

Effectiveness of Influencer Celebrities Vs Traditional Celebrities in Brand Promotion

A Study with Special Reference to Consumer Behaviour in Kerala

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Abstract

Proliferation of digital platforms has changed the way companies reach and influence Indian consumers. It has created a double promotion scenario whereby the content creators on social media now compete with the film or sports stars for the same brands. Through this work, the researcher studies the extent to which these two groups of endorsers differ in their brand image-making ability among consumers in Kerala. Kerala is notable for its high literacy levels, strong regional identity of Malayalam, and above-average digital connectivity.

The research is built on three key theoretical models: Ohanian's (1990) Source Credibility Model; Horton and Wohl's (1956) Parasocial interaction theory; and McKinsey's (2009) Consumer Decision Journey model. A mixed-method research design was followed using a questionnaire administered to 350 respondents and in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 practicing marketers operating in the Kerala marketplace across Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Kozhikode.

The findings indicate that the traditional celebrity enjoys a significant advantage in brand awareness and aspirational value communication. In contrast, influencers outperform the traditional celebrity in brand trust, purchase conversion, and cultural connection with local consumers. Differences are much stronger for endorsement (Hindi or English) in Malayalam as compared to Hindi or English, suggesting native language to be a significant moderating variable. The results are discussed in terms of theoretical and commercial impact for brands operating in culturally and linguistically distinct regional markets.

Keywords: Celebrity endorsement, influencer marketing, source credibility, brand perception, Kerala, Malayalam, consumer behaviour, parasocial interaction, purchase intention.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

For more than a century, prominent personalities have been involved in endorsing goods and services as a means of commercial communication. In India, the system evolved into a full-blown business that leveraged Bollywood actors and cricketers, with stars whose appeal traverses the country's regional communities. Based on the concept of celebrity-brand associations, consumers allegedly assign the qualities of the celebrity, such as expertise and trustworthiness, to the brand they are endorsing.

Over the past ten years, the explosion of digital connectivity and social media access has propelled a very different kind of ambassador to the fore. The influencer builds their audience through frequent, niche-oriented, interactive content on YouTube, Instagram and short-video platforms rather than through drama or prime-time television. An influencer's persuasive appeal rests more on a sense of nearness, shared everyday experience, and apparent candour, whereas that of a conventional celebrity relies on a measure of glamorous distance. There are various types of trust which yield different results for brands when communicating and consumer responsiveness.

The contrasting elements of Kerala make it a productive place of study. The literacy rates in Kerala is above 96 percent and the social media penetration among the highest anywhere in India. You also have a population with a deep, actively maintained sense of Malayalam cultural and linguistic identity. An active ecosystem of Malayalam-language content creators involved in food, travel, personal finance, beauty, politics, and lifestyle reflects a digital culture where regional

identity is not only preserved but mediated and reinforced through new media. By examining sponsorship consumers, this study endeavors to answer the question of whether and how this context alters the relative merits of influencer versus traditional celebrity endorsements.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In recent years, academic research on influencer marketing and celebrity endorsement has greatly increased, but the vast majority of published studies draw on western, English-language consumer settings. Research done in India usually has a national character, and its findings conceal the very large differences in consumer psychology and media behaviour in the country's many linguistically diverse regions.

Kerala provides a case that deserves closer scrutiny. Brands that are participating in the state, i.e. homegrown businesses or national companies wanting to deepen regional penetration, must keep deciding how to divide their endorsement money between costlier traditional celebrity contracts and more flexible influencer deals. Due to the lack of Kerala-specific empirical evidence, those decisions are usually based on industry convention, general instinct or findings from places that bear little resemblance to the Malayalam-speaking consumer. The purpose of this study was to close this evidence gap.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This research can be an asset for both academic and professional ones. This study provides scholars with source credibility, parasocial interaction, and the consumer decision journey in a regional and language context with which systematic work has hitherto been limited. By treating linguistic and cultural congruence as a testable moderating variable rather than as background context, this work makes a genuine contribution to the endorsement literature.

The findings provide concrete data-oriented information which would help the marketing practitioners in terms of endorser selection, budget allocation and content strategy in Kerala. By associating endorser performance with different phases of the consumer purchasing journey, firms can make more strategic investment choices. This is particularly important for small and medium-sized enterprises that cannot go after multiple endorsement channels without proof of returns.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study pursued four specific aims:

- To measure how consumer brand perception in Kerala varies according to whether the endorser is a social media influencer or a traditional celebrity, with particular attention to trust and brand awareness as separate outcomes.
- To identify which source credibility dimension — Expertise, Relatability, or Prestige — most powerfully predicts purchase intention among Kerala's digital consumers.
- To determine whether Malayalam-language endorsement content significantly moderates the relationship between endorser type and brand trust.
- To trace the relative performance of each endorser type across the stages of the consumer decision journey, from initial awareness through to post-purchase loyalty.

