

A Bibliometric Analysis of Research Trends, Themes, and New Directions on Social Media Influencers and Audience Engagement in the Digital Age

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Purpose-The social media influencer domain has been growing and maturing since 2019, which is remarkable, as there is a 20.78% annual growth rate and there has been strong international collaboration, which includes 39.88% of articles. Despite this expansion, no study was identified that contains a PRISMA and systematic bibliometric review of its output, influence and thematic evolution. We retrieved 1504 publications that were filtered using the PRISMA technique, which resulted in 163 filtered papers. This study fills this gap by analyzing 163 (Q1 category) Scopus publications from 2019 to 2026 covering 58 sources and conducting descriptive analysis with 481 authors and 3.34 average co-authors. It also includes the most influential document of the study, source distribution through Bradfords Law and Keyword pattern (568) phrases. The core journals were aligned (e.g. Journal of retailing and Consumer services), highly cited works, and thematic cluster(influencer, consumer engagement) it clarifies the field's collaborative structure, intellectual foundation, and emerging priorities to guide future agenda.

Design/Methodology- This study has used PRISMA approach and Bibliometric analysis using Rstudio. The data was collected from scopus with the keywords "Social media influencer" OR "Influencer Marketing" which generated 1504 papers. These papers were screened further by excluding Bibliometric and Systematic literature review (n= 447) to obtain 1057 empirical studies. Afterwards, the inclusion criteria "audience engagement" was implemented which yielded 163 documents (2019-2026).

Findings- The study finds an exponential rise with an annual growth rate of 20.78%. There was a peak in 2025 with 77 publications. International 39.63% , 3.34 co-authors average and impact(36.33 citations/doc despite 1.91-year avg age. The leading journal is Journal of Retailing and consumer services (h-index 12, 26 pubs ; Bradford core zone). Institutions: Pontificia Universidade Católica do Paraná is the leading institutions; USA(260)pubs, China(194), Hongkong(141). Hughes et al.(2019) received the highest number of citations (560). Keyword research discovered 568 phrases with primary themes including influencer marketing (59), social media (50), marketing (35) and rising clusters: consumer engagement (19).

Originality-

This is the first current collaborative study (2019-2026) Scopus Q1 bibliometric alignment of several indicators such as (Bradford/Lotka), institutional/country and thematic. It highlights core journals, citation journals and the changing trend, providing agenda and strategic insights for scholars navigating this expanding, globally collaborative sector.

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Introduction

Influencer marketing is believed to be one of the most effective advertising method. It is frequently used by companies to interact with their online communities and audience which in turn draws attention to the products and services they provide and to increase business performance (Guo et al., 2025). The market traction and extent to which social commerce inculcates customers to communicate, find and buy using social platforms has risen rapidly (Fu et al., 2026). It has also become the part of marketing communication as the customers shared the stories, reviews and opinions of the items they used in their everyday lives(Kim et al., 2025). The digital era has immensely transformed the marketplace. Brand involvement was mostly through social media. They also

deliberately teamed with social media influencer to extend the reach and awareness of the business (Cheah et al., 2024).

However, despite this development indicated by 163 scopus Q1 documents from 2019 to 2026 with 20.78% yearly growth, the study is still distributed among multiple publications, themes, techniques and regions. There are many empirical research but not connected. All the studies so far deal with various issues. Some study virtual vs human influencers, purchase intention ((Chen et al., 2026), Journal of Retailing and consumer services), gamified influencer messages((Kapoor et al., 2026), Journal of travel research), emotional expression and driving engagement((Liu, 2026), Frontiers in psychology), or Green Product endorsements((Wu & Li, 2026), Journal of retailing and consumer

services. The contribution of different countries differs dramatically (USA 260 pubs, China 194), but Asia is rising fast. There have been individual studies put up presenting narrow insights because of the fact that they focus on limited variables and fragmented theories. The bibliometric mapping analysis lacks the revelation of the core journals, influential authors/countries, keyword clusters, and other laws such as Bradford's/Lotka's that regulate their knowledge generation. This gap hinders the comprehension of human influencers as the foundation of the still-dominant paradigm of human influencers.

Literature review

1. Evolution of influencer marketing

Influencers have shifted from conventional to modern digital tactics of advocacy. With the growth in social media usage and technical advancement, the involvement of influencer marketing increased. Influencer marketing was formerly the domain of celebrities only for product placement, now it's celebrities who are active on social media platforms, to measure customer interest at the micro or niche level. Today, influencer marketing is done to reflect authenticity of influencer as well as for product being advertised. Social media influencers are independent third part endorsers who utilize social media to affect the attitude of the audience via blogs and tweets (Freberg et al., 2011)

The development of influencer marketing has been brought about by the growth of self-branding and micro-celebrity culture on social media platforms.

