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**INFLUENCER EFFECT: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF PARASOCIAL
RELATIONSHIPS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS**

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has been expanding at a great pace. This development has prompted increasing academic interest, as many research scholars are now drawn to the study of the formation and impact of parasocial relationships (PSRs) with social media influencers (SMIs). There has been a surge of studies in this area in recent years, giving rise to the need for a systematic review that can consolidate current knowledge and direct future research. The aim of this study is to review and synthesize the theories and dimensions that have been most frequently applied in PSR–SMI research. By applying the PRISMA framework, the study was able to identify 37 documents indexed in Scopus and these research articles were then analyzed on various dimensions. The findings showed that there has been a steady increase in publications on PSRs with SMIs since 2018, with the United States producing the largest share, and more recent contributions have also been emerging from Asia and Europe. Furthermore, 15 theories and 35 variables were identified, based on which a conceptual model has been proposed. This study contributes to the growing literature on influencer marketing by providing a structured reference for future researchers to test PSR-related variables. Moreover, marketing professionals can use the identified variables to refine their process of influencer selection, and prioritize attributes that strengthen PSRs.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, social media influencers, PRISMA, parasocial relationships, digital marketing, digital influencers.

INTRODUCTION

There has been an unprecedented growth in influencer marketing, especially in the past decade (Syrdal et al., 2023). Many factors have contributed to this enormous growth, chief among them being the reliance on social media for entertainment and information-seeking behavior (Abid et al., 2024; Jhawar et al., 2023). According to Statista, the global market size of influencer marketing was \$4 billion in 2018, but has now reached \$24 billion in 2024 (Global Influencer Market Size 2024, 2024). Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are defined as individuals who have formed a substantial and engaged following on social media platforms, which as a result has assisted them in leveraging their online presence to influence the purchasing behavior of their followers (Azhar et al., 2024; Pradhan et al., 2023). SMIs are able to do this by creating and sharing content that resonates with their audience and this has enabled them to charge brands for endorsements (Mardon et al., 2023). Leung et al. (2022) mentioned that over 75% of global brands now allocate a specific budget for influencer marketing. There is growing evidence that influencer marketing tends to outperform traditional celebrity endorsements because SMIs in comparison are able to form a far more intimate relationship with their followers.

SMIs have found a genuine and authentic way which allows them to connect with their target audiences and thus, to promote brands (Chidiac & Bowden, 2023). One of the main limitations of mass traditional advertising is that it cannot be personalized. SMI endorsements however, provide the missing human touch that allows the brands to reach the intended target audiences in a much more authentic manner (Deng & Jiang, 2023). Influencer endorsements allow brands to enhance visibility, as well as boost credibility, and as a result higher engagement rates and unswerving brand loyalty (Geng et al., 2024). Moreover, the recent digital advancements and expansion of social media are offering a fertile ground for SMIs to drive future trends; hence making them key drivers of consumer motivation and behaviors (Ooi et al., 2023).

While in many aspects, SMIs are similar to traditional celebrities, such as their reach and potential to influence consumer behavior, they have some distinct qualities which make them more appealing to marketers. The way SMIs engage with their followers is based on continuous interaction, and sometimes indirect communication occurs, which will engender the creation of an illusion of intimacy (Walla et al., 2023). Traditional celebrities have always been at a distance from their fanbase, but social media allows SMIs to interact with their followers in a much more personalized manner (Sharma, 2023). Hence, these SMIs are seen as relatable figures that people can reach out to and develop relationships with (Chung et al., 2023). This illusion of intimacy in one-sided interactions was first explained by Horton and Wohl (1956), who termed these one-sided relationships as “Parasocial Relationships (PSRs)” (Ki et al., 2020).

While the phenomena of PSRs emerged in the context of mainstream mass media, such as TV and Radio, the rationale behind it was so strong that it was picked up in a variety of contexts later (Möri & Fahr, 2023). The unparalleled influence that traditional celebrities enjoyed in the past, is now being challenged by SMIs. This development has led to an increased interest of academicians and researchers to study the formation, impact and consequences of PSRs that are formed with SMIs (Aggarwal et al., 2025; Lou et al., 2023; Nor et al., 2025). The understanding of this relationship is essential in explaining various aspects of influencer marketing, including what makes them effective, how they engage with their followers, and what sort of influence they exert on their followers (Balaban et al., 2022).

Therefore, the focus of academic research in influencer marketing has seen a shift towards a number of studies investigating PSRs with SMIs. As is the case in other disciplines, literature reviews allow scholars to assess the current knowledge in a particular field, and this will enhance the overall understanding of the existing body of knowledge. Consequently, such reviews will help in the identification of key areas to fill any identified research gaps. Therefore, the two main objectives of the present study are as follows: i) identify the theoretical frameworks used to analyze PSRs with SMIs; and ii) examine the dimensions reported in the literature for assessing PSRs with SMIs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concepts of PSI and PSR are not new, and have been studied extensively for many decades by scholars and researchers in the context of marketing, media and communication research. PSI and PSR are related but distinct concepts. PSI refers to the sense of conversational exchange experienced by audiences during mediated encounters, whereas PSR denotes the enduring one-sided bond that develops across repeated exposures (Azhar et al., 2025b). On some occasions, scholars have used the two terms interchangeably; however, there is a clear distinction between the two. PSI is related to an act of media consumption, and PSR reflects a cumulative relationship, that is formed after several PSIs (Stein et al., 2024). Within influencer marketing, PSI is understood as the mechanism through which immediacy and social presence are created during viewing, while PSR represents the deeper, friendship-like connection that supports perceptions of authenticity and trust (Koay et al., 2023).

Several recent efforts have tried to consolidate scholarship on parasocial influence in digital contexts, though none have yet zeroed in exclusively on PSR with social media influencers. For instance, Han & Balabanis (2024) conducted a meta-analytic review covering 53 studies and approximately 250 effect sizes, showing that influencer credibility, in terms of trustworthiness and perceived expertise, exerts strong effects on attitudinal outcomes. Parasocial Interaction Theory and congruity models also contribute to our understanding of this impact. In parallel, foundational meta-analysis by Tukachinsky et al. (2020) aggregated around 120 studies over four decades on PSRs across media. They confirmed that PSR robustly predicted various attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, and crucially found no support for the idea that PSR was a compensatory mechanism for social deficits.

