



# Antecedents and Effects of Influencer Marketing Strategies: A Systematic Literature Review and Directions for Future Research

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**Abstract.** Over the last decade, the adoption and use of Influencer marketing strategies have grown exponentially, resulting in the growing concerns of both academics and practitioners. Researchers have investigated the characteristics of the influencers, the nature of online interactions that occur over social media, and the effects of various antecedents of influencer adoption in the past. Based on a systematic assessment of more than 20 years of social media Influencer marketing research, the current study identifies and reviews the major themes present in the influencer marketing literature. Based on the analysis, an integrative multi-dimensional framework that considers theoretical frameworks, antecedents, mediators, and moderators of potential outcomes is presented. Besides integrating and synthesising the current body of knowledge about social media influencer marketing, the study provides valuable directions for future research that have impacts on digital marketing theory and practice.

**Keywords:** Influencer marketing · systematic literature review · social media

## 1 Introduction

Today, a large number of customers are spending their time on digital media for a variety of reasons varying from information searches to post-purchase evaluations (Faruk et al. 2021). The omnipresence of content created, shared and communicated and consumed by online users generates new communication dynamics in digital marketing (Vrontis et al. 2021). Some internet users are quite successful in attracting a mass audience, building a fan base, and becoming a source of advice for other users by providing informative and attractive content. These digital content creators with mass follower counts are generally known as social media influencers due to their potential influence on their followers. The increased adoption and use of social media platforms by consumers motivated marketers to focus on digital media-based promotions, particularly via social media influencers; a practice generally referred to as Influencer marketing. Influencer marketing refers to various influencers' endorsement and promotion practices of various branded products on their social media channels in return for free products or payments. Despite the growing

interest from practitioners, and academics in the field of Influencer marketing, literature in this subject area remains fragmented. Considering the growing importance of Influencer marketing strategies in a post-pandemic digital marketing world, a comprehensive and critical overview of current literature in this field is sorely needed. Toward this objective, the current study aims to identify and systematically review the relevant articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals in diverse fields over the last two decades. Based on the identification of key themes, concepts and theoretical foundations of influencer marketing, the current study provides valuable guidelines and strategies for future digital marketing practices. We address two research questions in line with this aim:

RQ1: How can we conceptualize Influencer marketing behaviours?

RQ2: What are the antecedents and effects of Influencer marketing strategies?

RQ3: What are the implications of Influencer marketing strategies to marketing theory and practice.

## 2 Background

Influencer marketing practices over digital media, particularly over social media channels like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are growing exponentially. Despite the impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the influencer marketing industry grew from USD 9.7 Billion in 2020 to USD 13.8 Billion in 2021 and is predicted to reach USD 16.4 Billion in 2022 (Santora 2022). This growth is primarily attributed to the growing popularity of short videos and attractive content created by diverse influential personae on their social media channels. With repeated exposure to these contents, and via constant interactions, social media users develop intimate relationships with influencer personae. Celebrities like Cristiano Ronaldo (549 million followers in Instagram), Lionel Messi (431 million followers in Instagram), and Selena Gomez (379 million followers in Instagram) are just examples of some social media influencers with a global fanbase. Influencers engage in two-way interactions with their followers through social media channels which in turn results in strong relationships between the two (Yuan and Lou 2020). The increased trustworthiness of content posted by social media influencers as well as the tremendous trust followers place on Influencers attract brands and advertisers to embrace influencer marketing strategies. The number of firms offering influencer marketing services has grown by 26% in 2021 to 18,900 worldwide (Santora 2022).

The increased usage of influencers in digital marketing practices has motivated a growing body of academic literature in this field (Feng et al. 2021; Pop et al. 2022). These works have contributed towards the understanding of how online consumers perceive, accept and trust marketing messages from social media influencers compared to brand-promoted ads, traditional celebrities, and opinion leaders. For example, current literature identified that digital consumers who are exposed to Instagram celebrities' brand-endorsed posts perceive the source to be more trustworthy, show a more positive attitude toward the endorsed brand, and feel a stronger social presence than those consumers who are exposed to traditional celebrity's brand posts (Jin et al. 2019). The influential power of social media influencers comes from the emotional bond they could

build with their followers. The stronger the emotional bond the social media influencers build with their followers, the more effectively they influence them to accept their brand or product endorsements (Ki et al. 2020). The current literature also examined the characteristics of influencer-generated posts that enhance customer engagement on social media platforms (Darmawan and Huh 2022; Lou et al. 2019). For example, Darmawan and Huh (2022) found that unbranded social media influencer posts compared to branded influencer posts generate a more favourable attitude toward the ad and higher behavioural intentions in the context of marketing prescription drugs. Narratives of the posts shared by the influencers play an important role in helping consumers to identify and relate themselves with influencers resulting in increased engagement (Feng et al. 2021). Current literature suggests that not only just narratives, but other content characteristics including originality, quality, quantity, underlying emotions such as humour, etc. are found to be increasing the effectiveness of social media influencer-generated messages and resulting in customer engagement (Barta et al. 2023).

