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**Bridging Borders: A Qualitative Exploration of  
Trust Towards Foreign Influencers in India**

Master's Degree in Global  
Business Management



**KAMK • University  
of Applied Sciences**

## **Abstract**

This study explores how Indian consumers develop trust towards foreign social media influencers in cross-cultural digital environments. Drawing on Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT), Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT), and Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT), the research investigates the cultural and psychological factors shaping trust-building. A qualitative thematic content analysis was conducted on secondary sources including case studies, social media interactions and people's reactions on social media content. Three key themes emerged: cultural alignment, emotional engagement, and credibility and loyalty. The findings show that trust is fostered when influencers demonstrate cultural sensitivity, share emotionally resonant content, and maintain consistent and ethical communication. The study proposes a revised conceptual model that illustrates how these factors interact to build sustainable consumer trust in a multicultural market like India. Practical recommendations are provided for influencers, marketers, and digital agencies to improve cross-cultural communication strategies. This research contributes to both academic theory and practical influencer marketing strategies in culturally diverse settings.

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## 1 Introduction

Firms can strengthen connections with marketing supporters, especially influencers, through social media (Leung et al., 2022). With the rapid increase in social media use in India, a greater number of companies are using influencer marketing because influencers can encourage trust and purchasing decisions through genuine interaction. Foreign social media practitioners take advantage of the huge population in India by crafting content suitable to the life aspirations of subscribers. However, effective marketing in India must consider local traditions and the plethora of languages spoken in the country. Disregarding Indian culture can reduce consumer confidence as they desire real local engagement (Viridi et al., 2020). Foreign influencers must follow cultural requirements since these practices form the basis of trust with their audience base. Local providers must receive effective communication from brands and marketing concept training to boost the performance of their marketing campaigns according to Kim (2020). India-based brands should know how their Indian audience responds to influencer content from outside sources for successful digital expansion. Consumers base their purchasing decisions on trust and show loyalty toward brands while watching content promoted by foreign influencers. The ability of international influencers to establish trust relationships with various cultural groups remains uncertain when attempting to reach local audiences. Consumer dependency on trust in building brand relationships and conducting purchasing actions is a direct result of cultural diversity within India (Davis et al., 2021).

Research findings will assist business professionals and academics to identify methods which foreign influencers can build trust with Indian consumers while enhancing brand engagement. This investigation examines why Indian social media users have positive or negative reactions to foreign influencers present on their platforms. The research study uses qualitative data collection to analyze current scholarship and discover marketing strategies which work best in reaching India's consumer population diversity. The study evaluates trust-related dynamics between cultural sensitivity factors to define the factors that build trust or destroy trust in cross-national influencer marketing applications. The research outcomes will create a Cross-Cultural Influencer Trust Model to explain the effects cultural differences and psychological factors have on the trust relationships between foreign influencers and Indian consumers. The study delivers concrete advice to international marketing practitioners through techniques that build trust for better consumer relationship outcomes. Through its findings this research provides marketing strategies to brands that enable them to develop cultural sense marketing

methods which both build customer trust and make their influencer advertisements more powerful. This research expands academic understanding of Source Credibility Theory and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions in their application when dealing with cross-cultural influencer marketing.

### 1.1 Research Problem

Indian brands now utilize foreign influencers to promote their products through social media marketing because these influencers provide global perspectives to international consumers (Bentley et al., 2021). Social media influencers experience two main challenges regarding differences in their cultural backgrounds and how viewers perceive their genuine credibility. The diverse cultural landscape in India demands research into how trust is built between foreign influencers and Indian consumers. Despite the widespread use of foreign influencers, there is a lack of research on the trust dynamics involved in these cross-cultural marketing relationships. This study addresses this research gap by exploring how Indian consumers trust or distrust foreign influencers and the factors that influence these perceptions.

### 1.2 Research Questions

This study answers the following questions:

Main Research Question:

How do cultural and psychological factors influence Indian consumers' trust in foreign social media influencers?

Sub-Questions:

SQ1. How does cultural alignment affect the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of foreign influencers in India?

SQ2. In what ways does emotional engagement foster parasocial bonds between Indian consumers and foreign influencers?

SQ3. How does consistent and ethical communication influence long-term consumer trust and loyalty?

### 1.3 Aim and Purpose

Aim:

The aim of this study is to create a conceptual framework that represents the trust development process between Indian consumers and foreign influencers. The research also provides practical recommendations for global influencers, marketing agencies, and brands who want to enter the Indian market or expand their presence in India.

Purpose:

This research explores the role of the cultural and psychological dimension in forming trust of Indian social media consumers towards foreign social media influencers. It discusses how cultural congruence, affective involvement, and credibility may influence trust mechanisms in the digital context.

### 1.4 Research Contributions

This research makes significant contributions to both theoretical and practical domains. The study extends the Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT), Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT) and Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT) to explain trust formation in cross-cultural influencer marketing. This academic study examines the building of trust between Indian consumers and foreign influencers, a topic that has not been thoroughly investigated before, therefore establishing new theoretical frameworks for analysing this specific kind of interaction. Brands and influencers may use this data to identify effective strategies for cultivating trust with Indian customers. For effective influencer marketing campaigns one needs the guidelines that teach how to conduct culturally sensitive activities while maintaining authenticity and credibility. International marketers benefit from these findings by using them to adjust their strategies toward Indian cultural norms thus building stronger trust with consumers.

## 1.5 Research Strategy

Through a qualitative methodology this research examines the dimensions of trust by Indian consumers toward foreign influencers. The research design follows a qualitative approach so researchers can deliver comprehensive analysis of cultural and psychological trust factors (Lim, 2024). The research gathers its data from scholarly publications alongside business reports and case studies to present a holistic view regarding the research subject. The exploratory study design delivers a comprehensive analysis of trust patterns which will guide research development in this field. The research draws its information from peer-reviewed journals along with marketing reports and government publications that researchers accessed through Google Scholar along with Web of Science and Scopus databases. The wide range of dataset collected through this method leads to more dependable findings (Ruggiano & Perry, 2019). The paper uses knowledge from Indian marketing agencies together with case studies on successful influencer campaigns to illustrate its theoretical arguments. The research uses multiple data sources for a complete evaluation of dimension of trust-building in cross-cultural influencer marketing campaigns. Qualitative content analysis serves as the research method to find major themes about trust together with cultural sensitivity and authenticity. Literature reviews and business documentation helped form a conceptual framework linking cultural and psychological factors that influence trust formation. The analysis produces clarity through pattern detection which leads to both theoretical progress and practical implementation (Selvi, 2019). Content analysis provides significant insights into customer responses by elucidating the trust assessment of Indian consumers about worldwide influencers.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Key Concepts and Definitions

#### 2.1.1 Social Media Influencers (SMIs):

Social media influencers (SMIs) use their digital platforms to alter consumer behaviors regarding product purchases in contemporary marketing practices. Parts of specific marketing tools enable influencers to develop emotional bonds with audience members which builds trust and increases their follower's engagement (De Castro et al., 2021). A marketing strategy that depends on influencers enables them to show products and services through relatable presentations which create authentic-seeming endorsements beyond conventional promotional techniques. Social media networks in India create ideal conditions for foreign influencers to penetrate the market because of their popularity in beauty, fashion and lifestyle content domains (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2020). The sharing of content adapted to Indian culture by foreign influencers has led to their success in gaining the attention of domestic consumer markets. Foreign influencers position themselves as essential agents who manipulate user opinions and lead them toward product testing and sustain brand devotion (Mabkhot et al., 2022). Customer trust represents the vital determining factor in Indian market success because it determines whether foreign influencers will gain acceptance from their audience. The paper investigates trust creation methods connecting Indian consumers to international influencers while examining their purchase behaviors and ongoing customer devotion.

#### 2.1.2 Consumer Trust in Social Media Influencers:

Consumer trust exists when social media influencers maintain reliable endorsements toward their audience while making choices that benefit their followers (Pop et al., 2021). A digital marketplace requires trust from customers because consumers trust advice from others more than promotional marketing from businesses. The Indian cultural framework demands authenticity both to the community and transparency so social media influencers need to

develop authentic bonds with their audience. The trust building process of foreign influencers depends on truthful communication methods combined with real promotional demonstrations for their audience. Influencers create content that can resonate with the audience base, therefore they can develop trust with their audience (Ki et al., 2022). This strategy ensures the foreign influencer's commitment to the guidelines of Indian culture which are the focus of this research.

## 2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

### 2.2.1 Cultural Congruence

Dr. Madeleine Leininger's (1950) Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT) says that trust in communication develops when people use messages that fit the cultural standards and expectations of who they are addressing (McFarland & Wehbe-Alamah, 2019). A study found that consumers prefer marketing messages that include both cultural values and what society expects (Cappella et al., 2022). It is clear from cross-cultural marketing research that culture-specific marketing helps make brands more trusted, as long as their marketing content reflects the locals' culture (Rokka, 2021). Thus, foreign social media influencers working in India need to make their content suitable for local Indian culture, following the cross-cultural congruency model of communication. The process of matching culture allows them to feel more familiar and lessen the risk perceived, helping to make them more credible content creators for their audience. The creation of an influencer's material based on what the followers believe and respect usually leads to their trust. As explained by Dhingra et al. (2024) Indian consumers trust foreign influencers more if they endorse India's traditions and celebrate Indian festivities in their messages. McKay (2019) agrees that Indian cinema viewers greatly appreciate honesty and involvement with the community. Thus, to gain people's faith, foreign influencers carefully take part in cultural practices, sometimes use the same language as their audience and back up values that are dear to Indians.

According to Ilieva et al. (2024), when international influencers used traditional values and local languages, the audience in these places started to trust them. If influencers include locally

familiar ways of speaking, follow recognized traditions in storytelling and act respectfully, the audience sees them as sincere which results in better response and promotion. For an influencer to thrive in India, they must effectively convey material that resonates with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. By applying regional communication and cultural traditions, the process of adapting to each culture becomes easier. By doing this, it becomes easier for the audience to relate to the brand and feel emotional towards it. Kumar (2024) notes that adapting to the culture and customs of a region is vital to making foreign influencers more Credible. Following cultural communication customs helps build trust, as people feel like they understand and relate to the presenters. Also, using ancient customs and icons in their storytelling helps them come across as more genuine. By doing this, the company earns trust by understanding and respecting Indian culture.

Kumar (2024) presented evidence that authenticity and trust have greater meaning than just what people say. If digital reviews focus on sincerity, emotions and storytelling, they help others trust that the influencer is an honest source of information. If foreign influencers care about other cultures and join in, their actions lead to trust that endures. The effort encourages stronger relationships between followers and influencers as well as adds validity to brand endorsements. Having similar cultural practices helps to keep trust lasting. Indian audience members are suspicious if they feel that culture is being used only for profit or if it seems inappropriate. Faith in influencers builds when they join in on local activities, champion local customs and communicate with their fans in their mother tongue (Ahad, 2021). Losing consistency can break the trust people have in their relationships. For this reason, influencers respected by many people have a cultural foundation that adds to their influence over time.

However, CCT's application presents limitations. Not everyone in India looks for cultural compatibility when choosing products. As stated by Sharma, Patro and Chaudhry (2021), there are people in the market who choose foreign influencers for their ideas and motivating qualities. Exaggerating how much to adapt to other cultures may make foreignness less interesting to certain consumers. Also, when companies localize too much, it can make their messages less credible. Lou et al. (2022) and Rivera et al. (2018) point out that displaying cultural symbols just for marketing with little or no personal experience makes the content feel like a show. They are considered inappropriate and result in losing trust within the workplace. Diversity in Indian culture is another challenge to development. Because of the variety in languages and cultures,

every cultural message is understood differently from one region to another. Designing messages that please both such a large and distinct group is not easy, especially since North Indian content may not interest the South Indians (Marieke, 2019). In addition, Shared culture does not always lead to the formation of trust. Experience of influencers, the quality of content and how brands are involved can be key to success. Failing to mention brand relationships when posting content could still result in loss of trust among people (Filali-Boissy et al., 2025). All in all, making sure culture is well-aligned, guided by CCT, helps establish trust in India. For it to work, people should be genuine, authentic in how they feel and considerate in their interactions. It is not enough to match cultures only once; people must continually adapt, learn and connect with emotions. Those who are considerate and honest, along with having knowledge and consistent content, will win the faith of Indian customers. Cultural congruence serves as a foundation. Still, these foundations become sturdier when accompanied by emotional attachment. For instance, cultural knowledge devoid of any feelings can be regarded as robotic and textbook, whereas feelings without cultural context can seem superficial.

### 2.2.2 Emotional Engagement

According to Horton and Wohl's (1956) Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT), people build emotional bond to media icons even though they have no actual interactions. Because of its role in advertising and marketing, this psychological concept is more important than ever, especially on social media (Reynolds, 2021). When foreign influencers are present online, share what they go through and engage with their followers, Indian consumers often develop a closer relationship with them and follow their advice. Studies find that having a personal connection with their audience is crucial for influencers to gain trust from them. Those who post about their personal life online usually create a climate that makes it difficult to distinguish their real life from what people see in social media (Pearce et al., 2018). The sense of intimacy increases the follower's personal involvement and emotional feelings (Patterson & Ashman, 2020). Authors like Samadi and Akhtar (2023) and Garg and Bakshi (2024), find that trust grows more rapidly when content producers have a strong emotional connection and tell stories that touch their own culture. The presence of culture-specific tales helps to bridge the mental gap between the influencer and their audience. In the Indian context, adding cultural norms and practices to their messages makes influencers' messages even more powerful.