In the domain of media and parasocial research more broadly, a descriptive review by Schramm et al., (2024) which was based on 281 studies from 2016–2020, mapped how parasocial research has migrated into digital and social media settings. They found that most studies still relied heavily on legacy scales, frequently adapted instruments without theorizing them, and often blurred the distinction between PSI and PSR. Their review shows that parasocial phenomena are now skewed toward studies of social media, but stops just short of doing a quantitative meta-analysis and does not focus exclusively on PSR with influencers.

What emerges across these reviews is a pattern of insight and fragmentation. It is clear that PSR matters for persuasion and marketing outcomes, that audiences describe their connections with influencers in terms resembling friendship, and that perceived authenticity often distinguishes influencer PSRs from traditional advertising effects (Azhar et al., 2025a). At the same time, there is little consistency in how PSR is defined and measured in the influencer context. Some studies collapse PSI and PSR into a single construct, while

others adapt legacy scales without attending to the interactive affordances of new platforms. The application of theoretical frameworks is also scattered, as there is no unifying theoretical foundation that links the parasocial process to marketing outcomes.

Furthermore, there have been attempts to review either influencer marketing or PSRs separately, but none have integrated PSR with SMIs. There is therefore, a need to come up with a new review that catalogues theoretical frameworks, consolidates dimensions/constructs, and identifies under-examined areas in this specific area. Hence, this study aims to fill this gap through a systematic literature review by focusing specifically on PSR in influencer marketing. The outcome of such a study helps in aggregating the current state of knowledge, and providing future directions for more theoretical and empirical investigations.

METHODOLOGY

The study involved gathering data from a targeted search using the Scopus database. The database was selected for its comprehensive coverage of multidisciplinary research abstracts and wide geographical representation, in comparison to other research databases. This approach allowed the inclusion of major studies while minimizing the omission of important and relevant researchers. Literature reviews have used the Scopus database mainly due to its extensive repository (Gurol et al., 2024; Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020; Linnenluecke et al., 2020; Pranckutė, 2021; Rosli & Zaki, 2023). The methodological framework suggested by Desalegn & Tangl (2022) was used to conduct the present study.

Sample Selection

The search strategy played an important role in the literature review as it was critical to find pertinent articles for the analysis. This strategy was aimed at exploring the extensive literature on influencer marketing and PSRs. The formulated search query was: TITLE-ABS-KEY (("SMIs" OR "Social Media Influencer" OR "Social Media Influencers") AND ("PSR" OR "Parasocial Relationship" OR "Parasocial Interaction" OR "PSI")). The first set of results, initially, yielded 84 documents in total. This number was without any filtering of research for relevance. Subsequently, the documents were then screened through a filtering process that ensured the relevance of those articles, which was to narrow it down to the study's focus.

Refining Criteria

The PRISMA framework which formed a strong basis for the present study's analytical approach, was applied for this systematic literature review. Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined based on the research questions. The timeframe used to find the articles extended from the earliest publication date available up to December 31, 2023, which marked the commencement of the present study. The scope of disciplines of interest were narrowed down to business, management, economics, and business finance, as the focus of this study was aligned with these fields. Consequently, a total of 19 articles were identified and omitted from this study. Due to the consideration of an accessible language, only English was selected as the language of articles to be selected; one article in Spanish was excluded as a result. The focus of the study was finding empirical studies that have contributed to the development of this area of research; hence

conference papers, books, book chapters, and review papers were also excluded from the list. This step led to the removal of an additional nine articles.

These exclusion and inclusion criteria meant that 55 documents were identified for retrieval. Out of these 55, seven were inaccessible because they were recently published and were not available at the time of this study's review. To identify studies which dealt with the relationship between PSRs with SMIs, the remaining 48 articles underwent a meticulous screening process involving titles, abstracts, and keywords. This step resulted in a further exclusion of 11 articles. Ultimately, 37 research articles were deemed suitable for the study as they could help address the research questions.

Data Analysis

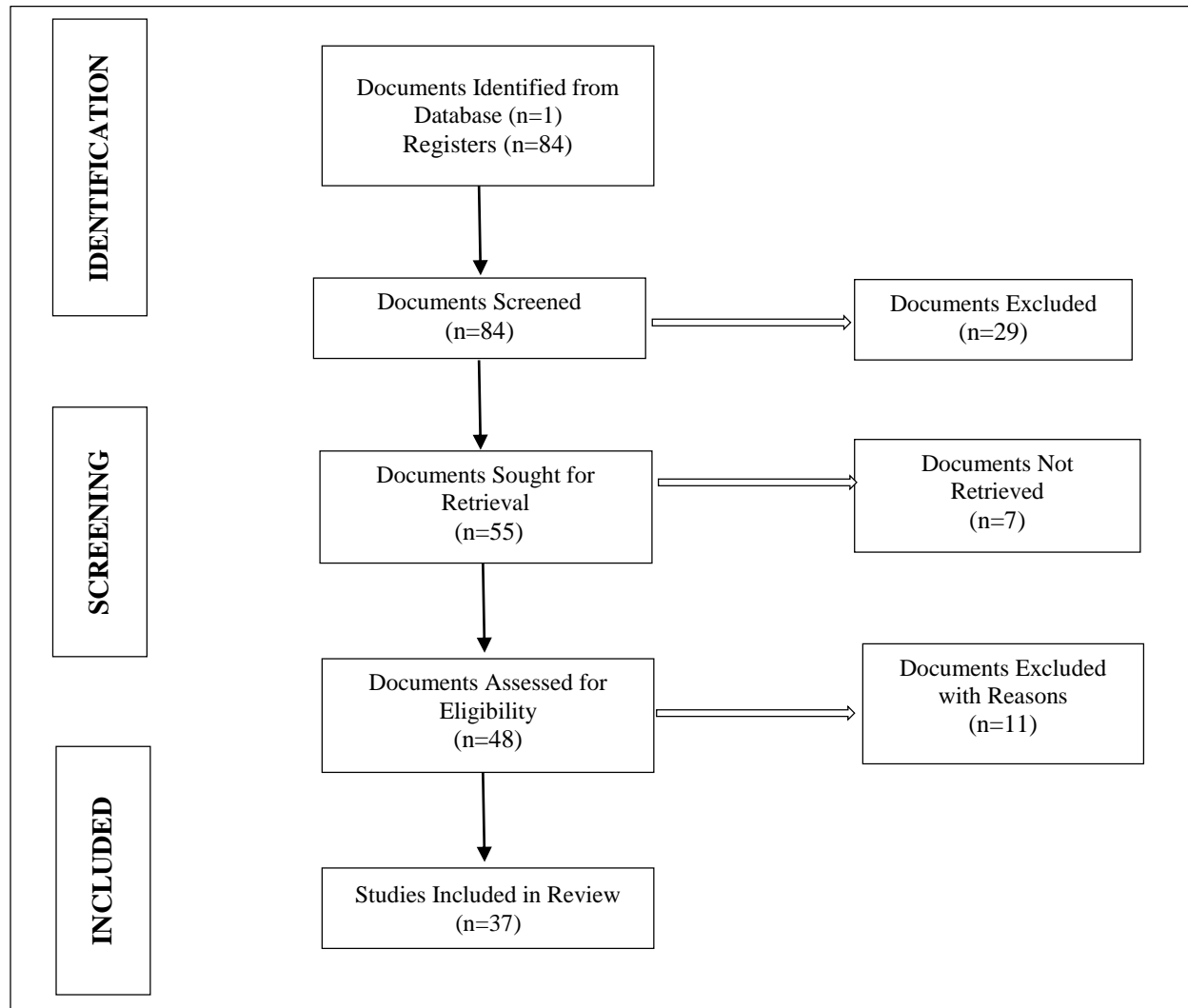
A structured qualitative approach was used to examine the final 37 articles. Each article was reviewed separately to extract the relevant information, and these included identifying: (1) the research methods used, (2) the theoretical frameworks adopted, (3) the variables measured, and (4) the key relationships and outcomes reported. The research team organized the extracted information and coded the relevant aspects using NVivo. The software was used to support the identification and development of thematic clusters. There were four analytical categories that were established to present the results. These included the following: 1) publication trends 2) country and regional contexts 3) theories employed 4) variables examined. In addition, Microsoft Excel was also used to present the descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). This was done to identify and establish patterns across the 37 articles used in the present review.

