



From Posts to Profits: A Systematic Review on How Social Media Influencers Shape Brand Communication and Success

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ABSTRACT: Background: Social media influencers (SMIs) have proved themselves as media stars in the field of brand communication, but little work has yet been done focusing on credibility, authenticity, engagement, or technological aspects of SMIs. However, no systematic review has until now analysed both psychological and emotional SMI characteristics together and investigated the impact of segmentation of the audience on the effectiveness of the brand communication.

Methods: This study is a systematic review of the literature done according to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar databases from January 2015 to December 2022. Moreover, both written (peer-reviewed) and published studies in English in full text that explored the impact of SMI on brand outcomes were included. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT Version 2018) was used to assess methodological quality.

Result: A total of 59 studies met the inclusion criteria and were subsequently synthesised from a total of 72,536 initial records identified. The themes that appeared are credibility and trust as the most important mediator of the brand outcomes; authenticity as the intervening variable that ranged between creating various positive influences depending on the experience; excessiveness as an interfering variable of the impression of credibility when it comes to experiences linked to likeness and trust; virtual influencers as underperforming, compared to human influencers, that it positively moderates the experience when it comes to communication effectiveness. Many times, micro-influencers were able to create more engagement for lower reach.

Conclusions: The effectiveness of SMI is influenced by the interactions of credibility, authenticity, audience characteristics, and platform context. This review suggests a new conceptual framework and recommends future research, such as a longitudinal study, cross-cultural evaluation, and AI-powered influences on the environment.

KEYWORDS: Social media influencers, brand communication, influencer marketing, systematic literature review, consumer engagement, PRISMA.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background and Context

Social media ecosystems have experienced rapid expansion, which has influenced the way social media brands communicate with consumers as well as the way digital consumers interact in the digital world. However, unlike the traditional advertising model, which mainly depends on an interactive influence network that connects and brings together brand and audience by involving or engaging with the ones who are influential in social media influencers (SMIs). [1] describe that this change is called moving from exposure communication to relationship communication influence.

Moreover, about the results of [2], one of the prominently emerging themes is the influence of influencer power in raising awareness and also directly influencing the positive brand attitudes through the assessments made via trust. Consequently, organisations are seeking long-term partnerships with creators, creating value for their relationship. Additionally, the influencer Ecosystem also evolved into Mega-, Macro-, Micro-, and Virtual Influencers with various types of engagements. While according to [3], it is possible that larger audiences could produce better endorsement results, this is not frequently the case. Therefore, the use of AI in the production of content is threatening to undermine notions of authenticity and digital influence.

B. Existing Knowledge



Recent studies indicate that on its own, followers' size is not a reliable indicator of the effectiveness of influencers. However, the consumer's response to the brand's messaging is dependent on the mix of credibility, authenticity, emotional attachment, and quality of engagement. As per [4], persuasive effects arise from psychological processes and because of the trustworthiness of influencers when emotional attachment is formed.

One of the other main streams is relational mechanisms. Parasocial interaction offers one explanation for how messages from an influencer can be accepted without being resisted by the consumer. The results presented by [5] buttress the argument that a more emotional connection within the parasocial relationship will make the influencers more persuasive. According to [14], interaction studies with engagement interest reveal that the quality of interaction is more correlated with effective outcomes than content. In a study by [6], inspirational responses are able to offset the negative perception of authenticity and help to preserve purchase intention.

B. Research Gap

Though the ability of influencer marketing research has risen significantly in a short time, evidence is still divided both within constructs and contexts and in expected outcomes. Many existing studies focus on trust and credibility, authenticity or engagement in isolation without understanding their interdependence and how all these factors influence brand outcomes.

On the other hand, another constraint is contextual inconsistency. Comparability between studies is reduced because of variations among and across any platform, influencer type, and measurement method. [7] demonstrate that the intensity of communication is not necessarily associated with greater engagement, suggesting that there is a conditional relationship between the effectiveness of communication and engagement. Moreover, emerging issues like AI-powered influencers, sponsorship recognition and changing consumer needs have not been fully incorporated. Therefore, existing reviews often prioritise the categorisation rather than explaining and creating a requirement for the integrated systematic review.

C. Theoretical Anchoring

The major theoretical frameworks expressed in this review apply an integrated character from four complementary aspects. Firstly, the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) Model or Problem Solving Approach, which describes how an action takes place through a matrix or a complex set of stimuli triggering the inner appraisal and the action response. Secondly, the Elaboration Likelihood approach provides insight into consumers' processing mechanisms across different levels of involvement with influencer content.

