

Influencer Marketing as a Tool of Digital Consumer Engagement : A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Influencer marketing is a recently emerging strategy that involves engaging people who are influential in the digital domain to share sponsored content of a brand with their followers. The purpose of this article was to review the published literature on influencer marketing, conduct a content analysis of the academic literature, and furnish a classification based on different parameters. The content analysis led to a distribution of articles as per eight different categories. This article provided the first such literature review of influencer marketing literature for the period from 2008 – 2019 to analyze and present the trends of this new marketing tactic, industries and fields involved, different platforms of social media used, key areas and methods employed by the social media influencers to connect with their followers, and spread a brand message. It was found that the major focus areas and industries utilizing social media influencers (SMIs) for brand messages and engagement of the digital consumers are lifestyles, fashion, and beauty. Empirical research was found to be predominant during the period under study. The most popular issues in the recent studies were self-presentation, para-social interactions, para-social relationships, and the credibility of the SMIs.

Keywords : Influencer marketing, social media influencers, digital marketing, social media, literature review

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The gradual expansion of social media with multiple platforms has changed how online content and information are communicated amongst millions of people (Booth & Matic, 2011). This change has led to a shift in marketing practices in the digital arena. One of the marketers' recent strategies is that of influencer marketing, where they incorporate social media influencers in their campaigns to spread their brand messages (Freberg et al., 2011).

Influencer marketing involves identifying and selecting users that are influential and stimulating them to promote a brand, product, or service through activities on their social media platforms in the form of their posts online. However, identifying a suitable opinion leader or influencer is significant for the success of any influencer-based campaign as many other word-of-mouth marketing strategies alike (Araujo et al., 2016).

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A social media influencer (SMI) can be defined as a digital celebrity who is seen as an opinion leader in the digital market, who is involved in engaging and communicating to a mass audience that is unknown to the influencer (Abidin, 2015; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

Influencers acquire this mass audience through their content without the intervention of any form of institutional mediation like the entertainment or sports industry (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Thus, it can be inferred that these digital celebrities create an online image by presenting themselves on social media in a distinct manner and utilizing their online image to attract the attention of a large following and customer engagement on one or more social media platforms (Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008; Senft, 2013). An added benefit of spreading a brand message with the help of social media influencers is higher credibility and trustworthiness because the users can relate and connect more with them, unlike a celebrity (Abidin, 2015; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

According to Turner (2010), digital celebrities are people who are popular to only a specific audience and have interactions with this network of followers. They can be anyone ranging from lesser-known actors and models, fitness freaks, and wealthy people who love luxury brands to university and school students (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2013; Saul, 2016). The influencers, though regarded as celebrities in the digital space, but are more easily accessible, trustworthy, credible, and relatable as they share their personal lives with the followers on different platforms and also interact with them personally such that they have an impact on both the brand value and the purchase decisions of the consumers (Abidin, 2016; Sharma, 2016).

Presently, one of the most effective ways to engage people with your brand message and grip their attention to your product or service is influencer marketing. The multinational clothing retail company H&M in the year 2013 created an outlet brand by collaborating with SMIs and featuring them (Rickey, 2013). As per the 2019 influencer marketing hub report (Geyser, 2021), 320 new influencer marketing platforms and agencies entered the digital market in the last 12 months with influencer marketing growth estimated to be more than double from 2017 figures; 69% of the 830 surveyed marketers focused on the B2C sector and 92% perceived influencer marketing as an effective form of marketing, with 70% measuring the ROI on their campaigns.

A Google search of the term “influencer” generated more than 32,000,000 results, but the research on this topic remains scarce (Hudson et al., 2016). According to Agrawal (2016), with its distinctive and noteworthy advantages, influencer marketing has been signified as “the next big thing.”

The conceptual studies from the dataset were studied to determine the basis/context of these research articles. It was found that only six of the 23 conceptual studies were taking social media on the whole or multiple social media platforms into consideration for being utilized in this marketing tactic. These six studies involved ethnographic fieldwork, integrating a concept related to influencer marketing into a specific framework, theoretical overview of certain factors impacting influencer marketing, understanding of SMI personalities and SMI capital, investigation of motivations and underlying meanings behind people creating and consuming user-generated content (UGC) about brands. All other studies studied a trend (e.g., #OOTD, #POTD, #goals), a particular theme, or a very niche area associated with SMIs or influencer marketing based on a single social media platform only.

On sieving through the review articles based on influencer marketing literature, it was found that no other study had carried out a content analysis based on classifications such as platforms, key topics, industry/focus area, tools and methodologies used, databases, and type of research in this area, which paves the way for the present study to provide a review and classification, distributing the articles into various parameters and consequently presenting both theoretical and managerial implications. Thus, influencer marketing is an attractive area for research as it is a nascent and creative approach to marketing, with businesses increasingly making use of this tactic for successful campaigns. But lack of scientific research in the area paves the way for more research and understanding of this marketing tactic. Considering that no such work has been done previously on similar lines to compile and review the influencer marketing literature, this paper will also assist in creating new frameworks and models for future research and studies. The research objectives for undertaking this study are as follows :

- (1) To analyze the trends in influencer marketing literature being published based on the year of publication and type of research.
- (2) To identify the databases and journals publishing most works in this area.
- (3) To identify the key topics and themes in the influencer marketing-related literature.
- (4) To analyze the literature to identify the industries utilizing this marketing strategy and examine the most employed social media platforms by the social media influencers.