1.5 Research Questions

The above objectives translate into the following primary research questions:

- RQ1: Do brand perception scores differ significantly between Kerala consumers exposed to influencer endorsements and those exposed to traditional celebrity endorsements?
- RQ2: Among Expertise, Relatability, and Prestige, which credibility dimension is most strongly linked to purchase intention in Kerala's digital consumer context?

- RQ3: Does the use of Malayalam in endorsement content significantly moderate the influence of endorser type on brand trust?
- RQ4: At which stage of the consumer journey — Awareness, Consideration, Purchase, or Loyalty — does each endorser type exert its greatest influence?

1.6 Scope and Limitations

Geographically, the study focused on three Kerala cities: Thiruvananthapuram in the south, Kochi in the centre, and Kozhikode in the north. This three-city structure was designed to capture meaningful intra-state variation while remaining practically manageable. All respondents were drawn from the 18–45 age bracket, the most active social media demographic and the primary driver of digital commerce in the state.

Several limitations should be noted. The cross-sectional survey design prevents causal inference or longitudinal tracking of attitude change. The urban-only sampling frame may not represent rural Kerala consumers. Self-reported attitudinal data carry inherent risks of subjective bias and response distortion. Lastly, the rapid pace of change in the social media environment means that specific numerical findings should be treated as temporally situated rather than permanently generalisable.

1.7 Chapter Organisation

This dissertation is organised into six chapters. The present chapter has established the study's context, problem, objectives, and scope. Chapter 2 critically reviews the relevant theoretical and empirical literature. Chapter 3 explains the research design and methodology. Chapter 4 presents quantitative and qualitative findings. Chapter 5 interprets those findings in light of the conceptual framework. Chapter 6 concludes with strategic recommendations, limitations, and avenues for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Celebrity Endorsement

2.1.1 Source Credibility Model

The scholarly inquiry into how the characteristics of a message source shape audience persuasion was formalised by Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953), whose work on attitude change demonstrated that an audience's perception of a source's credibility plays a decisive role in how receptively that audience processes and accepts the message. Ohanian (1990) built on this tradition to develop an endorsement-specific measurement instrument organising credibility into three components: Expertise, defined as how capable and knowledgeable the endorser is perceived to be in making valid product claims; Trustworthiness, reflecting whether audiences believe the endorser's motivations are genuine rather than purely commercial; and Attractiveness, covering both physical appearance and wider social appeal. Ohanian's scale continues to be one of the most widely applied instruments in endorsement research across disciplines.

Researchers have since adapted this model to digital contexts. Lou and Yuan (2019) identified informational value and entertainment value as additional credibility-relevant dimensions in influencer settings, proposing that influencer credibility travels along both a cognitive, information-based route and an affective, relationship-based route. For younger consumer segments, the affective route appears to carry greater weight.

2.1.2 Match-Up Hypothesis

McCracken (1989) offered a complementary perspective, contending that celebrities operate as cultural symbols whose associated meanings are transferred symbolically to endorsed brands through the endorsement relationship. This process is most effective when the meanings consumers attach to the endorser are coherent with the identity the brand wishes to cultivate. This logic was formalised as the Match-Up Hypothesis by Kamins (1990) and refined by Till and Busler (2000), who provided empirical evidence that endorsement effectiveness improves when there is a perceptible fit between endorser identity and product characteristics. Extending this to digital contexts, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and

Hudders (2017) found that the congruence between an influencer's content niche and the endorsed product significantly shapes consumer attitudes toward the brand.

2.1.3 Parasocial Interaction Theory

Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced parasocial interaction to describe how media audiences develop emotionally genuine, structurally one-directional relationships with media personalities — engaging with these figures much as they would with people they actually know. Although this idea was originally developed in the context of broadcast television, it has proven directly applicable to digital media. Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen (2016) and Chung and Cho (2017) have both demonstrated that social media's interactive features — comment threads, live broadcasts, direct messaging, audience polling — can generate parasocial relationships of considerable depth, often surpassing those formed with conventional broadcast celebrities who maintain greater interpersonal distance.

2.2 Traditional Celebrity Endorsement: Evidence and Constraints

A substantial body of literature has documented the generally positive effects of traditional celebrity endorsement on brand awareness, brand image, and purchase intention (Atkin and Block, 1983; Friedman and Friedman, 1979; Erdogan, 1999). Within India, Mukherjee (2009) and Sathish and Rajasekaran (2011) found that Bollywood performers and prominent cricketers exert notable influence over brand attitudes, with the strongest effects among consumers motivated by aspirational social mobility.

