

A WHITEPAPER ON PARASOCIAL MARKETING

The Friendship Illusion

You think you know them.

They don't know you exist.

*And somehow, that's become the most powerful force in
modern marketing*

Do You Have a Friend You've Never Met?

Every morning, you wake up and check their latest post. You know their coffee order, their relationship drama, their skincare routine. You've laughed with them, cried with them, defended them to strangers online.

They have no idea you exist.

This isn't stalking. This isn't obsession (well, mostly). This is the natural, completely human phenomenon that marketers are now weaponising at billion-dollar scale, and every one of us, from a 16-year-old watching gaming streams to a 65-year-old following a cooking vlogger, is living inside it.

WTF is Parasocial Marketing?

In 1956, two sociologists named **Donald Horton and Richard Wohl** were watching TV and had a thought:

Why do people feel like they know the hosts on screen?

So they gave this curious little phenomenon a name: **Parasocial Relationship**. It's a one-sided emotional bond where one person feels genuine intimacy, while the other doesn't even know they're part of the relationship.

That was television. Then came social media, and suddenly, that host wasn't just on your screen. They were in your pocket, replying to comments, doing Instagram Lives from their bedroom, crying on camera. The intimacy accelerated and the bond deepened.

And then, brands noticed!



Quick Brain Science: *Your brain is surprisingly easy to fool. When it comes to social emotions, it doesn't neatly separate your best friend from your favourite creator. Many of the same neural pathways are activated, making the connection feel chemically and emotionally real.*

\$32B

Global influencer marketing spend in 2025

63%

Gen Z who trust influencers more than celebrities

71%

More likely to buy after an influencer recommends

90%

Indians who have made a purchase based on an influencer's recommendation

Four People, One Screen & Zero Awareness

Parasocial marketing doesn't have a **"type."** It's happening to everyone, across every age group. Here are four fictional (but painfully real) people and their parasocial lives.

PRIYA, 16, PUNE

Gen Z · Student · Lives on Instagram Reels & YouTube Shorts

"I know everything about him. His dog's name. The café he goes to every Sunday. His whole thing with his ex. I've never met him. He has 4 million subscribers. But when he said he uses this particular phone case, I sent the link to my mom in, like, five seconds. It wasn't even a sponsored post. I just... trusted him."

What's happening?

Priya is in the deepest form of parasocial bonding, specifically she is in the Emotional Intimacy phase. She processes this creator's recommendations the same way she'd process advice from a close friend. The conversion rate on this kind of recommendation is 3–5x higher than any ad.

ARJUN, 29, BENGALURU

Elder Millennial · UX Designer · LinkedIn + YouTube + Reddit

"I know it's marketing. I can see the #ad. But somehow when this finance guy explains why a term plan makes sense while showing me his actual policy documents? I buy it. Not because of the ad. Because I feel like he's... on my side. He argues with brands. He admits when he's wrong. He feels real. So his opinion feels real."

What's happening?

Arjun represents the "aware-but-still-influenced" consumer that brands love. He has persuasion knowledge. He knows he is being sold to, but the parasocial bond overrides his scepticism. Research confirms this is the most commercially durable state.

KAVITHA, 44, CHENNAI

Gen X · HR Manager · Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp groups

"My husband thinks I'm wasting time watching cooking videos at 11pm. But that woman, she has been through so much. Divorce, career change, moved cities. And she still makes the most beautiful food. When she recommended those steel containers from that brand, I ordered two sets. One for me, and one for my sister.

Is that weird?"

What's happening?

Kavitha is in the "Community Ownership phase, meaning she advocates for this creator in her own social circles. She bought two sets. She converted someone else. This is word-of-mouth at no cost to the brand. Also, no, Kavitha, it's not weird. It's extremely normal.

SURESH, 61, AHMEDABAD

Baby Boomer · Retired Engineer · Facebook, YouTube

"My son set up YouTube for me during COVID. Now there is this doctor who explains health things simply. Not like those news channels. He's calm. He says what he knows, what he doesn't know. When he said a particular diabetes monitor was 'worth it,' I asked my son to order it the same day. I trust him more than I trust most people."

What's happening?

Suresh is part of the fastest-growing parasocial cohort in India, made up of older audiences discovering YouTube and forming intense bonds with trusted educational creators. This demographic is largely ignored by brands, which is a massive, missed opportunity.

Attention gets you noticed.
Trust is what earns you a place
in someone's life.