The ongoing interaction of an audience on social media offers individuals the chance to build their personal brands successfully and to obtain financial advantage through online exposure. (Khamis et al., 2017).

The influencer marketing has become platform-centred branding approach, with the increase of social media platforms like Youtube and Instagram (Kozinets, 2022). This study indicated that the efficiency of the followers on Instagram is significantly dependent on the follower number and the similarity between the influencer and the recommended products. The results of the study showed that customers have more positive engagement with the influencers that have maintained synergy and reliability for the products they support (De Veirman et al., 2017).

The expansion of influencer marketing has led to numerous studies that have looked at many different aspects of working with influencers. Influencer marketing has evolved to an integrated digital ecosystem in which multiple digital social media platforms are used to promote a business or to develop compelling content (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

2.2 Influencer marketing and consumer behaviour

There are many research that have established the association between the influencer marketing and the consumer behaviour. Influencers can establish trust with brands and influence purchasing decisions through compelling content and foster relationships with their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Previous research has found informativeness, enjoyment and credibility has positively improved followers trust which in turn has further affected brand awareness and purchasing decisions (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

2.3 Emerging trends in Influencer marketing research

There has been a transition which the recent studies has found out in the field of influencer marketing. There has been a shift toward artificial intelligence, virtual influencers and content strategies (Hudders et al., 2021; Leung et al., 2022). Research in this field shows that influencer marketing is now more data driven and technology oriented. In recent research it has been found out that the consumer behaviour and market effectiveness is being shaped by using virtual influencers, content strategy and AI enabled communication.

Recent study also highlight the concern about disclosure, ethical, influencer product fit, platform governance. The studies also shown concern about influencer's credibility, authenticity and sponsorship disclosure (De Cicco et al., 2021; Leung et al., 2022).

Research gap

There is fragmentation of literature across various disciplines in the field of influencer marketing. The research is done largely in the domain of consumer engagement or influencer credibility. There should be deeper analysis on human influencers vs virtual influencers. There is lack of studies in longitudinal studies on engagement effects. Also, there is limited integration of technology with engagement models. There is insufficiency in bibliometric studies that combines productivity analysis, collaboration structure, conceptual evolution, citation impact and thematic development.

The present study addresses the gap by doing bibliometric analysis and PRISMA approach.

3. Research methodology
3.1 The study was conducted using PRISMA technique and bibliometric analysis using RStudio to investigate the evolution of influencer marketing. The present uses a quantitative bibliometric research approach to investigate the results of this research on social media influencers and audience engagement. Bibliometric analysis is one of the rigorous and common method for assessing massive scientific quantitative data. Bibliometric analysis applies multiple methodologies which consist mathematics and statistics. Both strategies are employed to analyse huge academic publications. Bibliometric analysis offers systematic examination and

recognition of prominent authors, countries, citations, themes and patterns in the appropriate research field. It shows the evolutionary outcomes in study field. it helps to shine a light on the rising trends in a certain research area.

In this study, the quantitative review approach was also applied to analyze the academic publication in a numerical and statistical manner. This approach has been used in this study as it is suitable to study the evolutionary and rapid growth in the field of social media influencer as it helps in providing the measurable insights into thematic development, citation structure and publication growth. For more emphasis on the empirical data and to reduce subjective interpretation in bibliometric analysis, this study uses the quantitative review approach.

This study also uses the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) approach to improve transparency and dependability. PRISMA is a systematic framework in which data is refined through prescribed stages to make the final data set more reproducible and to decrease biases. It follows the systematic approach which is locating, filtering, accessing and incorporating relevant studies to make the research more dependable. The data for the present investigation were acquired utilizing the PRISMA technique. First, we extracted the data from Scopus using the terms "Social media influencer" and "audience engagement". We have chosen only Q1 category papers and this has given us 1504 documents. The data collection was subsequently filtered to exclude documents containing bibliometric research, systematic literature review, conference papers, and other unrelated documents, by applying exclusion criteria, leaving 1057 publications. The final step in the process of refining the dataset was the application of the inclusion criteria with an emphasis on topic relevance to social media influencer and audience interaction. The final data set for bibliometric analysis comprised 163 documents.

The data is obtained from Scopus. For this investigation data were collected from scopus database. The paper selected just scopus as a database as it gives larger coverage, quality indexing and citation reliability. It is one of the largest database and contains peer reviewed journals. The present study has analyzed just Q1 category journals. Since bibliometric analysis is performed on the data base, the dataset should be more dependable to obtain excellent findings.