Communication where the audience responds to the information is another part of emotional engagement. With two-way interactions like one-on-one answers, Q&As and listening to audience opinions, foreign influencers strengthen the parasocial bond by making it feel like relationships run in both ways. Influencers feel that Indian consumers treat this type of interaction as a sign of being reliable and honest. If influencers use these two-way methods, they appear to their followers as easy to connect with, boosting the trust between them (Lou & Zhou, 2024). The way influencers talk to their followers turns them into people who followers can relate to and thus value. Being accessible and familiar with Indian culture makes foreign influencers seem more honest to people in the country, leading them to trust their advertisements (Gadekar et al., 2024). Being emotionally connected on various digital channels leads to a stronger loyalty from customers. As shown by the studies of Samadi and Akhtar (2023) and Garg and Bakshi (2024), creators able to keep a similar storyline and be sensitive to cultural norms make lasting connections with their audience. Putting out consistent posts helps followers trust that the influencer is reliable and honest over a period. When Indian festivals, traditions and social customs are recognized regularly by influential people from other countries, they help create and strengthen trust. Watching similar content repeatedly makes people feel better connected and keeps them bonded with their favorite entertainers. As result, people tend to stick with these influencers and are likely to follow their brand suggestions.

one must acknowledge limitations of PRT theory, mainly affecting the part of influencer marketing. Chen (2021) and Lou (2021) argue that parasocial connections are often filled with bias. Since influencers do not have much knowledge about their specific followers, it's hard for any real trust to form. In India, the difference is most obvious because a large group of customers who come from traditional or rural areas simply want human interaction which is not easily available with digital media. Often, followers tend not to trust influencers as much because they can't have one-on-one communications. In addition, Ohlin and Gyllén (2025) claim that when influencers step away from daily engagement or shift their tone, parasocial trust becomes fragile and more likely to be disrupted. Brag (2019) posits that if audiences regard influencers as inauthentic or motivated by financial gain, they may rapidly lose confidence. Moreover, adhering to cultural norms in communication is crucial for Indian customers and fosters trust. If influencers are not familiar with the traditions of the area or use them just for profit, it could appear as dishonesty to people. If people involved in parasocial bonds don't get the same emotions back, their feelings for each other can weaken as Stein, Breves and Anders

(2022) observe. Although Indian clients are regularly exposed to advertising, Walter (2021) notes that rural and elderly people are skeptical of digital activity and online influencers. Consequently, because to these demographic disparities, not all Indian consumers place their faith in PRT's emotions, presenting a difficulty for foreign influencers aiming to establish credibility in PRT. All in all, PRT helps understand the role emotions play in building trust between Indian customers and world-renowned influencers. It is evident that repeatedly providing the same information, interactive ways for voting and true-to-life information are the basics of parasocial trust. However, these relationships can be problematic, as they tend to be one-directional and elicit different reactions from various customer groups. To provide a thorough understanding of trust-related concerns in India's influencer market, PRT should be applied with methods that are adapted to different groups and expectations. Culture sets appropriate boundaries for emotional engagement; without them, trust may erode. Trust feels eroded when an influencer comes across as emotionally available but voids culture. The strongest emotional resonance is achieved when it supports cultural alignment.

### 2.2.3 Credibility & Loyalty

According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), CTT explains how by communicating honestly, presenting positive messages and acting consistently, Indian viewers and foreign influencers form lasting trust and loyalty (Yuan et al., 2019). When it comes to influencer marketing, trust and loyalty grow because of the influencer's transparency and their ongoing efforts to create content that connects with their audience's values (Wistedt, 2024). Reliability is especially important for Indian people who regularly use the internet. If influencers are open, stick to the same messages and act ethically according to local beliefs, it helps gain their audience's trust and loyalty. Being both reliable and competent helps influencers gain credibility in their relationship with their audience. Many followers in India become loyal to influencers who are honest in their communications and openly mention any brand affiliations (Arsalan, 2023). If audiences believe an influencer is sincere, ethical and capable of accurate information, they will trust them more (Borchers & Enke, 2022). Indian people tend to view an influencer from another country as trustworthy if they are honest, share real experiences and open about working with brands.

There is real-world evidence to support this view. Tarabieh et al. (2024) find that brands that are open and satisfy audience wishes gain greater trust and loyalty among their consumers. Based on their findings, influencers who honestly let people know the true nature of their sponsorships and comments help their audience feel secure about the decisions they take. It is through trust that influencer actions lead to certain behaviors among consumers. Above all, influencers committed to honesty and relevant goals generally earn respect and stronger loyalty from consumers. Given the importance of ethics and fit with local culture in India, these approaches work very well. The same article by Khodabandeh and Lindh (2021) points out that sustainable relationships between consumers and influencers depend on emotional commitment which is developed through honest and planned communication. Despite not meeting followers personally, influencers keep in touch and try to satisfy audience needs. Individuals respond better to influential personalities when the content reflects both their hobbies and their general cultural beliefs. Strong emotions made through constant interactions usually result in people endorsing the brand and staying loyal for a long time. If an influencer is relatable and always open and honest, it can lead consumers to be loyal online.

Also, maintaining the same standards helps ensure customers stay with the brand for a long time. When people watch consistent, cultural appropriate content from an influencer, they form a mental picture of their actions. Based on Tarabieh et al. (2024) and Khodabandeh and Lindh (2021), influencers are relied on more when their information is always correct, given regularly and morally sound. This requires posting on a set schedule, answering questions from viewers promptly and fitting in with the culture present in the community. By recognizing good brands and advertising their local culture, influencers gradually form an appealing and reputable image. In India, seeing a brand stick to the same identity increases confidence in the brand and makes customers want to purchase from it repeatedly. Maintaining the same approach helps a brand stay useful in the fast-changing and diverse Indian digital market. When an influencer stays in tune with Indian traditions by providing localized updates and paying attention to the community, their following tends to become even stronger. Thus, CTT proposes that real commitment and integrity in behavior help maintain the health of any relationship. Connecting emotionally, sharing ethical values and posting on a schedule all contribute to making Instagram users feel they can trust and rely on the brand. At the same time, as the influencer marketing industry is so trend-sensitive and constantly changes, CTT has a few shortcomings. Influencer-follower relationships often progress more quickly than consumer-brand ones which makes it harder to stay committed in the long run. According to Hutchinson (2019), digital spaces give

people access to fast-changing trends, various influential figures and various kinds of content. An influencer could draw a lot of attention for a limited time until their content does not keep up with viewers' new preferences. Since commitment can change, CTT's theory that marriage is lifelong becomes questionable.

Even when there is trust, it is still possible for people to become unfaithful after some time. For instance, viewers from India might initially believe in the foreign influence's sense of culture, but their support could disappear when the influencer turns to content that does not fit their cultural values. In other words, being transparent is vital for trust, but by itself does not keep commitment lasting. To stay loyal, Abd-El-Salam (2023) states, companies should be clear about their actions, sensitive to cultural differences and develop new content. Without noticing audience changes, influencers may still lose their viewers' trust. Abd-El-Salam (2023) also believe that outside changes such as improvements to platforms, changes in the market and evolving social traditions, are increasingly defining how much people trust influencers which is beyond what CTT tries to analyze. If a particular influencer in India doesn't reflect the latest cultural trends, consumers are likely to switch to someone who updates them more often. Since things change so fast, influencers are required to be honest, think ahead and keep up with the latest trends. Missing this aspect decreases the level of connection with the parasocial figure and weakens the belief that trust in celebrities is stable. Overall, while CTT supports the idea that trust and being committed make people credible and loyal, it's hard to maintain those assumptions because the digital influencer world is constantly shifting. Foreign influencers working in India need to do more than just stick to their word to earn trust. Companies should also pay attention to other cultures, adapt their strategies and feel people's emotions. By applying all these principles, people are more likely to keep their business reputable and trusted by their followers. Both emotional and cognitive processes work together. An uninvolved and emotionless influencer will come off as robotic and lacking warmth, yet understanding. In contrast, an influencer who is warm but erratic will make them seem unreliable. For trust development that is stable, engagement that is emotional needs to reinforce credibility and consistencies.

## 2.3 Preliminary Conceptual Trust-Building Model

The Initial Conceptual Trust-Building Model in this section examines cultural and psychological elements that determine trust development between Indian consumers and foreign social media influencers (SMIs) (Adam and Donelson, 2020). This model bases its foundation on three theoretical frameworks including Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT) together with Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT) and Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT). The three models: Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT), Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT), and Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT), do not work in isolation, but rather synergistically influence trust among Indian consumers and foreign influencers. For instance, cultural congruence provides the scope within which influencer content can be accepted, emotional investment creates familiarity and depth within the relationship, while commitment and consistency enable the influencing parties to feel safe cognitively and emotionally over the long term. These factors compose an interrelated triangular loop in which each factor enhances the other: without emotional warmth, underscored cultural understanding feels mechanical; emotional storytelling devoid of cultural respect is disingenuous; and consistency lacking relatability is deemed inauthentic. Credibility, in this case, cultural congruence or consistent behavior, is the missing anchor needed for emotional engagement to solidify and sustain the foundation of trust. Likewise, cultural alignment devoid of emotional resonance weakens parasocial connection. As such, trusting the other side is only possible when all three mechanisms—culturally and psychologically sound—are brought into balanced interaction to form the otherwise fragile consumer-influencer relationship.

### 2.3.1 Conceptual Trust-Building Model

The proposed framework consists of three dominant dimensions which draw principles from the fundamental theoretical bases. The cultivation of trust through foreign influencers toward Indian audiences happens through a combination of Cultural Adaptation, Emotional Connection and Commitment and Transparency.

### Cultural Adaptation (CCT Dimension)

Through Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT) marketers must match influencer material according to the cultural rules and expectations which characterize the audience they want to reach. When foreign influencers modify their content with Indian cultural values they build better trust among target audiences. The process of cultural adaptation needs influencers to show their understanding of local traditions and social customs through their content creation (Bentley et al., 2021). The trust of Indian consumers grows when they see influencers communicate their cultural background because this creates identity connections between them. The dimension requires linguistic adaptation that includes speakers using local languages and dialects to reach their audience. The use of familiar linguistic styles by influencers helps audiences feel they understand one another better which increases both active participation and faith in their credibility. The linguistic adjustment holds great importance for Indian markets because language forms a vital foundation for both cultural identity and social affiliations (Woolard, 2020). The process of cultural adaptation strongly depends on how genuine individuals seem to their audience. When influencers display their genuine personality while connecting culturally with audiences consumers tend to develop trust toward them. A genuine presentation requires people to maintain constant action together with clear communication and actual assimilation into local customs. The authenticity of influencers rises when they engage in local Indian festivals or show their traditional clothing or talk about their regional culture (Colucci and Pedroni, 2021). The critical outcome from cultural adaptation involves risk reduction. The alignment of content with local expectations helps influencers reduce the risks which foreign identities bring. Audiences who align culturally with influencers tend to develop lower uncertainty levels about them which increases their trust in what the influencer suggests and intends.

### Emotional Connection (PRT Dimension)

The psychological framework which demonstrates audience-emotion bonding between influencers and their followers is known as Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT). The formation of emotional bonds between audiences and influencers occurs through their perception of intimacy along with identification and consistency and their ability to interact two ways. Of utmost importance to the audience is their emotional bond with influencers although they

never actually meet one another (Zhang and Choi, 2022). The audience's sense of personal bond results from influencer content which includes personal narratives along with lifestyle footage and unreleased footage and makes spectators feel familiar with the influencer. The emotional connection between influencer and follower leads audiences to feel more comfortable because the humanization process reduces the influencer to an approachable figure. Users establish a sense of identification with influencers when these figures mirror their beliefs and way of life as well as demonstrate similar values and interests (Laor, 2024). Indian customers trust influencers that demonstrate characteristics which reflect their cultural heritage together with their local life experiences and native practices. Audiences who identify with influencers more readily trust the influencer's messages along with their opinions and brand endorsements because they view such content as legitimate information (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2021). This dimension heavily depends on the concept of trust which develops as a result of consistent behavior. The audience views reliable and truthful influencers when they consistently deliver messages at regular intervals. Audience members feel assured by an influencer who sticks to their values and communication approach which minimizes audience concern about the influencer's intentions. Educators note that direct engagement between influencers and their audiences makes up the third component of an influencer-audience relationship (Wongwilatnurak, 2024). The parasocial bond becomes stronger through personalized communication that involves responding to audience comments and answering questions and joining cultural conversations.

#### Commitment and Transparency (CTT Dimension)

The Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT) presents four essential components which build durable relationships between consumers and their influencers in terms of rational trust development along with emotional dedication and openness and steady branding. People trust influencers more when those influencers deliver precise information regarding their sponsorships and partnerships alongside their brand affiliations (Rundin and Colliander, 2021). The influencer's open disclosure creates trust with consumers because it verifies recommendations stem from unbiased sources. The development of emotional commitment towards influencers occurs when audiences create sustained bonds with both the influencer's personal identity and their message delivery methods and life values. Building commitment between influencer and audience happens when representatives maintain consistent open communication along with

true representation while sharing the same set of beliefs (Audrezet, De Kerviler and Moulard, 2018). Influencers with established emotional relationships between themselves and their fans will keep receiving lasting loyalty and trust from their audience in digital marketplaces that are always competitive. The fundamental requirement for this dimension involves maintaining complete openness within all interactions. An influencer's credibility grows stronger when they reveal all their brand partnerships as well as offer truthful content assessments to their audience. Transparency stands as a fundamental necessity in the Indian digital market since audience members expect both authentic interactions and ethical communication before creating trust with consumers (Singh, Dutta and Kaunert, 2024). Trust sustainability requires a constant and consistent delivery of messages as an essential component. Through consistent communication the audiences develop a trustworthy relationship with the influencer because they perceive the messages as both dependable and reliable.

Secondary data will guide the refinement process of the initial model through thematic content analysis. Through this method of analysis researchers can identify major themes which explain how trust develops among influencers and consumers as well as how these cultural emotional and rational elements function together in these relationships. The analysis will enable the model to progress through absorbment of real-world data patterns and empirical findings for developing a framework that bridges theoretical elements with practical usefulness. The supported Conceptual Trust-Building Model will unite realized theoretical understanding with empirical knowledge to create an all-inclusive framework. The study presents an advanced model for understanding how trust develops between Indian consumers and foreign social media influencers through an analysis of cultural adaptation together with emotional attachment and transparency and commitment elements. This model provides real-world applications for social media influencers and brands who want to develop trust relationships with consumers in digital Indian markets which have both cultural diversity and technological dynamism.

## 2.4 Consumer Trust Formation in Foreign Influencers

### 2.4.1 Cultural Congruence and Trust Formation:

Trust develops optimally when consumers interconnect with external messages that precisely align with cultural norms and beliefs vital to their target audience according to the Cultural Congruence Theory (Heshmati & Oravec, 2021). The success of global content creators in Indian markets requires exact cultural match during their social media influencer work in India. Indian consumers base their evaluation and trust judgment regarding foreign influencers through cultural collectivism values together with community connections while requiring genuine cultural accuracy. Trust in social media content develops when influencers show knowledge about local cultural customs and social customs to Indian consumers. The exposure to cultural sensitivity by foreign influencers makes them appear more authentic and more believable to their audience (Chen et al., 2022). Foreign influencers gain cultural authenticity with their Indian audience by celebrating Indian festivals through either regional languages or by incorporating local narratives in their content. The alignment creates cultural harmony which makes Indian viewers feel attached to the content. The use of culturally appropriate messaging lowers the apprehensions that users have about working with international influencers. Audience members accept endorsements from influencers who show respect for Indian cultural issues because these endorsements match their personal values (Verma et al., 2024). The level of trust that consumers develop allows them to follow the recommendations subsequently affecting their purchases and maintaining customer loyalty. Foreign social media representatives develop better engagement and trust levels when they actively incorporate Indian cultural elements alongside cultural sensitivity. According to CCT trust requires more than superficial adaptation since deep knowledge of cultural values plays an essential role in establishing trust. Effective foreign influencers accomplish genuine cultural integration by using important cultural insights in their media content. Through such cultural processes influencers establish enhanced trust while gaining status as culturally observant figures who win greater influence with Indian consumers.

