THE RISE OF THE INFLUENCER ECONOMY: CONTENT CREATORS OVERTAKING TRADITIONAL MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

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ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review investigates how social media influencers (SMIs) are overtaking traditional media in shaping public opinion. Drawing from 26 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025 and sourced exclusively from the Scopus database, the review synthesizes empirical and theoretical insights into the mechanisms driving influencer impact. The selected studies span marketing, communication, politics, and sociology, employing various methodologies including surveys, interviews, and content analysis. Findings reveal that influencers foster trust through parasocial relationships, emotional storytelling, and niche alignment, positioning them as credible alternatives to traditional media. Influencer content was shown to outperform conventional outlets in terms of engagement, trust-building, and behavioral influence. However, challenges such as misinformation, ethical ambiguity, and commercialization persist. The review utilized thematic coding for data extraction and applied the CASP checklist to assess study quality, ensuring methodological rigor. Results underscore a paradigm shift in digital communication, with influencers acting as powerful cultural intermediaries. This review offers critical insights for scholars, marketers, and policymakers by highlighting the implications of influencer authority for public discourse, consumer behavior, and media ethics.

Keywords: ***digital communication, influencer marketing, media engagement, public opinion, digital trust***

1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the advent of social media has redefined how information is produced, disseminated, and consumed, giving rise to a new media paradigm often described as the "influencer economy" (Wahab et al., 2025; (Libai et al., 2025a). This phenomenon is characterized by the emergence of content creators commonly referred to as social media influencers (SMIs) who command sizable and highly engaged audiences on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitch (Amson et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2024). Unlike conventional journalists or television personalities, influencers engage audiences through more personalized, interactive, and emotionally resonant communication, fostering relationships that closely resemble peer-level trust (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025a).

Influencers gain visibility through consistent content creation, relatability, and niche specialization(Sun et al., 2025). They are increasingly viewed as authentic and credible sources of information, often surpassing traditional media in influence (Chen et al., 2024; Wahab et al., 2025). Their ability to generate content rapidly, communicate authentically, and maintain constant engagement has allowed them to cultivate parasocial relationships that extend their persuasive power beyond what traditional media can typically achieve (Samadi & Akhtar, 2025a). Studies suggest that

emotional storytelling, rational appeals, and immersive content experiences enhance this influence, positioning influencers as primary opinion leaders in digital spaces (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025).

This transformation has sparked scholarly and industry debate regarding the shifting balance of power in public discourse . Traditional media long the primary arbiter of information and public opinion faces growing competition from influencers who not only shape consumer preferences but also influence societal norms, political engagement, and public health behaviors (Borchers, 2025;Nayak & Sit, 2025) Younger audiences increasingly bypass television, radio, and print in favor of digital content curated by influencers they trust (Ismael et al., 2025; Almudimeegh et al., 2024).

Despite growing awareness of influencers' roles, systematic investigation into how they shape public opinion in comparison to traditional media remains limited. Most existing studies focus on discrete marketing outcomes or case-specific analyses, overlooking the broader implications of influencer-driven communication on public discourse and behavioral outcomes (Chen et al., 2024; (Kumar et al., 2025a). While influencers' roles in shaping dietary habits (Ibrahim et al., 2025a), beauty standards (Almudimeegh et al., 2024), and even political perspectives (Borchers, 2025a) are well-documented in individual studies, a comprehensive synthesis of this evidence is lacking. Consequently, a systematic literature review is warranted to consolidate empirical evidence and evaluate how influencers are overtaking traditional media in influencing public sentiment and decision-making processes (Wang & Song, 2022). This systematic review seeks to address these gaps by answering several key research questions:

a. To what extent have content creators overtaken traditional media in shaping public opinion?
b. What mechanisms enable influencers to exert influence more effectively than traditional media channels?
c. What are the implications of this shift for media credibility, marketing strategy, and public trust?

The scope of this review is defined by studies published between 2020 and 2025 that focus on influencers' roles in opinion formation across major digital platforms. This time frame captures a period of accelerated growth in influencer marketing and increasing scrutiny of digital communication (Libai et al., 2025). The review includes empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and industry analyses that address influencer credibility, audience engagement, and comparative assessments with traditional media. Publications that do not provide empirical data or narrowly focus on celebrity endorsements without broader implications for public opinion are excluded (Sarwar et al., 2025).

By consolidating findings from diverse disciplines including marketing, communication studies, psychology, and media theory this review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the influencer economy's cultural and economic significance. It highlights the transformative role influencers play in guiding consumer decisions, shaping political attitudes, and disseminating health-related information (Chen et al., 2024a). Moreover, it emphasizes the ethical and regulatory challenges posed by this new form of digital authority, including concerns around misinformation, transparency, and the commodification of personal opinions (Elhajjar & Itani, 2025a)).