That said, a number of limitations recur in the literature. When a single celebrity simultaneously endorses several brands, the credibility attached to each individual endorsement tends to be diluted (Tripp, Jensen, and Carlson, 1994). The vampire effect — in which the celebrity's persona overshadows the brand in consumer memory — can lead to high endorser recall alongside weak product recall (Rossiter and Smidts, 2012). The considerable financial outlay involved in securing traditional celebrity contracts also restricts access for smaller regional businesses.

Research conducted specifically in Kerala by Nair and Pillai (2018) found that while Malayalam cinema personalities generate strong recognition and affection among local consumers, their effectiveness as product endorsers outside entertainment-adjacent product categories depends heavily on how well their public persona fits the brand's stated values. Endorsements for products associated with regional traditions and local ways of life were considerably more effective when carried by locally rooted figures than by national Bollywood stars.

2.3 Social Media Influencer Marketing: Growth and Effectiveness

2.3.1 Defining the Social Media Influencer

Among the first formal academic attempts to define this category, Freberg et al. (2011) characterised the social media influencer as a third-party endorser whose influence over audience attitudes is exercised through content published across blogs and social media applications. Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017) extended this by framing influencers as deliberate self-branding practitioners who consciously build digital identities to accumulate social capital and generate commercial value. The influencer ecosystem has since developed a widely recognised tiered structure: mega-influencers (over one million followers), macro-influencers (between 100,000 and one million), micro-influencers (between 10,000 and 100,000), and nano-influencers (fewer than 10,000), each tier representing a different trade-off between broad reach and perceived authenticity.

2.3.2 Authenticity as a Key Driver

The most consistently identified factor behind influencer endorsement effectiveness is how authentic audiences perceive the endorser to be (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2018; Marwick, 2015). Consumer responses are most favourable when a promoted product emerges organically from the influencer's established content identity and lifestyle, rather than being inserted as an obvious commercial plug. The mandatory disclosure of paid partnerships — required in India under the Advertising Standards Council of India guidelines since 2021 — adds a layer of complexity to this dynamic: while transparency is broadly valued by consumers, the formal labelling of a commercial arrangement can erode authenticity perceptions for audiences that have formed strong parasocial attachments (Evans et al., 2017).

2.3.3 Influencer Marketing in the Indian Regional Context

India's influencer landscape is strongly differentiated by language. Vernacular-language content creators have been growing their audiences, engagement rates, and commercial revenues considerably faster than their English-language counterparts (Influencer Marketing Hub India Report, 2023). Kaur and Singh (2021) found that Hindi-language influencers achieved notably higher purchase conversion rates in tier-2 and tier-3 cities than English-language creators with equivalent follower counts. Academic scholarship focused specifically on the Malayalam-language influencer community within Kerala remains sparse — a knowledge gap this study was designed to address.

2.4 Source Credibility in the Digital Environment: Expertise, Relatability, and Prestige

Applying Ohanian's credibility dimensions to digital media has revealed meaningful shifts in how consumers weight those dimensions. Ismail (2018) found that while attractiveness and expertise continued to predict traditional celebrity endorsement effectiveness, it was trustworthiness — extended in the digital context to encompass perceived relatability alongside honesty — that emerged as the dominant predictor of brand attitude in influencer settings. Kim and Kim (2021) confirmed this pattern across multiple Asian market contexts.

Prestige — the aspirational status an endorser confers on a brand — is not explicitly named in Ohanian's original framework, but has been developed as a distinct dimension by later researchers (Choi and Rifon, 2012). Traditional celebrities, given their mass-media recognition and cultural prominence, typically score substantially higher on prestige, and this advantage is linked to stronger endorsement performance in status-driven product categories such as luxury goods and premium property.

Relatability — how much consumers see the endorser as someone who shares their lifestyle and everyday experiences — is the dimension on which social media influencers most consistently outperform traditional celebrities (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). This dimension appears especially consequential at the consideration and purchase stages of the consumer journey, where closeness to lived experience carries more persuasive weight than distant aspirational association.

2.5 Cultural Congruence and Language as Moderating Variables

The link between cultural alignment and endorsement effectiveness has been explored through the lens of cultural alignment theory (Albers-Miller and Stafford, 1999) and Hofstede's (1980) cultural values framework. Research in India consistently demonstrates that endorsements featuring figures who share the audience's regional identity, language, and cultural reference points generate stronger brand identification and purchase intention than endorsements by culturally distant national-level celebrities (Banerjee and Bhatt, 2022).

Language as a specific driver of congruence has received comparatively little systematic empirical attention, even though practitioner evidence points strongly to its importance. Google's India Market Insights report (2022) indicated that digital content produced in regional vernacular languages achieves substantially higher engagement and click-through rates relative to equivalent content in English across Indian regional markets. The specific effect of language on endorsement outcomes — with endorser type, product category, and audience demographics held constant — was a question this study was well positioned to examine.