Search Process

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the methodology used for this systematic literature review.

Figure 1

Flowchart of Document Selection



RESULTS

The preliminary analysis showed that 87% of the selected 37 articles were quantitative in nature. On the other hand, a small portion of studies (9%) used qualitative methodologies, whereas one study employed mixed methodology. The majority of quantitative studies were experimental in nature, using statistical techniques such as structural equation modeling, regression analysis, and content analysis. Qualitative research typically relied on case studies and thematic analysis.

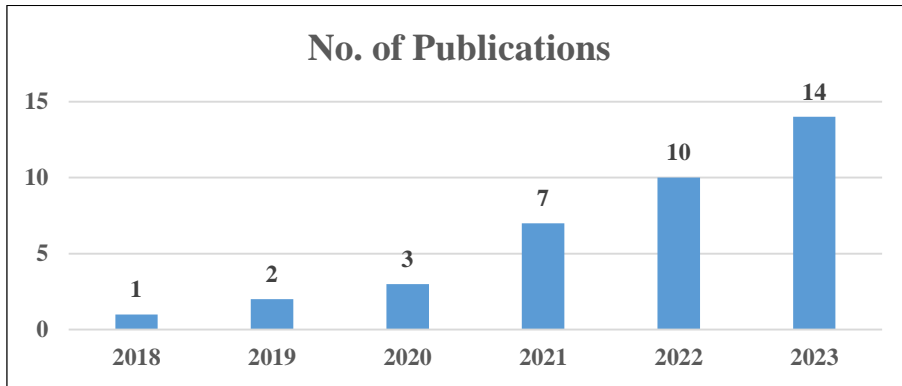
Trends in Publications

Figure 2 shows the increasing scholarly attention to PSR research in influencer marketing literature. There were 6 articles published from 2018-2020, but since COVID-19 the number of publications has been on the

rise reflecting a growing interest of academicians and researchers in this area of research. It has been on an upward trajectory since 2021, and as shown in Figure 2, the number of articles from 7 in 2021 has grown to 14 in 2023.

Figure 2

Publication Trend Over the Years

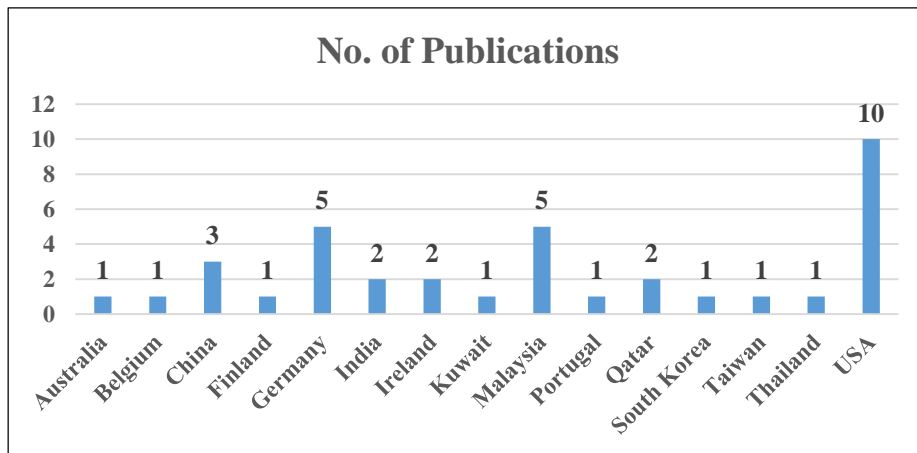


Country Context

Figure 3 represents the geographical distribution of the 37 studies included in this review. The United States emerged as a clear leader in this category, contributing 10 publications. With 5 publications each, Malaysia and Germany have emerged as the countries with the second-most publications. China is the country with 3 studies, while India, Ireland, and Qatar each have 2 publications to their credit. The remaining countries, Australia, Belgium, Finland, Kuwait, Portugal, South Korea, Thailand, and Taiwan, have a single publication.