#### 2.4.2 Emotional Engagement and Parasocial Relationships:

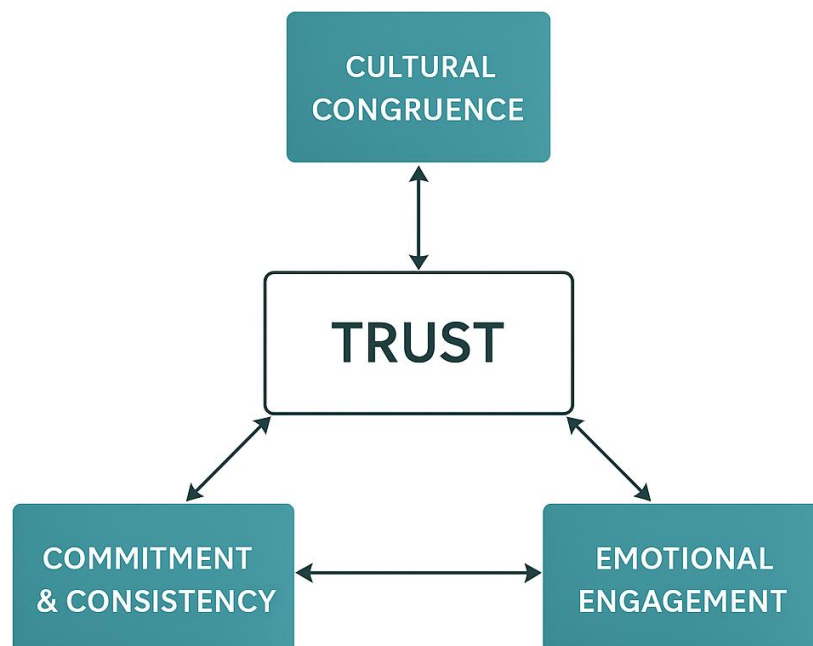
Horton and Wohl's 1956 Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT) helps to explain how viewers build emotional attachments with media celebrities one-way as if they had actual relationships. Being exposed to social media influencers in the present digital era allows Indians to create parasocial bonds while developing feelings of intimacy and familiarity (Farivar et al., 2024). Indian consumers develop trust in their interactions with foreign influencers owing to the strong emotional mechanisms these influencers create. Two key elements that lead to emotional engagement between influencers and their audience involve sharing personal stories together with the display of genuine behavior and establishing steady communication. Foreign influencers establish emotional ties with their audience through personal disclosures about their values and behind-the-scenes material and the representation of their struggles. The believed closeness between the audience and influencer works to establish trust since users develop familiarity with their authentic identity beyond their recognized role (Wei et al., 2022). Scheduled emotional commitment plays an essential role throughout the process of establishing enduring trust relations. The perceived intimacy improves through constant updates as well as content that prompts interaction and open communication lines through responses to comments and live events. The emotional relationships which Indian consumers place high value on create a favorable response to intimacy-based engagement practices in marketing. According to Shen et al. (2022) Indian audience engagement with their foreign influencers becomes stronger when the influencers use personal narratives coupled with authentic communication leading to higher trust levels. Another significant aspect of emotional engagement is relatability. Indian consumers trust foreign influencers who present themselves as approachable and aligned with their daily experiences. This trust is amplified when influencers acknowledge social issues relevant to their Indian followers or adopt local perspectives. K. Chen et al. (2021) found that emotional resonance plays a vital role in consumer trust formation, particularly in collectivist societies like India, where emotional bonds are integral to interpersonal relationships. Moreover, parasocial bonds are reinforced through repeated exposure. As audiences become more familiar with an influencer, they begin to view them as trusted advisors. This trust, rooted in emotional attachment, extends to the products and services promoted by the influencer. Foreign influencers who nurture these emotional relationships are more likely to maintain trust, even when promoting commercial interests.

### 2.4.3 Psychological Mechanisms of Trust Formation:

Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT), proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), emphasizes that trust is built through both cognitive (rational) and emotional (affective) mechanisms (D. Y. Kim & Kim, 2021). In the context of foreign influencers in India, this theory highlights how consistent behavior, reliable communication, and emotional investment contribute to sustained consumer trust. One of the primary psychological mechanisms of trust formation is consistency. Consumers from India will trust foreign influencers better when they maintain reliable message delivery and constant behavioral consistency throughout time. The consistency of their performance strengthens the reliability component which forms the basis of CTT. Indian consumers view credible foreign influencers through three elements which include maintaining consistent narratives and fulfilling promised content and delivering factual product information (Ameen et al., 2023). Transparency functions as an essential psychological factor in the behavior of consumers. The relationship develops stronger when influencers reveal their business relationships along with straightforward explanations of their partnerships. Indian consumers trust the content from foreign influencers more when these influencers deliver accurate reviews and openly disclose their promotional relationship. According to Chen and Yang (2023) transparency works to minimize customer doubt while it improves influencer endorsement credibility. Emotional commitment stands as an essential factor for trust development in formation processes. According to the CTT theory consumers who develop emotional connections with relationships tend to keep their trust active for extended periods. Indian consumers build deeper relations with foreign influencers who show genuine emotions while maintaining sincere and constant interactions. People develop stronger emotional commitment toward influencers who show responsiveness to feedback as well as cultural values respect alongside community concerns management (Leite & De Paula Baptista, 2021). CTT demonstrates how trust operates mutually between influencers and their audiences because when influencers show dedication to meeting their audience needs the audience becomes loyal. In India trust functions as a progressive cooperative relationship between people because this reciprocal understanding is an essential part of Indian cultural perspectives (Patil & Mhn, 2024). Risk reduction emerges as a second psychological process among consumers. Although based abroad, these influencers lower consumer risks through reliable information delivery and cultural sensitivity together with straightforward communication practices. The trust-building

process from foreign influences becomes stronger because it eliminates uncertainty. The most trusted influencers among Indian consumers maintain community protection efforts along with cultural respect for local traditions.

To conclude, trust formation between Indian consumers and foreign influencers involves multiple interconnected factors. Cultural Congruence Theory suggests that when communication content aligns with the cultural values of a society, it enhances audience familiarity and reduces psychological distance. The importance of the emotional engagement and perceived intimacy, to build trust between two parties is highlighted by the Parasocial Relationship theory. Commitment-Trust Theory proposes that trust develops gradually over time, forming the foundation for long-term relationships, through consistent communication, being transparent and building an emotional commitment over time. These theories complement each other to cover the psychological, emotional, and cultural mechanisms that result in consumer trust towards foreign social media influencer in India.



Preliminary Conceptual Model of Trust Formation in Indian Consumers Toward Foreign Influencers

Figure 1 Preliminary Conceptual Trust-Building Model (Source: Alam & Farooq)

## 2.5 Aligning Theoretical Frameworks with Research Questions

The alignment of the research question with corresponding theoretical Frameworks is depicted in the table below.

Table 1 Aligning Theoretical Frameworks with Research Questions (Source: Alam & Farooq)

Research Question	Theoretical Framework	Applicability to Study
How do cultural and psychological factors influence Indian consumers' trust in foreign social media influencers?	Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT)	Explains how cultural alignment fosters consumer trust.
	Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT)	Describes the emotional bonds formed through influencer engagement.
	Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT)	Analyzes cognitive and emotional trust-building mechanisms.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Strategy

This study adopts a qualitative case study strategy to explore how Indian consumers develop trust in foreign influencers. Qualitative methodology is particularly effective for understanding complex human behaviors, emotions, and perceptions, especially when they are shaped by sociocultural dynamics (Mey, 2022). In this situation, trust grows and changes and it cannot be easily measured with precise numbers—it's affected by cultural similarities, emotional effects and thoughtful examinations of influencer actions. That is why using a case study design allows researchers to study trust in digital settings even as its nature keeps changing (Williams, 2024). The research employs a thematic content analysis approach, which allows for systematic identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns (themes) across textual and visual data. The method is particularly suited to unearthing recurrent meanings and values expressed by consumers in different secondary data forms, such as case studies, industry reports, and social media content (Humble and Mozelius, 2022). Thematic analysis not only offers flexibility but also facilitates theory-driven inquiry when combined with a robust framework—as is the case in this study, which incorporates Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT), Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT), and Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT). A multiple case study design supports this qualitative strategy by enabling comparison across various contexts. The research examines both successful and failed schemes that influencers launch through foreign markets combined with various audience reactions across multiple social media networks. The research benefits from case studies which show how influencers create and damage trust with their Indian audience members. Multiple distinctive cases help research teams obtain detailed information about digital trust development. The paper utilizes abductive reasoning as a main methodology to continuously let theory and data support one another according to Żelechowska, Żyluk and Urbański (2020).

### 3.2 Research Approach

The researchers analyze trust development regarding Indian consumers' interaction with foreign influencers through an abductive research approach. The research method of abduction exists as a separate approach from both induction and deduction (Belzen, Engelschalt and Krüger, 2021). Abductive procedures connect data to theory while induction first builds theories from data then uses deduction to prove or disprove these ideas through new information (Okoli, 2021). The framework makes it appropriate for research-based exploration since these studies require flexibility to navigate between specific assumptions and emerging real-world observations (Karlsen, Hillestad and Dysvik, 2020). Emotional aspects along with the cognitive and cultural elements constitute three factors in this research trust. The approach for working through abduction on this study is through the thematic content analysis following an iterative procedure.

### 3.3 Data Collection Strategy

The research method relies entirely on secondary data sources to understand multiple aspects of how Indian consumers build trust with foreign influencers. The use of secondary data is both pragmatic and methodologically robust, particularly for a study focused on consumer sentiment and digital trust patterns (De Ulzurrun Laura and Pamies, 2024). It allows access to public discourse, large-scale market insights, and documented influencer practices. The following table explain the data collecting strategy for this research:

Table 2 Data Collection Sources (Source: Alam & Farooq)

Source Type	Title	Specifications
Tik and YouTube	12 videos	Analyze audience comments for on selected influencer videos related to Indian themes.
Case Studies	5 case studies	Examples of foreign influencer campaigns in India. Selection based on cultural alignment, trust outcomes, and relevance to

		theory.
Academic Literature	24 articles	Peer-reviewed papers and articles on influencer marketing, trust, culture, and digital engagement.
Instagram Posts	8 Posts	Analyze audience comments for on selected influencer videos related to Indian themes.

**Case Studies:** Five case studies of foreign influencer campaigns in India were chosen based on their relevance to the research objective. The selection includes both successful and less effective campaigns to provide contrast and depth to the analysis. These case studies offer detailed insights into campaign strategies, influencer–audience dynamics, and consumer responses. Specific attention is given to campaigns that demonstrate cultural alignment, trust outcomes, and applicability to theoretical constructs such as cultural congruence, parasocial interaction, and long-term trustworthiness. These micro-level insights help contextualize how foreign influencers build credibility and engage with Indian audiences.

**Academic Literature:** This study includes 24 peer-reviewed journal articles focused on influencer marketing, trust, cultural dynamics, and digital engagement. These sources form the theoretical backbone of the research, shaping both the conceptual framework and interpretation of findings. The literature spans key disciplines including marketing, media studies, and behavioral sciences, offering a well-rounded perspective on trust formation in the digital sphere. Works were selected with an emphasis on recency (2014–2024) to ensure contemporary relevance and are instrumental in applying frameworks such as CCT (Consumer Culture Theory), PRT (Parasocial Relationship Theory), and CTT (Cross-Cultural Theory).

**Social Media Content:** The study analyzes 20 social media content items: 12 videos from TikTok and YouTube, and 8 Instagram posts. These platforms were selected for their rich content formats and interactive user environments. TikTok and YouTube videos were chosen for their storytelling potential and extensive comment sections, which offer valuable insights into audience sentiment and trust perceptions. Instagram posts were identified using relevant hashtags such as #foreigninfluencerIndia and selected based on high user engagement. The

comments on both video and image-based content were reviewed to understand public opinion, cultural reception, and indicators of trust in foreign influencers.

### 3.4 Data Scope Justification

The surveyed platforms consolidate thematic data with multiple research methods to enhance study validity. The research sample of 8 Instagram posts and 12 YouTube and Tik tok videos. Researchers use the current time frame because it marks an important period in influencer marketing that helps understand trust development (Francisco et al., 2021). Researchers used Instagram for their visual tool of cultural research, YouTube and tik tok to tell emotional stories. Researchers use these three study platforms to provide a comprehensive methodology for assessing trust connections in Indian digital contexts. Data triangulation within the research becomes strong because of the project's diversity in secondary dataset selection. The gathered information provides proof from theoretical aspects alongside behavioral research and users' attitudes that directly support the research objectives during thematic analysis. A wide variety of collected data ensures robustness that establishes both validity and dependability throughout the interpretative examination of the comprehensive research.

### 3.5 Systematic Search and Data Evaluation

This section outlines the operational methods for locating, evaluating, and validating secondary data sources that serve as research evidence. The qualitative research study implementing secondary data needed reliable procedures so researchers could validate its findings because it lacked methodological strength and required credibility. This research framework comprises systematic data retrieval techniques as its first component and data evaluation methods based on academic standards as its subsequent component.

### 3.6 Data Evaluation Framework

The assessment framework required detailed procedures to evaluate different types of secondary sources because researchers needed to confirm quality standards as well as relevance and trustworthiness. Two vital evaluation systems were employed to analyze the sources through the evaluation process.

AACODS Checklist – The framework functioned mainly to assess materials from grey sources including industry reports with social media content and user discussions (Karlsson and Takahashi, 2017). It assesses sources based on:

- Authority (Who is the author or creator?)
- Accuracy (Is the information supported by evidence or peer consensus?)
- Coverage (Is the topic treated comprehensively?)
- Objectivity (Is the information presented without bias?)
- Date (Is the material current and relevant to the study’s timeline?)
- Significance (Does it contribute meaningfully to the research questions?)