Thirdly, an influencer's emotional connection and attachment to users diminish persuasion. Influencer contexts can be analysed considering parasocial interaction and trust as a combined variable, as this approach has been demonstrated to impact the purchase intention [8]. Lastly, Source Credibility Theory is the term used to describe why messages and brands are accepted or evaluated based on their expertise, trustworthiness, and authenticity [38]. Therefore, these insights combine to create a mechanism to explain consumer behaviour through influencers.

D. Research Questions

The following three revised research questions guide the review:

- RQ1: What are the SMI attributes (Psychological, emotional and technical attributes) needed to impact brand communication effectiveness?
- RQ2: What impact(s) do audience segments (socio-economic, platform, micro vs macro) have on the relationship between SMI attributes and brand outcomes?
- RQ3: What strategies for the brand-influencer collaboration can be identified with empirical evidence?

Additionally, these questions take the review beyond descriptive mapping, guiding a mechanism-based synthesis, through which the attributes of the influencer, the heterogeneity of the audience and the results of the collaboration are combined into a unified explanation of the effectiveness of the brand communication.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Review Design

The systematic literature review (SLR) design approach was utilised in this study to examine how brands' effectiveness in communication through social media and the outcomes for consumers diffuse in the digital environment as a consequence of the social media influencers (SMIs). The methodology described in the new version of the manuscript



has been improved on the basis of feedback from the reviewers: too much description, methodological lack of transparency, and poor analytical integration in the previous version of the manuscript. Accordingly, the revised review then embraced a different style from a narrative summarisation and engaged with a structured evidence synthesis approach.

Moreover, the review was conducted per Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines, which aim at enhancing the internal transparency, reproducibility, and consistency at article identification, screening, eligibility specification, quality evaluation, and synthesis stages [9]. The review was directed by the updated research questions exploring: (1) which SMI attributes are shown to be critical to the efficacy of brand communication and how they do so, (2) how audience segments affect the relationships between the SMI attributes and brand communication effectiveness, and (3) what evidence-based collaboration strategies are gleaned from previous research.

Additionally, a thematic synthesis approach was used due to methodological diversity among the studies included, ranging from quantitative surveys, experiments, qualitative studies, systematic reviews, and conceptual analysis. Heterogeneity of constructs, outcome variables and analysis approach precluded the use of meta-analysis. Furthermore, the synthesis comprised 59 studies published from January 2015 to December 2022.

B. Database and Search Strategy

Four databases were chosen: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), ScienceDirect and Google Scholar, to maximise breadth of retrieval and to minimise publication bias. The selection of databases indicated the reviewers' concerns about the limited source justification and evidence coverage. Moreover, the choice of Scopus and Web of Science was made due to their wide coverage across the fields of communication and marketing, business, and consumer behaviour. To collect the publisher-indexed peer-reviewed research, ScienceDirect has been incorporated. Google Scholar was added as an additional database to find the latest publications and those that have full-text PDFs available.

The search period is January 2015 to December 2022.

The search terms were created in a step-by-step process and linked to the changed research questions. Three of these domains were established: Influencer constructs, brand outcomes, and social media platforms. Search components focused on Appendix 1 Final Search String:

("social media influencer" OR "SMI" OR "SMIs" OR "digital influencer" OR "Instagram influencer" OR "YouTube influencer" OR "TikTok influencer" OR "micro-influencer" OR "macro-influencer" OR "megainfluencer" OR "virtual influencer" OR "key opinion leader" OR "KOL")

AND

("brand communication" OR "brand success" OR "brand outcome" OR "brand equity" OR "brand attitude" OR "brand loyalty" OR "brand trust" OR "brand awareness" OR "purchase intention" OR "consumer engagement" OR "consumer behaviour" OR "consumer behaviour" OR "customer engagement")

AND

("social media" OR "social networking" OR "Instagram" OR "YouTube" OR "TikTok" OR "Facebook" OR "Twitter" OR "X" OR "LinkedIn" OR "social platform")

Additionally, backward citation searching and forward citation tracking were performed to identify missed publications.

C. Eligibility Criteria

Before screening, eligibility criteria were created to minimise the elements of selection bias and to achieve methodological consistency. The inclusion and exclusion criteria table mentioned in appendix 2.

Studies were included in the analysis if they included at least one of the following aspects:

Psychological SMI attributes (trust, credibility, attitudes)

- Emotional mechanisms (authenticity, attachment, parasocial interaction)
- Slate: how the snail acts in response to the situation, e.g., via Artificial Intelligence (AI), new products, technical modifications, etc.
- Audience moderation factors
- Brand–influencer collaboration outcomes

Research focusing exclusively on digital or internet advertising and celebrity endorsement and/or unrelated social networking behaviours was not included.

Evaluation for eligibility was done at the title level, abstract level, and at the full text.

Finally, 59 studies were selected that met the criteria.