2.6 Consumer Decision Journey and Endorser Effectiveness

The traditional AIDA model of consumer persuasion has been substantially revised in the digital era. McKinsey's Consumer Decision Journey framework (2009) replaced the linear funnel with a non-linear model that recognises how consumer touchpoints are now distributed across multiple digital and physical channels, and that post-purchase loyalty and advocacy function as distinct and commercially significant stages. Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Pervan (2015) extended this framework by mapping endorser types onto specific journey stages, hypothesising that high-reach traditional celebrities would be most effective at generating initial awareness, while the dialogic and interactive nature of influencer content would make it better suited to later-stage consideration, purchase conversion, and loyalty maintenance.

Empirical testing of this stage-specific pattern remains limited. Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) found supporting evidence in a UAE sample, and Trivedi and Sama (2020) confirmed a similar configuration in a pan-Indian urban study. No prior research had examined these stage-specific dynamics in the Kerala market, nor whether native language use differentially shapes endorser performance at different journey stages.

2.7 Conceptual Framework

Drawing together the reviewed theoretical and empirical literature, this study proposes a framework in which Endorser Type (social media influencer versus traditional celebrity) and Cultural Congruence (operationalised through Malayalam-language use and local cultural alignment) function as independent variables. Brand Perception outcomes — comprising awareness, trust, and overall brand attitude — and Purchase Intention across journey stages serve as dependent variables. Source Credibility Dimensions (Expertise, Relatability, and Prestige) act as mediating mechanisms connecting endorser characteristics to consumer outcomes. This framework integrates Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, the Match-Up Hypothesis, and the Consumer Decision Journey model.

2.8 Research Gap and Contribution

The literature review reveals a substantive gap: no published empirical study has systematically compared influencer and traditional celebrity endorsement effectiveness within a linguistically defined Indian regional market. Existing India-focused scholarship predominantly operates at the national level, producing results that obscure meaningful variation across the country's diverse cultural and linguistic regions. This study addresses that gap on three distinct fronts: first, it provides a systematic empirical comparison of both endorser types within the Kerala context; second, it empirically tests the moderating role of Malayalam-language content in shaping endorsement outcomes; and third, it produces a detailed mapping of relative endorser effectiveness across consumer decision journey stages in the Kerala market.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

The study is grounded in a post-positivist philosophical orientation. This position holds that consumer attitudes and behaviours constitute an empirical reality, while acknowledging that any measurement of that reality is necessarily approximate and subject to error. This justifies placing the primary analytical emphasis on quantitative survey data, while recognising the important contextual and explanatory contribution that qualitative evidence can make.

The analytical approach is deductive. Established theoretical frameworks — Source Credibility, Parasocial Interaction, the Match-Up Hypothesis, and the Consumer Decision Journey — were used to generate testable hypotheses, which were then evaluated against the collected empirical data. Given the maturity of the available theoretical base and the study's objective of extending these frameworks into a new cultural context, this approach was the most appropriate available.

3.2 Research Design

A concurrent mixed-methods design was adopted, combining quantitative survey research with qualitative in-depth interviewing. Following the convergent parallel approach described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017), data from both strands were collected simultaneously and brought together during the interpretive phase. The quantitative component provides statistically generalisable findings regarding hypothesised relationships; the qualitative component adds contextual depth and allows the interpretation of patterns that numerical data alone would leave inadequately explained.

3.3 Hypotheses

Four null hypotheses were formulated for empirical testing:

- H01: Consumer brand perception scores do not differ significantly based on whether the endorser is a social media influencer or a traditional celebrity.

- H02: The three source credibility dimensions — Expertise, Relatability, and Prestige — do not differ significantly in their predictive power over purchase intention.
- H03: The language of endorsement content (Malayalam versus non-Malayalam) does not significantly moderate the relationship between endorser type and brand trust.
- H04: The effectiveness of each endorser type does not vary significantly across the Awareness and Action stages of the consumer decision journey.

3.4 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised adults aged between 18 and 45 living in three of Kerala's major urban agglomerations: Thiruvananthapuram in the south, Kochi in the centre, and Kozhikode in the north. These cities were chosen to capture geographic variation across the state while remaining practically accessible for fieldwork. The 18–45 age bracket was prioritised as the most active social media demographic and the most commercially significant digital consumer segment.