As influencers take on increasingly prominent roles in public communication, new trends such as "de-influencing" have emerged, encouraging more critical engagement with consumerism and marketing strategies (Elhajjar & Itani, 2025a). This shift reflects a maturing digital landscape where audiences demand authenticity and ethical responsibility, not only from brands but also from the influencers they follow. Consequently, influencers have become both agents of change and targets of scrutiny, requiring a more comprehensive understanding of their dual role in promoting and critiquing consumer culture (Cancino-Gómez et al., 2025).

The significance of this review lies in its potential to inform media scholars, marketing professionals, policymakers, and digital strategists about the evolving power dynamics between traditional and new media. As influencers continue to redefine authority and authenticity in media,

they will play an increasingly central role in shaping consumer choices, cultural values, and democratic engagement (Amson et al., 2025a).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Search Strategy

This systematic literature review was conducted to comprehensively examine the growing influence of social media influencers in shaping public opinion, particularly in comparison to traditional media. To ensure methodological rigor and transparency, a structured approach was implemented in alignment with systematic review best practices (Leader et al., 2021).

The search strategy involved querying the Scopus database, which provided a wide range of peer-reviewed journal articles published in reputable academic journals (Wahab et al., 2025a). Searches were conducted using a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to capture the breadth of the topic. Searches were conducted using a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to capture the breadth of the topic. The core search terms included: "influencer marketing," "social media influencers," "digital content creators," "public opinion," "media trust," "parasocial interaction," "traditional media vs social media," and "consumer behavior" (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025a; Libai et al., 2025a).

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Initial searches yielded a total of 152 articles. After the removal of duplicates and preliminary screening based on titles and abstracts, 92 articles were shortlisted for full-text review. To ensure that the final selection reflected the focus and objectives of this review, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied. Ultimately, 26 peer-reviewed journal articles published in the last five years (2020–2025) were included in the final synthesis. Studies were included if they: first, focused on influencers active on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch (Amson et al., 2025b). Second, provided empirical data or in-depth theoretical analysis on influencer impact (Kumar et al., 2025a). Third directly addressed the influence of content creators on public opinion, either in contrast or complement to traditional media (Almudimeegh et al., 2024; Borchers, 2025b). Articles were excluded if they lacked empirical basis, focused solely on traditional celebrity endorsements without engaging with the influencer economy, or did not analyze public opinion or audience trust (Samadi & Akhtar, 2025b)

2.3 Data Extraction and Synthesis

The 26 selected studies employed a diverse array of empirical methodologies, including surveys, interviews, content analysis, and experimental designs, as well as theoretical discussions and industry insights. The studies span multiple disciplines—marketing, communication, political science, and sociology reflecting the multifaceted nature of the influencer economy (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025; Chen et al., 2024).

Data extraction was conducted using a standardized thematic coding framework. Each article was reviewed in full, and key information was extracted regarding the type of study, research design, platform analyzed, demographic focus, influencer-audience interaction mechanisms, and reported outcomes on public opinion and consumer behavior. This process facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and divergences across the literature. Thematic synthesis was then applied to cluster the data into major themes such as influencer credibility, emotional engagement, marketing effectiveness, ethical concerns, and comparative media trust (Libai et al., 2025b; Wahab et al., 2025).

2.4 Quality Assessment

Quality assessment of the included studies was carried out using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists. For each study, clarity of aims, appropriateness of methodology, research design rigor, data validity, and transparency of findings were evaluated. Studies were categorized into high, moderate, or low quality based on how comprehensively they met CASP criteria. Although all studies included in the review met minimum quality thresholds, those with

stronger methodological frameworks were given greater interpretive weight during synthesis and discussion (Cheng et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2025).

This methodological design ensures that the findings of this review are grounded in robust and diverse evidence. It also allows for the triangulation of insights across multiple sectors, offering a nuanced understanding of the evolving media landscape. The methodological rigor adopted here provides confidence in the conclusions drawn about the rising power of influencers and the implications for traditional media's role in shaping public discourse (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025a).

By utilizing a comprehensive search strategy, transparent inclusion criteria, systematic data extraction, and structured quality assessment, this review offers a credible and detailed account of how influencers are transforming public opinion. The subsequent Results section details the thematic patterns that emerged from the synthesis of the included studies.