3.3 Bibliometric Tool

The study used Bibliometrix for analysis which is R based analysis package. This software is widely used for quantitative analysis of large dataset. This software provides comprehensive findings which includes citation analysis, co-word analysis, thematic mapping, collaboration networks word dynamics, source production overtime, country

citation analysis, most influential documents, institutional productivity, and trend analysis.

3.4 Reliability and validity

Bibliometric analysis is utilized to provide genuine and dependable data in order to increase the study's credibility. Along with bibliometric, several other methodologies are used to get the valid and reliable results.

First, The database was extracted using Scopus, where only Q1 category journals were considered. In the next step, PRISMA approach was used for screening and assessing the papers. And in the last final step exclusion and inclusion criteria was used to reduce the biasness of result.

Further to ensure the reliability and validity of the study the study was standardized by using the keywords which were more study focused.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Country-Wise citation

A citation analysis per nation was performed to identify the regional distribution of scholarly influence in the area of social media influencer and audience engagement research. Citation-based evaluation provides a more thorough view of research visibility, scholarly influence and intellectual contribution than just counting publications. The data demonstrate large country inequalities in citation performances and point to an unequal distribution of scholarly impact in the subject.

The data showed that the most influential country for total was the United States with 1166 citations. China was second with 736 citations, followed by Germany with 366, Hong Kong with 570 and Spain with 491. These findings reveal that, whereas publishing output is distributed worldwide, citation impact is still concentrated in a few countries. One notable conclusion is the mismatch between the average citation impact per article and the total volume of citations. Countries like China and the US had high total citations mainly due to their higher publication output. Other countries had remarkably high average citations per article despite their relatively lower publishing volumes. The highest average citation impact was found in Hong Kong (190 citations per article), followed by the United Arab Emirates (179.5 citations), Germany (122 citations), Singapore (95 citations) and Spain (81.8 citations).

These findings indicate that high publishing production is not necessarily related to more scholarly influence. For example, China generated a large volume of research yet the citation intensity per piece was far higher in Germany and Hong Kong. This shows that some countries publish fewer

but more important articles, which could suggest higher quality research, a more important theoretical contribution, or a deeper awareness of global issues. The citation structure also shows a large concentration effect in the worldwide research environment. United States alone contributed about 20.7% of the total 5,623 citations in the dataset. The top five countries also accounted for over half of all citations, highlighting a large disparity in the global impact of academics.

The United States ranks number one in the world for citation performance for a number of factors, including highly visible journals, robust international collaboration networks, advanced research infrastructure, and close linkages between academia and the digital marketing business. Similarly, China's fast-growing digital economy and ramped-up research spending on consumer interaction studies, social media analytics and artificial intelligence are mirrored in the country's impressive citation record. One of the most important findings of the investigation is the extraordinarily high average citation impact of Hong Kong. While there are considerably fewer publications in the region than in China or the US, the papers from the region receive significantly more citation attention. This could be a symptom of greater quality publishing, more international collaboration or placement in important journals.

The findings also illustrate the growing significance of emerging economies in the field of influencer marketing research. Citations were heavily influenced by countries with relatively smaller research ecosystems, such as Singapore and the United Arab Emirates. This means that the field is getting more and more great scholarship, as new research institutes appear. However, a few countries had a rather low citation performance. Very little citation impact was seen in South Africa, Belgium and Turkey. This little exposure may be due to a small number of publications, a recent introduction of the topic, a lack of international collaboration or restricted access to high-impact publication sources.

Another key result is the association between the influence of citations and international cooperation. Academic papers with higher citation impact were generally associated to stronger multiple-country publishing (MCP) patterns, showing that international collaboration enhances academic dissemination and visibility of research. Collaborative research networks offer potential to boost citation success through enhancement of methodological quality, worldwide accessibility and interdisciplinary integration. The distribution of citations per nation also reflects

the greater globalization of research in influencer marketing. Previous studies on digital marketing have been mostly concentrated on academic institutions in North America and Europe. But the latest results show substantial intellectual development in the Asia Pacific region, particularly in China, Hong Kong, India, Singapore and Malaysia. This suggests that the research on influencer marketing is more and more influenced by different cultural, technological and economic contexts.

The unequal distribution of citations in a theoretical perspective corroborate the bibliometric hypotheses that scientific effect is concentrated in a few major research systems. This kind of specialization is typical in nascent interdisciplinary fields, where a few countries establish intellectual leadership from the beginning. The findings are comparable with prior bibliometric studies on digital marketing and communication, which likewise reported concentration of citations in economically and technologically sophisticated countries. Yet, the present study is built on prior research, which points to the growing emergence of Asia-Pacific countries as significant contributors to the body of knowledge on influencer marketing. The country-wise citation analysis will greatly affect the future research breakthroughs. First, it stresses the need for more international collaboration between existing and future systems of research to ameliorate academic inequality. Second, it shows that future research on influencer marketing may increasingly involve cross-cultural viewpoints as more countries engage actively in the business. Third, the results indicate that, for underrepresented disciplines, interdisciplinary integration, joint publishing, and engagement with international academic networks are essential avenues to broaden the exposure of their research. Overall, the country-by-country citation analysis suggests that scholarly influence in social media influencer research and audience engagement remains highly concentrated but is expanding globally. Although citation accumulation is still dominated by traditional research systems, emerging countries are rapidly increasing their intellectual footprint, leading to a growing globalization of the subject.