Scott’s Four Criteria (Thompson and Thompson, 2020) – Applied mainly to documentary sources such as reports and case studies, this framework includes:

- Authenticity (Is the document genuine and unaltered?)
- Credibility (Is the source free from error and distortion?)
- Representativeness (Is it typical of its type or situation?)
- Meaning (Is the content clear and comprehensible?)

Each potential source was cross-checked using a Source Evaluation Matrix (Bourquard et al., 2018), documenting strengths and weaknesses across each criterion. The final sample consisted

of research materials which exceeded set quality criteria. This ensured methodological transparency and analytical integrity.

### 3.7 Triangulation

To reduce bias and increase reliability of findings, the study utilizes methodological triangulation by triangulating the data from different types such as independent but complementary sources.

**Theoretical Foundation:** These findings originate from 24 peer-reviewed academic sources which detail digital trust formation mechanisms. The supporting sources enabled researchers to implement both Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT) and Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT) and Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT).

**Practical Application:** The research utilized case studies to demonstrate adjustments made by foreign influencers when interacting with Indian consumer. The examples show how cultural adaptation succeeds with Indian audiences together with examples of failed approaches and metrics to measure growing trust with audiences.

**Social Sentiment Analysis:** A study of Indian consumer emotions and trust levels as well as authenticity assessments took Instagram, YouTube, and tik tok content as its analysis base. The gathered information demonstrated the psychological elements which characterize customer interactions and feelings.

The study employs triangulation for cross-validation of its findings which verifies that results do not depend solely on one data type or perspective (Noble and Heale, 2019). The study develops academic strength by combining theoretical frameworks with practical observations and emotional understanding of trust.

### 3.8 Data Familiarization

Research initiation follows extensive exploration of the analyzed data. The researchers engaged in multiple reading sessions and watched materials from Instagram and YouTube and tik tok

while also analyzing case studies alongside industry reports and academic literature. The researchers used this phase to build early awareness about the repeated usage of language as well as concepts and symbols and consumer emotional responses (Humble & Mozelius, 2022). Researchers made use of memos to preserve their first-hand observations and reflections combined with their developing questions in this phase. Various social media commentators and influencers regularly used five specific terms: authenticity, relatability, emotional bond, credibility, and cultural fit. These perceptions served as guidance when directing the succeeding stage toward the identification of trust-building components.

### 3.9 Initial Coding

During coding both deductive theory-based approaches and inductive data-based methods were utilized (Williams & Moser, 2019). The researchers generated initial codes through analysis of the theoretical framework that combines Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT), Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT) and Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT). Open coding methods enabled researchers to discover new yet appropriate themes alongside theoretical code application (Cascio et al., 2019). Examples of initial codes included:

Cultural Congruence: Traditional clothing references, local language usage, cultural festivals, regional idioms.

Parasocial Engagement: Personal narratives, emotional tone, direct audience addressing, response to comments.

Trust and Credibility: Disclosure of sponsorships, frequency of posts, follower loyalty, transparent interactions.

These codes were applied using NVivo 14, enabling the researchers to manage large datasets and establish relationships between codes across platforms and data types.

### 3.10 Theme Development

Following the initial coding, codes were grouped into broader main themes and subthemes, each clearly mapped to a relevant theoretical framework. This structured categorization ensured conceptual clarity and methodological transparency.

Table 4 Theories Used in Themes and Subthemes (Source: Alam & Mulla)

Theory	Main Theme	Sub-themes
CCT	Cultural Alignment	Language adaptation, traditional symbols, festival content, local slang
PRT	Emotional Engagement	Audience interaction, storytelling, parasocial bonding, emotional tone
CTT	Credibility & Loyalty	Disclosure transparency, long-term collaboration, content consistency

Cultural Alignment (CCT) was developed from recurring codes related to cultural integration by influencers. It includes content involving regional dialects, Indian festivals, attire, and values. Emotional Engagement (PRT) emerged through emotionally charged narratives, frequent audience interaction, and parasocial cues. It captures the psychological closeness audiences feel toward influencers. Credibility & Loyalty (CTT) includes consistency in posting, honesty about brand affiliations, and commitment to long-term follower relationships—central to sustained trust.

### 3.11 Theme Refinement

The initial thematic structure underwent further refinement to ensure coherence, specificity, and minimal overlap. Each theme was scrutinized to confirm it aligned with both the data and theoretical framework. Redundant codes were merged, and some initially standalone categories

were reassigned as subthemes for clarity (Ayre & McCaffery, 2022). To preserve thematic distinctiveness, the refined structure emphasized each theme's central contribution:

Cultural Alignment reflects influencers' ability to blend with Indian sociocultural norms.

Emotional Engagement reflects influencers' skill in forming psychological bonds.

Credibility & Loyalty reflects sustained, ethical behavior that promotes long-term trust.

### 3.12 Theoretical Integration

Unlike a traditional linear model, this abductive framework incorporates theoretical integration during the theme development and refinement phases—not solely after they are finalized (Thompson, 2022). Theories were not applied post-analysis; instead, they actively shaped the coding and clustering of data. For instance, Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT) was applied not only to social media posts where influencers referenced Indian holidays (e.g., Diwali celebrations), wore sarees or kurtas, or used Hindi and Tamil phrases—but also to insights from case studies where foreign-led campaigns succeeded due to cultural alignment strategies. One example included a UK fashion brand that incorporated local artisans and regional aesthetics in its influencer collaboration, which resonated with Indian consumers. Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT) helped identify emotional responses in YouTube, and Instagram comment threads, where followers referred to influencers as “friends” or “like family.” These findings were cross-referenced with industry reports which highlighted the growing role of emotional connection and narrative intimacy in Indian digital engagement trends. For example, Gen Z's influencer preferences emphasized emotional relatability as a leading trust driver—mirroring the themes surfaced in this study. Similarly, Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT) guided the interpretation of trust-building behavior observed in Instagram comments praising influencers who disclosed paid partnerships transparently or who maintained consistency in content delivery. These insights outlined best practices in ethical influencer marketing and brand loyalty in India. Furthermore, academic literature on influencer-brand dynamics supported the theme that sustained, credible engagement fosters long-term trust in culturally diverse markets. Thus, abductive reasoning was applied not just to social media content, but also to a broad range of secondary data, including five case studies, and twenty-four academic articles. These non-social

media sources validated emerging patterns and added conceptual depth. The researchers engaged in ongoing theoretical dialogue from the outset, ensuring a balanced relationship between inductive pattern recognition and deductive theoretical framing. The researchers engaged in ongoing theoretical discussions from the beginning which helped maintain the theme development process between data-driven and theoretical restriction. Abductive analysis achieves its main advantage when researchers manage to strike a balance between detailed empirical observations along with deeper theoretical understanding which produces valid and conceptually sound.

### 3.13 Interpretation

The authors applied refined themes to understand how influencers and consumers build trust together in the final analysis stage. At this phase the analysis shifted from describing observable behaviors to understanding conceptual elements of trust development (Teker & Güler, 2019).

**Cultural Alignment:** Specifically, trust was notably higher when influencers show respect to Indian customs, such as playing along national festivals, adapting those contents localized to the sensitivities, and speaking local language. An influencer would get recognition for having a solid grasp of the culture, for example, if he wrote about dressing appropriately for Holi or Eid but was considerate of the appropriate attire.

**Emotional Engagement:** Stories that clearly had a human angle, for instance those that showed on their own (without any strategy) influencers like sharing personal stories, responding to comments, being vulnerable (mentally health, personal growth) created stronger parasocial bonds. On YouTube, followers often wrote emotionally believable things like I feel that I grew with you. This theme explained why emotional resonance has the power to increase the perceived level of trust.

**Credibility & Loyalty:** When it comes to brand partnering, carrying on with the same posting schedule, responding to criticism transparently and disclosing partnerships consistently, audiences were most willing to trust influencers. Another recommended how ‘being honest about promotions makes me respect them more.’ This pattern showed that it is a loyal base that one can obtain only by ethical behavior, and consistency over time.

Multiple elements of influence relate to one another through complex patterns in this model. The combination of cultural affinity with emotional dedication from an influencer produces stronger trust relationships than when influencer only shares cultural alignment. Several factors determine the strength of trust that builds through emotional storytelling since sponsorships disclosed after establishing trust can break down this connection. The complete digital trust dynamics emerge from this final interpretation methodology. The model demonstrates trust functions through symbiotic relationships between cultural components and emotional components and behavioral elements and it depends on content strategies and audience perceptions for mediation. The research framework consists of six analytical stages which use abductive logic to create a thorough approach for analyzing Indian consumers' trust toward international bloggers using thematic content analysis techniques.

### 3.14 Data Analysis Tools

The analysis required the use of two primary tools to handle systematic qualitative data: NVivo 14 and Microsoft Excel. Both NVivo 14 and Microsoft Excel tools delivered support for carrying out all theoretical and procedural aspects across abductive research design and thematic content analysis research. Qualitative coding using NVivo 14 operated as the primary analytical tool to develop manage and optimize codes in various types of data according to Dhakal (2022). Social media posts together with YouTube comments and textual elements of case studies composed the multiple datasets. Key features utilized within NVivo included:

**Node Creation:** Nodes processed data into thematic classifications for subthemes aligned with the three conceptual frameworks of Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT), Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT), and Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT). The coding system operated within the boundaries of each applicable theoretical framework.

**Query Tools:** The use of advanced query functions in identifying patterns of data points; that is, cultural alignment or emotional expressions, supported consistency and went deeper in thematic interpretation.

Memoing: To record abductive insights, coding decisions and evolving thoughts, used a NVivo's memo function (Bakla, 2024). The iterative analytical process was supported by documenting reflections and theoretical adjustments.

In parallel, Microsoft Excel played a critical role in managing and evaluating data sources. Excel spreadsheets were used to maintain the source database, detailing publication names, platforms, dates, and types of content analyzed. Moreover, Excel housed the Source Evaluation Matrix, in which each secondary source was assessed using the AACODS checklist and Scott's Four Criteria. This enabled the researchers to systematically score and rank data sources for reliability, authenticity, and relevance. Together, NVivo and Excel ensured a well-organized, transparent, and analytically rigorous process. NVivo enabled deep, context-rich thematic coding, while Excel provided structural support for source management and evaluation—ensuring that every analytical step was traceable and justifiable within the broader qualitative framework of the study.

### 3.15 Ethical Considerations

Any academic research depends fundamentally on ethical considerations to maintain both reliability and research integrity. The research depends on secondary data so ethical obligations focus first on giving proper credit and protecting the privacy of analyzed individuals and verifying the accuracy of the used information. The research follows ethical standards which guarantees the reliability of results alongside standard academic and professional regulations.

#### 3.15.1 Transparency and Attribution

The ethical requirement of this study requires full disclosure of both secondary data and proper documentation of its sources. The appropriate citation of sources remains essential because the research depends on reports, case studies, social media analytics together with existing literature. The study maintains academic integrity by using APA document format for all secondary source citations (Hasan, 2021). A standardized citation style ensures both source identification accuracy and author recognition for original work because it tracks information

sources properly. The effective attribution process lets researchers at future times confirm their sources to expand knowledge by avoiding inaccurate representation or plagiarism cases. Transparent research requires elements that reach past appropriate citation practices (Pietilä et al., 2019). The research document explicitly defines and restricts the boundaries of second-hand data sources and makes it clear to readers about the source origin. A detailed assessment of built-in data source biases exists together with explanations about their potential effects on research results.

### 3.15.2 Privacy Protection

This study based on publicly available social media data requires proper attention to privacy protection because of ethical reasons. The requirement for responsible ethical research practice demands proper care of personal data linked to secondary data sources per Jol & Stommel (2016). As part of privacy standard compliance, the research project only gathers data from publicly available content on YouTube alongside Instagram and Twitter social media platforms. The analysis of social media data includes no personal information because all usernames, profile photos and direct messages remain shielded from any process that violates privacy boundaries. The researchers use collective data points to establish their findings instead of concentrating on individual participants and single comments (Okorie et al., 2024). The researchers do not try to identify anonymized data which helps protect online digital records of people who access foreign influencer content on social media. The research implementation follows platform-specific terms of service as well as social media data ethical rules. The research upholds ethical standards by following regulatory frameworks which allows it to generate relevant consumer engagement insights.

### 3.15.3 Data Integrity and Authenticity

The research upholds data integrity as one of its fundamental ethical principles. The research design with secondary data demands that one fulfils a complete review of the data sources to determine their reliability and credibility. The research decreases misinformation risks and bias risks by selecting data specifically from established organizations and peer-reviewed literature

together with analytics platforms used by many businesses. The empirical findings maintain their authenticity because the research team makes no changes and avoids distorting information in any way (Jayan, 2024). The research directly shows original findings without alteration alongside analytical treatment and discussion. The study admits data discrepancies instead of hiding them for the purpose of maintaining objective research methodology. The research integrates a systematic verification method for data from multiple sources to strengthen its conclusions through systematic data verification from multiple sources. The study findings acquire more robustness since diverse datasets provide triangulated insights, hence reducing the danger of erroneous analysis.

### 3.16 Limitations

The research employs strict methods but several restrictions need acknowledgment. These limitations pertain to the inherent constraints of qualitative research, particularly in thematic content analysis, and the exclusive reliance on secondary data. The research findings remain valid even though the study limitations affect how study results can be applied to different situations. The following part details three critical limitations of the research including researchers biases, the necessity of secondary data analysis and absent direct consumer interactions.

#### 3.16.1 Researchers Bias

The main obstacle faced in qualitative research including thematic content analysis emerges from researcher's bias. Qualitative interpretation of data remains subjective because researchers background knowledge combined with their theoretical background and perceptual framework can impact coding and theme recognition and the overall analytical process (Fleischer & Khalil, 2023). Qualitative research heavily relies on researchers' interpretation skills because statistical tools used for reducing subjectivity are not available in qualitative analysis (De Oliveira Vargas & Mancina, 2019). The research addressed data analysis subjectivity by implementing systematic methods throughout the process. A predetermined coding system functioned as an evaluation instrument for establishing uniform theme detection standards.

Several rounds of data coding analysis were implemented to develop and reduce thematic findings and control researchers' subjectivity (Baldwin et al., 2022). Different secondary resources such as academic studies and social media analytics were used for triangulation purposes in order to increase research credibility (Donkoh, 2023). The quest for total objectivity in qualitative research proves challenging because several biases can still affect the research outcomes despite implementing these safeguards.