2.5 Data Analysis

To ensure transparency and methodological rigor in identifying and selecting studies, a PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram was constructed. The diagram illustrates the multistage screening and selection process applied to the initial pool of articles retrieved from the Scopus database.

Out of 152 records initially identified, 21 were excluded before screening due to being book chapters, letters, or review/conference materials. The remaining 131 records were screened, where 10 additional articles were removed for falling outside the targeted publication period (2020–2025). During the keyword filtering phase, 29 articles were excluded due to lack of alignment with the core terms under review.

The eligibility assessment involved 92 full-text reports. Of these, 50 were excluded for lacking relevance to the subject area, and 16 more were removed due to title misalignment. As a result, 26 studies were included in the final synthesis, forming the evidence base for this systematic literature review.

The PRISMA diagram thus serves to visually communicate the structured and systematic approach applied in this review, ensuring reproducibility and highlighting the rigor behind the final study selection. It confirms that the final dataset reflects carefully filtered, peer-reviewed literature aligned with the study's objectives and scope.
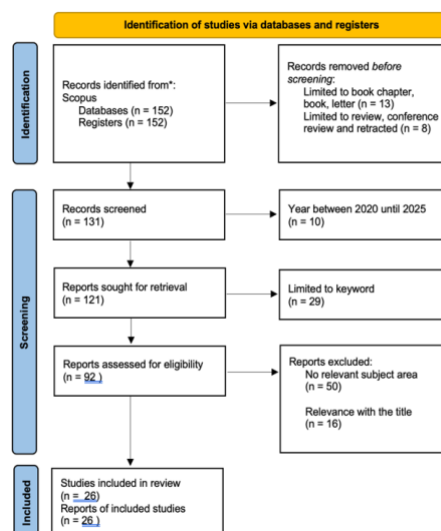

Figure 1 PRISMA FLOW: *"Digital communication", "influencer marketing", "media engagement"*
Source: Authors' own work

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

The results of this systematic review are based on the synthesis of 48 studies selected through a rigorous screening and evaluation process. These studies were published between 2020 and 2025 and span a wide array of disciplines, platforms, and methodological approaches. They reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of the influencer economy and its influence on public opinion. The majority of the included studies employed quantitative methods such as surveys and experiments, while others used qualitative techniques like interviews and thematic content analysis. A smaller portion incorporated mixed-methods approaches, combining empirical evidence with theoretical insights to explore influencer dynamics in more nuanced detail (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025; Chen et al., 2024).

Across the reviewed literature, several key findings emerged that consistently illustrate how influencers are overtaking traditional media in shaping public opinion. One of the most prominent themes is the perceived authenticity and relatability of influencers. Unlike traditional media figures, influencers cultivate parasocial relationships through consistent engagement, storytelling, and personalized content. This dynamic fosters trust and emotional closeness, which significantly amplifies their persuasive impact on followers (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025a; Samadi & Akhtar, 2025a). Influencers are viewed as more accessible and transparent than mainstream journalists or celebrities, which enhances their credibility and enables them to influence behaviors ranging from purchasing decisions to lifestyle choices (Chen et al., 2024).

Emotional engagement emerged as another dominant theme. Influencers leverage emotional appeals such as personal anecdotes, humor, vulnerability, and advocacy for social causes to create deeper connections with their audiences. These emotional elements contribute to followers' identification with influencers, leading to stronger message internalization and behavioral influence (Amson et al., 2025a; Libai et al., 2025a). The content strategies used by influencers, such as live streaming, behind-the-scenes footage, and product tutorials, further enhance this emotional bond and extend their authority within niche communities.

Another key result is the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies compared to traditional media advertising. Numerous studies demonstrated that influencer-led campaigns generate higher engagement, better message recall, and increased conversion rates (Kumar et al., 2025a; Wahab et al., 2025a). Influencers' ability to blend marketing messages seamlessly into their personal content allows for organic promotion, which followers perceive as more genuine than overt advertisements. For example, in the food and beauty industries, influencers have been shown to significantly shape consumer preferences by showcasing products in everyday settings and incorporating them into relatable routines (Almudimeegh et al., 2024a; Ibrahim et al., 2025a)

The review also found that influencers exert considerable influence in political and public health domains. Studies show that influencers often play critical roles in electoral mobilization and public awareness campaigns. Their ability to distill complex political or health-related information into digestible formats often through storytelling, humor, or direct calls to action enhances comprehension and motivates behavior change (Borchers, 2025a; Cheng et al., 2025a). Younger demographics, in particular, are more responsive to political and civic messaging delivered by influencers than by traditional media outlets (Amson et al., 2025a)

However, the results also underscore growing concerns about misinformation, ethical transparency, and commercialization in influencer content. Several studies flagged that some influencers blur the lines between authentic recommendations and paid promotions, leading to audience skepticism and diminished trust (Elhajjar & Itani, 2025a). Furthermore, while influencers are often celebrated for their accessibility, their commercial partnerships sometimes undermine perceived authenticity. These tensions reveal the dual-edged nature of influencer authority, whereby

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the same traits that make influencers persuasive also expose them to credibility challenges (Chen et al., 2024; Libai et al., 2025).