The workflow of the review and classification in this study are based on the frameworks suggested by Ngai (2005) and Das (2009).

Methodology

This study provides a review of papers and research on “influencer marketing” published across four databases with a full-text option in 35 journals from 2008 – 2019. The approach of content analysis was employed for the classification of academic literature. Holsti (1969) chiefly defined content analysis as, “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (p. 14). Content analysis provides researchers with an easy mechanism to arrange large volumes of data in an orderly manner.

The list of online journal databases harnessed to generate academic literature about influencer marketing includes :

- ↗ Science Direct
- ↗ Emerald Full Text
- ↗ Taylor and Francis
- ↗ Sage

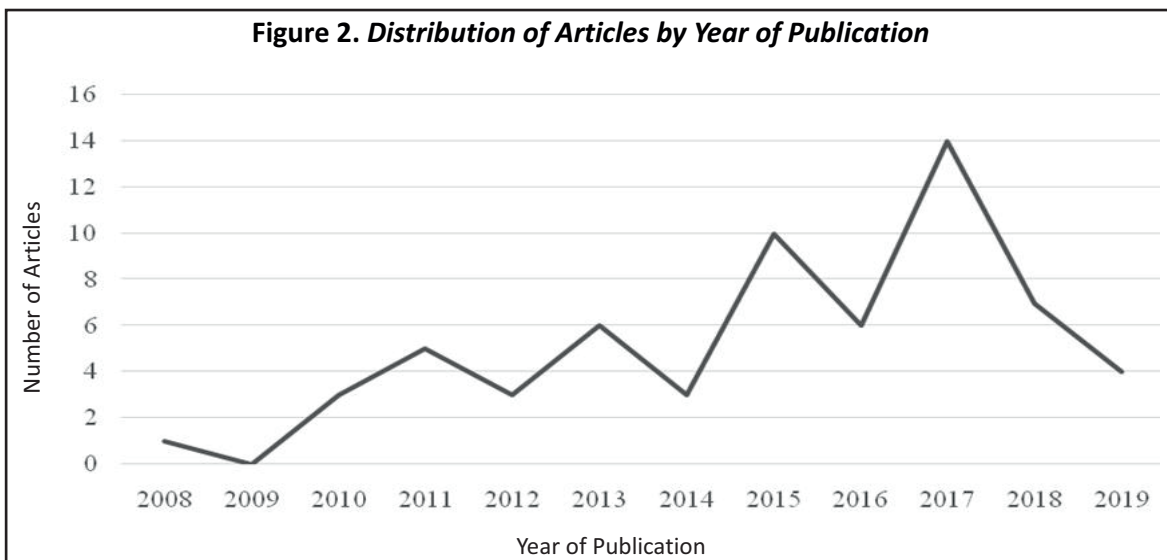
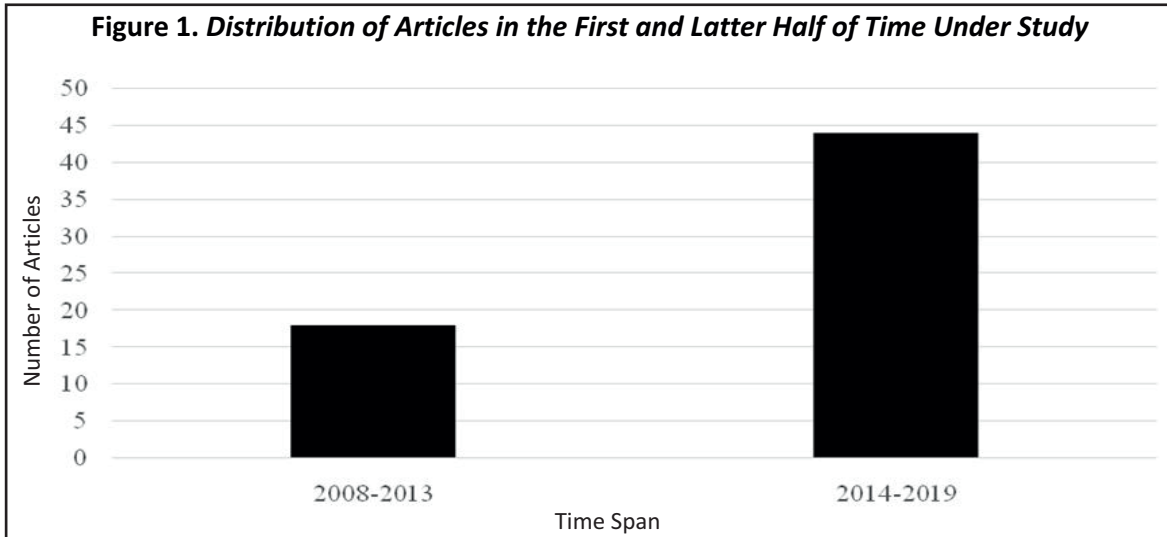
The literature search was based on the keyword descriptor “influencer marketing” for the specified list of databases. The databases were examined for the keywords and terms mentioned in the title, abstract, and keywords list. The period of this study was November 2019 – April 2020. The papers and academic literature generated from this search were scrutinized for relevance, with influencer marketing being utilized for engagement of the digital consumer by reading their full text and screening the related articles for the study. Initially, 93 papers were shortlisted, out of which the dissertation theses and e-books were excluded, and eventually, 62 papers were utilized for this review article.

