Research Article

Social Media Influencers as an Emerging Marketing Tool in India's Cosmetics Sector

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Received: 25 July 2026 | **Revised:** 2 September 2026 | **Accepted:** 7 September 2026

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how social media influencers are becoming a key marketing tool in India's cosmetics industry, focusing on credibility, authenticity, informational value, audience alignment, trust, and buyers' purchase intentions. It uses a narrative review method, synthesizing themes from thirteen academic articles along with relevant industry and regulatory sources for context. The findings highlight that influencer expertise, perceived honesty, genuine communication, valuable content, audience relevance, and alignment with brands are consistently identified as crucial factors. However, data on follower counts, platform benefits, and engagement are mixed. Indian research largely relies on cross-sectional and self-reported data, which limits causal inferences. The study contributes by integrating these findings through Source Credibility Theory, proposing a pathway linking influencer traits and content to credibility, trust, identification, brand perception, and purchase intent. For practical use, cosmetic brands should evaluate influencers based on expertise, reliability, audience fit, content quality, and transparency, rather than just follower numbers.

Keywords: *Social Media Influencers; Influencer Marketing; Cosmetics; Consumer Behaviour; Source Credibility; Authenticity; Trust; Purchase Intention; India.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media's expansion has changed how consumers learn about products and how companies interact with potential clients. This shift is particularly noticeable in the cosmetics industry, where consumers may exchange tips, routines, product evaluations, and comparisons via social media and entertainment platforms. Because promotional messages are integrated into an existing creator-audience relationship rather than appearing exclusively as traditional commercials, influencers play a unique function in this context.

Previous studies have identified a number of mechanisms that could account for the impact of creator-led communication. Expertise, reliability, and attractiveness were identified by Ohanian (1990) as essential components of source credibility. While De Veirman et al. (2017) discovered that follower numbers can influence perceptions of popularity, audience size alone does not fully indicate persuasive power. Freberg et al. (2011) investigated how audiences perceive social media influencers. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) focused on perceived similarity and credibility; Casaló et al. (2020) looked into opinion leadership; Lou and Yuan

(2019) connected source credibility and message value to trust in sponsored content; Ki and Kim (2019) looked at consumers' propensity to copy influencers; and Schouten et al. (2020) focused on identification, credibility, and product–endorser congruence.

The results are not totally consistent, despite the fact that this body of research is instructive. Purchase intention, identity, trust, engagement, authenticity, and credibility are sometimes examined as separate variables. Depending on the audience, product kind, and study approach, results related to follower counts, platform features, and various creator categories may vary. High visible engagement, for example, shows contact, but it does not always indicate a purchase or the formation of a long-term client connection.

An extra contextual viewpoint is offered by research carried out in India. Influencer marketing in the Indian cosmetics industry was examined by Raghuwanshi and Kumrawat (2024). Singh and Agrawal (2024) looked at Generation Z consumers' intentions to buy skincare and cosmetics. While Mane and Aggarwal (2025) investigated social media and influencer marketing among urban Indian cosmetic customers, Shadiya and Chitra (2025) concentrated on online cosmetic product purchasing behaviour. In the Indian context, Bishnoi and Anand (2025) discussed platform preferences, engagement quality, authenticity, and legitimacy. Although these studies increase the body of data, simple comparisons are challenging due to variations in populations, factors, and research methodologies.

Compared to the general finding that influencer marketing is growing, the gap examined in this article is more focused. Relationships involving credibility, authenticity, engagement, and purchase-related outcomes are frequently reported in Indian research on cosmetics; however, these observations are not always combined into a cohesive account of how source qualities, content usefulness, audience relationships, and commercial circumstances interact. By using a critical narrative synthesis based on Source Credibility Theory, this analysis fills that gap by distinguishing results that are consistent from those that are conditional or limited by methodological constraints.

Firstly, the study aims to critically review and integrate research concerning social media influencers and consumer reactions within the cosmetics industry, particularly in the Indian context. The second objective is to explore how credibility, authenticity, content usefulness, engagement, identification, trust, brand attitude, and purchase intention are related across the existing literature. Next, the study aims to distinguish areas of convergence and disagreement while recognizing methodological and contextual limitations. Finally, the study focuses on developing theory-based implications for Indian cosmetics companies that employ influencer marketing.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Social Media Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing refers to promotional communication delivered by individuals who have developed an audience through digital platforms and share information related to products or

brands with that audience. Its distinctive characteristic is that commercial messages are embedded within an already established relationship between the creator and followers. As a result, consumers may simultaneously evaluate the product, the communicator, the message itself, and the apparent commercial motivation behind the communication.

Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory serves as the principal theoretical lens for this review. Ohanian (1990) conceptualized credibility in terms of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Applied to influencer communication, expertise reflects the creator's perceived knowledge of the relevant product category, trustworthiness relates to perceived honesty and dependability, and attractiveness concerns the communicator's appeal. These dimensions have particular relevance to cosmetics, where consumers commonly look for guidance about product suitability, application methods, and likely results.

A source-oriented explanation becomes stronger when the qualities of the message are considered alongside the communicator. Lou and Yuan (2019) associated message value and source credibility with trust in branded content, indicating that even a credible influencer must provide information that followers consider useful.

Complementary Mechanisms

Several complementary mechanisms broaden the source-credibility perspective. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) emphasize similarity and relatability. Ki and Kim (2019) investigate consumers' desire to imitate influencers. Schouten et al. (2020) highlight identification and product–endorser fit, while Casaló et al. (2020) focus on opinion leadership. Together, these mechanisms help explain how a creator may acquire personal significance within an audience beyond basic source characteristics.

Integrated Conceptual Pathway

The conceptual sequence developed from the reviewed literature is not a statistically validated model: Influencer characteristics + Content value + Creator–brand fit → Perceived credibility/authenticity → Trust and identification → Brand attitude → Purchase intention. Transparency and the intensity of commercial activity are regarded as contextual factors that may influence how audiences interpret both the communicator and the message. The pathway is presented as a proposition for future empirical investigation, not as a causal finding established by this review.

METHODS

Research Design

The study adopts a narrative literature-review design supported by thematic synthesis. It is not claimed to be a systematic review, meta-analysis, bibliometric analysis, or primary empirical study. This approach is suitable because the selected publications vary in terms of populations, platforms, constructs, measures, and research designs. Accordingly, the objective is to interpret and compare the evidence rather than produce a pooled statistical estimate.

Evidence Base and Source Identification

The review retains 13 academic studies as its central evidence base. These publications include foundational

international work on source credibility and influencer communication as well as recent Indian research, especially studies addressing cosmetics and consumer behaviour. Industry and regulatory publications are considered separately and are used to provide market and compliance context.

The underlying research records did not retain a complete search log showing all databases consulted, the number of records initially retrieved, duplicate handling, or detailed screening decisions. Consequently, the paper does not reconstruct numerical search totals or present a PRISMA flow chart. Reporting such figures without contemporaneous documentation could give an inaccurate impression of how the review was originally conducted.

Search Terms and Scope

The literature was located using combinations of terms reflecting the subject and the studies retained for analysis, including "social media influencer," "influencer marketing," "cosmetics," "beauty," "skincare," "consumer behaviour/behavior," "purchase intention," "credibility," "authenticity," "trust," "engagement," and "India." These keywords describe the scope of the review rather than serving as a reconstructed record of a systematic database search.

Inclusion and Exclusion Logic

Material was regarded as relevant when it examined influencer communication, consumer responses, credibility, authenticity, engagement, purchase intention, or related digital-marketing mechanisms applicable to cosmetics. Foundational publications were included where they provided established concepts or explanatory mechanisms. Indian research was given particular weight when interpreting the local context, while industry and regulatory sources were used only for market or compliance-related information.

Synthesis Procedure

The selected evidence was organized by themes instead of being discussed individually in publication-by-publication order. The principal themes were credibility and authenticity; information or message value; identification and engagement; creator–brand congruence and audience relevance; and transparency and commercialization. These themes were subsequently interpreted through Source Credibility Theory while considering differences in methodology and the level of inference justified by each study.

Quality and Interpretive Caution

Interpretation considered the relevance of each source, traceability of the evidence, methodological transparency, and theoretical contribution. No formal numerical risk-of-bias instrument was applied because one was not part of the original review process. Therefore, findings from cross-sectional, correlational, and self-reported studies are understood as reported relationships rather than evidence that exposure to influencers directly causes purchasing behaviour.

RESULTS

Credibility, Authenticity and Trust

Credibility emerges as the most consistently repeated theme. Across foundational and influencer-marketing research, expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, similarity, and opinion

leadership appear as relevant characteristics (Ohanian, 1990; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Casaló et al., 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019). More recent Indian studies likewise place credibility and authenticity prominently in explanations of consumer response. Taken together, the evidence indicates that recommendations are more likely to be accepted when the creator is viewed as knowledgeable, dependable, and appropriate to the audience or category.