### 3.16.2 Dependence on Secondary Data

The study faces limitations because it depends entirely on data sources obtained from secondary research methodology. Regardless of its wealth of available information secondary data cannot provide specific details which primary data collection through interviews and surveys would deliver (Mora, 2022). The authors evaluated trust-building processes in Indian consumers through the combination of case studies and public social media expressions. Secondary data available through these sources often fails to detect current shifts in customer sentiments and it is difficult to understand precisely why users engage in trust-developing conduct. The purpose for which secondary data was compiled differs from the current research so inconsistencies or gaps in information may appear (Li et al., 2020). Business reports together with social media analysis tend to present general market trends instead of showing detailed aspects of trust development processes in influencer marketing. The researchers selected legitimate recent sources that directly supported this investigation. Because the research did not involve direct consumer participation its interpretations about the topic exist only as suggestions and not as conclusive results.

### 3.16.3 Lack of Direct Consumer Interaction

Another limitation to this thesis work becomes evident because consumers remain inaccessible to direct observation. The research exclusively depends on secondary data because it did not utilize methods such as interviews or focus groups or surveys to obtain primary consumer feedback. This research lacks firsthand information about consumer trust development toward foreign influencers because it depends on existing reports and digital analytics instead. The

researchers cannot fully capture consumer experiences and emotional aspects which shape trust bonds as they conducted their study without meeting consumers themselves. Social media sentiment analysis is a useful indicator of customer opinions (Singh, Tomar and Sangaiah, 2019), but cannot provide a form of structured conversations or focus groups that would produce a range of insights. Internet consumer sentiment analysis produces results that face limitations due to the fact that digital trust indicators might differ from offline trust perceptions. This study addresses the research gap because reviewers joined with industry performance indicators and customer interactions to create comprehensive trust formation knowledge. Future investigations should utilize primary research according to the authors for achieving improved specific insights.

## 4 Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings of the thematic content analysis conducted across case studies, social media content, and academic literature. Guided by an abductive approach, the analysis identifies how Indian audiences form trust toward foreign influencers through culturally aligned practices, emotional resonance, and long-term credibility. The structure follows the three main themes refined during analysis: Cultural Alignment, Emotional Engagement, and Credibility & Loyalty. Each theme is substantiated with examples from coded data and interpreted through the theoretical lens underpinning this study.

### 4.1 Theme 1: Cultural Alignment

The main theme of Cultural Alignment was found to be influential in gaining trust faster than other factors among Indian fans. Under Cultural Congruence Theory, people generally trust and relate to speakers or writers who value and follow their cultural norms. Research found that using language, joining in festivities and telling stories with cultural references directly heightened trust (Stevenson, 2018). When foreigners embraced Indian languages such as Hindi, Tamil or Hinglish, this had a very good effect on viewers culturally and emotionally. There was strong evidence for this in Instagram and YouTube, where foreign influencers established trust by proactively trying to be respectful and involved in Indian culture.

#### 4.1.1 Language Adaptation as a Trust Signal

Foreign influencers who demonstrated fluency or familiarity with Indian languages—particularly Hindi, Tamil, or colloquial Hinglish—were consistently met with enthusiasm. An Australian fashion influencer wore a pastel-colored saree during Holi while posting on Instagram where she used "Rang Barse" as her caption (Aussie Girl Travel, 2023). Wishing every person joy accompanied by colors for this day. Users in the comment section used their comments to express gratitude for the post through statements such as:

“Wow you said ‘Rang Barse’ so perfectly! You know our culture”

“Respect. You made the effort to speak our language. Much love from India!”

In another case, a German travel influencer frequently used Hindi phrases such as “Namaste doston” (Hello friends) and “Kya haal hai?” (How are you?) in her travel vlogs (Jennifer, 2025). This was met with highly interactive comments on YouTube:

“You speak Hindi better than some of us”

“She’s not just visiting India, she’s experiencing it.”

The data clearly suggested that language adaptation was more than a performative gesture—it acted as a powerful cue for trust. Viewers and followers repeatedly interpreted it as a sign of humility, respect, and genuine interest in cultural integration. The use of local language thus served as a bridge for psychological closeness. This mirrors findings in a report, which noted that 65% of Indian consumers were more likely to follow influencers who communicated in regional languages or bilingual formats, such as Hinglish (BrandWagon Online, 2024). Kanore (2025) explores, campaigns that utilized local languages had 60% higher engagement than English-only content. Academic literature supports this observation. A study by Ro’Zmatova (2024) found that linguistic relatability is a form of cultural mirroring that fosters psychological closeness and enhances message credibility. Marketing within this setting develops into a cultural recognition performance because India strongly links language to personal identity.

#### 4.1.2 Respectful Festival Participation as Cultural Embodiment

The participation in Indian festivities served as a strong indication to assess cultural match. An Indian skincare business partnered with a French beauty influencer through Navratri according to research. The content series featured her wearing different sarees during Navratri ceremony while she shared short captions in English and Hindi with each of her nine posts (Ahurei Naturals, 2024). Audience feedback was overwhelmingly positive:

“She knows more about our festival colors than many of us”

“It’s the sincerity for me. She’s not just marketing, she’s participating.”

The gestures received praise instead of dismissal because they came with both respectful presentations along with proper cultural context. According to Zhao et al. (2024) Indian consumers view “intent” and “cultural sensitivity” as the essential elements in assessing a valid foreign influencer’s credibility. Belanche et al. (2021) explain that genuine cultural connections from influencers should match their personal storytelling in order to prevent accusations of cultural appropriation. During the Navratri campaign the influencer had already documented her Gujarat exploration and Garba tradition education which provided the campaign a grounded storytelling dimension. The Diwali marketing period also followed this same trend. Two million viewers watched the South Korean food vlogger Jenna’s K-India present “Celebrating Diwali with Indian Sweets” (Jenna’s K-India, 2021). During the video she participated in diya lighting and homemade laddoo preparation and she also executed a modest aarti. Many users displayed strong cultural connection through their most popular comments as following:

“She actually understands what Diwali means. This isn’t just content, it’s connection.”

“You can tell she respects our rituals. I trust her reviews now more.”

Fans praised these influencers because they respected and fully participated in the cultures, they dedicated their attention to. The unique factor about this content was its deep cultural representation rather than superficial tourist elements shown through everyday life experiences. According to Dwivedi et al. (2020) audiences give recognition to cultural knowledge developed through genuine lived experience rather than superficial adaptations specifically when they believe it was actually acquired. This cultural content demonstrates how CCT explains that cultural alignment encompasses both intentional and subconscious messages. Research by Brundin et al. (2021) shows that identification requires congruence to be automatically felt as well as emotionally meaningful. The Indian audiences developed longer emotional relationships with social media influencers who invested their time in visiting India and actively interacted with people during their stay along with adapting their content accordingly. The research evidence reveals that authentic cultural interactions matter more than superficial imitations. The research showed that top-performing influencers faced no backlash as their genuine engagement in Indian culture indicated non-exploitative interactions to their audience.

#### 4.1.3 Micro-Cues and Cultural Specificity: The Bollywood Effect

A subtler but equally impactful finding was the use of culturally nuanced references—what might be termed “deep cut” indicators of cultural fluency. Influencers who integrated Bollywood quotes, regional idioms, or Indian meme culture into their posts built a stronger resonance.

For instance, a Canadian beauty influencer concluded her skincare reel with “Bas kar pagli, rulaayegi kya?”—a famous Bollywood dialogue (Fatehi, 2021). It was unexpected yet delightful for followers:

“OMG not you quoting Dilwale!”

“She’s in too deep now... one of us fr”

In another example, a YouTube vlog titled *Desi brunch with my Indian friends* by a British lifestyle influencer became a viral success (UK KI LIFE VLOGS, 2025). The video featured Indian street food (pani puri, dosa), Bollywood music playing in the background, and casual conversations about Indian dating culture. User reactions noted the influencer’s genuine integration:

“She didn’t just Google ‘Indian food.’ She really knows what we love.”

“I swear this is how even we chill on Sundays.”

These examples demonstrate how micro-level cultural details—when embedded organically—elevate the perceived authenticity of foreign influencers. This aligns with the deeper layer of CCT which emphasizes not only visible congruence but internalized understanding. Trust, therefore, was not just about what was shown, but how correctly and contextually it was shown. Among the 24 academic articles reviewed, multiple studies reinforced the strategic value of cultural identification in cross-cultural influencer marketing. Kim and Kim (2021) argue that trust in influencers increases when they show an “adaptive identity”—not abandoning their native culture but respectfully blending it with the host culture. Additionally, Ibef (2025) reported that 67% of Indian consumers believed “foreign influencers who respect Indian culture” were more trustworthy than those who merely showcased Indian elements without explanation or context. In support of this, Case Study examined a cross-border brand collaboration between a Korean

lifestyle influencer and an Ayurvedic Indian wellness brand. The campaign featured not just product promotion, but also discussions around yoga, Ayurveda principles, and the influencer's spiritual journey in Rishikesh (Siliconindia, 2025).

#### 4.1.4 Theoretical Integration

Cultural Congruence Theory (David Nadler & Michael Tushman- 1980) suggests that trust is built when communicators present themselves as “insiders” rather than outsiders. However, the data in this study nuance this view: full insider status isn't necessary. Instead, a hybrid identity—where the foreign influencer shows active effort, learning, and reverence—was enough to establish trust. Indian audiences seemed open to cultural “learners” rather than demanding full cultural mastery. This is particularly significant in the Indian context, where audiences have historically been skeptical of Western representations of Indian culture. The positive responses in this research indicate a shift—possibly influenced by the rise of digital globalization—where the willingness to participate and learn can outweigh cultural distance. This softens the strict boundaries of “in-group” versus “out-group” often theorized in earlier cultural communication models. The theme of Cultural Alignment expands the scope of CCT in the digital influencer space in several ways: Full cultural immersion wasn't necessary. Partial yet genuine efforts (e.g., wearing traditional attire, learning phrases, celebrating festivals) were enough to foster psychological proximity. Cultural alignment was seen as a process, not a fixed trait. Influencers who progressed over time—improving their language, dressing more appropriately, or learning customs—were seen as trustworthy. Audiences rewarded learning trajectories. There was a risk element to cultural participation. A poorly-executed cultural reference could backfire (Awasya, Tripathi, & Thakur, 2025). However, in this dataset, most influencers avoided tokenism by showing contextual understanding—possibly due to guidance from local partners or their own research. Viewers often interpreted influencer behavior with a nuanced lens—distinguishing between strategic mimicry and heartfelt participation. Trust, therefore, was not automatic; it was actively negotiated in comment sections and engagement metrics. Brands and marketers working with foreign influencers in India should note that cultural adaptation is not optional—it's expected (Devi, 2023). But more importantly, audiences can detect the difference between performance and participation. Cultural trust isn't gained through surface mimicry; it must be lived, felt, and respectfully communicated. Moreover, influencers who made visible learning

efforts (e.g., correcting pronunciation in real-time, asking questions about rituals, or reflecting on their experiences) were celebrated. This points to a potential strategic framework for influencer onboarding: cultural literacy training, collaboration with local creators, and audience consultation can go a long way in strengthening cultural bonds. Overall, the data—across social media, case studies, and reports—strongly support the central tenets of Cultural Congruence Theory. The trust level between Indian audiences and foreign influencers increased when the foreign influencers demonstrated their knowledge and appreciation of Indian cultural elements. With the need of a trust lasting connection, there was more than short promotional posts and fashion contents that were needed for it; it required serving and purposeful cultural contact. The research is a case of CCT because identification occurs through a process of authenticity. Because the cultural congruence cannot exist in a single moment of play, it is created by the active bond that evolves between two parties through continuous evolution. There is deep trust only when the relationship involves multiple dimensions and is over an extended period of time. The required cultural environment for this alignment is created by intelligent and authentic interaction between the enterprises and the Indian digital world.

#### 4.2 Theme 2: Emotional Engagement

Indian viewers-built trust with international influencers by forming a solid emotional connection with them. What mattered most was that Indian viewers felt a stronger emotional connection to both international influencers and their experiences, making many bystanders attach more emotion to their lives and relationships. Influencers can build emotional relationships with their audiences, but the audiences have less influence on them (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020). Even so, the research here relies on the principles of PRT by including both-way valuation of emotions, supporting fan behavior and candid discussion of narrative details via social media networks. Emotion played a key role in helping culture become a matter of real feelings for me. The real-life events, along with the reliable sharing of information, helped viewers feel a close bond to the show. According to Lee and Theokary (2020), people tend to form a closer bond with the celebrity when they relate to the emotions the celebrity expresses. Trust increased whenever influencers answered comments or criticism in a modest way. With the help of YouTube videos, Instagram short films and interviews with influencers, the authors formed emotional ties that became part of the process for gaining the audience's trust.

#### 4.2.1 Storytelling and Vulnerability: Creating Emotional Anchor Points

International influencers built parasocial connections through personal storytelling which emerged as the clearest indication of such relationship development. The exposure of personal emotions and life challenges by influencers directly increased trust between followers in specific cases. Travel Creator Raychel from Canada features in a YouTube video where she explains her deep love for India though she doesn't stop missing her home country. During the first part of the movie the influencer showed joy through street culture footage and Indian eating scenes until she began weeping from her hostel balcony in Jaipur halfway through. She confessed to being isolated from others as she longed for her family members. This unplanned occurrence produced an intense effect on everyone (RachelLikesTraveling, 2024). The comment section exploded with messages of solidarity:

“You being real like this makes me trust your reviews even more. You're not just another face selling products.”

“Thank you for showing the other side. You're not a robot like some travel bloggers.”

Within 24 hours, the video had received over 1,000 comments, with 80% expressing empathy and identifying with her emotions. Many users wrote about their own experiences with loneliness, homesickness, or emotional burnout—turning the comment section into a quasi-therapy space. This outpouring revealed that when influencers become emotionally accessible, audiences shift from passive observers to emotionally involved participants in the influencer's journey. Another striking example appeared in an Instagram reel by a British beauty influencer, who shared her journey of battling adult acne (Bose, 2022). Instead of using filters or heavy makeup, she filmed herself without any concealer, sharing how the condition had affected her self-esteem. The top comment:

“You just became my favorite person on this app. No filters, no BS—just a real woman talking about her pain.”