Why Does Your Brain Fall For This **Every Single Time?**

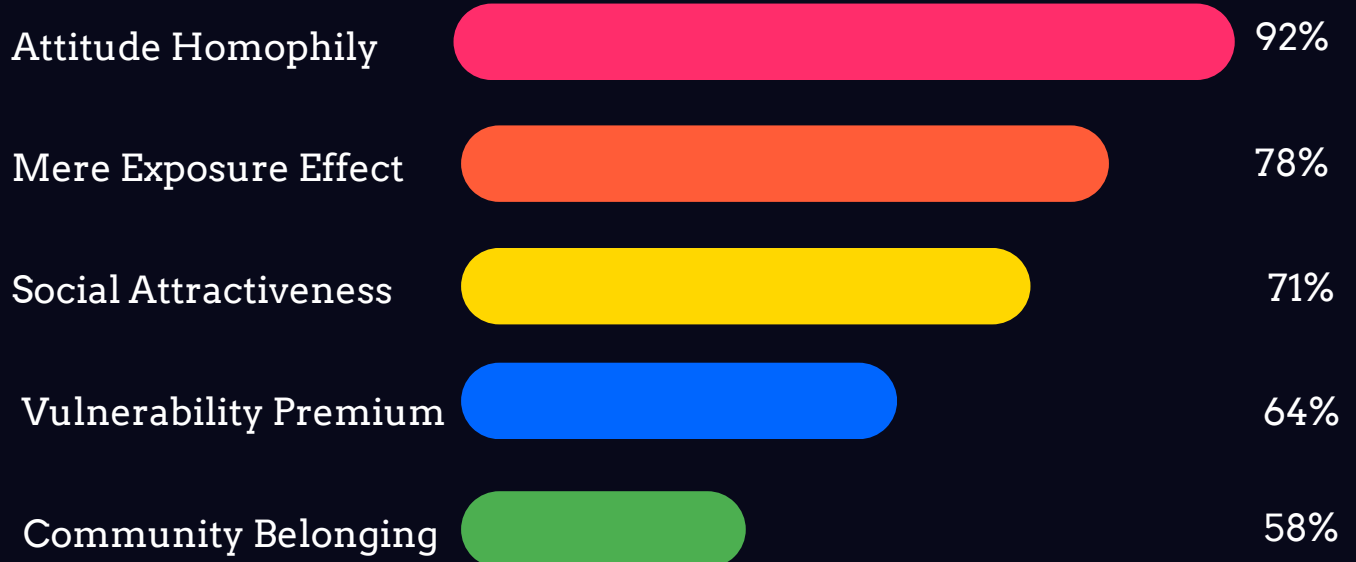
Here's the uncomfortable truth: You're not naive. You're not gullible. Your brain is working exactly as designed, and marketers figured that out before you did.

There are five psychological mechanisms driving parasocial bonds. All five are ancient. All five were designed for real human relationships. And all five fire when you're watching someone you've never met make breakfast on Reels.



Quick Brain Science: Studies from the American Psychological Association (2024) show that emotionally invested followers are 71% more likely to act on a recommendation than casual followers. This is not just correlation; it is a causal, measurable effect

Five Drivers of Parasocial Bonds



Source: Compiled from academic meta-analyses on parasocial relationship formation (2021–2025)

The Four Stages of Falling!

(For a Brand)

We often call it a marketing funnel, but that doesn't quite capture what's happening. Funnels end when someone clicks 'Buy'. Relationships don't. They evolve, they require consistency, they can lose trust, earn it back, and over time, turn ordinary audiences into people who willingly champion your brand.

I Know That Voice

1

The first moment of recognition. You stumble on a creator and something clicks. They speak your language, not literally, but in register. The slang is right. The reference lands. The frustration they describe is yours. You feel seen by someone who didn't even know they were seeing you

"This sounds like me talking to myself"

Part of My Life Now!

2

The brand or creator stops appearing as content. They are just there. Like wallpaper that you notice only when it's gone. Their product is on the shelf in the background. They mention it once, casually, weeks ago. You don't remember the ad, but you remember thinking "hmm, I should try that."

"Wait, when did I start watching them every day?"

Our Brand, Not Theirs

3

The parasocial bond goes social. You discover others who feel the same way. You talk about this creator in WhatsApp groups. You feel a proprietary fondness, as if this is something you were into before it was mainstream, and that early-adopter identity becomes part of who you are.