Stratified random sampling was used, with strata defined by city, gender, and age sub-group. The minimum required sample size was calculated using Cochran's (1977) formula for proportional sampling at a 5 per cent margin of error and 95 per cent confidence level, yielding a minimum of 384 respondents. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed across the three cities and 350 fully completed responses were retained for analysis, representing an effective response rate of 87.5 per cent.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

3.5.1 Quantitative Questionnaire

The structured questionnaire comprised five sections. Section A gathered demographic information including age, gender, educational background, occupation, monthly household income, and preferred social media platforms. Section B measured frequency of exposure to influencer and traditional celebrity endorsements using a seven-point scale. Section C captured source credibility dimensions using an adapted version of Ohanian's (1990) scale, extended with relatability items from Lou and Yuan (2019), all rated on a five-point Likert scale. Section D recorded brand perception outcomes — awareness, trust, and overall brand attitude — and purchase intention using instruments validated in prior literature. Section E asked respondents to assess the role that Malayalam-language and culturally proximate content played in shaping their responses to endorsements.

The questionnaire was first drafted in English and subsequently translated into Malayalam by a bilingual research collaborator, with a back-translation procedure employed to verify semantic accuracy. A pilot study involving 30 participants was conducted to assess item clarity and internal consistency; three questionnaire items were modified as a result before full-scale data collection began.

3.5.2 Qualitative Interview Protocol

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 senior marketing professionals holding active experience in the Kerala marketplace. Participants included brand managers, digital marketing executives, advertising account directors, and social media agency principals. Interview topics spanned: perceived comparative effectiveness of influencer versus traditional celebrity endorsements for their respective organisations; criteria applied in endorser selection; the role of regional language and cultural context in campaign planning; the metrics used to measure endorsement outcomes; and emerging patterns in the Kerala endorsement landscape. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted over video conferencing platforms with each participant's prior written consent.

3.6 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26) and AMOS for structural equation modelling. The analytical sequence comprised: descriptive statistics and frequency distributions for the demographic profile; Cronbach's Alpha reliability testing for all multi-item scales; independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA to examine group mean differences (Hypotheses 1 and 4); Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression to identify credibility predictors of purchase intention (Hypothesis 2); hierarchical regression with an interaction term to test the

moderating role of language (Hypothesis 3); and Structural Equation Modelling with Maximum Likelihood estimation to test the full conceptual model.

Qualitative interview data were subjected to thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and write-up. NVivo 12 was used to support systematic coding and theme management throughout the process.

3.7 Reliability and Validity

Construct validity was confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis prior to structural equation modelling. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Average Variance Extracted criterion of Fornell and Larcker (1981), requiring an AVE of at least 0.50 across all constructs. Convergent validity was established when standardised factor loadings exceeded 0.70 for all items. Common method bias was tested using Harman's single-factor procedure; as no single factor accounted for more than 40 per cent of total variance, the risk of common method contamination was judged to be acceptably low.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

All research procedures complied with the ethical standards set by the institutional Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was obtained from both survey respondents and interview participants prior to any data collection activity. All participants were made aware that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without explanation or consequence. Individual responses were kept strictly confidential and used solely for aggregate analytical purposes. Audio recordings from interviews were stored on a password-protected institutional server and will be securely deleted once the research project is formally complete.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The final analytical sample of 350 valid responses included 52.3 per cent female respondents, 46.1 per cent male, and 1.6 per cent identifying as non-binary — a gender distribution broadly reflective of Kerala's near-equal demographic balance and relatively progressive social environment. The most represented age cohort was the 18–25 group at 38.6 per cent, followed by the 26–35 group at 34.2 per cent and the 36–45 group at 27.2 per cent. Educational attainment was notably high: 61.7 per cent of respondents held at least a graduate-level qualification, consistent with Kerala's well-documented demographic profile.

Regarding social media platform preferences, YouTube recorded the highest daily usage rate at 73.1 per cent, followed by Instagram at 68.4 per cent, Facebook at 54.2 per cent, and WhatsApp Status at 47.8 per cent. YouTube's dominance was more pronounced than national usage data would predict, reflecting the strong appetite within Kerala for long-form video content produced in Malayalam.

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	52.3
	Male	46.1
	Non-Binary	1.6
Age Group	18–25	38.6
	26–35	34.2
	36–45	27.2
Education	Graduate / Postgraduate	61.7

	Higher Secondary	24.8
	Other	13.5

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

4.2 Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha values for all multi-item measurement scales exceeded the widely accepted 0.70 threshold (Nunnally, 1978). The Source Credibility scale returned an Alpha of 0.876; the Brand Perception scale returned 0.841; the Purchase Intention scale returned 0.889; and the Cultural Congruence scale returned 0.832. These values collectively confirm satisfactory internal consistency across all measurement instruments used in the study.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

4.3.1 H01 — Comparative Impact on Brand Perception

An independent samples t-test compared brand perception outcomes between respondents whose most recent endorsement exposure involved a social media influencer ($n = 178$) and those who had last been exposed to a traditional celebrity endorsement ($n = 172$). Brand trust scores were significantly higher among those in the influencer group ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.71$) than among those in the traditional celebrity group ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.83$; $t(348) = 4.23$, $p < .001$). The pattern was reversed for brand awareness, where traditional celebrity endorsements yielded significantly higher scores ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.62$) compared with influencer exposures ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.74$; $t(348) = -5.17$, $p < .001$).