D. Screening Process

The study selection process included study identification, duplicate removal, screening, eligibility assessment and final inclusion of studies, following PRISMA 2020. Prisma data screening process table and framework is focused on appendix 3.

The selection of studies was done using the recommendations of the PRISMA-2020 guidelines, which included stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. Using database searches, Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar, the initial number of hits found equals 72,536. After eliminating the database consolidation, there were 54,262 unique records eligible for screening.

Studies which were irrelevant for social media influencers, digital communication, consumer behaviour, and brand outcomes were screened out. This process resulted in 3281 records, the remainder of which were abstracted for screening. 37 studies were epistemologically excluded during abstract level evaluation due to differences with the new research questions, lack of empirical focus or being related to issues different from diminished communication phenomena.

Subsequently, 267 full-text articles were then reviewed based on the set of pre-retrieval criteria and excluded if they failed to meet the inclusion criteria. 28 studies were rejected due to a mismatch in concepts, 15 were not relevant, 15 due to publication limitations and 104 due to inaccessible full-text. The remaining 59 studies, of which 21 were considered, as the methodological quality of the study was assessed using MMAT (Version 2018), were included in thematic synthesis. Lastly, this revised PRISMA flow is now in line with the reviewer's comment, which mentions about 72,536 initial records and consistency with your final included sample ($n = 59$).

E. Quality Appraisal

The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT Version 2018) was used to appraise the methodological quality [37]. The studies that are included are rather diverse in terms of methodology, and that is why the study MMAT was chosen. MMAT framework and interpretation mentioned in appendix 4.

Moreover, the quality appraisal was centred on the methodological transparency, the validity of measures, the appropriateness of analysis procedures and consistent interpretation. Publication prestige was not the only criterion used to exclude studies, but methodological and conceptual value were both taken into consideration. Thus, only conceptual and review studies were retained where they furthered the theoretical interpretation.

F. Data Extraction and Synthesis

Information was extracted using an evidence matrix. Data extraction table mentioned in appendix 5.

The preliminary coding matrix that was established among the 59 studies included was used to guide the extraction process. Moreover, thematic synthesis was used to synthesise data.

The three last analytical themes were formed:

1. Influence mechanism and SMI attributes
2. Establishing a relationship with the audience and segmenting the audience.
3. Brand–influencer collaboration strategies

This synthesis was immediately associated with the revised research questions and gave an explanatory integration when compared with the previous descriptive variant of this synthesis.

IV. RESULT

A. Study Selection and Characteristics

After following the PRISMA-based screening procedure, there were 59 studies left for synthesis. The selected literature featured a wide but widespread range of methodological approaches, geographical contexts and platform environments. Overall, a quantitative survey design would prevail, as evidenced by the overall and present focus on measuring behavioural outcomes, consumer perceptions, engagement patterns, and purchase intention. Moreover, the second largest were experimental studies, which were mainly used to investigate causal mechanisms related to influencer characteristics, disclosure of sponsorship, authenticity perceptions and persuasion processes. Thus, a minority of qualitative and review-based studies provided conceptual elaboration and theory.

Instagram and TikTok were the most commonly studied platforms in the range of studies reviewed, except for multiplatform environments. Additionally, the platforms that showed up the most across the studies were Instagram and



TikTok, followed by multi-platform environments. There is growing evidence that the perception of personalisation influences the results of the user's reactions within the social advertising setting, making social platform communication structures far from neutral and reproducible contexts. In addition to this, the literature in the included material was grouped into six themes that appeared throughout the research. Therefore, this variation helped emphasise the importance of synthesis with mechanisms and not individual variables.

B. Quality Appraisal Results

The quality assessment of the methodological soundness of the evidence retrieved was moderate to high. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT Version 2018) was applied to check for the basic expectations for empirical studies in terms of analytical appropriateness, construct validity, and reporting. Comparisons typically revealed greater agreement in statistical methods used and in the reliability of the tools used to ensure these were also survey-based, but this type of survey also raised issues of sampling issues and convenience recruitment.

Moreover, the causal interpretation of factors other than people came with the experimental studies, and this contributed to the explanatory power, although there were some (repeated) ecological validity concerns. Argue that exposure level and the context of the scenarios muddy the waters of the relationship between effects and the context for an advertisement, beyond what exposure alone in a regulated evaluation setting might indicate. Additionally, theory base-building reviewed and conceptual studies were created as an addition to the body of theory, but exhibited inconsistent transparency of protocol and article selection rationale. Therefore, the quality of information as assessed from the methodological design analyses the criterion, and identifies the concepts that were included to explain the context and analysis and add to the synthesis of the concepts.