"I was a fan before they got big, obviously"

Don't Let Us Down

4

The deepest, most commercially powerful, and most dangerous phase. The audience feels invested in the brand's future. They advocated. They converted their friends. And now they hold the brand to the standards of an actual friend, which means any perceived betrayal lands like a real one.

"We built this together, don't mess it up!"



The important difference from traditional frameworks: In a standard marketing funnel, the end is "loyalty." In parasocial marketing, the end is accountability: an active emotional stake in the brand's behaviour. This is the most commercially durable state. And the most explosive when violated.

India is home to over **4 million content creators**, and vernacular creators alone could influence **₹84.5 lakh crore** in consumer spending by 2030. The parasocial economy isn't the future. It's already shaping how India buys, trusts, and belongs.

India Didn't Learn Parasocial Bonds From Netflix, **India** **Invented Them!**

Long before Instagram or influencers, Indians were already forming parasocial relationships. We felt connected to the cricketer from our city, discussed a film star's breakup like family news, and started our mornings listening to spiritual leaders we had never met.

*Social media didn't create these relationships.
It simply scaled them.*

That's why parasocial marketing in India works differently. People know what genuine connection feels like, and they're quick to spot when it starts feeling manufactured.

What No One Will Tell Brands About India?

Insight	Why It Matters	Opportunity/Risk
The Vernacular Advantage	Regional creators build deeper trust than one-size-fits-all influencers. Regional content is becoming mainstream.	Massive Opportunity
Influence Happens in Private	WhatsApp, Telegram, and Discord communities drive stronger trust than public social feeds.	Underinvested
Backlash Travels Faster	Strong emotional connections also mean mistakes spread faster and damage trust more quickly.	High Risk
The Rules Are Changing	Influencer marketing is under greater regulatory scrutiny, making transparency non-negotiable.	Regulatory Risk

India's Influencer Trust Landscape

Trust influencer recommendations over traditional ads	67%
Still trust traditional advertising over influencers	33%
Have made a purchase based on an influencer recommendation	90%

Source: Kantar Influencer Playbook + ASCI Trust Report

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Indians have always trusted people over institutions — a family doctor's word over a hospital's brochure, a neighbour's mechanic over a branded service centre. Creators are the digital-age extension of that instinct. In insurance, where skepticism runs deep, we've found that a creator who speaks from lived experience does what years of brand advertising struggled to — make protection feel personal. The illusion, if there is one, is thinking this is a shortcut. It isn't. It demands more authenticity from the brand, not less.



Rahul Sharma

Vice President - Brand Marketing & PR -
IndusInd General Insurance

The Drama, The Chaos, The Lessons

INDIA | 2023-24

The Founder Tweet That Surfaced

A massively successful D2C beauty brand had built its empire on influencer trust and authenticity. Their audience felt like shareholders in a mission, not customers of a product. Then: old social media posts from the founder, criticising the very culture of influencer marketing that had made them rich, resurfaced. The audience didn't just feel deceived. They felt specifically mocked. The brand had used the parasocial machinery while privately rolling their eyes at it. The backlash was not just a PR crisis. It was a parasocial contract failure. Their most loyal community members led the outrage, because they were the most invested.

INDIA | 2024

The 69% Disclosure Scandal ASCI studied India's top 100 digital stars, people with a combined 11 crore followers, and found 69% were not disclosing paid partnerships. By 2025, that had risen to 76%. Audiences were forming deep parasocial bonds and making purchase decisions based on what they thought were genuine recommendations, while the creators were quietly being paid to promote. When this became widely known, it didn't just hurt those specific creators. It made audiences retrospectively question every recommendation they'd ever acted on. Trust is expensive to build and cheap to destroy

GLOBAL | 2024

An Italian influencer promoted a Christmas cake with an implied charitable contribution. Buyers believed their purchases supported a cause, but the donation was a small fixed amount regardless of sales. When the truth emerged, she was fined over €1 million, resigned from corporate boards, and the controversy led to stricter influencer regulations. The backlash wasn't just about misleading advertising. It was about broken trust. She had felt like a friend, and friends aren't expected to deceive you.



The Finfluencer Reckoning SEBI had to step in after a category of creators, the so-called financial influencers, built enormous audiences around stock market advice packaged as casual, friendly education. Millions of followers making real financial decisions based on content that sometimes had zero regulatory backing. The parasocial trust was immense (these people felt like smart uncles giving you inside knowledge). The potential harm was enormous. SEBI's 2024 crackdown named names, flagged accounts, and began the process of either certifying or silencing an entire creator category. The friendship had become legally consequential.