Figure 3

Number of Publications According to Country

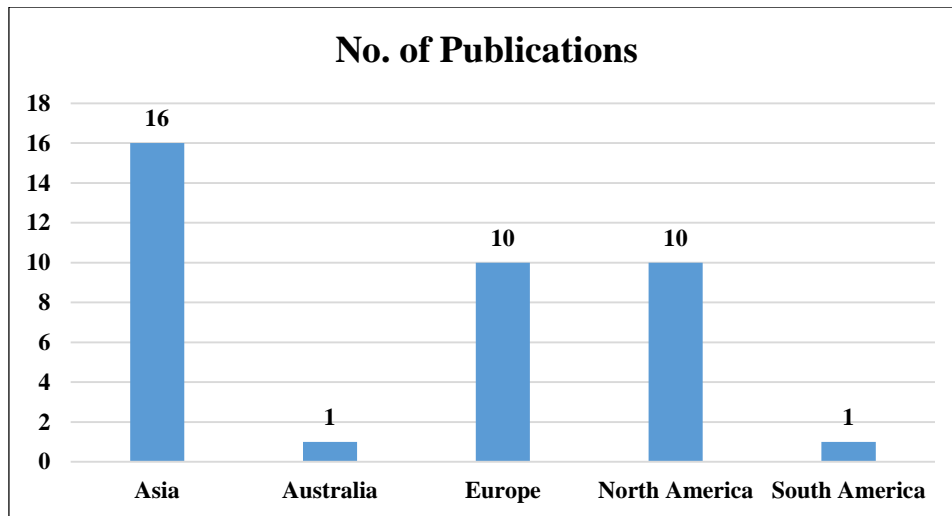


Regional Context

Despite the position of the United States of America as the leader in influencer marketing research, the Asian context dominates the number of publications overall with 16 studies related to PSR with SMIs. Figure 4 represents the regional distribution of studies. Europe and North America come in second, each contributing 10 papers, while South America and Australia were represented by only one paper each, indicating relatively limited attention from these regions. Within Asia, the studies were further divided into the following sub-regions: 2 papers originate from South Asia, 5 from East Asia, 6 from Southeast Asia, and 3 from the Middle East.

Figure 4

Number of Publications According to Region



Most Cited Publications

The ten most cited articles examining PSRs in the context of influencer marketing are summarized in Table 1. The most cited article, "You really are a great big sister-PSR, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing", from the "Journal of Marketing Management" in 2020, has received 198 citations. Similarly, "How SMIs Foster Relationships with Followers: The Roles of Source Credibility and Fairness in Parasocial Relationship and Product Interest", a study in the "Journal of Interactive Advertising" from the same year has 151 citations. The citation counts of these studies serve as indicators of their importance and relevance in the field (Zaki & Rosli, 2024), highlighting the growing recognition of the impact of PSR of SMIs.

Table 1

Most Cited Publications

Title	Year	Journal	No. of Citations
'You really are a great big sister'–PSR, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing	2020	Journal of Marketing Management	198
How SMIs Foster Relationships with Followers: The Roles of Source Credibility and Fairness in Parasocial Relationship and Product Interest	2020	Journal of Interactive Advertising	151
Impacts of influencer attributes on purchase intentions in social media influencer marketing: Mediating roles of characterizations	2022	Technological Forecasting and Social Change	118
“Stop the unattainable ideal for an ordinary me!” fostering PSR with SMIs: The role of self-discrepancy	2021	Journal of Business Research	80
Product placement 2.0: “Do Brands Need Influencers, or Do Influencers Need Brands?”	2019	Journal of Brand Management	76
Blind trust? The importance and interplay of PSR and advertising disclosures in explaining influencers’ persuasive effects on their followers	2021	International Journal of Advertising	71
The Influence of SMIs: Understanding Online Vaping Communities and Parasocial Interaction through the Lens of Taylor’s Six-Segment Strategy Wheel	2018	Journal of Interactive Advertising	67
“I follow what you post!”: The role of SMIs’ content characteristics in consumers' online brand-related activities (COBRAs)	2022	Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	66
The effects of SMIs’ self-disclosure on behavioral intentions: The role of source credibility, PSR, and brand trust	2022	Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice	51
I trust what she's endorsing on Instagram: moderating effects of parasocial interaction and social presence in fashion influencer marketing	2021	Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management	50

Underpinning Theories

Utilizing theoretical frameworks enhances the outcomes of research studies. A review of 37 articles from the Scopus database was conducted to examine the PSR involving SMIs. Within this sample, 20 articles incorporated 15 distinct theories related to PSR with influencers, with some studies employing a single theoretical perspective while others integrated multiple theories. The theories employed to achieve the research objectives are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2

Theories Applied in Studies Related to PSR with SMIs

Source	Theory	Theory Relevance
(Choi et al., 2023)	Construal level theory	How closer social distance is linked to the impact of endorsements
(Masuda et al., 2022)	Persuasion Theory	Role of SMI characteristics in shaping buying behaviors
(Rudeloff & Damms, 2023)	Organization-public-relationship (OPR) Theory	How influencers' PSI can strengthen organization public relationships (OPR)
(Yang & Ha, 2021)	Uses and Gratifications Theory	How individuals engage with SMI videos
(Ma et al., 2024)	Parasocial Interaction Theory	How PSIs translate into liking for endorsements
(Leite & Baptista, 2022)	Self-Disclosure Theory	How self-disclosure of SMIs lead to trust in SMI recommendations
(Tafheem et al., 2022)	Parasocial Interaction Theory, Self-Congruity Theory	Impact of congruence of SMI and followers on PSR
(Castro, 2023)	Parasocial Relationship Theory, Consumer Trust Theory	The role of PSR in influencing purchasing decisions and behaviors
(Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen & A Manaf, 2019)	Parasocial Interaction Theory	The dynamics of fan and SMI interaction in different cultural settings
(Su et al., 2023)	Communication Theory	How identities of SMIs drive engagement
(Jhawar et al., 2023)	Source Credibility Theory	Comparison of human and virtual SMIs and how their characteristics impact their relationships with followers
(Breves et al., 2021b)	Psychological Reactance Theory	How perceived threats can lead to resistance against persuasive messages
(Jin & Muqaddam, 2019)	Reactance Theory	To examine consumer reactions to fashion influencers' endorsements
(Hudders & De Jans, 2022)	Social Identity Theory	To explore how an influencer's gender impacts SMI effectiveness

(continued)

Source	Theory	Theory Relevance
(Aw & Chuah, 2021)	Parasocial Interaction Theory	To examine how influencers' attributes enhance PSR
(Bradley et al., 2023)	Construal Level Theory	How the perceived social distance affects the intimacy and nature of their interactions
(Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2021)	Parasocial Interaction Theory	How PSIs can foster stronger connections compared to traditional media.
(Koay et al., 2023)	Parasocial Theory, Self-congruence Theory	How SMI-follower relationships enhance purchase intentions when the influencer's persona aligns with the follower's self-image
(Alhaidar & Xue, 2023)	Match-up Theory	The impact of visual and verbal consistency in endorsements
(Conde & Casais, 2023)	Parasocial Relationship Theory	How the number of an SMI's followers can affect the effectiveness of SMI recommendations

Key Dimensions Studied

The selected sample of 37 articles, as presented in Table 3, details the various factors and variables that have been employed to investigate PSR with SMIs, along with their corresponding findings.