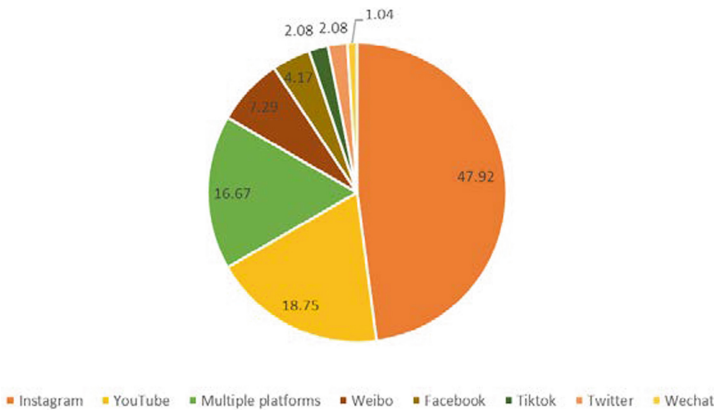
Even though, the current literature investigates a wide range of influencer variables such as trust (Pop et al. 2022), narratives (Feng et al. 2021), content quality, credibility, storytelling etc. (Al-Emadi and Ben Yahia 2020), any academic research aimed to systematically assess and to provide an integrative analysis of influencer marketing practices is still in its early stages. Also, findings from a comprehensive analysis of the extant influencer marketing literature are expected to provide strategic and practical insight into how practitioners can capitalise on this digital marketing strategy.

### 3 Methodology

The relevant literature for this study is collected from three major business databases: ProQuest, ABI/INFORM Collection and ScienceDirect. These databases were chosen because of the great coverage of business literature they provide (Christofi et al. 2017; Vrontis et al. 2021). To be consistent with the prior literature within the fields of business and marketing as well as to ensure the quality, the current study analysed only those peers reviewed, ABDC ranked journal articles published in the English language thus omitting book chapters, books, case studies, editorials and other non-refereed articles. The articles published during the last two decades (2000–2022) were considered for this analysis. To begin with, keywords such as “*Influencer marketing*”, “*social media influencer marketing*”, “*Nano influencers*”, and “*Opinion leadership*” were used. The initial search resulted in the identification of 28647 articles for the study. Once the study excluded the non-academic peer-reviewed articles (6875), non-ABDC journal articles (15,023), non-English articles (602), duplicate records (204) and other irrelevant articles (5767), a sample of 176 articles was identified for further analysis. Along with this selection, an additional 8 articles published recently and/or have been cited by the selected works were added leaving us with a final sample of 182 journal articles. Once the literature selection is completed, an Excel-based data extraction sheet is developed. This helped the researchers to eliminate any human errors as well as document the results in a transparent and replicable manner. Each article was numbered and coded according to 1) author/s, 2) year of publication, 3) the Journal name, 4) Type of the article (theoretical or empirical), 5) research methods, 6) social media platforms, 7) Titles, 8) keywords, 9) key findings, and 10) future research agenda provided by the authors.

### 4 Key Findings

Our analysis indicates that Instagram has been the most examined social media platform by the researchers (48%, n = 46) followed by YouTube (19%, n = 18). Refer to Fig. 1 for the most popular social media platforms examined in the influential marketing literature. These results are not surprising as Instagram and YouTube are regarded as the most important platform for influencer marketing (Ki et al. 2020). In terms of the geographical coverage of the studies, The United States (20%), India (6.5%), China (5.7%), France (4.7%) and the United Kingdom (4.41%) accounted for the top 5 countries for the influencer marketing literature.



**Fig. 1.** Most studied social media platforms for Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing strategies have been examined and explained based on multiple theoretical backgrounds. Theories of para-social interaction (17%) followed by the persuasion knowledge model (13%) and meaning transfer models (6%) are found to be the three most popular theoretical frameworks for explaining the conceptual foundations of Influencer marketing strategies. The study identified 52 antecedents of influencer marketing adoption among online audiences. We have classified these antecedents into three categories: 1) Influencer characteristics, 2) Content characteristics, and 3) Audience characteristics. Influencer characteristics such as perceived homophily, commitment, levels of interaction, control mutuality, perceived goodwill and credibility, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and social presence are found to be strongly influencing online consumers. The success of influencer marketing depends on consumers’ adoption of the Influencer’s recommendations regarding a brand or product. This happens only when social media users become emotionally attached to online influencers. The personal characteristics of the influencers help the social media users to develop a human brand image on influencers who fulfil their needs for ideality, relatedness and competence which in turn leads to acquiring the products or brands they endorse or recommend (Ki et al. 2020).