The final set of articles was codified on different parameters, such as the basic themes and key topics involved. The emergent areas and industries making use of influencer marketing were acknowledged. The frequency with which research is done on influencer marketing and related domains is considered. The classification also involves taking the prominent areas and industries employing influencers in their marketing strategy into account. The segmentation of the articles is also based on the research type, tools used, and methodology adopted in these articles. Another basis of classification is the number of articles published by each of the databases included in the study. This paper examines the trends and patterns involved in the approach of influencer marketing.

Analysis and Results

Classification of Articles by Year of Publication

On examining the number of articles as per the year of publication (Figure 2), it is observed that the maximum

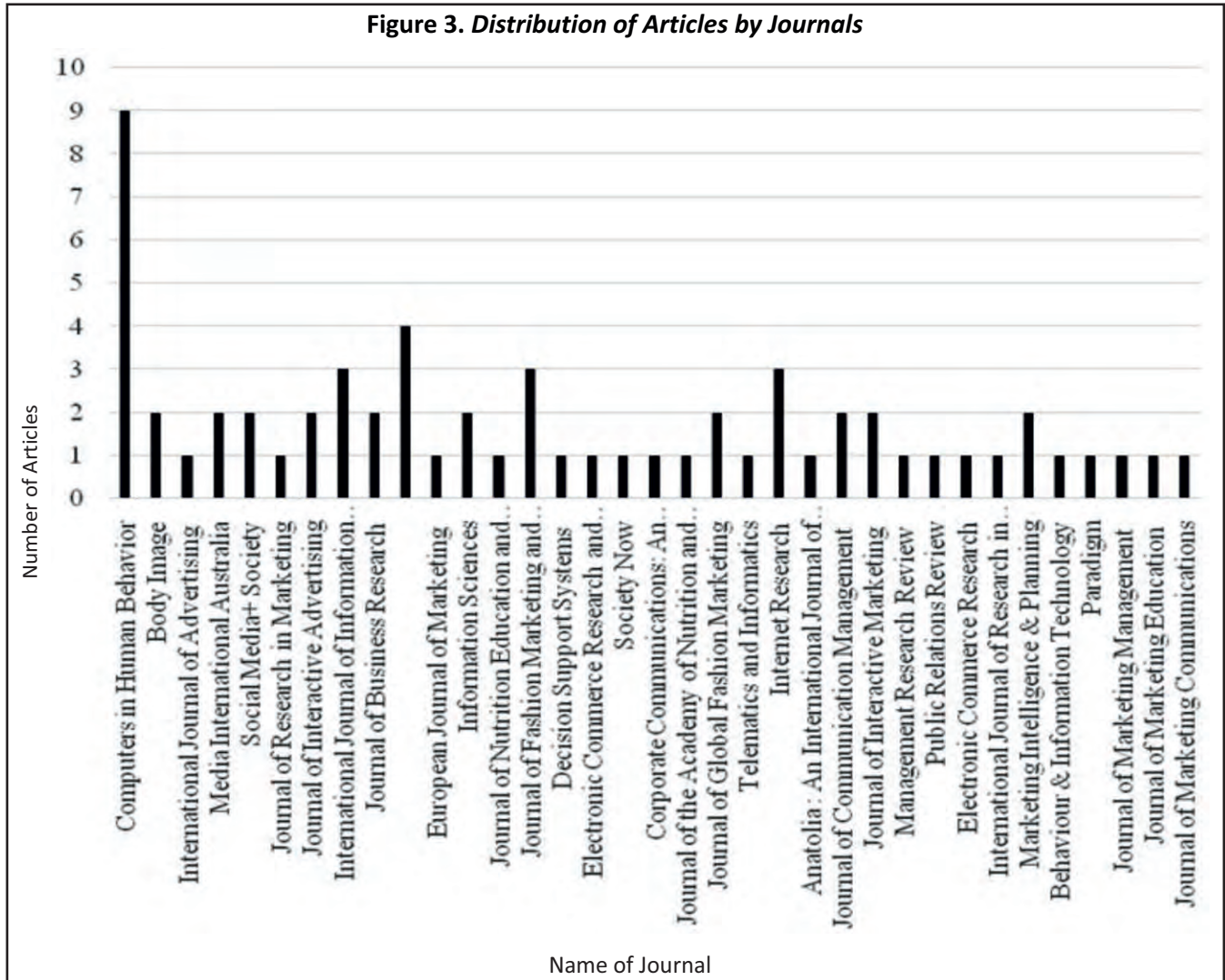


number of articles published in the last decade was 14 in the year 2017. No persistent overall pattern is observed during the period under study, but a gradual outspread of influencer marketing has been evident since the year 2015. As per Influencer Marketing Hub study-2017, there was a 325% increase in Google search of the phrase “influencer marketing” in the last 12 months. It is discovered from Figure 1 that only 29% of the total articles were published from 2008 – 2013; whereas, 71% of the articles were published in the period from 2014 – 2019.