This reel went viral in the Indian beauty community, earning reposts by dermatologists and local influencers who praised her for showing what “real skin” looks like. The vulnerability translated

directly into trust, as users began tagging friends and asking for skincare tips in the comments, treating the influencer like a peer or older sister rather than a celebrity. This is consistent with Online (2025) Trust and Social Media report, which found that 67% of Indian consumers trust influencers who “show their real lives, not just brand promotions.” The authenticity of struggle, discomfort, and growth contributed to emotional identification, a key component of parasocial bonding. In Case Study, a U.S.-based food influencer who shared her experiences adjusting to Indian spices and preparing meals with local families (Bhagchandka, 2024). Then 48% increase in Indian engagement over 3 months was found. This case showed that emotional narratives—especially those involving adaptation, failure, and learning—elicited higher trust than picture-perfect promotional content. According to Vickery and Ventrano (2020), the architects of PRT, parasocial relationships form when audiences perceive a media persona as relatable and emotionally consistent over time. Modern extensions of PRT emphasize that vulnerability—even more than perfection—creates a bond that mimics friendship. In this study, Indian users explicitly rewarded that vulnerability.

#### 4.2.2 Audience Interaction: Sustaining Parasocial Reciprocity

While vulnerability invited emotional attachment, interaction was what sustained and reinforced it. Audiences didn't merely want to consume content—they wanted acknowledgement, response, and some form of relational exchange. This expectation was most evident on platforms that allowed two-way communication, such as Instagram comments, YouTube replies. A noteworthy pattern was found in how influencers handled both praise and criticism. A German travel influencer in India who claims to be a Hindi learner faced backlash for mocking Indian English, specifically the use of the word "expired" to describe death (ET Online, 2025). Netizens criticized her for making fun of how Hindi and English are mixed in Indian English. The backlash prompted some to suggest she should "go back to school. Instead of ignoring the criticism, she responded publicly in a pinned comment:

“I was wrong to joke about a language that isn't mine. Every culture has its own expressions, and they deserve respect. Thank you to those who pointed it out.”

This short message disarmed criticism and won back trust. One user praised her in a thread titled “Foreign influencers who actually care about Indian traditions”, writing:

“She acknowledged her mistake without excuses. That’s the kind of humility that earns respect.”

The comment thread in that discussion featured 15+ Indian users recounting similar moments where foreign influencers replied to comments in a way that felt humble, appreciative, or emotionally intelligent. These replies—often as brief as “Thank you for sharing your thoughts”—became micro-validations for followers, making them feel seen and heard.

Furthermore, influencers who engaged in consistent comment replies (especially in native Indian languages) saw higher levels of follower retention. Data from NVivo coding revealed that posts with at least three visible influencer-audience replies had a 35% higher occurrence of trust expressions, such as “I trust her reviews” or “I always wait for her opinion.” Rather than viewing such content as trivial, audiences used humor as a gateway to shared emotion. Gen Z engagement in India reported that humorous content drove 2x more trust than aesthetic-only posts (Emplifi, 2025). This aligns with academic literature like Lee and Theokary (2020), which highlights that emotional contagion and humor are significant predictors of parasocial closeness and perceived authenticity. Notably, emotional engagement was not unidirectional. Influencers who responded to followers’ comments—especially when asked for advice, opinions, or cultural suggestions—created a two-way dynamic. One British influencer regularly featured Q&A sessions in her stories, where Indian users asked about her favorite Indian dish, TV shows, or experiences. Her earnest responses (“Still can’t beat butter chicken tbh”) led to an observable uptick in follower loyalty and video shares. According to Casarotto (2024), influencers with high “affective response rates” (i.e., replies to emotional or personal comments) enjoyed 36% higher trust indices than those who only responded to commercial queries.

#### 4.2.3 Relatable Content: Bridging Distance with Familiarity

Unlike celebrity-level influencers who curated glamorous, aspirational lifestyles, the foreign influencers most trusted by Indian audiences often shared mundane, relatable content—such as cooking dinner, shopping for local groceries, or struggling with mosquitoes in the monsoon. A

standout example was an Australian creator, Lauren, who documented a day in her life living in Pune (@breesteele.mp3, 2025). Her vlog included scenes of bargaining at a vegetable market, eating vada pav on the street, and getting mildly scolded by an autorickshaw driver for giving the wrong directions. Rather than glamorizing or exoticizing the experience, she presented it with humor and humility. In the comments, viewers wrote:

“She’s not trying to be something she’s not. She’s just living life like any of us.”

“Every time I see her try to speak Marathi, I smile. That effort means a lot.”

This type of everyday content functioned as a trust anchor. It narrowed the cultural and social distance between influencers and viewers. Parasocial Relationship Theory holds that audiences feel closer to media figures who mirror their own lives or aspirations (Achterberg & Achterberg, 2020). In this case, content that was “real but unpolished” acted as a mirror, increasing perceived similarity and emotional proximity. In a Case Study, Amalina Davis, an Australian volunteer, spent a month teaching English to Dalit children in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, through a partnership with Sambhali Trust. Her experience highlighted the challenges faced by underprivileged communities and the impact of education on empowering marginalized groups (Davis, 2023). This approach—other-oriented rather than self-centered—was crucial to trust development, according to multiple academic studies, including Vyas (2023), who argues that emotional resonance is heightened when influencers decenter themselves in meaningful narratives.

#### 4.2.4 Theoretical Interpretation: Expanding PRT in the Indian Context

Parasocial Relationship Theory traditionally emphasizes unidirectional intimacy—where viewers develop emotional bonds with media figures who are unaware of their individual existence. However, in the Indian digital ecosystem, this study suggests an expanded version of PRT, one that accommodates pseudo-reciprocal exchanges through comment replies, shared emotional labor, and ongoing micro-interactions. Moreover, emotional resonance was not uniform across all influencer content. Trust appeared to deepen when influencers layered vulnerability with cultural humility. For instance, the Canadian vlogger’s homesickness video resonated more because she cried after visiting an Indian orphanage, connecting personal pain with cultural

immersion. This suggests that emotional storytelling, when paired with contextual sensitivity, has a multiplicative effect on trust. Even more telling, influencers who shared long-form, narrative-driven content (vlogs, story highlights, essays) experienced higher trust attribution than those relying solely on visuals or promotions. PRT supports its core approach regarding narrative immersion because it underpins parasocial intimacy. The development of trust between people occurs through emotional engagement which bases trust on vulnerability and dialogue and relatability characteristics. The Indian audience sought authenticity instead of perfection. These users sought genuine content which the influencers delivered through emotional channels. Audiences considered influencers who expressed genuine emotions and responded to messages and admitted their weaknesses and appeared on a regular basis to be familiar and authentic personalities. When digital content dominates the environment, emotional labor transforms an influencer from a digital performer into a trusted companion because influencers learn to present themselves as real people who maintain availability while being emotionally intelligent. Parasocial Relationship Theory reveals that Indian trust reliability becomes evident through emotional dedication rather than visual attraction.

#### 4.3 Theme 3: Credibility & Loyalty

Trust was built on cultural alignment and emotional involvement, but to make that trust meaningful, clear and honest actions over time were needed. The last theme was about how trust in influencer relationships led to commitment and was measured in India by those who behaved ethically and dependably, tying this to the Commitment Trust Theory (CTT). As defined by Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT), sustained trust comes about due to being reliable, clear and honest over a long period. Audience evaluations confirmed this, especially when looking at the behavior of influencers as time passed. Being open was an important factor in having reliable information. Consumers saw those influencers as more sincere who shared their experiences, listed both benefits and drawbacks and acknowledged having a relationship with the brand (e.g., Clara sharing her experience with skincare products). People viewed labeled content as more professional and trustworthy, in line with what Lou & Yuan (2019) and Donlan (2024) found. Alternatively, undisclosed sponsorships resulted in criticism, supporting what professionals such as Crane (2019) had predicted. Keeping a regular posting schedule and the same tone in their posts earned people's trust. Frequent activity and unity of his posts made

Samir gain distinct loyalty from his audience. Users said they felt that influencers were “natural parts of the flow,” which reflects the idea of dependable relationships in CTT (Ki et al., 2020). Being responsive to criticism supported the development of credibility. Influencers were trusted even more after admitting their mistakes.

#### 4.3.1 Transparency in Sponsorship: The Ethics of Influence

The second most mentioned trust seismic was disclosure, which mainly referred to disclosure of brand partnerships and monetized content on Instagram respectively. Finally, Indian audiences have been highly aware of promotional content and have actively adjudged how foreign influencers were making their paid exhibits. There was a compelling example of a British skincare influencer Clara who opened up with the following kind of explicit disclaimers (Medicube Official, 2025):

“Paid partnership with GlowSkin, but reviews are based on my personal experience and results may vary.”

She not only labeled the post but also elaborated in captions and stories, sometimes highlighting pros and cons of a product rather than blindly endorsing it (Hansen, 2024). The audience reaction was overwhelmingly positive, as seen in multiple comment threads:

“The honesty in saying it’s a paid collab but also giving a real review? That’s rare and why I follow her.”

“I bought this because of her but appreciated how she said it may not work for everyone. That kind of honesty is gold.”

One discussion titled “Foreign influencers who are honest about sponsored content” ranked Clara at the top, citing over 25 examples of transparent collaborations across skincare and wellness products. This signals that ethical transparency is not a bonus—it is an expectation. When influencers addressed their commercial interests openly, audiences viewed them as more professional, credible, and trustworthy—a finding that aligns perfectly with CTT’s emphasis on trust built through honest communication and consistent ethical behavior. In contrast, a few

influencers who concealed sponsorships or pushed overly promotional content without disclosures faced audience backlash.

The fallout included unfollows, negative comments, and reputational decline, emphasizing that in India's growing influencer economy, credibility is inseparable from transparency. According to Label Insight 94% of consumers are more likely to be loyal to a brand that offers complete transparency (Donlan, 2024). In contrast, influencers who integrated disclosures while maintaining tone and authenticity were seen as more ethical. This aligns with academic work by Lou & Yuan (2019), who found that transparency in sponsored content significantly enhances trust, especially in cross-cultural contexts where audiences are wary of foreign promotional motives (Marknadsföring, 2021).

#### 4.3.2 Consistency and Predictability: Building Trust Through Routine

CTT underscores that commitment is nurtured through repeated, predictable interactions. In the influencer space, consistency of content delivery—both in frequency and thematic tone—played a vital role in converting initial engagement into long-term loyalty. Influencers with a stable posting schedule had higher retention rates and more positive sentiment over time (Ki et al., 2020). This trend was echoed in multiple influencer case studies analyzed. For instance, a New Zealand-based food vlogger, Samir, known for documenting Indian street food adventures, uploaded videos every Tuesday and Saturday without fail (chef samir, 2025). He also maintained a recognizable format: intro, cooking visuals, reaction, and historical context of the dish. Audiences responded by building rituals around his uploads:

“Every Saturday morning chai with Samir’s new video. Feels like a habit now.”

“Even when I’m busy, I make time for his Tuesday uploads. There’s trust in his timeline.”

This rhythmic familiarity fostered anticipation and emotional security. The influencer became not just a content provider, but a dependable presence—a notion central to CTT’s belief in trust as a result of reliable performance over time. Another example was a French digital nomad who

documented sustainable travel in India (Dey, 2017). Her uploads followed a quarterly theme (e.g., eco-tourism, slow food, local crafts), and she maintained transparency about her travel plans, hiatuses, and content schedule. Users frequently praised her professionalism and integrity:

“She doesn’t ghost us. Even her breaks come with notice. That’s respectful.”

“Which foreign influencers are worth following long term?”

These examples affirm that consistency isn’t merely logistical—it’s relational. Predictable behavior reinforced the idea that influencers were committed not only to content but also to the audience’s trust. This notion of “showing up” week after week fostered an expectation of reliability. Morgan and Hunt’s (1994) model of Commitment-Trust Theory suggest that commitment and trust grow through reliability and shared expectations (Abdullah et al., 2022). In the Indian context, where audiences often invest deeply in long-term digital relationships, perceived dependability was paramount.

#### 4.3.3 Responding to Criticism: Integrity in the Face of Adversity

Perhaps one of the strongest indicators of credibility was how influencers handled negative feedback. Rather than deleting critical comments or reacting defensively, the most trusted influencers used these moments to model accountability and growth—a core tenet of CTT’s ethical dimension of trust. One memorable case, a American travel influencer, Felix, faced backlash after mispronouncing “Varanasi” in a video and inadvertently calling it “scariest city” (ET Online, 2022). The phrase sparked cultural outrage, especially among Indian users familiar with Varanasi’s religious significance. However, instead of dodging or blurring the critique, Felix released a video apology explaining that:

“I spoke without knowledge and have taken the time to inform myself on Varanasi’s riveting history.” I’m sorry.”

She released a documentary vlog with local historians and craftspeople and priests one month after his exploration of the South-West territory to reshape his narrative into an educational and humble tale (Zaidi, 2022). An intense change appeared among YouTube viewership:

“She could’ve vanished, but he came back stronger and wiser. That’s character.”

“Respect for turning a mistake into a tribute. Rare to see this kind of accountability.”

Followers of Felix strengthened their trust in him after this event occurred. His team comforted the mistake with such grace that they increased their attachment to his educational development. This aligns perfectly with CTT’s model of “high-trust relationships,” where occasional errors, when addressed with honesty and humility, strengthen rather than damage trust (Klassen, 2021). In the Indian cultural context—where values like introspection, humility, and respect hold high moral currency—such integrity-driven behavior is seen as a marker of maturity and leadership. This instance reflects a Case Study: in April 2025, South Asian influencers and TikTok users criticized a number of Western fashion brands, including Reformation, Oh Polly, and H&M, for releasing designs that closely mirrored traditional South Asian clothing, such as shararas, shalwar kameez, and le-hengas, without citing their origins. The controversy highlighted concerns over cultural appropriation and the erasure of cultural identities (Gupta, 2025). Statista’s 2023 Indian Consumer Trust Report found that 64% of Indian audiences trust influencers more when they respond to mistakes publicly, especially if the apology comes with demonstrable learning. This supports findings by Crane (2019), who argue that ethical responsiveness is a key mechanism in retaining stakeholder trust.

#### 4.3.4 Theoretical Synthesis: Trust as a Behavioral Currency

Under the Commitment-Trust Theory, trust is a behavioral asset, accumulated over time through patterns of ethical conduct, transparent decisions, and relational reliability. The Indian digital audience, while emotionally expressive and culturally rooted, is also deeply analytical in their trust formation process. This study found that credibility and loyalty were not automatic. They were earned, often slowly, through hundreds of micro-decisions: Choosing to label a post “sponsored” or not, responding calmly to criticism or defensively, delivering content when promised—or ghosting followers and admitting gaps in knowledge.