4.2 Keyword Frequency Analysis We employed keyword frequency analysis to discover the most prominent conceptual topics, new research directions, and intellectual framework in the field of social media influencer and audience engagement research. Keywords are the intellectual basis of scientific writing and they show the subject orientation, academic priorities and developmental trends of a research area. Looking at terms that occur regularly can assist discover fundamental themes of study, conceptual groupings and shifts in research

interests.

The data indicate that influencer marketing emerged as the most common term in the sample with 59 occurrences. Then came social media (50 mentions), marketing (35 mentions), consumer engagement (19 mentions) and virtual influencers (18 mentions). The prominence of these terms shows the main focus of the subject is the ways of audience contact, social media ecosystems and digital marketing communication.

A high frequency of phrases linked to influencers indicates that the major focus of scholarly work is on digital consumer interaction and influencer-driven persuasion. The interdisciplinary character of the topic is further underscored by the cohabitation of words pertaining to marketing, communication, consumer behavior and technology. This underscores the field's transition from traditional advertising to more extensive inquiries involving psychology, artificial intelligence, information systems, and digital sociology. The topic analysis revealed three major conceptual clusters in the literature. The first cluster contains keywords such as influencer marketing, social media influencer, influencer, influencers and virtual influencer, and is concerned with the influencer ecosystem, emphasizing the growing academic interest in digital personalities and influencer-mediated communication. The second cluster relates to consumer behavior and engagement and is captured by terms like consumer engagement, customer engagement, consumer behavior and consumption behavior. These terms indicate an increasing focus on the impact of influencer material on consumer attitudes, trust, emotional connection and buy intentions. The third cluster, concentrating on digital platforms and technology-related topics, such as Instagram, social media, and electronic commerce, reflects the growing importance of digital interaction structures, algorithmic visibility, and platform-specific communication environments in shaping audience engagement.

Another core cluster is made up of the themes of sincerity, trust and persuasion tactics. As indicated by keywords like authenticity, authentication, and content marketing, scholarly interest in the growth of credibility, consumer trust, transparency, and ethical challenges in influencer communication, such as the disclosure of sponsored material and phony followers, is expanding. The paper also points out the fast rise of virtual influencers as an important research topic in view of the growing academic interest in AI-generated digital identities and technology-facilitated audience engagement. The findings suggest that influencer marketing research is moving away from traditional human-centered communication and towards technology-integrated ecosystems that include artificial intelligence, algorithmic customization,

and digital authenticity. Besides, the abundance of keyword forms, such as influencer and influencers, reveals terminological fragmentation, indicating that the subject is still in the making, dynamic, and in search of conceptual uniformity.

4.3 Most Influential Documents Through the analysis of the most influential papers, the most influential documents were identified, and the foundational writings that have significantly contributed to the intellectual development of social media influencer and audience engagement research were determined. The citation-based evaluation revealed that most of the most highly cited research was published between 2019 and 2022, showing that the subject is relatively new yet developing rapidly. The prevalence of recent publications suggests that research in influencer marketing is in an active developmental stage with high knowledge growth and rising scholarly interest. The most influential publication at global citation level was Hughes et al. (2019) with 560 citations, while the second was Jiménez-Castillo et al. (2019) with 396 citations. In contrast, normalised citation indicates that the relative scholarly influence is stronger for more recent research such as Tafesse (2021) and Leung et al. (2022). It was discovered that during the era between 2019 and 2022 the papers were highly cited which shows influencer marketing was dynamic and raising significantly during that period. The latest release shows that there is a rapid development of knowledge, driven by technological transformation. The key conclusion of the analysis is that the latest studies had a higher normalized citation effect than the earlier studies. For example, Tafesse (2021) and Leung et al. (2022) received very high normalized citation scores, demonstrating that recent research is affecting current research orientations more than older foundational works. This shows how fast influencer marketing research is moving with new subjects like digital engagement, virtual influencers, authenticity, and AI-driven communication systems getting scholarly attention and citations. The data also reveal the field's tremendously diversified yet marketing-oriented conceptual structure. The most cited papers were in journals dealing with marketing, advertising, retail and digital information management. This indicates that, while a background in marketing scholarship is retained, the research in influencer marketing draws on insights from a variety of academic fields. The citation structure indicates the discipline is characterized by strong current scholarly relevance, rapid theoretical evolution and increasing technology integration.