H01 is rejected. Endorser type has a statistically significant and directionally distinct effect on brand perception outcomes, with influencers producing higher trust and traditional celebrities producing higher awareness.

4.3.2 H02 — Source Credibility Dimensions

Multiple regression with Purchase Intention as the outcome variable and the three credibility dimensions as predictors yielded a statistically significant overall model ($F(3,346) = 47.3$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.29$). Relatability was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$), followed by Expertise ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < .001$). Prestige did not achieve statistical significance ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = .14$) after the other two predictors were controlled for.

H02 is rejected. The three source credibility dimensions differ substantially in their ability to predict purchase intention, with Relatability emerging as the dominant driver among Kerala's digital consumers.

4.3.3 H03 — Cultural Congruence and Language Moderation

Hierarchical regression was used to test whether Malayalam-language use moderates the effect of endorser type on brand trust. In the first step, endorser type and Malayalam content preference were entered as predictors ($R^2 = 0.21$, $p < .001$). The interaction term (Endorser Type $\times$ Malayalam Content) was introduced in the second step and proved statistically significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.06$, $\Delta F = 18.4$, $p < .001$). Simple slope analysis confirmed that the trust advantage held by influencer endorsements over traditional celebrity endorsements was substantially stronger when content was delivered in Malayalam ($B = 0.38$, $p < .001$) than in non-Malayalam formats ($B = 0.14$, $p = .03$).

H03 is rejected. Malayalam-language content significantly amplifies the brand trust advantage that influencers hold over traditional celebrities, establishing language as a meaningful moderating variable in the endorsement effectiveness relationship.

4.3.4 H04 — Purchase Journey Stage Mapping

A chi-square test of independence examined the association between endorser type preference and the consumer journey stage at which the endorsed experience was reported to be most influential. The association was highly significant ($\chi^2(3) = 67.4$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.44$). Traditional celebrity endorsements were most strongly associated with the

Awareness stage (61.2 per cent of celebrity-influenced decisions) and early Consideration. Social media influencer endorsements were concentrated at the Purchase/Action stage (58.7 per cent) and the Loyalty/Advocacy stage.

Decision Journey Stage	Influencer (%)	Traditional Celebrity (%)	Chi-Square p-value
Awareness	38.7	61.2	< .001
Consideration	44.1	55.9	< .01
Purchase / Action	58.7	41.3	< .001
Loyalty / Advocacy	63.4	36.6	< .001

Table 3: Endorser Type vs. Stage of Consumer Decision Journey

4.4 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the twenty practitioner interviews produced four primary themes that enrich and contextualise the quantitative results.

The first theme, The Authenticity Premium, emerged with near-universal consistency. Practitioners described Kerala consumers as advertising-literate and highly attuned to the difference between genuine advocacy and contractual endorsement. Influencers who had built loyal followings through consistent and candid content, and who integrated brand messaging in contextually appropriate ways, consistently outperformed traditional celebrities whose brand associations were perceived as transactional rather than personally felt.

The second theme, Malayalam as a Cultural Passport, surfaced with particular force across multiple interviews. Practitioners described Malayalam not merely as a vehicle for communication but as a signal of cultural belonging and interpersonal trustworthiness. Several professionals reported that shifting endorsement content from Hindi-language national celebrity formats to natively produced Malayalam influencer content generated noticeable improvements in audience engagement and sales conversion. Language, on this reading, contributes a quality of social trust that the endorser's credentials alone cannot replicate.

The third theme, Traditional Celebrities as Trust Anchors, offered an important qualification to the broader influencer advantage. For product categories in which consumers require high baseline confidence before making a purchase — financial services, healthcare products, and premium property — respected traditional celebrities, particularly prominent Bollywood figures, were found to confer a kind of institutional legitimacy that influencers have not yet been able to replicate. This foundational credibility is especially valued by brands entering the Kerala market for the first time.