Classification of Articles by Journals

The academic literature search for this review article is based on the keyword descriptor “Influencer Marketing” for the specified databases over a span of 12 years. A total of 35 journals emerged from which the 62 articles of the study were chosen. *Computers in Human Behaviour* was the journal that published nine, the maximum number of articles over the specified period. This journal alone published 15% of the articles during this time. *Procedia*

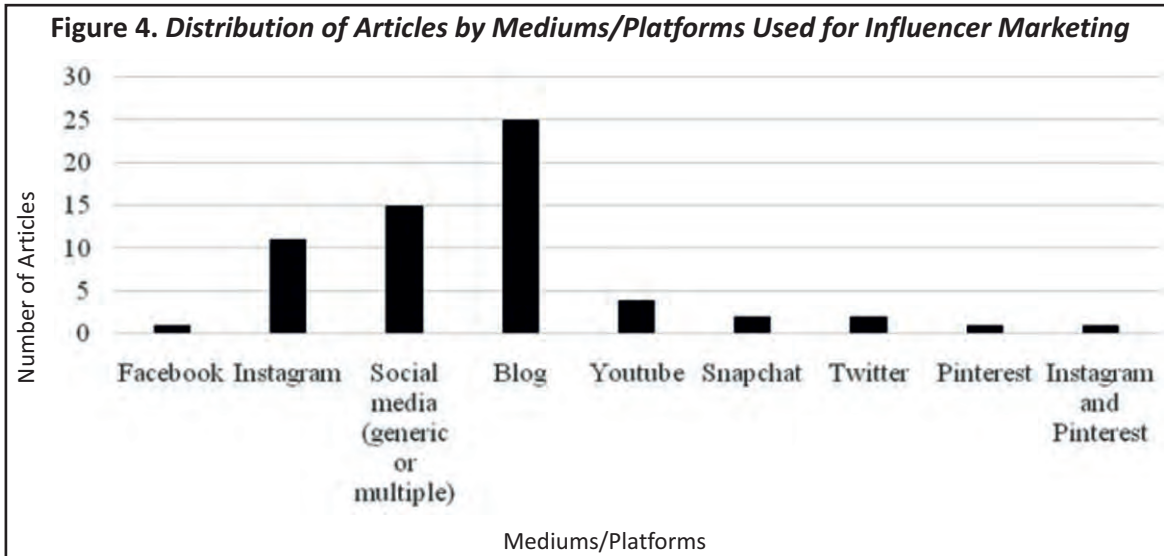
Figure 3. Distribution of Articles by Journals



Computer Science and Procedia Social and Behavioural Sciences was the journal next in order, publishing four articles followed by the International Journal of Information Management, Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, and Internet Research, as shown in Figure 3. It is observed in this review that 15 journals published 68% of the influencer marketing articles, with at least two published articles in each one of them, respectively, and 20 journals published only one paper each in the entire period under study.

Classification of Articles by Mediums/Platforms Used for Influencer Marketing

It is observed that blogs were the most popular medium utilized by the influencers to stay connected within their digital social circle, with 25 articles involving blogs published in the specified period. Blogs constituted 40% of the articles published on various platforms in use by digital opinion leaders. The second most published articles were 15 related to social media being used in the studies in a generic manner or with multiple social networking sites being used in the influencer-based campaigns published in this period. Abidin (2015, 2016) conducted a study on how influencers create content for the promotion of products and services in the form of pictures and

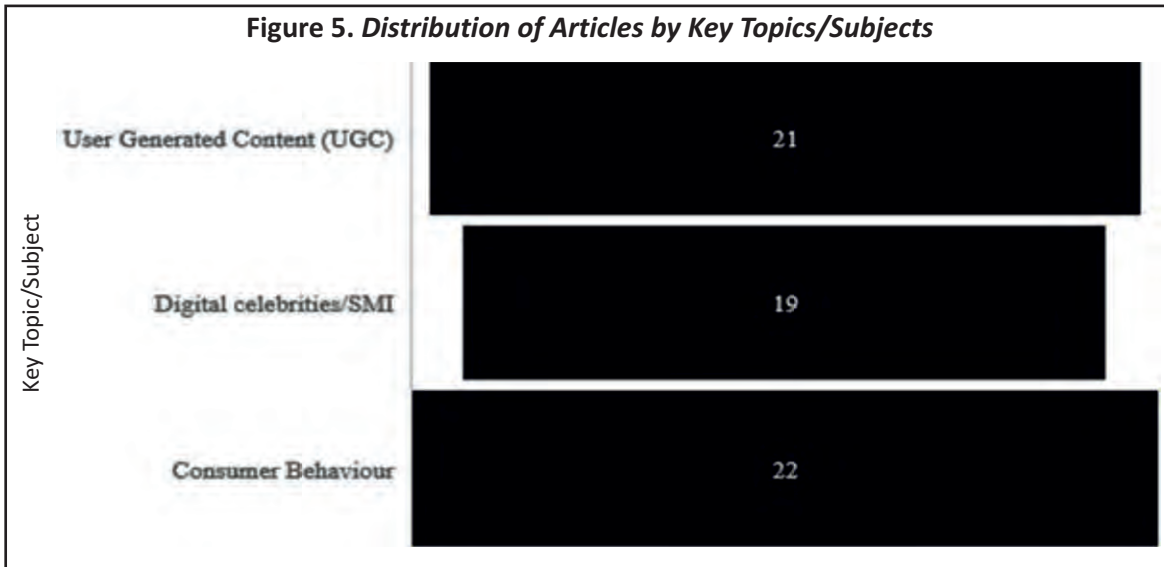


textual narration of their day-to-day lives on social media in the form of ethnographic research. However, experimental research on the working of influencer marketing is largely absent. Kietzmann et al. (2011) presented a model about the theoretical components of social media platforms. Instagram seemed another rapidly growing influencer marketing platform, with 11 related articles published along with one article involving both Instagram and Pinterest, followed by YouTube, which had four related articles published from 2008 – 2019. Instagram alone constituted 20% of the total influencer marketing articles across the four databases. This inference is as per the results of the 2019 survey by Mediakix, which highlighted that the most preferred source of influencer marketing was Instagram posts followed by Instagram stories, YouTube videos, and Instagram videos, respectively. Other welcomed platforms that emerged out of this content analysis are Twitter and Snapchat, both of which had two published articles each. Figure 4 depicts the various mediums and platforms being used for influencer marketing in the digital arena.