4.4 Institutional Productivity Analysis The institutional productivity analysis identified the top academic institutions that support research on social media influencers and audience engagement. The results demonstrate a geographically broad and

dispersed research landscape, with contributions from institutions in Asia, Europe, North America and South America. The contemporary region is marked by a rather decentralized institutional structure reflecting a widespread internationalization and weight of global interest, as opposed to academic specialties that are consolidated and often dominated by a few famous universities.

The most productive association was Pontificia Universidade Católica do Paraná with six publications. Indian Institute of Management Indore was next with five. Other notable contributions include Pennsylvania State University, Sunway University, Jinan University, Sunway Business School. Institutions from Brazil, India, China, Malaysia, Hong Kong and United States are present, which highlights the global dimension of influencer marketing research and illustrates that academic contributions are not confined to a particular geographic location.

The data indicates a significant trend: Asia-Pacific institutions are well represented. A substantial amount of the research output is from colleges in China, India, Malaysia and Hong Kong, which is representative of the region's growing reliance on influencer-led economies, digital marketing and social media use. This finding is consistent with the rising influence of Asia-Pacific countries in consumer engagement and global digital transformation research. Additionally, the fact that firms from developed and developing countries are involved shows that influencer marketing has become a subject of global importance, which is beyond countries' boundaries. Also the largest contribution was only six publications, and hence the statistics also suggest that no single institution has an inordinate amount of control over publishing output. This means that the field remains in an expansion phase with decentralized competency and collaborative knowledge development, and still institutionally fragmented. This type of institutional dispersion is often associated with emerging and diverse research disciplines, in which various universities contribute to theory development and empirical investigation. Overall, the analysis of institutional productivity highlights the collaborative and global nature of influencer marketing research, illustrating the role of many academic institutions in advancing the knowledge of audience engagement and social media influencers.

4.5 Author Productivity Analysis A study on author productivity was undertaken to recognize the most active contributors and to review the authorship pattern in the research domain of social media influencer and audience engagement. The results indicate that the research area is characterized by a spread of academic activity and is not dominated by a single researcher or research group. The pattern

implies that influencer marketing is still a nascent and rapidly evolving profession that draws contributions from a broad range of academics from different fields and geographical locations. The most productive authors were Sun Y and Wang Y with four publications each in the sample. However, if we take the fractionalized authorship into account, which takes into account the level of individual involvement in co-authored works, Wang Y [KS16.1][PS16.2] has a slightly higher contribution (1.45 fractionalized articles) than Sun Y (1.28 fractionalized articles). Other authors with three papers each were Chen J, Cheung M. L., Kim E, Koay K. Y., Li J, Li X, Myers S, Sen S, and Syrdal H. A. . This further confirmed the existence of numerous medium-output authorities and not a single dominant intellectual authority. The data also illustrate the fragmented authorship structure with most authors publishing one or two papers and a tiny fraction of them having several publications. This distribution is consistent with Lotka's Law which asserts that while the majority of academics publish relatively few publications, scientific activity tends to be concentrated in a small number of scholars. This is a quite common pattern in new fields of research, where theoretical perspectives are continually shifting and knowledge development is widespread among many persons. One of the major findings is that scholarly impact does not necessarily correlate with publishing production. Some less productive scholars may get high citation impact from publishing in high profile journals, whereas some very productive authors may not be the most cited. This contrast highlights the difference in the influence and production of academics in the area. In summary, the author productivity analysis reveals that the research on social media influencers and audience engagement is marked by decentralized academic participation, expanding international cooperation, and augmenting intellectual diversity, which collectively facilitate the sustained development of the field.

4.6 Thematic Evolution The objective of the topic evolution analysis was to examine the advancement of research themes in the field of audience engagement and social media influencers. The results illustrate a clear progression from basic ideas about influencer marketing and social media communication to more specialized topics such as consumer engagement, authenticity and technology-enabled influence mechanisms. The discipline has grown as academics have shifted from descriptive studies of influencer phenomena to more nuanced evaluations of audience behaviour, persuasion strategies and digital interaction dynamics. At the beginning of the research process, broad themes such as social media, marketing, influencers and social media influencers garnered the lion's share of academic attention. These issues have provided the conceptual basis of the field,

concentrating on the role of digital content providers in marketing communications and brand promotion. Currently, the majority of research focused on online exposure, influencer characteristics, and the effectiveness of social media platforms as marketing tools.