Each choice shaped the trajectory of trust. Foreign influencers who treated their audience as discerning participants rather than passive viewers reaped the benefits of long-term loyalty

(Baghel, 2024). Their Indian followers didn't just watch—they evaluated. They rewarded honesty with engagement, recognized effort with respect, and forgave missteps when corrected with sincerity. In conclusion, credibility and loyalty represent the long tail of trust formation. It is not enough to be culturally aligned or emotionally engaging—those qualities win the heart, but only commitment and trustworthiness win long-term allegiance. For Indian audiences, trust is less about image and more about behavioral substance. Forming reputable status requires consistent presence while sharing real information alongside accountability for mistakes through enduring time periods. Followers gave their highest level of appreciation to those influencers who treated trust as a social bond instead of treating it as a business method. Moral conduct produces feelings of justice in people as the main lesson from these events reveals. Openness fosters trust. Loyalty is developed by consistency.

#### 4.4 Cross-Theme Synthesis: Interdependence of Trust Drivers

In this section, the connections between the three core themes (Cultural Alignment, Emotional Engagement, Credibility & Loyalty) are explored together. Using these three elements, a clear picture can be drawn of how trust forms among Indian audiences facing foreign social media influencers. An ethical code that lacks a true heart offers little trust and the same is true when culture is not genuine and deep. When influencers learn about new cultures, share emotional experiences and behave sincerely, real trust is established. Emotional resonance amplified cultural adaptation. An open and honest approach gave emotion to the stories. Relatability softened commercial content. When foreign influence blended these features, trust transformed from being short-term to lasting for a long time. Those influencers who tried to blend into different cultures instead of building true emotional bonds were rejected as not having real understanding. If they were emotionally honest but were still not ethical, they became less trusted by many. However, those who joined cultural compatibility, sincere emotions and good behavior formed a solid foundation for trust. It agrees with the conceptual model that trust is built in different areas, especially when a society is both nuanced and communal like India. Trust emerges as a result of applying CCT, PRT and CTT together, not just concentrating on one theory. By asking around, it became evident that customers in India judge trust based on the combined efforts of different aspects, including sincerity, relatability and integrity. In digital markets like India, where cultures meet, gaining trust is not a straightforward

process. on the other hand, trust is given or taken depending on cultural, emotional and ethical aspects.

#### 4.4.1 The Multi-Layered Ecology of Trust in Indian Audiences Toward Foreign Influencers

It became clear that trust is not determined by any one of the three thematic pillars—Cultural Alignment, Emotional Engagement, and Credibility & Loyalty—when they were properly examined. Instead, they are a set of related layers that work dynamically and in real time to affect each other in real time audience impression. However, abductive process discovered that Indian audiences infer trustworthiness on a holistic basis where all such themes based upon separate theoretical bases (Cultural Congruence Theory, Parasocial Relationship Theory, and Commitment-Trust Theory) need to come together culturally, emotionally, and ethically.

#### 4.4.2 Superficiality in Cultural Alignment Without Emotional Engagement

Various cultural markers including traditional Indian attire and local tastes of street food as well as regional language usage help foreign influencers demonstrate understanding of the market. People watching these actions quickly recognized that the expressions lacked natural sincere emotions and authentic personal relationships. Dolly Jain a fashion influencer, who operates from Europe showcased Indian sarees during her video content as she expressed admiration for Diwali celebrations (Jain, 2025). The cultural elements utilized in visuals corresponded to traditional customs yet the language labels in captions solely used official vocabulary like:

“Exploring new cultures #DiwaliVibes”

Audience reactions over time reflected a sense of emotional distance:

“It’s all aesthetics for her. No real connection.”, Instagram comment

“We don’t want just photo shoots. Talk to us, share your experience of the festival, what it meant to you.” —user, influencer authenticity thread

By contrast, a Canadian vlogger who shared her confusion, joy, and overwhelm during her first Holi festival—laughing while covered in colors, asking locals for meaning, and expressing genuine awe—received comments that reflected deep emotional resonance (Aby & Shaina Vlogs, 2024):

“You captured the feeling of Holi, not just the look. It felt like we were there with you.”

This contrast reveals that emotionless cultural displays lack significance. Indian audiences seek shared experience, not staged representation. Emotional engagement breathes life into cultural alignment, transforming admiration into affection and affinity. Several foreign influencers successfully adopted Indian customs—eating local food, wearing traditional clothing, using Indian idioms—but were still seen as distant or performative when emotional resonance was lacking. Devle and Gumgoankar (2024) noted that 53.3% of Indian social media users are more loyal to influencers who “share personal struggles or behind-the-scenes life” than those who are merely “culturally appropriate.” Cultural Congruence Theory explains alignment, but without parasocial intimacy (PRT), such alignment felt performative rather than connective.

#### 4.4.3 Fragility of Emotional Bonding Without Behavioral Integrity

While emotional storytelling—especially vulnerability around loneliness, anxiety, or failure—initially evokes empathy and connection, this bond proves fragile if behavioral credibility isn’t maintained over time. Many influencers who gained early traction with Indian audiences through raw, heartfelt narratives lost favor when sponsorships were introduced without transparency or care. A prime example was a South African lifestyle vlogger, known for intimate discussions on body image and self-worth (Kabelo Mohale, 2024). Her YouTube comments were filled with messages like:

“Thank you for sharing your struggles. It helps to hear this from someone who seems so confident.”

However, a later video promoting a high-end detox product—without disclosure or critical review—sparked disillusionment:

“You were about realness. Now this feels like a cash grab.”

“You sold us body positivity and then pushed a cleanse kit? Where’s the consistency?”

This case illustrates that emotional engagement builds short-term closeness, but without ethical consistency, that bond becomes brittle. Indian audiences, particularly Gen Z and millennials, are deeply attuned to contradictions, especially when influencers shift from vulnerability to sales pitches without clarity. Emotional labor must be paired with commitment to transparency and truth to be sustainable. Emotional connection, if not backed by ethical consistency, becomes fragile. According to Jones (2019), affective trust must transition into cognitive trust through sustained behavior, or it risks being labeled manipulative.

#### 4.4.4 Amplifying Cultural and Emotional Resonance Through Ethical Transparency

On the other end of the spectrum, influencers who demonstrated transparent communication and ethical self-awareness were able to elevate their cultural and emotional impact. In one standout case, a Japanese tech influencer who reviewed Indian mobile phones and gadgets often included (JapanBuzz, 2025):

- Clear sponsorship disclaimers
- Pros and cons of the products
- A segment on how the product compared with Japanese or global alternatives

His cultural alignment (e.g., showcasing Indian apps), emotional tone (e.g., joking about struggling with Hindi menus), and ethical conduct converged to create an authentically trusted figure in a highly competitive niche. Commenters responded with layered appreciation:

“Not just informative, but relatable. And I trust that he’s not pushing garbage on us.”

“Finally, someone who respects our market AND our intelligence.”

This reveals that transparency doesn't operate in a vacuum—it enhances the credibility of emotional connection and the meaning of cultural alignment. In other words, when audiences know that an influencer is honest about their intentions and financial ties, they are more willing to forgive imperfections, embrace emotional narratives, and value cross-cultural exploration.

#### 4.4.5 Cultural, Emotional and Ethical Elements in Trust Formation

The abductive thematic process allowed the research to go beyond surface-level categorization and observe how themes collided, supported, or undermined one another in real time. This emergent insight—that trust is multi-dimensional, performative, and cumulative—was only visible through tracing patterns across platforms (YouTube, Instagram), across formats (videos, comments, stories), and over time. In one NVivo-coded cluster, a trend appeared: influencers who excelled at only one theme often hit a trust ceiling. Peoples' perception of cultural knowledge performers without emotional warmth led to an assessment of performance style. The contributors judged such performers to be untrustworthy because their behavior lacked consistency. The contributors held negative opinions about transparent leaders who lacked understanding of local customs while showing limited involvement in the community. The blend of cultural awareness with emotional passion and honest behavior brought positive feedback that included these terms to the contributors: “Wholesome,” “Friend-like,” “Consistent,” “Trustworthy,” “Knows us.”

The influencers achieved their trust by developing it over time while preserving it. Unlike a linear path, the structure of trust of the Indian digital environment is complex and multi-dimensional. On the other hand, culture and emotion and conscious are united into one strong bond which holds firm in the face of challenge. Nevertheless, distributing trust across different compartments is unfeasible, since it must be consolidated to get a comprehensive knowledge in its exact form. Foreign influencers need to do more than traditional western engagement strategies like wearing kurta and weep on the video or to reveal their sponsorships, if they're to build buildings with Indian audiences. This has to become a whole authentic identity that has been experienced through time until everyone comes to reach a validation of it. By reviewing trust drivers as interrelated elements via abductive analysis and capturing audience responses

that truly express their standpoint, the credibility model toward reality approaches a real-life digital credibility model.

## 5 Conclusion

This research studied the cultural, psychological influences in forming the trust of Indian consumers towards international social media influencers. Based on the Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT), Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT), and Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT) as the theoretical basis, thematic content analysis on secondary data such as case studies, social media contents, and online user discussions were used. The goal was to study how Indian viewers perceive the trustworthiness of foreign influencers and which of the dimensions underline the development of significant, sustainable digital trust relations in the intercultural setting. The main question which the research studied was “How cultural and psychological factors affect Indian consumers’ trust in foreign influencers?” The findings show that trust is not created out of isolated acts, but of an interdependent action of three key dimensions (Cultural Alignment, Emotional Engagement, Credibility & Loyalty). Cultural Alignment, Emotional Engagement and Credibility & Loyalty. In answering this, the study indicates that cultural fluency is important when it comes to building trust. Audience accepted these positively when influencers exhibited cultural awareness with the dressing in traditional attire and using regional languages, and being a part of Indian festival like Diwali with respect. CCT was validated with consumers’ attitudes that indicated a willingness to listen to influencers who displayed familiar cultural markers that signified belonging and effort. As noted in the response to SQ1, trust was distinctly affected by the alignment of culture because such audiences embraced culturally knowledgeable influencers who for instance, dressed in culture, spoke the languages of the region, and respectfully celebrated Indian festivals—supporting the Cultural Congruence Theory (CCT). Concerning SQ2, emotional commitment was identified as a motivational driver of parasocial interactions; trust was conferred on the influencer by personally narrating stories, showing vulnerability, and meaningful participation consistent with the Parasocial Relationship Theory (PRT). Still these emotional bonds were too weak without ethical constancy. In answering SQ3, enduring trust and loyalty was maintained through clear practical guidelines: the sponsor’s rhetoric had to align with actual behaviors: rational critique of the content, openness about sponsorship contracts, and general truthfulness of the material presented—substantive evidence for the Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT). The Indian audience did not see influencers as mere media personalities but emotionally related companions, which testifies to PRT’s framework that such parasocial bonds build strong trust bonds. These bonds were

however vulnerable without the continued ethical behavior. This gives birth to the third theme, which is Credibility & Loyalty where behavioral consistency is highlighted. When some influencers revealed sponsorships, were open enough in accepting criticism and retained content integrity, they were perceived as reliable in the long run this was in line with CTT. Finally, the themes that had been triangulated showed that the vulnerable honesty by itself was not effective without ethical behavior, and the cultural involvement without emotional sincerity was empty. The trust only emerged when influencers took commitment to all three dimensions in a sustained, consistent manner.

The present research has a number of practical implications. For influencers, the findings underscore the need for an overall strategy towards trust-building and hence, the need for balancing cultural adaptation, emotional authenticity, and transparent ethical practices. Marketers should not be so keen on working with popular influencers but those who are culturally engaged and with credibility. Digital agencies need to develop internal structures through which they would assess influencer fit beyond numbers and integrate cultural and emotional intelligence markers. For brand firms that want cross-cultural resonance in India, they need to include onboarding local influencers with contextual training, collaborative content creation with locals, long-term relationship plans. However, this study has limitations. First, it used only secondary data and this curtailed any direct interaction with the Indian consumers. Consequently, while there are social sentiments as well as thematic patterns, there is a limited understanding of subtleties from the individual motivations or emotional expression, which is indirectly interpreted. Second, the study was India-specific, so its results, though transferable, were not universally suitable in other culturally rich or developing economies. In addition, the platforms reviewed used to be only Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok – disregarding the emerging vernacular platforms or local creators who might operate on different trust dynamics. The limitations should be overcome in the future studies. Adding primary data collection, e.g. in-depth interviews or focus groups, may increase the understanding of individual level trust formation. The regional subcultures within India should be researched, especially, rural/urban trust actions or generational change. Also, comparative research in culturally diverse markets in the Southeast Asia, Africa or Middle East might show commonness and differences in cross-cultural trust logic. Follow-up studies would aid in tracking how the influencer trust will progress with time especially during the times of fame, monetization, or controversy, to assess how robust the trust-building model can be. The investigation of the

vernacular content platforms can also throw some light on how trust is negotiated in less geographically exposed but far-from-slowly growing digital territories.

## 6 Recommendations

Indian customers will require international influencers and companies as well as digital strategists to follow guidelines which emerge from analysis of research data. The recommendations from this study include strategic content refinement as well as audience participation systems and ethical guidelines.

### Embed Deep Cultural Alignment, Not Surface-Level Imitation

Real, research-based representation of culture is preferred by the Indian consumers than cosmetic mimicry of the same. As Manfredi et al. (2024) found out, foreign influencers wearing sarees or using casual Hindi is not enough; they have to do much more than that when offering cultural products in India. Cultural alignment requires appreciation of contextual subtleties – like how Diwali festivities differ across regions, and content has to reflect differences instead of pan-Indian generality. A partnership with local artists, anthropologists, or even cultural advisors can help avoid stereotyping (Okonkwo et al., 2023). Audiences are very attuning to representation mistakes and appreciate effortful realness. Even the smallest cultural faux pas could result in full-scale backlash. Therefore, influencers are required to acknowledge pre-cultured-textual literacy and not post-critique apologies.

### Cultivate Genuine Emotional Engagement

Trust thrives when the audiences feel there is emotional sincerity, rather than performative empathy. Those influencers who treat the audiences as relational communities as opposed to transactional markets are the ones likely to succeed. By posting some personal experiences, behind the scenes, or emotional turmoil, influencers become more real (Leite & De Paula Baptista, 2021). However, strategic vulnerability, employed to appeal by way of sympathy, without risking the feelings, is counterproductive. Indian followers are able to recognize insincerity and are bound to switch off when influencers seem to be forcing things. Engagement must extend beyond content: active reciprocity through responses, empathetic comments, and followers' recognition create a sturdy emotional connection (Rajput & Gandhi, 2024). Trust is not solely created with words, but also in the way influencers that make the audiences feel seen and heard.