Classification of Articles by Key Topics/Subjects

The categorization of articles done under three key topics or subjects related to influencer marketing is namely, user-generated content (UGC), social media influencers (SMI), or digital celebrities and consumer behavior, as demonstrated in Figure 5.

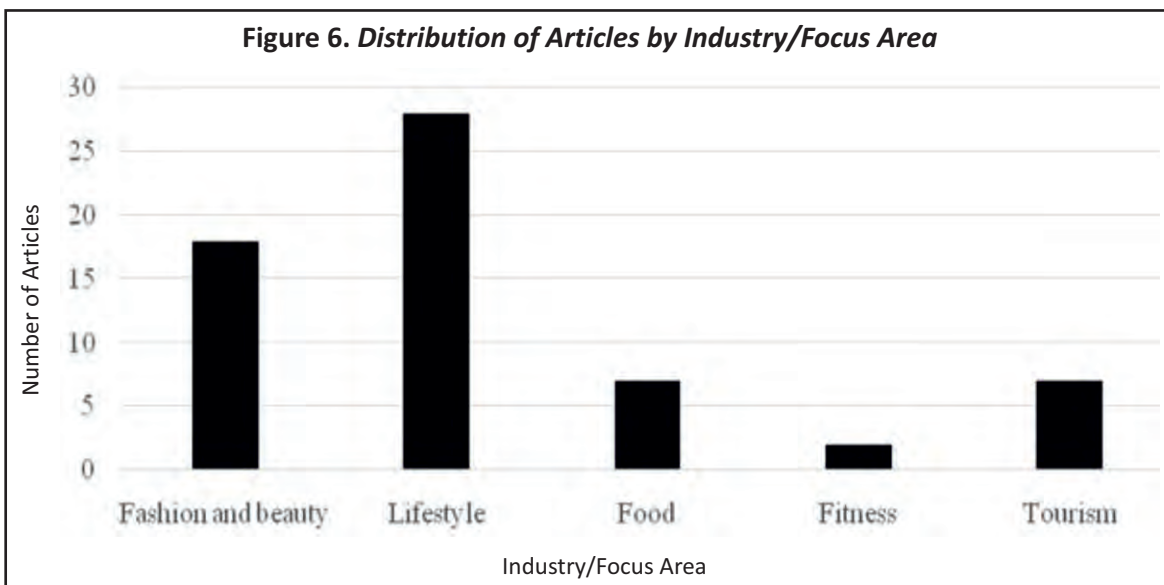
The maximum number of articles, that is, 22 were related to the area of consumer behavior which amounted to approximately 35% of the total published articles. With the evolution of the digital market, the customers utilize access to technology and social media in gathering information about a desired product or service and are also influenced by the creativity of influencer content on social media (Christodoulides et al., 2013; Li, 2010; Padival et al., 2019). The next area was that of user-generated content (UGC), which captured 34% of the total articles. UGC may be referred to as the online content created, consumed, and communicated by the digital users and mainly contains brand-related content that builds brand awareness and impacts the purchase intention of consumers (Blakley, 2013; Daugherty et al., 2008). As per Lou and Yuan (2019), influencer-promoted ads had a greater engagement with a positive sentiment of 76.36% than brand promoted ads with 54.40% positive sentiment, as indicated by sentiment analysis results in their study. UGC lays a strong foundation for brand conversations and consumer insights (Christodoulides et al., 2012). It was found in a study that more than 70% of the millennials and Baby Boomers got influenced by peer endorsements and reviews in making a purchase (Lithium, 2014). There



were 19 articles related to the power, impact, growth, case studies, and trends and practices followed by these digital opinion leaders. Social media influencers and user-generated content comprised of 62% of the total related articles published from 2008 – 2019, highlighting the significance of these digital celebrities and their content.