C. Thematic Synthesis

1) Theme 1: Credibility and Trust as Core Mediators

Credibility and trust are the most consistently defined and clearly mentioned from the literature reviewed, that it is a mechanism that are at the core of the relationship between SMI attributes and brand outcomes. [10] demonstrate the contributions of perceived credibility positively to positive engagement intentions by impacting believers' trust in influencers' recommendations. Similarly, [11] recommend that it is credible and not otherwise that audiences will believe the message. Thus, based on these results, it may be argued that trust works as an interpretation rather than as a result. However, this credibility did not completely abate over the studies. Researchers chose to stress aspects of emotional sincerity and closeness, or to replace these with what the researchers define as tech competence skills. In symbolic, not information channels, authenticity signals elicit credible perceptions [12]. Therefore, the overall results suggest a dimensional mediation between communication inputs and behavioural outcomes. 2) Theme 2: The Dual Role of Authenticity

The notion of authenticity is identified as one of the more current yet conceptually 'uncharted' entities. The consumers in the evidence are analysed to be receptive to the perception of the authenticity, transparency and congruence of the influencers' communication to their identities. However, the results also suggest that authenticity is not always a universal predictor of effectiveness. Studies of aspirational self-presentation [6] suggest that unconventional presentation forms could be still more effective as they may even appear to be more unique than conventional authentic ones. Similarly, [13] show that AI-generated communication can still be seen to the detriment of the perception of authenticity of any brand.

Significantly, authentic elements also engaged with aspectual features like expectations of the platform audience, disclosure, and audience access. Additionally, this implies that there is a negotiation process that involves determining the authenticity, instead of determining the authenticity as an objective attribute. Therefore, the reviewed evidence refutes the notion that being natural and unscripted is the only way to achieve the success of an influencer. 3) Theme 3: Parasocial Relationships and Engagement

One of the themes that emerged in the research was the idea of parasocial relationships related to the communicator's types and mechanisms used in interpersonal communication and their link to continued consumer engagement. This represents a new paradigm of marketing as opposed to transactional and influencer marketing, which has given them a part to make digital interaction more socially meaningful and relevant to their audience. Moreover, as per [13], their argument for how perceived relational closeness enhances persuasion is based on the idea that when the guidance is perceived as interpersonal, rather than promotional, it is more likely to be interpreted as a persuasion. Furthermore, [14] demonstrated that the quality of a relationship is more predictive of behavioural reactions than is the amount of exposure.



However, a review determined that parasocial influence is not always positive and seldom occurs from context. The success of the engagement was contingent upon the access, content and audience's expectations. Use of participation strategies will deepen the relational continuity of the topics being explored within platforms, as found by [15], for example, by giving the follower the impression of proximity to the creator. The results also show that engagement is not necessarily known through a particular interaction. Additionally, relationships and emotional investment had a

greater effect than likes, views or reach. Therefore, this creates a perception of a promotion based on exposure, instead of a relationship-based brand interaction via influencer communication. 4) Theme 4: Over-Endorsement and Consumer Backlash

As the evidence presented shows, there is a downside to focusing so loudly on the advantages of influencers promoting messages, as it has a detrimental impact on the quality of the communication. Across multiple studies, consumers were exposed to sponsors, the more it influenced their perception of the product's sincerity as well as their interest in communicating with the product they had seen being consumed. When it comes to over-endorsement, it raises questions about the consistency of the influencer's brand and the product endorsed in the promotion campaign, which results in an uncertain belief of the influencer and the sponsor's brand [16]. Thus, this is particularly evident when the commercial operators are participating in projects in which there is no connection to the ones for content patterns established before.

Additionally, Research also shows that the combination of offending expectations of the consumers and advertising frequency can create a backlash. [17] have shown that disclosure of sponsorship, when viewed as a sincere attempt can mitigate negative reactions to the disclosure. It is important, then, for endorsement saturation to be a relationship, rather than a set threshold. Therefore, results indicate that working with brands and influencers should not be a long-term proposition.

5) Theme 5: Human versus Virtual Influencers

The reviewed literature revealed that one of the biggest trends is the revolutionization of influencers with the introduction of virtual influencers and AI assistance to replace human influencers. The evidence today is that virtual influencers are gaining traction as a medium they have greater message control over, they are easier to scale, and they have less reputational uncertainty, among other benefits. But their effectiveness is dependent and not necessarily better than all the other options. As identified by [18], when backed by content that is entertaining and coherent with a visual appearance, the perception of the virtual influencers' authenticity can be comparable to that of a human influencer. However, when consumers feel the artificiality does not inspire them, the responses are less positive. [19] also discovered that among all situations involving trust building and authentic relationships, virtual influencers still fall short compared to their human counterparts. Despite virtual influencers' ability to reinforce brand consistency, they cannot capture emotional spontaneity and do not always have the perception of real or social worlds. 6) Theme 6: Audience Segmentation

The results confirm that the effectiveness of the influencers is heavily dependent on audience factors, supporting the updated research proposition that the relationship among communication outcomes varies between different groups of consumers. However, influencer attributes do not produce consistent reactions and are dependent on specific demographic, behavioural and platform conditions. [20] found that if it were about the omission of the influencer's scale, then communication would not be successful, as there would be differences in the interpretation of the message in different audiences of followers. Thus, micro-influencers were often identified as more accessible and relevant, leading to higher engagement metrics.