The Show That Crossed a Line (And the Internet Erupted)

A wildly popular comedy show, built on the trust between its hosts and audience, became the centre of one of India's biggest digital controversies. FIRs, Supreme Court proceedings, passport seizures, and eventually, the show's removal followed. What made the fallout so significant wasn't just the controversy itself. It was the broken trust. The same parasocial bond that had earned unwavering loyalty also amplified the sense of betrayal, bringing an entire creator ecosystem under regulatory scrutiny.

THE PATTERN ACROSS EVERY SCANDAL

Every single major influencer controversy follows the same arc: deep parasocial bond, then the audience lowers its critical filter, then the creator or brand exploits or disappoints, then the audience discovers the gap between the performed version and the real one, and finally the intensity of the bond determines the intensity of the backlash. The bigger the friendship felt, the bigger the betrayal.

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In FMCG, we've always known that trust moves product faster than awareness. What creators did was democratise that trust — suddenly a 22-year-old with a phone had more influence over a purchase than a ₹2 Cr TV spot. At some point, we stopped asking 'how do we reach consumers' and started asking 'who do they already believe?' That shift changed everything about how we plan campaigns. What worked was leaning into creators whose audience already lived in our category — summer, indulgence, everyday joy. What surprised us was how little production value mattered; an unboxing in a car outperformed a studio shoot. The real insight? Consumers don't buy the product a creator recommends — they buy into the life the creator represents



Janki Patel

AGM Marketing, Havmor Ice Cream Pvt Ltd

69% of India's top digital stars
failed to disclose paid
promotions.
The audience thought they were
getting genuine
recommendations. They were
getting sponsored content
without a label.

What happens when the Friendship Breaks?

The Authenticity Collapse

When the performed persona and the real entity are revealed to be misaligned. AI generated apology statements (increasingly common in 2025) are the fastest way to confirm what people suspected: the friendship was a media team's work, not a person's. The audience doesn't need perfection. They need the signals of honesty to actually be honest.

Commercial Oversaturation

Research is unambiguous: as sponsored content rises as a proportion of a creator's output, the parasocial bond erodes. Counterintuitively, the most bonded audiences are the most sensitive to monetisation. The people who trusted you most are the first to notice when every other post is an ad. Frequency of sponsorship, and the ratio of commercial to personal content, matters enormously.

Values Misalignment

Homophily is the sense that this person thinks like me. It is the engine of parasocial bonds. When a commercial choice contradicts the values that created homophily, the engine goes into reverse. The audience doesn't just lose interest. They feel personally lied to. Old tweets. Brand partnerships with companies whose politics contradict yours. These aren't PR problems, they're identity betrayals

The Crisis Protocol Failure

In parasocial relationships, crises require human communication: direct, honest, and in the creator's actual voice. Legal team drafting, corporate framing, and silence all communicate the same thing to a bonded audience, which is that the friendship was a performance. This confirmation is often more damaging than the original transgression. The PR department's crisis playbook is the parasocial marketing team's worst enemy.

Traditional advertising, when it fails, fails quietly. A bad ad is forgotten. A parasocial bond, when violated, breaks loudly, because the audience feels not just disappointed, but betrayed by a friend. The intimacy that created the commercial value is the same intimacy that transmits the damage.

What Comes Next?

(And It's Weirder Than You Think)

AI Personalities & Synthetic Intimacy

Research published in 2025 found that people form parasocial bonds with virtual influencers at rates comparable to human ones. The psychological mechanisms are identical; only the substrate differs. What your brain responds to is emotional coherence and consistent personality over time. Whether that's generated by a human or a model matters less than you'd think. For India specifically: the virtual influencers most likely to succeed will be culturally and regionally specific. Generic AI personas optimised for global reach will fail here, because Indian audiences can tell when the homophily is fake.

The Invisible Advertising Horizon

The progression of integration marketing: explicit sponsorship → casual mention → lifestyle integration → environmental presence → background invisibility. At the ambient end of this spectrum, the product is simply part of the content texture. The brand relationship is felt but not cognitively processed as advertising. This is the most effective parasocial state, and also the most ethically complex, because it operates below the threshold of persuasion knowledge. Regulatory bodies will increasingly grapple with whether invisible integration requires disclosure.