Classification of Articles by Industry/ Focus Area

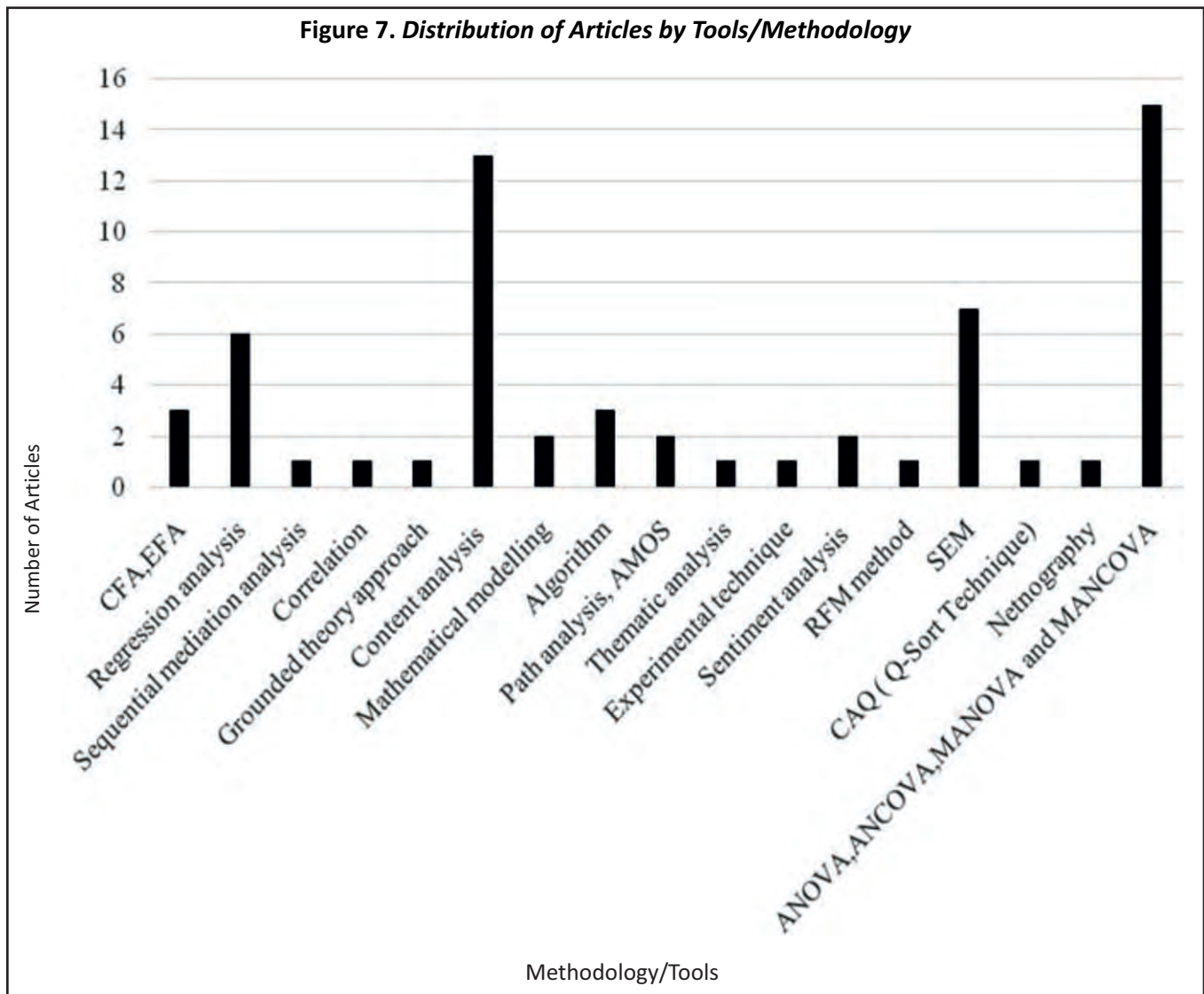
The stratification of articles based on the industries or focus areas on which influencer marketing is being employed is demonstrated in Figure 6. The maximum number of articles related to a focus area was 28, based on one or more aspects from the lifestyle of the social media influencers, which is shared on social media platform(s) with their followers. This was followed by the fashion and beauty industry-based articles constituting 29% of the total articles published in this area. In their fashion-based study, Halvorsen et al. (2013) observed the increasing



influence of these digital celebrities and the mechanisms that enabled them to change and influence the attitudes and decisions of their followers. Both the tourism and the food industry had seven related articles published during the period under study. The least number of articles observed was two articles related to fitness.

Classification of Articles by Tools Used for the Analysis of Data

Figure 7 demonstrates the tools/ methodology used for the analysis of data in the articles included in this study. It was observed that most of the articles were empirical in nature, with different tools being employed to analyze the data. All the papers were classified as per their methodology or tool(s) used. The most used tools for data analysis included ANOVA, ANCOVA, MANOVA, and MANCOVA, which were used in 39% of the empirical studies. The next most used tool was regression analysis used in 16%, followed by factor analysis and algorithm utilized in three empirical articles each. Content analysis was the most widely used technique in 56% of the conceptual articles under study.