Message Value and Demonstrative Content

The value of the message adds an important layer to explanations based on the communicator alone. Lou and Yuan (2019) demonstrate the importance of informative value for trust in branded influencer content. Within cosmetics, demonstrations, tutorials, comparisons, and reviews based on personal experience can help consumers understand product information more readily. Persuasion is therefore more appropriately viewed as an interaction between the source, the message, and the audience.

Identification, Relationship and Engagement

Identification and imitation provide possible explanations for variation in audience reactions. Schouten et al. (2020) associate identification with responses to endorsements, while Ki and Kim (2019) investigate mimicry as one route through which influencers may persuade consumers. Indian studies also consider the quality of audience engagement. Nevertheless, metrics such as likes, comments, and views should not be interpreted as direct evidence of buying behaviour or customer loyalty.

Influencer–Brand Fit and Audience Relevance

The available evidence does not indicate that follower volume alone is an adequate measure of influencer effectiveness. De Veirman et al. (2017) show that follower numbers can shape perceptions of popularity, whereas Schouten et al. (2020) demonstrate the significance of product–endorser fit, and Casaló et al. (2020) examine the role of opinion leadership. In cosmetics campaigns, relevant expertise and alignment with the intended audience may therefore be as important as overall reach.

Transparency and Commercialization

Paid partnerships introduce a potential credibility tension because a creator may alternate between routine content and sponsored brand messages. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) requires disclosure where a material connection exists between an advertiser and an influencer. Disclosure consequently functions not only as a compliance measure but also as part of the information consumers use when judging the recommendation.

India-Specific Context

Evidence from India needs to be interpreted separately from broader international findings. Raghuwanshi and Kumrawat (2024), Singh and Agrawal (2024), Shadiya and Chitra (2025), Bishnoi and Anand (2025), and Mane and Aggarwal (2025) provide India-focused findings, although the studies differ in samples and methodologies. For example, Mane and Aggarwal (2025) used primary data from 384 urban Indian consumers who were active on social media and interested in cosmetics. This respondent group belongs to their study and should

not be confused with a sample generated by the present review.

Areas of Agreement and Disagreement

The literature shows considerable convergence around the importance of credibility, authenticity, useful information, audience relevance, and relationship quality. Greater uncertainty remains around the effects of follower size, the superiority of particular platforms, and whether specific influencer tiers consistently outperform others. Differences in participants, platforms, product categories, measurement approaches, and research designs may account for some of this variation. The evidence therefore supports a context-dependent view rather than a universal hierarchy of influencer strategies.

India-Specific Market Evidence

The 2025 India Influencer Marketing Report prepared by WPP Media, The Goat Agency, and Kantar estimates that India's influencer-marketing industry was worth ₹3,600 crore in 2024 and projects 25% growth during 2025. It further reports that 63% of Indian users rely on influencers for product discovery, 69% for information, and 60% for action. These statistics concern influencer marketing across industries rather than cosmetics specifically, so they are used only to describe the broader Indian market environment.

Table 1: *Selected India-Wide Influencer-Marketing Indicators from WPP Media, The Goat Agency and Kantar (2025)*

Indicator	Reported figure	Interpretation
Indian influencer-marketing industry, 2024	₹3,600 crore	Broad influencer-marketing estimate; not cosmetics-specific.
Forecast growth, 2025	25%	Industry forecast reported by WPP Media/The Goat Agency/Kantar.
Influencer use for product discovery	63%	Indian user-level figure reported in the industry report.
Influencer use for information	69%	Indian user-level figure reported in the industry report.
Influencer use for action	60%	Indian user-level figure reported in the industry report.
Brands citing trust/credibility as a reason to engage	70%	Brand-side figure; not a consumer purchase measure.

Source: *Author*

DISCUSSION

The reviewed evidence indicates that influencer effectiveness is more usefully understood as an audience-evaluation process than as a straightforward result of exposure. Source Credibility Theory offers the initial explanation: consumers assess whether the communicator appears knowledgeable, trustworthy, and appealing. In cosmetics, perceived expertise may have particular importance because buyers frequently require guidance concerning application, suitability, and interpretation of product claims.

Credibility alone is insufficient to explain every consumer response. Similarity, identification, and mimicry can increase

the personal relevance of a recommendation. This may explain why a creator with a smaller but highly compatible audience can be useful for a particular campaign; however, the evidence does not justify the broader conclusion that smaller creators are always more effective.

The usefulness of the content forms another part of the proposed process. A communicator may be trusted, yet the information provided must still be meaningful to the audience. Tutorials, demonstrations, comparisons, and experience-based explanations can convert product information into material that is easier to act upon. Influencer communication should therefore be considered through the combined roles of source, message, and audience.