In a world where every brand is learning to simulate friendship, the only sustainable advantage is being genuinely worth trusting.

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Creator trust in India isn't new: cricket, cinema, and spiritual broadcasts wired us for parasocial bonds long before Instagram existed. Social media just industrialised it. What we've learnt at Broadway is that it only converts when there's genuine conviction behind it. Audiences here are remarkably good at detecting when a recommendation is earned versus bought. The wrong creator, even with massive reach, can quietly undermine the very credibility you were trying to borrow. We treat creator partnerships more like curation decisions than media buys. That shift in framing has made all the difference.



Sidhant Bhutani

Head Of Marketing - Broadway

Seven Moves That Actually Matter

Recommendation	What Brands Should Do	Focus
Build Relationships, Not Campaigns	Invest in long-term creator partnerships instead of one-off collaborations.	Long Game
Go Vernacular Early	Regional creators build stronger trust and deeper community connections.	India-First
Treat Comments as Community	Engage genuinely in the comments. Small interactions build lasting trust.	Easy Win
Lead with Honesty	Be transparent, own mistakes, and communicate openly. Trust compounds over time.	Trust Builder

Recommendation	What Brands Should Do	Focus
Build Communities, Not Followers	Prioritise active, engaged communities over vanity metrics.	High Return
Create a Parasocial Ethics Framework	Set clear guidelines for disclosures, creator partnerships, and crisis response before you need them.	Risk Management
Prepare for the Inevitable Crisis	Respond quickly, honestly, and in your own voice when trust is tested.	Crisis Prep

You didn't build a following. You got
adopted.
 The question is whether you
deserved it.

Brands Doing It Right

(And One That Learned the Hard Way)

GLOBAL · EDTECH · PHASE 4: EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

Duolingo

The Brand That Turned a Guilt-Tripping Owl Into a Cult Personality

Over time, Duo, the green owl, stopped feeling like a mascot and started feeling like that slightly unhinged friend who was personally offended every time you skipped a lesson. By the time Duolingo announced Duo's "death" in February 2025, millions of people genuinely reacted. That wasn't accidental. It was the result of years spent turning a cartoon owl into a personality people cared about.

The strategy goes far beyond witty social posts. From its five-second Super Bowl ad featuring Duo, paired with a push notification sent to nearly every eligible user, to collaborations with Squid Game and Charli XCX's Brat era, every touchpoint builds on the same idea. Duolingo isn't just marketing a product. It's expanding a universe people want to be part of.



Duolingo didn't just create an app; it created a personality. Duo isn't a mascot anymore. It's the friend who remembers you skipped your lesson and isn't afraid to remind you. That's why the brand stays top of mind, even for people who haven't opened the app in weeks. The guilt is part of the bond.

Zomato

The Brand That Decided to Own Conversations, Not Impressions

In 2017, Zomato's then Global Head of Marketing made a simple observation: the goal wasn't to own impressions anymore. It was to own conversations. That shift went on to redefine how Indian brands behaved online.

Zomato stopped sounding like a food delivery app and started sounding like a person. Its posts were witty, self-aware, and refreshingly human. People didn't follow the brand because they wanted food updates. They followed it because they enjoyed hearing what it had to say.

One of the best examples came in November 2024, when Swiggy listed on the BSE. Instead of treating it as a competitive moment, Zomato congratulated its rival with an illustration of a Zomato and Swiggy delivery partner standing together outside the stock exchange. The post went viral, not because it was clever, but because it felt genuinely generous. It was the kind of thing you'd expect from a good person, not a brand.



Zomato's biggest differentiator isn't just its app. It's its personality. In a market where the product experience is often similar, people gravitate towards the brand that already feels familiar. Years of consistent storytelling have made Zomato feel less like a company and more like someone you know.



But then came the Pure Veg controversy:

In March 2024, Zomato announced its Pure Veg Fleet, with separate delivery partners for vegetarian orders. The move was met with immediate backlash, with many calling it discriminatory. Within hours, CEO Deepinder Goyal addressed the criticism on X, acknowledged the concerns, and rolled back the separate fleet. The response felt direct, personal, and transparent. It wasn't a polished corporate statement; it was a conversation. And that helped preserve the trust Zomato had spent years building.

Amul

The Original Parasocial Brand. Before Parasocial Was a Word

If you want to understand parasocial marketing in its most enduring form, look at Amul. The Utterly Butterly Girl has been commenting on India's everyday moments since 1966 without missing a beat. Politics, cricket, Bollywood, social issues, global events, everything eventually finds its way onto an Amul billboard, usually within hours of the news breaking.