As the discipline evolved, research slowly shifted towards consumer-centered perspectives. With the increasing interest in understanding the effect of influencer-generated content on audience attitude, trust, emotional attachment, and behavioral responses, subjects including consumer engagement, customer engagement, consumer behavior, and buy intention have become more important. This trend is indicative of the increasing importance of research on audience outcome and relationship-building process in the digital setting, as opposed to source-centric research. More recently, the thematic evolution has been characterized by the emergence of technologically oriented themes such as virtual influencers, authenticity, artificial intelligence, and digital trust. The growing prominence of these subjects shows that influencer marketing research is entering a new phase in which AI-generated digital personalities, algorithmic communication and technology innovation are becoming core research areas. This shift in focus reflects the growing convergence of behavioral and technical perspectives into the wider influencer marketing literature.

The thematic evolution study reveals that the topic has evolved from basic research on influencer communication to a more diverse and technologically sophisticated research field. The evolution of themes reflects changing corporate practices, advances in digital technology and increasing scholarly interest in understanding the complex mechanisms through which influencers shape audience engagement and consumer decision. Trend topic analysis was conducted to identify new and emerging themes of study in the literature on social media influencers and audience engagement. It shows the areas that are attracting increased academic interest. It offers an understanding of the changing academic priorities by analyzing the temporal distribution of keywords. The results demonstrate a considerable topic variety within the profession, with new subjects surfacing alongside existing study issues. The data reveal that traditional issues such as influencer marketing, social media and marketing have stayed popular during the time frame of the study, which suggests their significance as key concepts in the literature. These themes still predominate academic discourse and provide the theoretical foundation of studies on influencer marketing. Their continued use demonstrates that influencer driven communications strategies and the social media platforms are still relevant to marketing

research today. One interesting finding is the growing popularity of engagement-related topics, e.g. customer engagement, consumer behavior, and consumer engagement. The growing use of these terminology suggests an increasing interest from researchers to understand audience engagement, interaction and behavioral outcomes from influencer communication. This is part of a bigger shift from measuring influencer marketing effectiveness by the sheer number of people reached or the prominence of the content, to measuring it by engagement metrics.

The most important emerging trend discovered in the inquiry is the emergence of virtual influencers and related technology-driven concepts. The growing prevalence of this keyword indicates that scholars have increasingly been focusing on artificial intelligence (AI) generated digital personalities, synthetic identities and technologically mediated forms of influence. With the growth of virtual influencers, notions such as authenticity, digital trust and content credibility have also emerged in the context of increasing concerns about transparency, ethical communication and consumer perceptions in the increasingly complex digital world.

The trend study also reveals that the research on influencer marketing is becoming more diverse. "The field is expanding, as evidenced by emerging topics that draw on marketing, psychology, communication, information systems and artificial intelligence. The presence of well-developed topics and rapidly changing themes indicates a vibrant research environment characterized by constant innovation and conceptual evolution. Overall, the trend topic analysis indicates a shift in the influencer marketing literature from traditional social media communication studies to more complex studies around behavior. As virtual influencers, issues of authenticity and AI-mediated engagement are becoming more important, and it is expected that future research will explore more deeply issues of digital trust, algorithmic influence, technical authenticity, and the evolving relationship between consumers and digital communication agents.

4.7 Collaboration Structure A cooperation structure analysis was implemented in the Most Relevant Countries by Corresponding Author dataset to explore the extent of domestic and international research collaboration in the field of social media influencer and audience engagement. The collaboration patterns were analysed based on the distribution of Single-Country Publications (SCP) and Multiple-Country Publications (MCP) which provide information on the national research capabilities and international exchange of knowledge. The results indicate a globally interconnected research landscape with strong

domestic research ecosystems and wide international cooperation networks. According to the data, China was the largest contributor (38 articles, 23.3%), followed by the US (16 publications) and India (15 publications). These countries also had a higher fraction of single-country publications, showing that domestic collaborations play an important role in their research output. China generated 29 SCPs against 9 MCPs and the US and India demonstrated a stronger reliance on national research networks. This trend implies that these countries have a solid internal intellectual capability and well-developed research infrastructures. In contrast, other countries showed far higher levels of international cooperation. The strong dependence on foreign cooperation was observed in countries such as France (80% MCP), Germany (66.7% MCP) and the United Kingdom (60% MCP). Also, countries such as Belgium, Brazil and Hong Kong had a 100% MCP rate, which indicates that all the retrieved publications were the result of international collaboration. These findings indicate that international collaboration is vital to knowledge production and dissemination, especially in countries with tiny research communities or highly specialized abilities.