Creator–brand compatibility represents another important condition. When a promoted product fits the influencer's established expertise and content identity, the recommendation may appear more credible and natural. Conversely, a clear mismatch can cause the promotion to be perceived as opportunistic or commercially driven.

Transparency links these communication mechanisms to responsible promotional practice. ASCI calls for prominent disclosure when an influencer has a material commercial relationship with a brand. Making that relationship visible provides audiences with information needed to interpret the endorsement appropriately. At the same time, frequent or poorly integrated promotional content may still influence perceptions of authenticity.

Theoretical Implications

Source Credibility Theory continues to provide a useful explanation for why an identical product message may receive different responses depending on the communicator who delivers it. Authenticity should be understood primarily as a perception formed by the audience and influenced by source characteristics, communication style, creator–brand alignment, and the surrounding commercial context. Follower numbers and engagement statistics should not be used as replacements for credibility. They primarily indicate visibility or interaction and do not necessarily demonstrate persuasive effectiveness. Identification, mimicry, opinion leadership, message value, and product–endorser fit broaden the explanatory reach of the traditional source-credibility perspective. The integrated pathway proposed in this paper is intended for future empirical examination; it should not be interpreted as a causal relationship statistically demonstrated by the present review.

Practical Implications

Creator selection should consider expertise, trustworthiness, audience fit, and product compatibility alongside the creator's potential reach. Where the campaign requires consumers to understand the product as well as notice it, brands should prioritize demonstrations, tutorials, comparisons, and other information-rich formats. Products should be paired with creators whose established content themes and audience interests are compatible with the product category. Whenever a material commercial relationship exists, brands and creators should provide clear and prominent

disclosure in line with ASCI requirements. Campaign evaluation should combine multiple measures, such as relevant engagement and available conversion indicators, instead of depending solely on likes, views, or growth in follower numbers. Micro- and nano-influencers may be appropriate when they offer strong audience relevance, but their smaller scale should not be treated as proof of universal superiority. Brands should also monitor the frequency of sponsored communication because an excessively commercial content mix may affect how followers perceive the creator's authenticity.

Limitations and Future Research

A major limitation is the absence of a complete search diary and screening record from the original research process. For this reason, the paper cannot responsibly provide exact database retrieval totals, duplicate-removal figures, or PRISMA screening statistics. The study is therefore appropriately characterized as a narrative review.

The evidence base includes cross-sectional, correlational, and self-reported studies. Stated purchase intention should not be equated with actual purchasing behaviour, and observed associations cannot by themselves demonstrate causality. Variations in samples, platforms, product categories, and measurement procedures also restrict direct comparison across studies.

Future investigations should adopt reproducible systematic-review methods when comprehensive evidence retrieval is required. Empirical researchers should test the proposed relationships using experimental or longitudinal approaches, separate purchase intention from observed behaviour, and examine differences in platform, influencer tier, disclosure practices, and audience characteristics within India.

CONCLUSION

Social media influencers now occupy a significant place in cosmetics marketing in India, yet the available literature does not support the assumption that influencer exposure automatically or universally produces causal purchasing effects. The most consistently recurring themes concern credibility, authenticity, useful content, audience relevance, identification, trust, and creator–brand fit. The principal contribution of this article is the integration of these themes into a theory-informed framework. Characteristics of the influencer and the content may influence perceptions of credibility and authenticity; these perceptions may, in turn, support trust and identification, which may be associated with brand attitudes and purchase intentions. This sequence is proposed as a direction for future empirical testing rather than as an empirical result established by the review. From a managerial perspective, the evidence supports influencer programmes built around credible creators, useful information, audience compatibility, transparent commercial disclosure, and meaningful performance measures. For researchers, an important next step is to determine the conditions under which influencer communication is linked to observable consumer behaviour in India's cosmetics market.

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Acknowledgements*:* The authors have no specific acknowledgements to report.

Author Contributions

Aruna M: Conceptualization, literature review, thematic synthesis, manuscript preparation and revision.

Dr. P. Rajasekar: Supervision, critical review, and academic guidance. Both authors approved the final manuscript.

Funding: The authors received no financial support or funding for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement: No primary dataset was generated for this narrative review. The analysis is based on published academic literature and publicly available industry and regulatory material cited in the reference list.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Usage Disclosure

The authors declare that generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used only to assist with language editing, grammar improvement, and manuscript formatting where necessary. All research activities, including study design, data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation of results, and scientific conclusions, were performed solely by the authors. The authors have carefully reviewed and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the submitted manuscript.