Long before "moment marketing" became an industry buzzword, Amul was already doing it.

What's remarkable is that these ads rarely try to sell butter. Instead, they capture the country's mood with humour, familiarity, and just the right amount of wit. Over time, people stopped looking at an Amul hoarding as an advertisement and started looking at it as part of the conversation. When something big happens, you almost expect Amul to have an opinion on it.

That's what decades of consistency can do. It turns a mascot into a familiar face and a brand into a cultural commentator that generations have grown up with.



Amul proves that the strongest parasocial relationships aren't built through massive ad budgets. They're built through consistency. For six decades, the brand has shown up with the same voice, the same cultural awareness, and an uncanny ability to say something relevant at exactly the right moment. People trust Amul to have a take on whatever the country is talking about, and that trust has compounded over generations. No influencers, no celebrity ambassadors, no elaborate campaigns. Just a cartoon girl who somehow always seems to know what's on everyone's mind.

Stanley

The Brand That Let a Burning Car Write Its Best Marketing Story

In November 2023, a TikTok creator shared a video of her car after it had caught fire. Everything was destroyed except one thing: her Stanley tumbler. It was still sitting in the cup holder with ice inside. The video quickly went viral.

Stanley could have replied with a comment or sent her a replacement tumbler. Instead, the company's president personally offered to replace her car.

It wasn't just a generous gesture. It showed the audience that the brand was listening and willing to act. Within days, Stanley had turned a viral moment into a lasting demonstration of trust. People didn't just remember the tumbler survived the fire; they remembered how the brand responded. Sometimes, that's what people end up buying into.



Stanley's biggest marketing moment wasn't a campaign. It was a crisis. What made it memorable wasn't the viral video, but the response. Instead of a corporate statement, the company's president offered to replace the customer's car. It felt personal, empathetic, and immediate. Sometimes, the strongest parasocial moments aren't created in a boardroom. They emerge from how a brand chooses to show up when no one expected it to.

At a Glance: What Phase Are You In?

Brand	Parasocial Phase	What They Do Well	Key Takeaway
Duolingo	Phase 4: Intimacy	Built a distinct brand personality through humour, recurring lore, and community in-jokes.	Personality creates emotional attachment.
Zomato	Phase 3: Community	Uses a consistent, human voice, topical content, and transparent communication.	Consistency builds familiarity and trust.
Amul	Phase 4: Generational Intimacy	Six decades of cultural commentary delivered with humour and consistency.	Long-term consistency compounds into cultural relevance.
Stanley	Phase 3 → 4	Turned an unexpected customer moment into a memorable display of empathy.	How you respond often matters more than what you market.

The best brands don't chase **attention**. They earn **trust**, and then show up often enough to keep it.

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About SoCheers



An end-to-end Marketing Agency

Founded in 2013, SoCheers began with a simple vision: to shape brand narratives that truly connect. Over the years, we've evolved from a digital-first agency into a fully integrated creative and marketing partner, combining storytelling, media, technology, and AI to solve business challenges and create measurable impact.

Today, we work across branding, social media, influencer marketing, performance marketing, films, AI-led solutions, and integrated campaigns. Our approach goes beyond execution. We partner with brands to build strategies that drive growth, strengthen reputation, and create lasting consumer connections through a blend of creativity, data, and innovation.

Our client portfolio spans industries including FMCG, entertainment, retail, automotive, consumer technology, education, and hospitality. We've had the privilege of partnering with brands such as **Amazon MX Player, ITC, ASUS, boAt, Study in India, Croma, Mahindra Automobiles, Havmor, Asian Paints, BGMI, Godrej Interio, Tata Consumer Products, Nickelodeon, Belgian Waffle, Haldiram's, JioStar, Sony**, and many more.

Our work has been recognised by some of the industry's most respected platforms, including **Clio Entertainment Awards, The Webby Awards, The Drum Awards, and MMA Smarties**.

Today, SoCheers continues to evolve as a strategic partner for brands, helping them navigate an increasingly complex marketing landscape through integrated thinking, bold creativity, and technology-led solutions.

The Friendship Illusion

A whitepaper on parasocial marketing for anyone who's ever laughed, cried, defended, or felt strangely invested in someone they've never actually met. In other words, almost all of us.