Table 3

Source, Variables and Main Findings

Source	Factors/ Variables/ Dimensions	Main Findings
(Choi et al., 2023)	Attractiveness, expertise, social distance, source credibility, PSR, brand attitude, attitude towards advertising, purchase intention, social media sharing intention	Attractiveness enhances the advertising outcome when the audience feels a smaller social distance from the influencer, while expertise plays a more critical role when the social distance is greater.
(Masuda et al., 2022)	Attitude homophily, physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, trustworthiness, perceived expertise, PSR, purchase intention	PSR had a significant positive effect on consumers' intentions to purchase compared to other factors. Moreover, there was a significant association between PSR and the three identified personal attributes.
(Rudeloff & Damms, 2023)	F2F desire, guidance, intimacy, PSI, purchase intention, satisfaction, commitment, trust	Findings indicate that engagement with entrepreneurs' personal social media content enhances PSI, leading to positive effects on the organization's communication results. As a consequence, PSI boosts both organization-public relationships and intentions to purchase.

(continued)

Source	Factors/ Variables/ Dimensions	Main Findings
(Jansom & Pongsakornrunsilp, 2021)	Social attractiveness, physical attractiveness, PSI, value perception, purchase intention	The results show that Thai millennials are receptive to Instagram influencers' parasocial interactions, influencing their perception of value and motivating them to purchase luxury fashion items.
(Aw et al., 2022)	Prestige, expertise, interactivity, self-disclosure, PSR, purchase intention	Attributes such as prestige and expertise, along with interactive engagement and self-disclosure by influencers, positively impact the development of PSR, which subsequently enhances the intention to purchase.
(Yang & Ha, 2021)	Entertainment, information sharing, information seeking, socialization, persuasion knowledge, PSR, purchase intention	The findings revealed that seeking entertainment was the primary reason for using Douyin. However, users motivated by the desire for socialization exhibited greater awareness of persuasion techniques and stronger parasocial connections with influencers.
(Yuan & Lou, 2020)	Expertise, attractiveness, trustworthiness, similarity, fairness, PSR, product interest	Attractiveness of influencers, their perceived similarity to followers, and the fairness of procedures and interactions between followers and influencers positively influence the development of PSR with influencers. These relationships, in turn, act as mediators, enhancing the impact of these factors on followers' interest in products endorsed by influencers.
(Ma et al., 2024)	Attractiveness, trustworthiness, interactivity, self-disclosure, PSR, perceived quality uncertainty, perceived fit uncertainty, impulse buying urge	Trustworthiness of the influencer, the interactivity with the influencer, and the influencer's self-disclosure are significant predictors of PSR, which subsequently affect impulsive purchasing behavior.
(Cheung et al., 2022)	Information quality, design quality, creativity, technology quality, PSR, wishful identification	Design quality, technological quality, and creativity predict the development of PSR. Additionally, design quality and creativity strongly influence wishful identification. Both PSR and wishful identification play a crucial role in predicting consumers' engagement in online brand-related activities (COBRAs).

(continued)

Source	Factors/ Variables/ Dimensions	Main Findings
(Breves et al., 2021a)	PSR, follower status, advertising disclosure, perceived source credibility, persuasion knowledge	The status of individuals as followers or non-followers impacted the intensity of PSR, the perceived credibility of the source, and the assessment of a sponsored post.
(Leite & Baptista, 2022)	Intimate self-disclosure, PSR, source credibility, brand trust, purchase intention	High levels of intimate self-disclosure from SMIs can increase consumers' likelihood to purchase from the endorsed brand. Additionally, the impact of a parasocial relationship with an SMI on consumer behavior is greater than the effect of source credibility.
(Tafheem et al., 2022)	Self-congruity, PSR, Cobra (Consumer Brand Engagement)	User-influencer congruence significantly predicts PSR and consumer online brand-related activities (COBRA), with parasocial interactions notably influencing customer engagement with brands.
(Castro, 2023)	Social perception, perception towards influencer, consumer trust, PSR, perception towards harmful content, SMIs Influence	Social perception and potential harm are significant predictors of susceptibility to SMI influence.
(Taher et al., 2022)	Communication skills, influence, perceived authenticity, perceived expertise, PSR, intention to purchase	Expertise and communication skills of SMIs significantly correlate with PSR, which in turn, strongly correlate with the intent to purchase.
(Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen & A Manaf, 2019)	Parasocial interaction, Instagram use, attitude homophily, perception on hijab, attitude towards hijab, behavior towards hijab, religious background	Attitudes, homophily and parasocial interactions with a celebrity can significantly affect both the frequency of visits to the celebrity's profile and the number of likes received on their photos.
(Su et al., 2023)	Social media persona, credibility, homophily, parasocial friendship, parasocial love, purchase intention	Homophily significantly influences purchase intentions and enhances the credibility of college athlete influencers among students, while athletic identity is deemed the most effective in generating follower engagement and purchase behavior.

(continued)

Source	Factors/ Variables/ Dimensions	Main Findings
(Zhang & Lu, 2023)	Source identity, self-disclosure, authenticity, expertise, PSI, information seeking intentions, prosocial intentions, anti-intellectualism	Authenticity, expertise, and parasocial interaction significantly affect audience responses to scientists on social media
(Jhavar et al., 2023)	PSI, perceived trustworthiness, perceived attractiveness, perceived expertise, perceived similarity, acceptance of virtual influencer	PSI between social media users and virtual influencers enhance the perceived credibility of the influencers, leading to their acceptance by users
(Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022)	Advertising recognition, skepticism, source credibility, PSR, website visit intention, brand attitude, purchase intention	Advertising recognition leads to generally negative reactions from consumers towards brand endorsements by SMIs. Additionally, the study found that source credibility and attitudes towards endorsements mediate these reactions, while the strength of PSR and consumer skepticism towards influencer marketing play a moderating role.
(Borchers et al., 2022)	Brand endorsements, PSR, perceived persuasive intent, perceived appropriateness, cognitive resistance, affective resistance, brand attitude, influencer authenticity	Endorsements by multiple influencers influence the activation of evaluative persuasion knowledge and subsequent coping strategies, which adversely impact brand perception and the perceived authenticity of the influencer.
(Breves et al., 2021b)	Perceived threat to freedom, counterarguing, PSR, trustworthiness, persuasive resistance, persuasive effectiveness	Followers develop more intense PSRs compared to non-followers, leading to greater trust in the source and a decrease in perceived threats to freedom and counterarguments following a sponsored Instagram post.
(Jin & Muqaddam, 2019)	Source credibility, source likeability, product placement, PSI, corporate credibility, attitude towards the brand	When the source was an Instagram influencer, there was an increase in perceived corporate credibility and a more favorable attitude towards the brand, especially in scenarios where the influencer was shown with the product, compared to situations featuring the product alone.