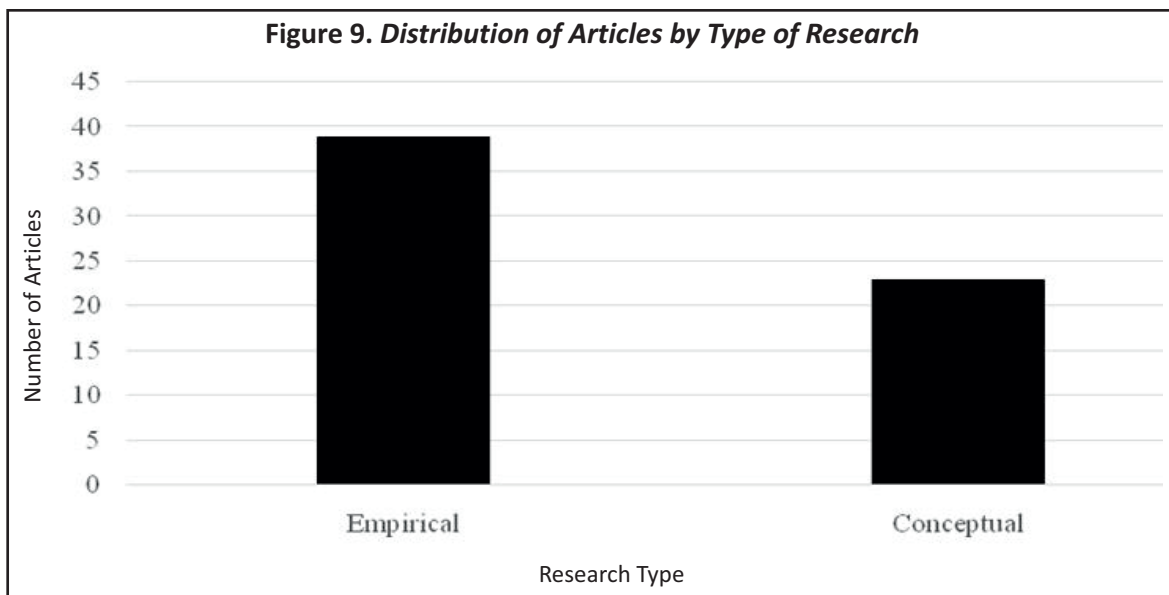
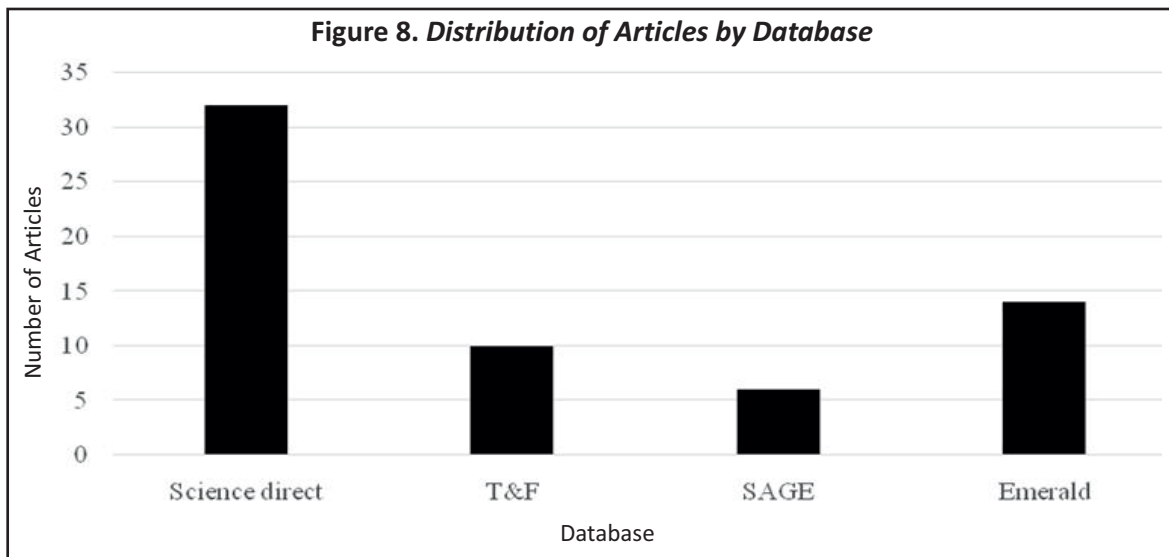


Classification of Articles Based on Database

The distribution of articles across different databases is shown in Figure 8. The maximum number of papers published was 32 by ScienceDirect, followed by 23% of the articles published by Emerald. Taylor and Francis database was next in order with 16% of the total articles published in the area of influencer marketing and lastly followed by SAGE, respectively.

Classification of Articles Based on the Type of Research

The codification of articles is also done based on the research type: conceptual or empirical, as shown in Figure 9.



It is observed that 63% of the total articles comprised of empirical research, while 37% of the articles published were conceptual in nature.

Managerial and Theoretical Implications

The evolution of social media and the advancement of technology has amplified the potential of connectivity amongst people to interact and exchange views in numerous ways. This growing power of communication enables social media influencers to create creative, unique, and captivating content to effectively communicate a brand message to an extensive social network in the midst of the plethora of information in the digital market. The 62 articles chosen for this study were classified on different parameters and concludingly generated several inferences and implications.

It is observed from this study that there is an evident increment in the number of articles published in the latter half of the period under study (2014 – 2019), which implies that there has been an increase in the potential of influencer marketing to be used as a successful strategy by the marketers for campaigns. Unlike the expenditure of advertisements on primordial forms of media and celebrity endorsements, the content of influencer marketing is relatively much easier to create and more cost-effective (Noyan, 2017). More than 90% of the marketers who have implemented influencer marketing in their campaigns reported it as an efficient marketing strategy (Ahmad, 2018). It can be inferred from this study that there has been a rise in the acceptance and popularity of influencer marketing in the digital marketplace significantly in the last five years.

Social media showed a deep correlation with digital marketing, with 24% of the articles being related to social media marketing and social networking sites in general or how these digital celebrities were using multiple platforms to establish themselves as influencers in the articles that were published in this period. Blogs, Instagram, and YouTube were found to be the most popular mediums being employed for influencer marketing as approximately 65% of the articles published were related to these three platforms only. As per Appelman and Sundar (2016), the accuracy, authenticity, and trustworthiness aspect of the content created by the influencers could be a good measure of the message's credibility. However, the usual measure is the likes, comments, visits, and sharing of content (Huang et al., 2008; Mir & Ur Rehman, 2013). Further, the theory of social impact (Latane, 1981) adds that the credibility of any social media platform increases when it gains popularity, and several users share the same opinions about the content through their opinions, expertise, reviews, likes, dislikes, and comments (Arora et al., 2018; Mir & Ur Rehman, 2013). Thus, creating engaging content as per the social media platform being utilized becomes crucial for the success of influencer-based campaigns.