The analysis also points to a significant gap between countries that are focused on collaboration and those who are research powerhouses. Many European and smaller countries rely substantially on international cooperation, while large production countries such as China, the US and India rely more on indigenous research skills. Large research systems have the capacity to fulfil national research objectives. Smaller countries rely on international networks to raise visibility, access expertise and increase the effect of research. This pattern is consistent with the general trends in worldwide scientific productivity. Another important conclusion is the highly skewed contribution of the nations to the study. Most countries publish one or two articles, but a small number of countries provide a large proportion of all publications. This unbalanced distribution also means that there is still a concentration of knowledge on audience interaction and social media influencers in only a few research centres. The presence of a wide variety of countries, however, indicates the growing importance of influencer marketing as a multidisciplinary subject of study on a global scale. Overall, in the study of the partnership structure, the area demonstrates increasing internationalization and international sharing of information. The existence of strong domestic research systems and wide-ranging cross-border collaborations indicates an advanced and interconnected academic network. These findings suggest that future trends in influencer marketing research will be driven by further international collaboration, interdisciplinary collaborations, and the inclusion of different

regional perspectives on digital communication and audience engagement.

5.

The current study provides a comprehensive bibliometric examination of the conceptual, intellectual, and collaborative evolution of research on audience engagement and social media influencers. An review of 163 Scopus-indexed journal papers shows that influencer marketing has evolved into a complex interdisciplinary research topic, encompassing consumer behavior, communication studies, information systems, artificial intelligence and digital sociology. All results indicate that scholarly productivity, conceptual variety and international cooperation in the field have increased significantly in recent years. One of the most noteworthy outcomes of the study is the spatial concentration of intellectual influence. The country-wise examination of citations shows that the United States, China, and Hong Kong, respectively, are in the top three in terms of citation effect, proving their dominant role in shaping the intellectual foundations of the discipline. The United States had the highest total citations, reflecting its long history of marketing and consumer behavior research. However, the exceptionally high average citation ratings for Germany, United Arab Emirates and Hong Kong suggest that not only the publication volume determines the research impact. Instead, the findings suggest that small research communities are able to create very influential work that has a strong impact on the scholarly discourse. This result is consistent with the broader bibliometric literature that argues that citation excellence is often associated with collaborative networks, visibility of publications, and research quality and not only production.

Additional evidence for the assertion that influencer marketing is still a relatively new and developing subject of research is provided by the author's productivity analysis. There is no dominant author in the discipline, with the most prolific scholars having written only four publications each. This fragmented authorship structure is common for emerging research topics, when numerous academics work collaboratively to develop ideas and improve empirical findings. The results reveal the existence of a large number of intermittent contributors existing together with a small number of rather prolific researchers in agreement with Lotka's Law. The pattern indicates that the field is still open to new theoretical perspectives and analytical tools, hence fostering intellectual diversity and creativity. The institutional productivity study provides more evidence of the worldwide and decentralized nature of the field of influencer marketing research. The most prolific institutions' associations were Brazil, India, China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and the United States, meaning that academic contributions are

scattered all over the world and not limited to a few prominent universities. The value of institutions from developing economies becomes particularly evident in countries undergoing rapid digitization, where the power of social media platforms and communication driven by influencers is on the rise. This geographic variation increases the global applicability of influencer marketing theories and informs the development of insights that account for context.

Analysis of keyword frequency is quite useful for the conceptual framework of the area. The most used key words were influencer marketing, social media, marketing, consumer engagement, and virtual influencer. This shows that the interaction with the audience is still the main focus of the current research on influencer marketing. The occurrence of behavioral terminology alongside technological and marketing-oriented terms points to the field's development beyond traditional advertising paradigms and underscores its multidisciplinary nature. The increasing prominence of terms related to consumer engagement suggests a growing study focus on understanding the processes by which influencers influence audience views, trust building, emotional bonding, and behavioral intentions.

One particularly important finding is that virtual influencers are an emerging topic of study. The increased use of this phrase signifies a rise in academic interest in digitally mediated persuasion processes and AI-generated digital personalities. This trend constitutes a major conceptual movement away from human-centric influencer communication towards hybrid ecosystems, which include digital identity construction, algorithmic customization and artificial intelligence. Brands in the digital marketing and communication space are exploring AI-generated content makers to enhance audience engagement and brand storytelling. This is mirrored in the rise of virtual influencer studies. The thematic evolution analysis also further shows the shift of the topic from basic research on influencer communication to more complicated studies on authenticity, consumer engagement, trust, and AI-mediated persuasion. The early study's major goals were to identify influencer characteristics and assess their value as marketing tools. However, recent study has focused on the ethical, technological and psychological implications of influencer communication. This evolution reflects rising theoretical sophistication in the literature and it is the natural expansion of the field.