(continued)

Source	Factors/ Variables/ Dimensions	Main Findings
(Hudders & De Jans, 2022)	Perceived similarity, PSI, post engagement, brand attitude, gender	The influencer's gender did not directly affect the persuasiveness of sponsored content, there was an interaction effect with the viewer's gender; specifically, women showed higher engagement and more positive brand attitudes when interacting with female influencers, driven by perceived similarity and parasocial interaction.
(Aw & Chuah, 2021)	Attractiveness, prestige, expertise, self-discrepancy, PSR, self-serving motive, purchase intention	Attributes like attractiveness, prestige, and expertise, positively affect the formation of PSR. However, these relationships lead to negative perceptions of the endorser's motives, perceived as self-serving, which subsequently lowers the intention to make a purchase.
(Kanwar & Huang, 2022)	PSI, brand image, perceived value, purchase intention, credibility	Credibility of SMIs has a significant effect on the development of PSR with followers. This relationship enhances the audience's perception of value and brand image, ultimately leading to a higher likelihood of purchase intentions.
(Reinikainen et al., 2020)	PSR, influencer credibility, brand trust, purchase intention, audience comments	Establishing a parasocial relationship with an influencer strengthens the influencer's perceived credibility, and this effect is moderated by the comments from other viewers. Additionally, the credibility of the influencer has a positive impact on brand trust and the intention to purchase.
(Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2021)	Endorser type, PSR, attitude towards brand, purchase intention	Celebrities, compared to SMIs, establish stronger PSR and are more effective endorsers, particularly in the Indian context where materialism and cultural values play a significant role.
(Sulaiti & Mimoun, 2023)	PSR, product involvement, perceived expertise, intention to purchase, WOM, product trial	PSR with SMI significantly enhance purchase intentions and that SMI's perceived expertise strengthens this effect. Additionally, it was found that consumer involvement impacted the effectiveness of endorsements, with low-involvement products benefiting more from PSR.

(continued)

Source	Factors/ Variables/ Dimensions	Main Findings
(Koay et al., 2023)	Intimate self-disclosure, PSR, purchase intentions, congruence	PSR do not act as a mediator between the intimate self-disclosure of SMIs and consumers' purchase intentions.
(Alhaidar & Xue, 2023)	Post credibility, influencer credibility, sharing intention, brand interest, purchase intention, persuasion knowledge, congruence	Significant correlations between influencer-product congruency and outcomes, such as sharing intentions, brand interest, and purchase intentions. Similarly, PSR were significantly associated with post credibility, influencer credibility, brand interest, and purchase intentions.
(Conde & Casais, 2023)	Size of SMI, popularity, opinion leadership, PSR, intention to adopt recommendations	The results indicate that the relationship between the number of followers and the likelihood of following SMIs' recommendations was mediated by perceived popularity and opinion leadership, with PSR acting as a moderator.
(Leite & Baptista, 2021)	Intimate self-disclosure (ISD), PSR, self-brand connections	ISD from SMIs enhances the connection between consumers and brands, primarily due to the establishment of a perceived PSR with the SMI.
(Jin et al., 2021)	PSI, social presence, trustworthiness	Content from fashion-influencer accounts shows that the presence or absence of a person in product posts does not change the positive link between PSI/social presence and brand trustworthiness. However, for fashion-brand accounts, product posts featuring a person strengthen the relationship between PSI/social presence and trustworthiness.

DISCUSSION

Table 4 presents a summary of the key insights gained from the systematic review. These insights can help identify the relevant research gaps and aid future researchers in investigating key areas related to PSRs with SMIs.

Table 4

Major Findings

Topics	Major Findings
Publication Trends	There is a growing trend of studies in this area. In the recent past, the focus has shifted from general SMI characteristics to specific traits in different contextual settings.
Country and Regional Contexts	Majority of the studies came from the United States of America (10). The leading position of the United States of America also reflects their leading position in terms of industry practices and trends. In the recent years; however, research contributions from Asia and Europe have also increased.
Theories Applied	In the selected 37 articles, 15 theories were employed. Many established theories have yet to be examined in this context.
Variables Identified	The review identified 35 variables across different dimensions. A framework is proposed which can be utilized to study different dimensions of PSR with SMIs.

Publication Trends

Over time, research on PSR with SMIs has revealed a change in emphasis. In order to understand the role PSR plays in the efficacy of SMIs, early research in 2018 started by looking at large communities, such as online vaping circles. By 2019, studies began to focus on particular cultural influences, such as how Instagram use affects perceptions in Malaysian communities. In 2020, the focus of research shifted to the fundamental elements that influence these connections, such as the functions of fairness and credibility, and the ways in which audience participation affects marketing results.

Research has focused on the personal aspects of PSR from 2021 to 2023, paying special attention to how followers' purchase intentions and brand trust are impacted by influencers' self-disclosure. Examining influencers' personal branding and how it affects PSR is becoming increasingly popular. More recent research is concentrating on how influencers' characteristics and actions, such as their perceived expertise and attractiveness, affect consumer choices. A more sophisticated approach to researching PSRs that carefully takes into account the implications for marketing strategies and consumer engagement is indicated by the body of work that is moving toward a more thorough understanding of how these influencer-follower relationships affect consumer actions.

Country and Regional Context

The findings revealed that the research related to PSR with SMIs is distributed across continents. However, the United States of America contributed to more than 30% of the studies conducted in this domain. This reflects a strong interest of academicians studying influencer marketing and PSRs in the American setting, which is often regarded as the pioneer of marketing innovation. Furthermore, the United States of America is also considered the most technologically advanced setting, which is one of the primary drivers of research

in digital marketing within that context. On the other hand, research from other regions is also emerging, including in Asian nations like China, India, and Malaysia. This expansion of studies in the Asian context is enhancing our understanding of how SMIs influence public opinion and consumer behavior. Most of the early studies were conducted in Europe which laid a strong foundation for the other scholars to apply the core concepts of PSRs in their relevant regional contexts.

Theories Applied

A thorough analysis of the 37 studies shows that the researchers have viewed this aspect of influencer marketing through different theoretical lenses. It was a challenge to identify a single theory that stood out from these studies as the application of theories was widespread. Some of the theories that emerged as the most employed included parasocial relationship theory, parasocial interaction theory, construal level theory, and reactance theory.