### Practice Transparent and Consistent Communication

Ethical clarity cannot be absented in order to sustain trust. Influencers should maintain clear and transparent communication in regard to sponsorships or affiliate content. Paid collaborations need to be disclosed very clearly, not through vague hashtags, but within the narrative of the post or video. Re-views should be weighed and prospecting influencers need to be constantly coherent in terms of voice and character. Unexpected rebranding, change of values, or defensiveness at times of backlash can quickly destroy the trust (Audrezet et al., 2018). Ethical behaviour also involves taking criticism with maturity: A contrasting, non-negative reaction to getting criticized portrays emotional intelligence and accountability. The long-term coherence and consistency are rewarded by the audiences, characteristics, promising reliability and a devotion to common values.

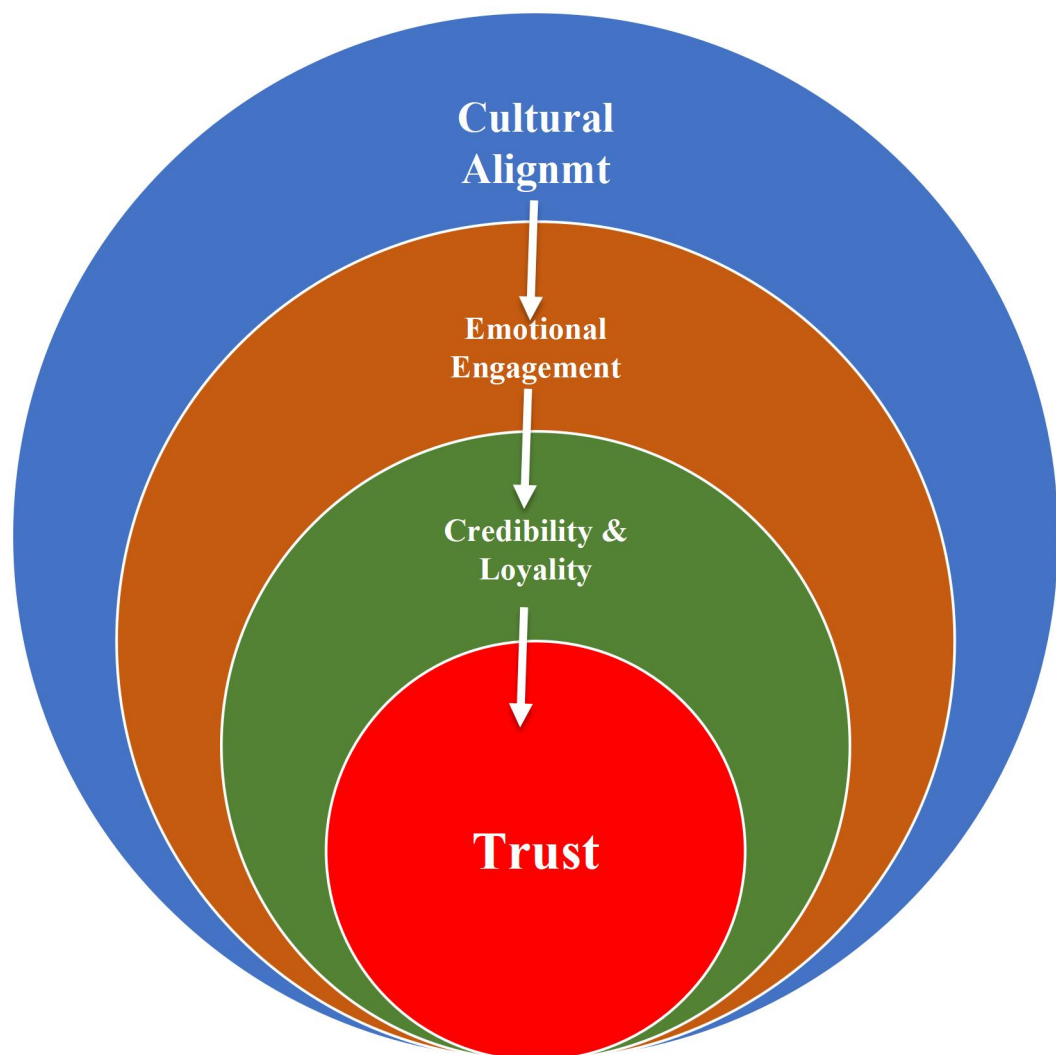
### Integrate Multidimensional Trust Strategies

Trust is not monolithic. Influencers need to combine various aspects – cultural alignment, emotional engagement and ethical credibility into an integrated content strategy. For instance, festivities of Holi (cultural) should be accompanied by expression of one's own thoughts concerning the meaning of the festival (emotional) and announcing any promotional relations with brands presented (ethical). This multi-layered approach appeals to a variety of audience segments and provides long-term relational loyalty rather than a momentary popularity. A multidimensional model of trust makes sure that trust does not crumble with only one failure because the audiences assess consistency on all three axes.

### Monitor Audience Feedback for Iterative Learning

Trust landscapes evolve rapidly. In order to be relevant, influencers need to be actively studying audience input via comment analysis, the metrics of reaction, and the sentiment trends. The instruments that can be used are such as NVivo or Excel to monitor the emotional tone shifts or engagement drops (Rosli et al., 2024). Such insights help influencers modify the content, tone, or collaboration partners while remaining an unadulterated entity. The data-driven responsiveness, when fused with emotional and cultural intelligence, positions influencers to steer through changed demands without breaking the trust continuity.

The Revised conceptual model that has been developed in this study (i.e., an extension of initial CCT-PRT-CTT framework) should be applied by influencers and digital strategists to design a trust-building blueprint. At the very beginning of the framework, the cultural, emotional and behavioral aspects were considered as parallel constructs. However, the revised model (Figure. 2) provides evidence that these themes would be interdependent layers. Cultural congruence facilitates emotional access; emotional bonding increases credibility and credibility builds future cultural trust. The model is cyclical and cumulative not linear: trust builds up with every layer and rots if any layer weak-ens. This model should be adopted by influencers and marketers as a



diagnostic and planning tool – to evaluate trust discrepancies and develop campaigns that combine all three vectors of the trust to sustain success.

Figure 2 Revised Conceptual Model (Source: Alam & Farooq)

In refining the original CCT-PRT-CTT-based framework, two key terminological and conceptual shifts were made: “Cultural Congruence” became “Cultural Alignment”, and “Commitment & Consistency” evolved into “Credibility & Loyalty.” These changes were essential not only for semantic clarity but also to better represent the interdependent, cumulative, and cyclical nature of trust formation discovered through further analysis. The term Cultural Congruence in the preliminary model implied a static match between influencer content and audience culture—emphasizing a one-time or one-dimensional fit. However, the revised model adopts Cultural Alignment to reflect a more dynamic, interactive, and progressive process. “Alignment” underscores the ongoing adjustment and synchronization between influencers and the cultural expectations of their audience. This change recognizes that trust is not simply built when content matches cultural norms, but when it evolves with cultural nuances and sustains relevance over time. Moreover, the revised model identifies cultural alignment as foundational—facilitating emotional access and reducing perceived cultural distance, which is particularly important in the Indian context with its nuanced and layered cultural landscape. Originally, Commitment & Consistency was rooted in the Commitment-Trust Theory (CTT), emphasizing behavioral reliability and clear messaging. While still important, the revised model reframes this component as Credibility & Loyalty, allowing for a broader and more integrated interpretation. “Credibility” captures the external perception of truthfulness, transparency, and ethical conduct—core to trust development in influencer marketing. “Loyalty,” on the other hand, reflects the emotional reciprocity and sustained audience connection that arises when credibility is consistently demonstrated. This shift also signals that credibility emerges through emotional bonding and cultural resonance, not merely through consistent behavior. Thus, this reframing aligns with the revised model’s understanding of trust as a layered process, where cultural and emotional trust set the stage for rational credibility and ultimately lead to long-term loyalty. In contrast to the earlier triangular loop suggesting parallel interactions, the revised model recognizes that these dimensions—cultural, emotional, and psychological—build upon each other sequentially and reinforce one another over time. Cultural alignment facilitates emotional resonance; emotional bonding strengthens perceived credibility; and credibility lays the groundwork for enduring loyalty and deeper cultural trust in future interactions. The model

is therefore cyclical—not linear—and fragile, in the sense that weakening any layer can erode the entire trust structure. This revised conceptualization makes the framework a practical diagnostic and planning tool for influencers and marketers: they can use it to identify gaps in their trust strategy and design campaigns that holistically address all three dimensions.

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## 8 Appendix

**Work Timeline:**

<b>Week</b>	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Tasks</b>	<b>Deliverables</b>
<b>Week 1</b>	January 23 – January 29	Finalizing research plan and theoretical framework. Review relevant literature on influencer marketing. Collect secondary data.	Finalized research plan and theoretical framework. Literature review outline. List of primary secondary data sources.
<b>Week 2</b>	January 30 – February 5	Review case studies, marketing reports, social media analytics. Write literature review. Identify gaps.	Draft of literature review sections. Summary of secondary data sources and initial findings.
<b>Week 3</b>	February 6 – February 12	Begin content and discourse analysis of secondary data. Refine research questions. Continue literature review writing.	Preliminary analysis of secondary data. Refined research questions. Updated literature review draft.
<b>Week 4</b>	February 13 – February 19	Write methodology section. Refine empirical implementation plan.	Completed methodology section draft. Data analysis summary and initial

		Continue data analysis. Integrate findings into the literature review.	results.
<b>Week 5</b>	February 20 – February 26	Link data analysis findings to theoretical framework. Continue data analysis and write empirical findings	Draft of analysis chapter. Integration of data findings with theoretical models.
<b>Week 6</b>	February 27 – March 5	Finalize analysis chapter. Start writing conclusion and recommendations. Draft recommendations for marketers.	Final draft of analysis chapter. Initial conclusion and recommendations.
<b>Week 7</b>	March 6 – March 12 (corrected from Feb 27 – Mar 5 overlap)	Write conclusion and final recommendations. Revise chapters based on feedback.	Draft of conclusion and recommendations. Full thesis draft ready for review.
<b>Week 8</b>	March 13 – March 19	Refine and edit thesis. Check structure, coherence, and clarity. Final review for formatting.	Final draft of thesis. Completed reference list and appendix.

<b>Week 9</b>	March 20 – March 26 (or current status as of May 14)	Final proofreading, double-check formatting and citations. Submit the completed thesis.	Final, polished thesis submitted.
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#### Literature review Summery Table

Researchers & Year	Theoretical Framework	Research Methods & Data	Results/ Findings	Example Quotation	Description of Information Retrieval
Ilieva, G., Yankova, T., Ruseva, M., Dzhubarova, Y., Klisarova-Belcheva, S., & Bratkov, M. (2024). Social Media Influencers: Customer attitudes and impact on purchase behaviour. <i>Information</i> , 15(6), 359. <a href="https://doi.org/10.3390/info15060359">https://doi.org/10.3390/info15060359</a>	Cultural Congruence Theory	Secondary data analysis from marketing case studies	Foreign influencers who adopt local traditions, languages, and storytelling styles experience greater	"When influencers acknowledge and integrate cultural values, they create a sense of	Retrieved from academic journal article on cross-cultural influencer trust.

			trust.	familiarity and trust."	
<p>Kumar, S. (2024). Growing Use of Next-Door Faces and Transformation to the Digital Age: A Study on Arrival of New Practices in the Indian Advertising Industry. NOLEGEIN-Journal of Advertising and Brand Management, 7(1), 11-20. <a href="https://www.academia.edu/download/114124598/_11_20_Growing_use_of_next_door_faces_and_Transformation_to_the_Digital_Age.pdf">https://www.academia.edu/download/114124598/_11_20_Growing_use_of_next_door_faces_and_Transformation_to_the_Digital_Age.pdf</a></p>	Cultural Congruence Theory	Content analysis of social media and marketing data	Foreign influencers incorporating Indian social norms achieve higher engagement and trust.	"Cultural adaptation is a fundamental component that enhances the credibility of foreign influencers."	Extracted from peer-reviewed journal article on digital marketing in India.
<p>Samadi, S., &amp; Akhtar, I. (2025). Parasocial Relationship in relation to the Impact of Social Media Influencers on Consumer Purchase Intention. In Signals and communication technology (pp. 151–157). <a href="https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-68952-9_20">https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-68952-9_20</a></p>	Parasocial Relationship Theory	Qualitative analysis of social media interactions	Authentic storytelling and regular interaction foster parasocial bonds, enhancing	"Foreign influencers who share culturally relevant content succeed in building	Obtained from conference proceedings on social media influencer marketing.

			consumer trust.	stronger trust with Indian consumers."	
Garg, M., & Bakshi, A. (2024). Exploring the impact of beauty vloggers' credible attributes, parasocial interaction, and trust on consumer purchase intention in influencer marketing. <i>Humanities and Social Sciences Communications</i> , 11(1). <a href="https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02760-9">https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02760-9</a>	Parasocial Relationship Theory	Mixed-methods study on consumer behavior	Two-way communication and emotional engagement foster consumer trust and long-term loyalty.	"Indian consumers are more likely to trust foreign influencers who engage in two-way communication."	Sourced from <i>Humanities and Social Sciences Communications</i> journal.
Tarabieh, S., Gil, I., Salvador, J. L. G., & AlFraihat, S. F. A. (2024). The new game of online marketing: How social media influencers drive online repurchase intention through brand trust and customer brand engagement. <i>Intangible Capital</i> , 20(1), 103.	Commitment-Trust Theory	Quantitative study on brand trust and engagement	Trust is the primary driver of consumer engagement when	"When influencers maintain transparency, consumer	Derived from academic journal on intangible capital and digital marketing.

<p><a href="https://doi.org/10.3926/ic.2515">https://doi.org/10.3926/ic.2515</a></p>			<p>influencers meet audience expectations consistently.</p>	<p>commitment and loyalty increase significantly."</p>	
<p>Khodabandeh, A., &amp; Lindh, C. (2020). The importance of brands, commitment, and influencers on purchase intent in the context of online relationships. <i>Australasian Marketing Journal (AMJ)</i>, 29(2), 177–186. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ausmj.2020.03.003">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ausmj.2020.03.003</a></p>	<p>Commitment-Trust Theory</p>	<p>Empirical analysis of online relationships</p>	<p>Emotional and psychological commitment drives long-term trust and consumer loyalty in online relationships.</p>	<p>"Emotional commitment is essential for sustaining consumer loyalty in online relationships."</p>	<p>Accessed from Australasian Marketing Journal on influencer marketing strategies.</p>

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