The trend topic analysis reinforces these findings by highlighting the increase in authenticity, virtual influencers, digital trust, and algorithmic communication as issues of current scholarly interest. The increasing importance of these issues suggests that research in influencer marketing is becoming increasingly technology-oriented, yet still

closely related to communication theory and consumer behavior. These trends are in keeping with the ongoing digital transformation processes that are altering the way consumers, influencers and brands interact online.

The examination of the partnership structure shows a worldwide research network well interconnected. Some European and smaller countries demonstrate a substantial dependence on international cooperation, whereas countries such as China, the United States and India show a big potential for local research. The high MCP figures in countries like France, Germany and the UK are indicative of the growing internationalisation of influencer marketing research. International cooperation facilitates the exchange of knowledge and the integration of different cultural perspectives, thereby enriching theoretical and empirical insights.

The results point to a phase of rapid intellectual growth in social media influencer and audience engagement studies, with emphasis on conceptual heterogeneity, technical integration, and increasing internationalization. This is one of the most vibrant fields of research in current marketing. It is moving fast as digital platforms, consumer behavior and communication technology change.

The present study provides a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of research on social media influencers and audience engagement. The analysis is based on 163 journal articles indexed in Scopus, identified using a systematic search and screening process. The study used bibliometric tools to analyze publishing trends, influential authors, prolific institutions, citation networks, keyword frequencies, evolution of themes, trend subjects and collaboration networks to map the intellectual landscape of the area. The results clearly illustrate that the research on influencer marketing has increased substantially in recent years and has become a multidisciplinary research topic including perspectives from information systems, marketing, communication, consumer psychology, and artificial intelligence. Citation analysis indicates that scholarly impact remains concentrated in a small number of countries, with major intellectual influence coming from the US, China and Hong Kong. At the same time, the studies on institutional and author productivity demonstrated that knowledge production is decentralized, with broad participation globally and no dominant scholarly authority. The keywords and themes analysis showed that the main conceptual pillars of the industry were influencer marketing, social media, consumer connection, authenticity and virtual influencers. The results indicate that the main problems of modern research on influencer marketing have become the involvement of the audience, the formation of trust and technological innovation. Furthermore, the development of AI-powered communication

platforms and virtual influencers signals new directions for future research and exemplifies the ongoing development of digital marketing ecosystems.

The cooperation analysis demonstrated an increasing internationalization of the field with extensive cross-national research collaborations in support of information generation and exchange. These collaborative patterns indicate an increasing breadth and impact of influencer marketing studies worldwide.

In sum, this work contributes to the literature by providing a systematic overview of the growth, organization, and future research directions of social media influencer–audience engagement research. The results synthesize not only the existing knowledge but also bring out fresh study directions and themes which could guide future academic studies and practical implementations in digital marketing and communication.

The findings of this bibliometric review imply that future research should focus more on the increasing usage of digital technology and artificial intelligence in influencer marketing. With the rise of virtual influencers, there is a need to explore how audience perceives AI-generated influencers and human influencers in terms of authenticity, trustworthiness, credibility and emotional connection. As influencer marketing is becoming more technologically sophisticated, future study should also explore the impact of algorithmic personalization, augmented reality and AI-based communication approaches on audience engagement and consumer decision-making. It will be important to understand these advancements to explain how the advancements in technology are changing the ties between the influencers and the consumers and how digital influence is being redefined. The future research on consumer behavior, digital trust and authenticity seems promise. While the notion of authenticity has become an important concept in the literature, additional research is needed to improve understanding of its complex nature in diverse social media platforms and cultures. Future research should examine the interplay between audience perceptions of credibility, influencer-brand congruence, sponsorship disclosures, and authenticity and transparency procedures. In addition to more traditional outcomes such as engagement and purchase intention, researchers should also consider more broad behavioral effects such as brand advocacy, electronic word-of-mouth, customer loyalty, psychological well-being and long-term relationship building. Comparative and cross-cultural studies could enhance our understanding by assessing the effect of cultural values and social customs on audience reactions to influencer communication.

Finally, future study should use bigger ecological and methodological approaches, so to better the theoretical and practical understanding on influencer marketing. Instead than focusing on individual influencers, researchers should consider the complex networks of firms, platforms, agencies, algorithms and online communities that work together to impact audience engagement. In the meantime, there is a need to pay greater attention to regulatory and governance issues, because of growing concerns about sponsored content disclosures, inaccurate information, fake followers, influencer fatigue and ethical communication practices. Future research should incorporate more complex analytical approaches such as social network analysis, machine learning, big data analytics, longitudinal designs, and experimental techniques to enhance empirical rigor. As social media ecosystems continue to evolve, the next generation of influencer marketing research is likely to be shaped by the confluence of artificial intelligence, digital trust, platform governance, and consumer engagement, making it one of the most dynamic and fast-growing fields in digital marketing scholarship.

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