Moreover, according to [21], persuasive mechanisms are different depending on the platform context; for example, those environments involving visual and interaction components stimulate more relational engagement than other information-oriented platforms. Other audience segmentation included between age, involvement and digital familiarity. [22] highlighted that younger consumers are more receptive to messages with identity-specific connections and sentiments of intimacy from the influencers. Therefore, the results contradict some of the common views on influencers' performance, leaving the impression that for shoppers to engage with brand messages, influencers, platform affordances and audience expectations need to align with each other more than just their mere visibility.

D. Contradictory and Conditional Findings

The literature examined in this study is largely equivocal on the relationship between the measures of influencer activity and the results of the brand, although there were a number of contradictions. Firstly, with the role of authenticity came conflicting results. Authenticity was found to be a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the initiation of trust



formation and engagement in several studies, while other studies revealed that aspirational presentation, aesthetic qualities, and symbolic identity can lead to stronger resulting effects as compared to perceived realism. Thus, this inconsistency implies that authenticity is evaluated differently in different situations or contexts rather than being a fixed attribute of an influencer.

Secondly, conflicting data on the size of influencers began to circulate. This is a different way of thinking about macro and mega influencers, which are thought to be more effective by virtue of visibility, while a few studies have highlighted the higher involvement rates and behavioural outcomes associated with micro-influencers because of the perceived intimacy and credibility. [23] state that sometimes quality over quantity is more of a consideration for their effectiveness. Thirdly, the results for Disclosure of Sponsorship were inconclusive. [24] reveal that disclosure can raise the level of advertising awareness without fatally damaging persuasion. Therefore, there are some studies that describe AI-influencers as scalable communication tools, while others highlight the distrusted emotional sense of social identification.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Interpretation of Findings

The results show that the effectiveness of social media influencers (SMI) lies in a multi-stage process of communication, including influencer visibility. The results of the studies reviewed revealed that credibility is the most consistent precursor of positive brand outcomes as it impacts the evaluation and internalisation of marketing messages by audiences. According to the theory of opinion change by [25], credibility is thought to aid not just in the identification process, but also in the internalisation process, leading to the making of personally meaningful recommendations from promotional content.

One of the other main understandings gleaned from this second study is on the topic of authenticity. Although authenticity was considered by most of the literature reviewed as something that is important universally in the influencer's success, there are explanations behind it, indicating it's not that straightforward. [26] conclude that creating a stronger illusion and a greater sense of authenticity leads to greater persuasiveness when there is a sense of commercial manipulation. Furthermore, [27] suggest that improved perceptions of authenticity and less commercial manipulation would facilitate a higher level of persuasion. Therefore, the discovery indicates that authenticity is recognised as an attribute of the influencer and is felt to be socially negotiated.

Furthermore, the course activity also highlights the importance of parasocial relationships to current brand communications. Due to repeated exposure to influencers, messages can be perceived as being supportive of friendly and familiar relationships, thereby influencing acceptance [28]. Finally, the results indicate that contextual moderators play a crucial role in influencers' effectiveness. However, not all occurrences of frequent communication resulted in or were facilitated by positive communication outcomes, nor were the communications on platforms that were capable of these positive outcomes. In addition to this, the composition of the audience, platforms, products, and the frequency of endorsement were found to frequently influence the communication results. Thus, the impact of the SMI has to be evaluated at the level of its different components in which the psychological mechanism, the interpretation of a message by the audience, and the communicative setting.

B. Theoretical Implications

This review helps in doing that as it pulls the extract from various materials together on a single point of an explanatory framework for influencer marketing. The concept of credibility, authenticity, engagement and purchase intention has been explored separately in previous studies. However, this synthesis suggests that these variables serve as elements that work together in a larger communication process [29]. Moreover, the reviewed evidence indicates that social media influencers engage in the processes of compliance, identification or internalisation within the same message. Communication effectiveness depends on compliance, identification, and internalisation, of which all three processes are considered in the same message communicated by social media influencers.

The results also further expand Source Credibility Theory to show that expertise and trustworthiness are not the only aspects that contribute to credibility. With these, credibility is created rather through continuous audience interpretation guided by authenticity signals, relational closeness and communication consistency. [30] proposed that people in the process of interaction are actively shaping impressions for audience-spectators, which perfectly captures the process of creating impressions on influencers.