A notable finding is that consumer behavior is the most predominant area, with a maximum number of articles published in the decade-long span highlighting the significance of issues such as purchase decision, buying behavior, engagement, retention, and attribution of the digital consumer. This observation about consumer behavior being influenced is in resonance with Banet-Weiser's (2012) study, which stated that on being inspired by the SMIs and their content, the active Instagram users tend to follow their challenges and trends similarly via tags, popular hashtags like #OOTD (outfit of the day), #POTD (photo of the day), and creating an extensive advertising content which is encouraged by both brands and the influencers.

Another observation is of digital influencers and user-generated content together constituting 40% of the published articles, indicating the importance of the influencers and their content, implying them to be the kingpins of this marketing tactic. The content that provides social acceptance to the digital consumer as gratification for consuming UGC positively influences the purchase intention when the content is spread via a trustworthy source (SMI) embedded in the network of digital consumers (Chu & Kim, 2011; Connors, 2013; Venkataraman & Raman, 2016). There has been an increment in the quality of the advertorial and brand campaign content created by the SMIs. This content is creatively written in the form of a review or opinion woven with the display of their everyday lives online (Kozinets et al., 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013).

An interesting finding is that 45% of the articles involved influencers sharing their self-created content from different aspects of their lifestyle, sharing about their preferences of products and services they used, or any new product being introduced in their lifestyle, making a special mention of the related brand. The recommendations from the lifestyle ranged from electronics, online shopping, books, food, fitness, fashion, or accessory items. This finding supports the findings of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who stated that the content written, created, and posted by the SMIs had a significant influence on both the followers or digital consumers and the social status of the influencer as well.

It is observed that the most prominent industry mainly making use of influencer marketing is fashion and beauty, where the influencers promote brands by embedding their products in their content in a creative manner. A potential for exploration can be seen in the food and tourism industry, where influencers promote certain food or tourist destinations by sharing that content in the form of posts giving reviews and recommendations on their social media platforms. For instance, one of the most popular post-genre of fashion influencers on social media is #OOTD, where the SMIs share pictures of the clothes they wear, focusing on their creativity to style an outfit. This format documents outfit styling pictures of the SMIs that they selectively post featuring a specific brand or multiple brands (Bailey, 2016 ; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013).

It is observed that the significant issue of most of the articles is the self-presentation of SMIs and branding practices employed by the digital managers primarily after 2013. Thus, it would be crucial for digital marketers and researchers to closely connect and strike a congruence between these crucial factors for the success of an SMI based campaign.

The factors majorly highlighted and studied in the context of influencer marketing and SMIs in the articles are SMI identification and classification, purchase intention, and trustworthiness, and the focus of the recent articles revolved around issues such as para-social interactions between the SMIs and the digital consumers and the type of para-social relationships formed between them, advertisement effectiveness, source credibility, and sponsored content, making each of these factors to be crucial for consideration when understanding this marketing tactic closely.

Conclusion

Although, recently, there has been an increase in the research studies investigating the phenomena of influencer marketing, but there is a void in the literature to support how influencer-based campaigns outperform other forms of brand communication and what makes it an effective marketing strategy. This article aims to examine the phenomena of influencer marketing, its connotations, and provide a review based on the academic literature selected by means of keyword descriptor “Influencer Marketing” for the specified databases over a period ranging from 2008 to 2019. This systematic literature review strives to present a backdrop for researchers in quest of the patterns and trends arising in influencer marketing from a span of 12 years with the help of a substantial literature review. This article will thus provide valuable insights to academicians, researchers, practitioners, and digital marketers to enhance their understanding of the research methods, developments, tools, industries, key areas, and mediums that can be explored and utilized to draw implications for future theorizing and practice in the area of influencer marketing.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest that the content created and consumed by online users impacts the effectiveness of the SMI based campaigns. This paves the way for future studies to investigate the role of content created by SMIs in the success of campaigns or brand promotions as it eventually affects the purchase intention. Another

finding of this literature review is that most articles accounting for 63% of the total articles were empirical studies. There remains scope for more conceptual research in the future as there were only 37% conceptual research studies. This review was conducted at a time when the popularity of this marketing strategy had just begun, and factors/ issues related to this area were also limited.

Future research could explore which aspect (positive/negative) of the mentioned factors in this review are currently being studied and whether there are more related factors in the area. Another limitation of this study is the focus on engagement as an objective of the SMIs. However, future research should explore other objectives of SMIs, such as awareness, communication, and purchase intention. This review classifies the articles based on the social media platforms used, key topics, and industries using this tactic and presents an overview of these parameters. But with the rapid growth of this strategy, it would be interesting to investigate new platforms, more factors, and themes such as the role of age and gender in the effectiveness of influencer marketing. For instance, Sharma et al. (2020) indicated that men preferred Instagram and women preferred YouTube as digital marketing platforms for content and information. Another possible direction of future research could be to conduct an analysis of the factors suggested by this content analysis and their impact on different aspects of influencer marketing.

Authors' Contribution

Anshika Singh Tanwar devised the study idea, the main conceptual framework, and the manuscript outline. The classification, codification, and the articles' findings were verified, and the entire study was supervised by Dr. Harish Chaudhry. Manish Kumar Srivastava contributed to the interpretation of the results and implications of the study. Anshika Singh Tanwar conducted the content analysis, analyzed the data, designed the figures, and wrote the manuscript in consultation with Dr. Harish Chaudhry and Manish Kumar Srivastava. All authors discussed the results, provided critical inputs, helped shape this research, and contributed to the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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