The fourth theme, The Strategic Value of Micro-Influencers, highlighted practitioners' growing appreciation of the exceptional commercial return achievable through nano- and micro-influencers with tightly defined local community followings. Kerala's social geography — marked by dense, closely networked communities — lends itself well to community-level penetration through micro-influencer campaigns. Several interviewees described networks of influencers with between five thousand and fifty thousand highly engaged local followers as outperforming both macro-influencer and traditional celebrity campaigns on cost-adjusted conversion metrics.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Interpretation

5.1 Interpreting the Comparative Impact Finding

The finding that influencers generate stronger brand trust while traditional celebrities generate stronger brand awareness is consistent with — and advances — the theoretical predictions of both the Source Credibility Model and the Consumer Decision Journey framework. The trust advantage of influencer endorsements is most convincingly explained through the lens of Parasocial Interaction Theory. The conversational, personally situated, and linguistically intimate character

of influencer content within Kerala's Malayalam-language digital environment cultivates parasocial bonds of unusual depth. The trust that emerges from these bonds has a distinctly relational quality — grounded in perceived shared experience rather than aspirational admiration — that connects more directly to purchase intention than the status-based regard consumers hold for traditional celebrities.

The awareness advantage retained by traditional celebrities reflects their ongoing dominance of high-reach broadcast channels, particularly Malayalam television networks and Mollywood theatrical releases, which command larger and more age-diverse audiences in Kerala than national viewership data might suggest. For brands needing rapid, wide-scale awareness across a broad population base, traditional celebrity-led campaigns through these channels remain unusually effective instruments.

5.2 The Primacy of Relatability in Kerala's Credibility Architecture

The finding that Relatability outperforms both Expertise and Prestige as a predictor of purchase intention among Kerala's digital consumers carries significant theoretical and practical weight. Theoretically, it suggests that Kerala consumers apply a distinctive evaluative standard to endorsers — one in which the relevant question is less 'how accomplished is this person?' and more 'does this person's life and experience actually resemble mine?'

This pattern is coherent with several characteristics of Kerala's broader social context. The state's high average literacy, its comparatively egalitarian social structure relative to many other Indian regions, and its tradition of community-centred civic deliberation may together predispose consumers to find status-based appeals less persuasive and peer-proximate endorsements more compelling. The strong performance of micro- and nano-influencers — who by their nature inhabit the same communities, geographies, and everyday realities as their small but highly engaged audiences — follows logically from this relational credibility dynamic.

5.3 Language as a Cultural Bridge: The Malayalam Moderation Effect

The robust moderating effect of Malayalam-language content on the relationship between endorser type and brand trust represents the most theoretically novel contribution of this study. By demonstrating that language functions as a distinct and potent variable — not merely a component of generalised cultural congruence — the findings advance beyond prior endorsement research and introduce a new dimension into the source credibility framework as applied to regional markets.

Language, understood in this context, is not simply a conduit for information. When a Malayalam-speaking influencer creates content in the language — drawing on local idiom, cultural humour, community references, and the distinctive cadences of Kerala's regional dialect varieties — the result is not a translated message but a collaboratively constructed communicative experience. This process strengthens parasocial intimacy, heightens perceived relatability, and generates a quality of consumer trust that Expertise and Prestige cannot replicate when communication is delivered across a cultural and linguistic distance.

5.4 Stage-Specific Effectiveness and Strategic Implications

The empirical confirmation of stage-specific endorser performance — traditional celebrities strongest at brand awareness, influencers strongest at purchase conversion and loyalty building — provides systematic quantitative grounding for a pattern that many marketing practitioners have sensed intuitively but rarely had the data to document. The practical implication is clear: framing endorsement strategy as a binary choice between traditional celebrities and influencers misrepresents the evidence. The two endorser types are better understood as performing complementary functions at different points within the same consumer journey.

For a brand entering the Kerala market or launching a new product, an initial phase of traditional celebrity-driven awareness building — leveraging broadcast television and theatrical platforms — may be essential for reaching a broad population and establishing foundational brand recognition. Once that awareness is in place, a sustained phase of influencer-led engagement — particularly through micro-influencers with deep roots in local communities — can drive consideration, trial, and purchase conversion more efficiently. Post-purchase loyalty can then be maintained through ongoing influencer content that keeps the brand present within consumers' everyday social worlds.

5.5 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three distinct theoretical contributions. First, it extends Ohanian's Source Credibility Model into a non-Western, linguistically defined regional market and demonstrates that the relative weight of credibility dimensions is culturally contingent rather than universal — an important qualification for researchers applying the model across diverse global contexts. Second, it operationalises and empirically tests language as a distinct moderating variable within the established credibility framework, addressing a gap that prior literature had acknowledged but not systematically examined. Third, by empirically mapping relative endorser effectiveness onto specific consumer decision journey stages within a new cultural context, it advances the stage-specific endorsement hypothesis from theoretical proposition to evidential finding, and establishes a methodological template applicable to similar research in other regional markets.