On the other hand, another theory contribution is focused on the contextual contingency. The authors of the current review revealed that the moderation effects that affect the effectiveness of influencers are more salient than previously acknowledged, as [31] have indicated they occur more across platforms and audience groups than previously acknowledged. The communication outcomes were always found to be significantly affected by audience segment, endorsement frequency, product category and platform affordances. Therefore, the framework offers a more solid theoretical basis for future studies of influencer marketing.

C. Comparison with Existing Reviews

The results broadly support the results of the other systematic reviews that were published earlier, but with some novel and useful elaborations. Other factors that were identified as helping the effectiveness of an influencer were also trust and credibility, which were also corroborated in this review [32]. In this current synthesis, it is argued that credibility acts not directly but via psychological mechanisms, which in turn have an effect on behaviour in much the same way. The findings also confirmed that one of the key factors affecting consumers' engagement is authenticity, similar to [33]. Hence, the findings indicate that the notion of authenticity should be an audience evaluation and not as an attribute of an influencer. In appendix 6 the conceptual framework is mentioned.

Furthermore, the review is also a fresher amalgamation of the past reviews, which also has new research associated with the thought of virtual influencers and AI being utilised. Past reviews have occurred before the explosion of AI-generated bodies of content, meaning information is scarce on the comparison of humans and VE's. Finally, the present study focuses more on the audience segmentation as a moderating process as compared to previous reviews. Therefore, this view may partly explain the inconsistencies found in the past studies and provide a nuanced view of the effectiveness of influential individuals. S. Practical Implications

The results have a variety of practical implications for brand managers looking to utilise the power of influencers more effectively. The first point is that it must reflect an organisation's decision to select the appropriate influencers based on both the number of followers and credibility. The study by [34] is a superb instance of how audience belief can more accurately forecast campaign performance than measures of reach.

Secondly, all brands need to have a strategic approach to how they approach authenticity management. Moreover, [35] state that consumers are more likely to engage with meticulously selected content when it aligns with the influencer's brand. Thus, when a manager's attempts to increase the authenticity of their communication are unsuccessful, it is more important to the outcome to focus on the perceived coherence.

Third, product seeding with influencers is preferably done on a long-term basis. Moreover, the findings from the studies mentioned by [36] revealed the connection between interpersonal love and the acceptance of the message disseminated. According to the cited research of [36], it was discovered that interpersonal connection is established when experiencing relational familiarity, as this connection had a positive effect on the acceptance of the message.

Fourth, endorsement frequency should be closely identified by managers. Different business deals can diminish the authenticity and cause consumer doubt. Additionally, organisations must make decisions around the adoption of virtual influencers that are based on campaign goals. Therefore, virtual influencers should be chosen carefully and their campaigns directed towards different areas such as innovation, tech or entertainment, to avoid the risk of the negative consequences of many virtual influencers affecting the brand's reputation.

VI. CONCLUSION

The scope of this systematic literature review was to analyse the evidence from a total of 59 studies that were published between 2015 and 2022, considering the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in the effective communication of brands in the current digital context. The review was done by merging the outcomes of the studies that were found related to extant research on Influencer attributes, psychological mechanisms of influence, the segmentation of target audiences and the outcome of the communication process from the brand perspective.

A. RQ1: What are the psychological, emotional, and technical SMI's attributes that affect the effectiveness of brand communication and how?

It was found that there are three types of brand communication attributes which greatly affect brand communication outcomes, namely: psychological attributes (credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness), emotional attributes



(authenticity, relatability, and inspiration), and technical attributes (content quality, platform activity, and technological capability). Thus, the effects are mostly triggered through the formation of trust, the development of parasocial relationships, the involvement of the consumers, their identification, and perceived value.

B. RQ2: What are the audience segments that moderate the relationship between the SMI attributes and the brand outcomes?

The results suggest that audience types and platform choices, influencer types (micro, macro, mega and virtual), product type, and type of endorsement (sponsored, unpaid, or alongside sponsored gratitude) all have statistically significant effects on communication effectiveness. Thus, the same influencers can yield results that vary from one segment to another and one environment to another.

C. RQ3: What are the best strategies for the brand–influencer collaboration based on empirical evidence?

There are indications that successful collaborations share the following characteristics: influencer-brand congruence, selective endorsement strategies, long-term partnerships, transparency and audience relevance. Moreover, the way it is done is over-commercialised, resulting in loss of credibility and consumer scepticism.

