Kowsalya, V., & Kaniska, A. P. (2024). The impact of social media influencers on consumer purchasing decisions. Library Progress International, 44(3), 28914–28920.
9. De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. International Journal of Advertising, 36(5), 798–828. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035
10. Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. Computers in Human Behavior, 68, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.009
11. Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. Public Relations Review, 37(1), 90–92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001
12. Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet? Journal of Interactive Marketing, 18(1), 38–52. https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.10073
13. Hollebeek, L. D., Glynn, M. S., & Brodie, R. J. (2014). Consumer brand engagement in social media: Conceptualization, scale development and validation. Journal of Interactive Marketing, 28(2), 149–165. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2013.12.002

Vol. 12 Issue 4s (August, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 37-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69980/2fv2zr60
14. Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. Psychiatry, 19(3), 215–229. https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049
15. Jin, S. V., Muqaddam, A., & Ryu, E. (2019). Instafamous and social media influencer marketing. Marketing Intelligence & Planning, 37(5), 567–579. https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-09-2018-0375
16. Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications. Free Press.
17. Kumar, A., & Jibril, A. B. (2025). Exploring the landscape of influencer marketing research: A systematic review and bibliometric analysis. SAGE Open. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251364040
18. Libai, B., Babić Rosario, A., Beichert, M., Donkers, B., Haenlein, M., Hofstetter, R., Kannan, P. K., van der Lans, R., Lanz, A., Li, H. A., Mayzlin, D., Muller, E., Shapira, D., Yang, J., & Zhang, L. (2025). Influencer marketing unlocked: Understanding the value chains driving the creator economy. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 53(1), 4–28. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-024-01073-2
19. Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. Journal of Interactive Advertising, 19(1), 58–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501
20. McCracken, G. (1989). Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process. Journal of Consumer Research, 16(3), 310–321. https://doi.org/10.1086/209217
21. Ohanian, R. (1990). Construction and validation of a scale to measure celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Journal of Advertising, 19(3), 39–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1990.10673191
22. Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2020). Celebrity vs. influencer endorsements in advertising: The role of identification, credibility, and product-endorser fit. International Journal of Advertising, 39(2), 258–281. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1634898
23. Shamim, K., & Azam, M. (2024). The power of social media influencers: Unveiling the impact on consumers' impulse buying behaviour. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 11(1), Article 1461. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03796-7
24. Singh, J. (2025). Exploring the impact of social media marketing on consumer behaviour: A case study from Haryana. International Journal of Progressive Research in Engineering Management and Science, 5(11), 1734–1742. https://doi.org/10.58257/IJPREMS45009