Although not well conceptualized as a stand-alone theory, parasocial relationship theory was used by many scholars to ground their theoretical frameworks. The studies used the core concept of PSR to explain why followers were inclined to get influenced by SMI endorsements. The application of this theory in those studies help establish the role of PSRs in developing trust and loyalty for the endorsed brands. Similarly, some scholars have used the related Parasocial Interaction Theory. They defined it as a theory that is concerned with the one-sided interactions followers have with SMIs. The findings from these studies revealed that the frequency and communication style of SMIs can enhance the quality of relationships with followers.

Furthermore, a well-established theory, Reactance Theory was also used in this context. The theory suggested that followers tend to have negative reactions to efforts that constrain their freedom of choice. Findings indicated that SMIs that were engaged in over-endorsements were viewed critically by the followers and that triggered a defensive response from them. The authenticity of SMIs was linked to the level of trust that followers placed in SMIs and anything that hampered that connection results in a reduced effect on endorsement effectiveness. Another important well-established theory that emerged was construal level theory. This theory was applied to suggest that psychological distance influences how abstract followers' thoughts are regarding SMIs. The studies using this theory demonstrated that a perceived close social distance between SMIs and followers can lead to intimate relationships, leading to persuasive communication by SMIs.

Other than these theories, many other theories were also applied, which brought different aspects to the research domain. For instance, the Match-up Theory demonstrated the importance of congruence between the SMIs and the endorsed brands/products, while the Self-Disclosure Theory showed how SMIs sharing of personal information helps in building trust among their followers. Similarly, the Social Identity Theory and Source Credibility Theory have been pivotal in explaining the role of individual identity and credibility of SMIs and the amount of influence it can have on consumer behaviors. Uses and Gratifications Theory also offered insights into how SMIs' reputational cues and content quality can lead to better marketing outcomes for SMI campaigns. The application of many theories has definitely improved our understanding of PSRs with SMIs, however, there is a need for an integrated effort to combine different theories and enhance the overall understanding of which SMI characteristics lead to PSRs, and in under what conditions can they lead to better marketing outcomes.

Variables Identified from Literature

The analysis indicates that investigations into PSR with SMIs have been conducted using a variety of dimensions and variables, and tailored to a variety of different contexts. While some studies feature overlapping factors, others introduce unique variables that essentially represent similar concepts. In total, 35 variables have been pinpointed as instrumental in these studies, serving as independent variables, mediators, moderators, and dependent variables. This compilation has been refined by omitting variables that are strictly contextual and by amalgamating those with closely related meanings.

The independent variables used in the studies can be categorized into the following three broad categories: influencer characteristics, interaction strategies, and consumer perceptions. The findings revealed that characteristics of an influencer, such as attractiveness, expertise, prestige, trustworthiness, and credibility, significantly influenced followers' perceptions and behaviors. Attractiveness, often the most highlighted characteristic in studies, included both aesthetic appeal and the social appeal. Expertise established an influencer as a knowledgeable source within a specific domain, while prestige reflected their status and influence. Trustworthiness and credibility were essential for maintaining a long-term influential presence, as influencers developed a sense of reliability and authenticity. Self-disclosure, where influencers share personal information, also played a substantial role in humanizing their persona, allowing followers to feel a personal connection and deepening the parasocial relationship.

Interaction strategies were the methods by which influencers engage with their audience. These included following: the level of interactivity, such as responsiveness to comments; the frequency of interactions, as these conveyed consistency and availability; and the style of communication, which can range from formal to casual, depending on the influencer's brand and the preferences of their audience. These interaction strategies influenced the strength and intimacy of the PSR by determining how accessible and relatable the influencer appears.

Consumer perceptions formed the third category and were shaped by how followers perceive the influencer in terms of similarity to themselves, popularity among peers, opinion leadership, and the value provided through their content. Perceived similarity enhanced relatability, while perceived popularity and opinion leadership elevated the influencer's authority and potential to shape public opinion. The perceived value, whether educational, entertaining, or inspirational, contributed to the overall effectiveness of the influencer and the likelihood of followers engaging with and endorsing the influencer's content.

Three mediating variables were identified with PSI and PSR being used as independent variables in some studies. PSI intensified the impact of an influencer's attractiveness or expertise on a follower's engagement with the content. PSR took this a step further by solidifying PSI into a longer-term feeling of a bond or friendship with the influencer, similar to the relationship with a peer. This deeper bond significantly affected a follower's trust in the influencer and his/her willingness to follow recommendations, extending beyond casual interactions to influence more substantial behavioral changes, such as purchase intentions. In one of the studies, social presence, for example, the influencer's ability to make followers feel acknowledged and valued through their social media engagement, was used as a mediator. A strong social presence made followers feel as though they were directly interacting with the influencer, which amplified the effects of PSR and led to higher levels of consumer trust and loyalty.

Several moderating variables have also been used in the studies under discussion. Gender shaped the type of content that individuals engaged with, while age influenced the choice of social media platforms and how users interacted with content. The length of time a user spends on social media reflected their familiarity and engagement with the platform, which in turn affected how they perceived and interacted with influencers.