The three theoretical advances provided in the current review are: (1) the assembly of fragmented constructs of the influencer marketing domain into one explanatory framework; (2) the fusion of theories of Source Credibility and Parasocial Relationships in the modern day of influencers; and (3) the development of a contingency-based model of influencer effectiveness. Therefore, it finally offers three practical improvements that show the guidelines for the selection of influencers, appropriate authenticity management strategies, and evidence-based advice for tackling the collaboration between brands and influencers.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While offering a detailed overview of the body of current literature on influencer marketing studies, certain drawbacks should be noted.

Firstly, only the sources Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar were searched. Consider looking for relevant studies in other databases, such as PubMed, PsycINFO, and ERIC, as these could also contain studies related to health communication and/or psychology-related influencer research.

Secondly, publications were identified solely in English, which may mean that the evidence is not available from other languages, where there could be very different practices for influencers.

Third, grey literature such as dissertations, industry reports, preprints, working papers, etc., was not taken into account. This could lead to publication bias and publication of significant results, and non-publication of zero or contrasting results.

Fourth, the studies analysed were heterogeneous in terms of methods. The difference in sampling methodology, measurement and analytical processes could have affected reported results, although an acceptable level of quality was determined through MMAT review.

Fifth, most studies used a cross-sectional survey design, which reduced the ability to make causal inferences. Experimental studies provided high intra-study rigour, but generally employed artificial research environments.

Sixth, though there is already a strong body of work focused on Instagram and YouTube, little evidence has emerged specifically regarding TikTok, Threads, and BeReal – the newer applications.

Seventh, of the studies reviewed, two-thirds were in North America and Europe, making the generality of the results questionable for contexts other than Latin American, African, Middle Eastern and Asian.

Finally, the review was an experiential review conducted by one researcher. Structured screening procedures and predetermined selection criteria were used, although independent dual screening could not be achieved, resulting in an increased risk of selection bias.



These are some questions that need to be looked into further:

1. What are the impacts of AI-generated influencers on consumer trust compared to human influencers?
 2. Are perceptions of authenticity different in different cultural contexts?
 3. What is the effectiveness of influencers on different emerging social media platforms?
 4. What makes an influencer–brand congruence effective?
 5. How do relationships evolve in response to the experience of parasocial contact within longer-term contexts?
 6. How does algorithm-driven content contribute to influencers' effectiveness?
 7. What differences can be found in consumer confidence with respect to disclosure practices by the audience?
- Therefore, addressing these answers would help build up theory and enhance practical knowledge on influencer-generated brand communication.

VIII. DECLARATIONS

Funding: This research did not involve funding from any specific funder in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sector.

Conflict of interest: The author does not have a conflict of interest.

Data Accessibility: The data collection tables and additional data materials used to develop the findings of this review are supplied by the corresponding author on reasonable demand. The checklists and norms used in the PRISMA project are included in the appendices.

Ethics Approval: Not applicable. This study is a systematic review which was based only on published literature, so it does not require human participants or personal data.

Author contribution: [Your Name]: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Visualisation.

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APPENDIX

Component	Search Terms
Influencer Terms	social media influencer, SMI, digital influencer, Instagram influencer, YouTube influencer, TikTok influencer, micro-influencer, macro-influencer, mega-influencer, virtual influencer, key opinion leader, KOL
Brand Outcome Terms	brand communication, brand success, brand outcome, brand equity, brand attitude, brand loyalty, brand trust, brand awareness, purchase intention, consumer engagement, consumer behaviour
Platform Terms	social media, social networking, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, X, LinkedIn, social platform

SEARCH COMPONENTS

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Published between 2015–2022	Published before 2015
Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference papers, editorials
English language	Non-English publications
Full-text/PDF accessible	Abstract-only articles
Focus on SMIs and brand communication	Studies unrelated to influencers
Empirical, qualitative, review, experimental	Commentary papers

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Stage	Screening Activity	Number of Records
Identification	Records identified through Scopus	24,418
Identification	Records identified through Web of Science	18,672
Identification	Records identified through ScienceDirect	12,904



Identification	Records identified through Google Scholar	16,542
	Total records identified	72,536
Duplicate Removal	Duplicate records removed	18,274
	Records after duplicate removal	54,262
Title Screening	Records excluded after title review	50,981
	Records retained for abstract screening	3,281
Abstract Screening	Records excluded after abstract review	3,014
	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	267
Eligibility	Full texts excluded – outside scope	108
Eligibility	Full texts excluded – insufficient relevance to SMI–brand communication relationship	56
Eligibility	Full texts excluded – publication type / inaccessible full text	44
	Studies retained for quality appraisal	59
Quality Appraisal	MMAT assessment conducted	59
Included	Studies included in the final thematic synthesis	59