Chapter 6: Conclusions, Recommendations, and Future Research

6.1 Summary of Findings

This dissertation examined the relative effectiveness of social media influencers and traditional celebrities in brand promotion within Kerala, paying particular attention to source credibility dimensions, the moderating role of Malayalam-language content, and stage-specific effectiveness patterns across the consumer decision journey. The core findings, derived from a mixed-methods study incorporating survey responses from 350 consumers and in-depth interviews with 20 marketing professionals, can be summarised as follows.

Social media influencers significantly outperform traditional celebrities on brand trust and purchase intention, with the influencer advantage substantially amplified when content is produced natively in Malayalam. Traditional celebrities retain a clear superiority in generating brand awareness, reflecting their continued prominence on high-reach broadcast platforms. Among the source credibility dimensions, Relatability is the strongest predictor of purchase intention, outweighing both Expertise and Prestige. Malayalam-language content functions as a significant moderator, deepening consumer trust responses to influencer endorsements in particular. Endorser type also shows pronounced stage-specific effects: traditional celebrities dominate the Awareness stage, while influencers dominate the Purchase and Loyalty stages.

6.2 Managerial Recommendations

The following strategic recommendations are offered to brand managers and marketing practitioners working in or targeting the Kerala consumer market.

First, endorsement strategy should be structured around a complementary, multi-endorser model rather than an either-or choice between the two types. A sequenced approach — using traditional celebrities for awareness building and influencers for conversion and loyalty maintenance — is likely to produce superior aggregate outcomes compared with either strategy pursued alone.

Second, budget allocation should favour natively conceived Malayalam-language content over nationally produced material rendered into the language through translation. Content created originally in Malayalam by credible regional voices consistently delivers stronger trust and conversion returns, and the investment in cultural authenticity required to produce it is well justified by the outcomes.

Third, influencer selection should prioritise Relatability and genuine community connection over raw follower counts. Micro-influencers with smaller but more engaged, locally rooted audiences will typically achieve stronger purchase conversion outcomes than macro-influencers with larger but more diffuse followings.

Fourth, in product categories where a foundation of consumer trust is a prerequisite for purchase trial — including financial services, healthcare products, and premium consumer durables — traditional celebrity endorsements from respected Bollywood personalities may continue to play a critical role in establishing the institutional legitimacy on which subsequent influencer-led conversion campaigns can build.

6.3 Limitations

The cross-sectional survey design limits the study to a single snapshot of consumer attitudes and prevents observation of how those attitudes shift over time in response to changing media environments or campaign activity. The urban-only sampling frame, while providing intra-state geographic variation, may not capture the media habits and cultural responses of consumers in rural Kerala. All primary data are self-reported, which carries the standard risks of social desirability bias and limited introspective accuracy. Finally, the fast-evolving nature of the social media landscape — including algorithm changes, platform shifts, and developing regulatory norms around advertising disclosure — means that specific numerical findings should be read as contextually and temporally situated rather than as permanently generalisable.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

Several productive avenues for future inquiry emerge from this study. A longitudinal panel design tracking the same respondents' brand attitudes and purchase behaviours over twelve to eighteen months would provide substantially stronger grounds for causal inference than the cross-sectional design used here. Experimental designs that expose randomly allocated consumer groups to matched influencer and traditional celebrity stimuli under controlled conditions would generate more rigorous evidence of effectiveness differentials and the mechanisms that produce them.

Comparative research across other linguistically distinct Indian states — including Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Maharashtra — would test the generalisability of the language moderation effect identified in Kerala and begin to map how regional linguistic identity shapes endorsement dynamics across India's diverse cultural landscape. Research into product category boundaries — identifying more precisely the categories in which the influencer advantage is most and least pronounced — would provide finer-grained strategic guidance for brand managers across a wider range of sectors.

Finally, the ethical and regulatory dimensions of influencer endorsement practice in India's post-ASCI environment — particularly the implications of mandatory disclosure requirements for authenticity perceptions and consumer trust — represent a significant and currently underexplored domain for future consumer behaviour research.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

The brand endorsement landscape in Kerala is undergoing a genuine transformation, driven by the expanding reach and sophistication of the regional Malayalam-language influencer community, near-universal smartphone penetration, and an audience that is simultaneously digitally engaged and deeply attached to local cultural identity. Traditional celebrities are far from obsolete — they retain meaningful functions in conferring institutional legitimacy and generating broad-scale awareness — but the intimate, culturally embedded communication of the Malayalam-speaking influencer community is demonstrably more effective at the stages of the consumer journey that most directly govern purchase decisions. For brands seeking to build genuine, lasting relationships with Kerala's discerning and digitally confident consumers, authentic influencer partnerships grounded in real linguistic and cultural congruence have moved from tactical experiment to strategic priority.

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