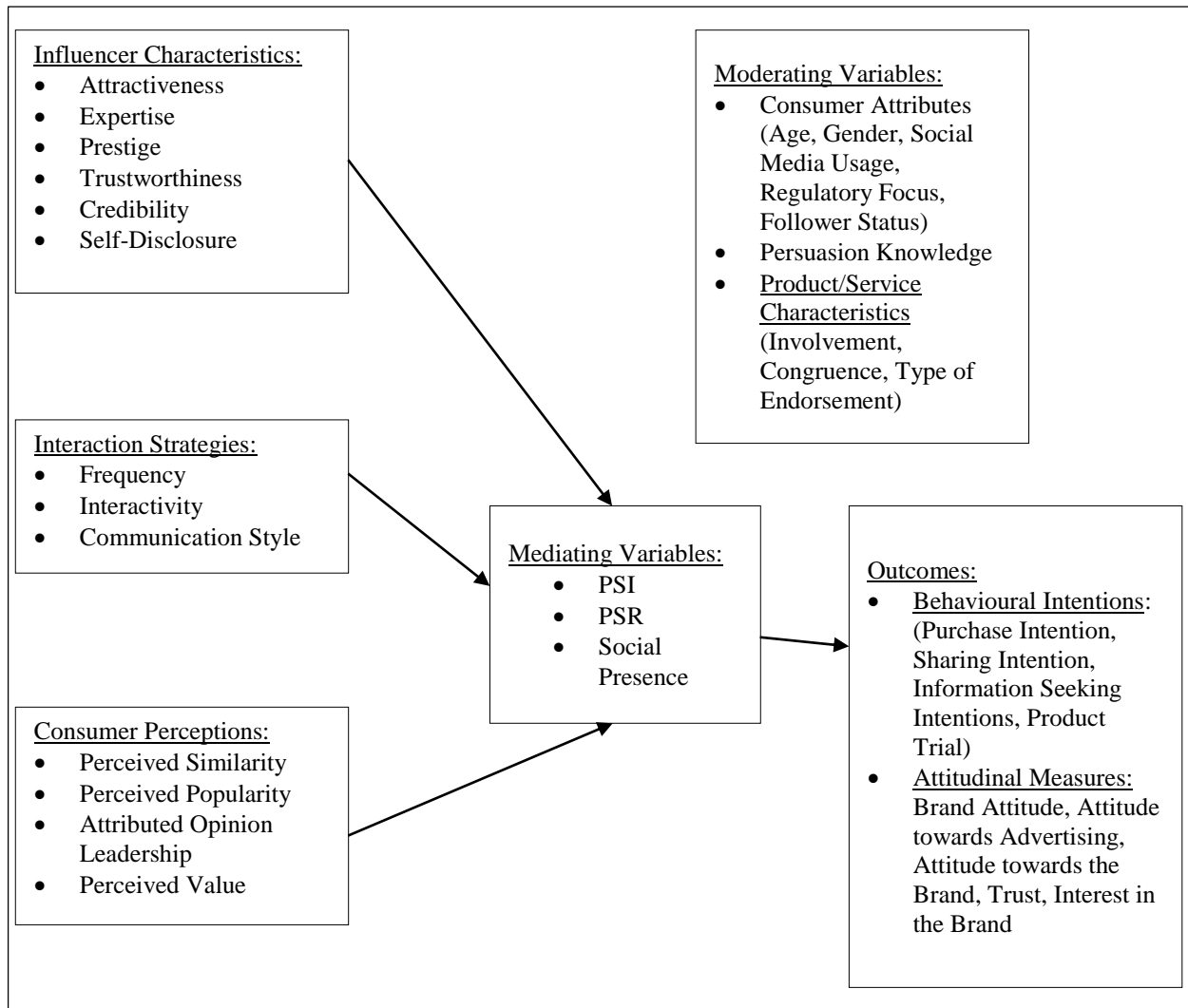
Similarly, the nature of the product or service being promoted altered the effectiveness of an influencer's endorsement. The congruence between an influencer's image and the product they endorsed also affected the impact of their message; the greater the alignment, the more persuasive the endorsement was. Additionally, the subtlety or directness of the endorsement influenced how genuine the influencer's message appeared to consumers. Persuasion knowledge shaped how consumers process influencer endorsements, with those more aware of persuasive tactics being more critical of an influencer's motives and the authenticity of their endorsements.

Dependent variables in social media influencer research typically measured the outcomes of the influencer-follower interaction and often considered indicators of an influencer's impact on followers' behavior and attitudes. A primary focus of such studies, reflected in the majority of cases, is on purchase intention. This measure reflected the likelihood that a consumer will buy a product or service based on the influencer's recommendation. Many studies indicated that there was a correlation between SMIs' characteristics and purchase intention, mediated by PSR. Sharing intention and information seeking intentions were other behavioral outcomes studied. Sharing intention gauged the extent to which consumers were motivated to distribute an influencer's content within their networks, which was seen as a form of endorsement and amplified the influencer's reach. Information seeking intentions reflected the consumer's drive to learn more about products or services after an influencer's post, which served as the first step in the consumer journey towards a purchase.

On the attitudinal side, brand attitude measured how favorably consumers perceived the brand after influencer endorsement. Similarly, attitude towards advertising assessed consumers' reactions to the promotional content itself, and attitude towards the brand was indicative of the overall sentiment towards the brand in question. Trust was another pivotal dependent variable, as it included the level of confidence consumers placed in both the influencer and the endorsed brand, serving as a prerequisite for the effectiveness of other attitudinal measures. Based on its review of the selected articles, this study has proposed the following framework, which is depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Proposed Model Based on Past Studies



DIRECTIONS

This study was based on a systematic analysis of selected articles published in Scopus-indexed journals. There is clear evidence that there has been increased academic interest in research on PSR with SMIs. Arguably, the biggest contributor of this growing academic interest is the expansion and growth of the overall influencer marketing industry. Geographically, the growth has been quite pronounced in countries, such as the United States, Germany, Malaysia, and China.

Furthermore, the diverse application of various theoretical frameworks as evidenced by the prevailing 15 distinct theories, reflects that research in this area is not particularly driven by just one single theory. Many authors have turned to the availability of theories, either a particular single theory or several theories in combination, to explore the various facets of PSR with SMIs. The theories that have been employed mostly

include the following: Parasocial Relationship Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, Construal Level Theory, and Reactance Theory.

The present study has contributed to the growing body of knowledge on influencer marketing by proposing a model that is based on incorporating the 35 variables that were identified through its systematic review of the literature in the field. The model can be applied by future researchers to investigate the influence of various variables within different industries, or contextual settings, thereby expanding the understanding of PSRs and influencer marketing. The research momentum in this field is evident from the growth in the number of articles within this domain. Hence, this study provides a rationale, as well as justification for using different variables for future research.

Furthermore, for marketing professionals, this study provides several insights that can improve their understanding of influencer marketing, and consequently help them in optimizing their influencer marketing strategies. This study highlights how previous studies have identified some characteristics that can help brands in identifying and choosing the right influencers for their campaigns. The model and other findings of the study can also aid marketers in selecting the influencers who have the traits to form intimate relationships with their target audiences, therefore improving the overall effectiveness of their influencer marketing campaigns.

However, the study is not without its own limitations. For instance, the study has ignored the WoS database and is reliant entirely on the Scopus database. Future researchers could build on this methodology and add multiple databases which can help in aggregating more studies on PSR with SMIs. Furthermore, the findings of the study reveal that there is a noticeable gap when it comes to contributions from regions like Africa, South America, and Oceania. Despite the strong growth of influencer marketing from these regions as well, academics have not addressed the research gaps within these regional contextual settings. Therefore, researchers should explore this research gap in the field. Moreover, future scholars should also do a comparative analysis of how research on PSR with SMIs has progressed in comparison to the PSRs with traditional celebrities. Findings from such studies can aid marketers in deciding between traditional celebrities and influencers.

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