PRSIMA DATA SCREENING PROCESS

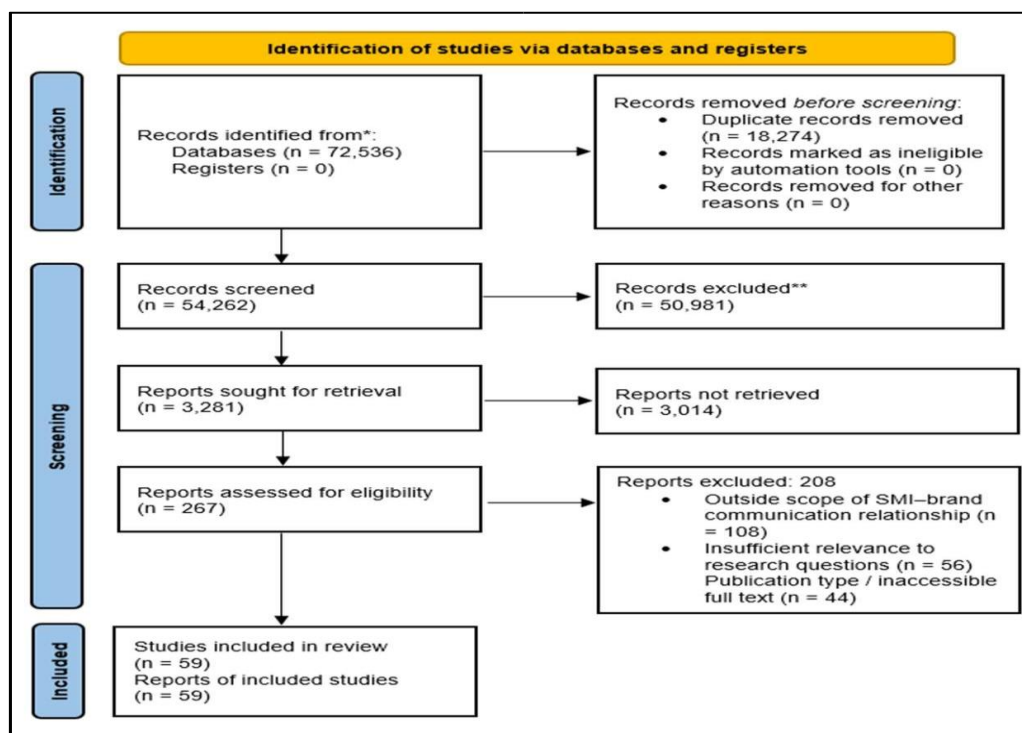


Fig. 1. PRISMA Framework



Study Type	Criteria
Quantitative Survey	Sampling, representativeness, completeness, validity, analysis
Experiment	Randomisation, comparability, outcomes, blinding, analysis
Qualitative	Data collection, interpretation, coherence, reflexivity

MMAT FRAMEWORK

Score	Interpretation
0–2	Low Quality
3	Moderate Quality
4–5	High Quality

MMAT INTERPRETATION

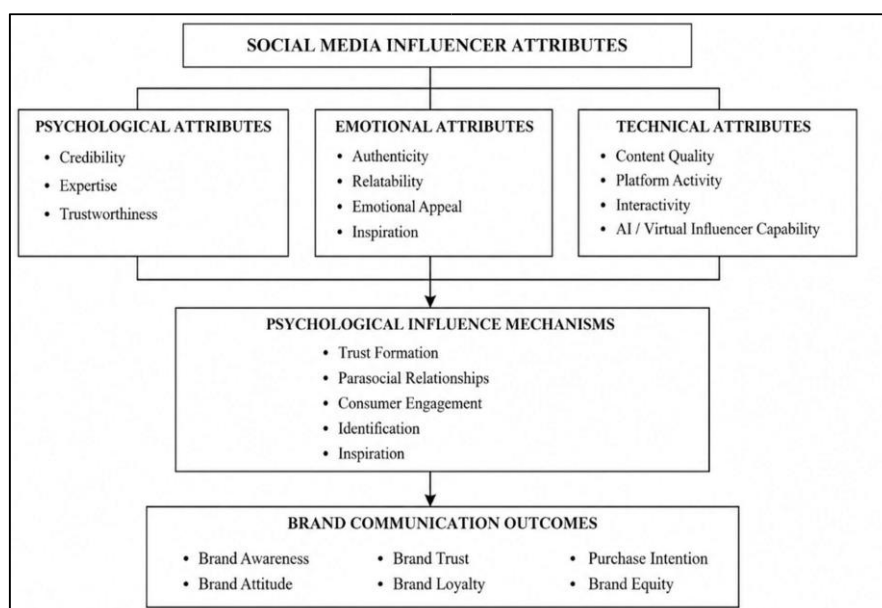


Fig. 2. Conceptual Framework