Not only the personality, trustworthiness, and charisma of the influencers but also, the way the messages are communicated in social media channels are important in influencer marketing. Content characteristics such as informativeness, content quality, fitness with the platform, message valence, product novelty, disclosures, storytelling, entertainment value, visual elements etc. are found to be significant predictors of follower engagement and influencer admiration. Storytelling is found to be a very effective form of sharing content on social media platforms. If a story has sufficient appeal and interest, it can spread beyond people's networks and the reach can influence millions of people without geographical boundaries (Al-Emadi and Ben Yahia 2020). As most social media users are seeking information and recommendations from the influencers they follow, the content quality, particularly, the usefulness of the information received, the attractiveness of the content as well as the diversity of the information/posts shared by the influencers are significant for its followers to develop a pleasant, rewarding, and hedonic experience.

The success of Influencer marketing strategies also depends on the characteristics of the social media followers. Audience characteristics including citizenship behaviour, participation behaviour, desire to mimic, envy, parasocial interaction, perceived congruence etc. were found to be the predictors of followers' behavioural intention in social media. The influence of parasocial interaction on the follower's intention to follow the advice is evident in the influencer marketing literature. Parasocial interaction occurs when social media followers develop an emotional relationship with the influencers with the illusion of intimacy as for the "real" interpersonal relationships between two parties. The physical and social attractiveness of the influencers, as well as the perceived similarities between the influencer and followers in terms of attitude/ethical values are found to be stimulating the parasocial interaction between social media users and influencers. Further, individual circumstances and personality characteristics such as empathy, loneliness, low self-esteem etc. are found to have a positive impact on social media users' parasocial relationships with online influencers (Hwang and Zhang 2018).

Further, our review identifies several mediating variables affecting the adoption of influencer marketing recommendations. Variables such as parasocial interaction, manipulative intention, influencer's credibility, goodwill, expertise, sponsorship transparency etc. were found to mediate the relationship between follower characteristics (e.g., empathy, loneliness, self-esteem, and persuasion knowledge) and follower behavioural intentions (purchase intention, message liking, information search, and engagement with brand posts).

In terms of the consequences or outcomes of influencer marketing strategies, most studies were focused on the behavioural intentions of the followers. The most popular outcomes include followers' engagement with ads, purchase intentions, brand congruence, influencer admiration, influencer trust and expertise, and eWOM intentions. Future influencer marketing strategies should address three areas of concern: 1) the influencer's congruity with the brands, 2) the Influencer's relationship-building attributes such as homophily and commitment to innovative ways of engagement practices, 3) the brands' commitment towards influencer selection and collaboration, content management practices such as content design, training of influencers in photo editing tools, sponsorship disclosures, as well as their efficiency in implementing performance measurement indicators.

## 5 Directions for Future Research

The study identified two major themes for setting the future research agenda. These include 1) content management practices, and 2) customer relationship management. Content management practices particularly Influencer selection, content design, sponsorship disclosures, and their performance measurement mechanisms are essential for the successful implementation of influencer marketing practices. Future studies are expected to shed more light towards improving content management practices. Developing and maintaining successful online customer relationships are also paramount. Followers develop various levels of parasocial relationships with influencers which in turn leads to favourable purchase behaviours and positive word of mouth. However, the intensity of the para-social relationships with influencers depends on various factors including design quality and creativity of the influencers, type of influencers, their disclosures, and so on. Moreover, diverse influencer characteristics such as physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and subject expertise of the influencers determine their overall identification and credibility among their potential audience. Therefore, marketers should find those influencers who could relate easily to the characteristics of the target audience to facilitate more positive engagement. Future research towards understanding and enhancing customer relationships through influencers is expected to have wider implications in enhancing brand management strategies. Influencer technology adoption and technology quality is another significant subject area for future researchers. The availability of reliable and convenient visual enhancement tools (e.g., photo-taking, and editing tools) is found to be a prevalent requirement for social media influencers. Further, the advancements in Information and communication technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, virtual reality, extended reality, and metaverse as well as advancements in web technologies such as web3 are expected to play a significant role in influencing social media users' attitudes and behaviours. Further research towards investigating how online users accept and engage with influencers via these technologies in novel social media platforms is highly encouraged.

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