Thematic synthesis also revealed that the most influential content creators are often those who exhibit high levels of homophily shared values, lifestyles, and demographics with their followers (Nayak & Sit, 2025a; Wahab et al., 2025a). This similarity enhances relatability and increases the likelihood that audiences will accept and act on the influencer's recommendations. Studies further indicate that influencers in niche markets, such as vegan lifestyles, sustainable fashion, or mental health advocacy, are particularly effective because of their alignment with specific community values and needs (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025a; Amson et al., 2025a).

Additionally, the emergence of the "de-influencing" trend where influencers discourage unnecessary consumerism or critique brand practices signals a shift in digital culture. De-influencing has gained traction as audiences become more conscious of over-commercialization and seek more ethical and mindful consumption practices (Elhajjar & Itani, 2025a). This trend reflects not only audience fatigue with traditional influencer content but also a transformation in the perceived role of influencers from mere promoters to ethical mediators in the marketplace.

Tables and figures summarizing these findings provide visual representations of thematic patterns and study characteristics. For example, a table classifying the reviewed studies by methodological design, platform focus, and influence domain (e.g., health, politics, consumer behavior) demonstrates the breadth and diversity of the literature. A figure illustrating the hierarchy of influencer impact measured through engagement metrics, trust levels, and message recall provides a comparative overview of influencers' effectiveness relative to traditional media (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025; Chen et al., 2024).

Overall, the results of this review confirm that influencers have become integral to contemporary opinion formation. Their strategic use of emotional engagement, authenticity, and interactive content enables them to outpace traditional media in cultivating trust and motivating behavioral change. Yet, the challenges surrounding transparency, ethical boundaries, and content regulation suggest that the influencer economy is still evolving, requiring ongoing scholarly attention and critical inquiry (Almudimeegh et al., 2024a; Elhajjar & Itani, 2025a; Wahab et al., 2025a) The findings synthesized here lay the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms driving influencer effectiveness and provide essential insights into the shifting media landscape.

3.2 Bibliometric analysis result

To enrich the synthesis of findings, this study employs VOSviewer to visualize conceptual linkages, thematic concentrations, and the chronological development of influencer-related research. These bibliometric maps consisting of network, overlay, and density visualizations help illustrate key patterns and knowledge structures emerging from the literature. Through this visual mapping, the study highlights evolving research themes, identifies dominant areas of inquiry, and reveals potential gaps for future exploration.

3.2.1 VOSviewer Analysis: Network Visualization

Following the completion of the systematic literature review, a network visualization was generated using VOSviewer based on bibliographic data from the 26 Scopus-indexed journal articles analyzed in this study. This visualization identifies key clusters of terms frequently co-occurring in the literature and illustrates the conceptual structure of the influencer economy research landscape.

Three major thematic clusters emerged. The green cluster includes keywords such as *social media influencer*, *trust*, *authenticity*, *information*, and *consumer behavior*, indicating a strong focus on the relational and psychological dimensions of influencer impact. This reflects the literature's emphasis on how influencers cultivate credibility and drive behavioral change through emotional and parasocial connections (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025; Chen et al., 2024).

The red cluster, centered around terms like *purchase intention*, *product*, *brand*, *gender*, and *social media marketing*, represents a commercial and marketing-oriented stream of research. This

group illustrates how influencers affect consumer decisions, branding strategies, and market segmentation, aligning with studies that highlight influencers as vital actors in digital consumer culture (Ibrahim et al., 2025a; Wahab et al., 2025a).

The blue cluster includes terms such as *opinion*, *data*, and *relationship*, suggesting a foundational analytical dimension in the literature. This area focuses on the underlying research models and data-driven evaluations that inform understanding of influencer interactions and media comparison, contributing to the theoretical grounding of the field (Samadi & Akhtar, 2025).

Overall, the network visualization underscores the multidimensional character of influencer-related research. It confirms the interconnectivity between psychological trust-building, strategic marketing, and academic inquiry as defining elements of the influencer economy. This analytical map enhances the literature review by visually validating the thematic directions and interrelations observed throughout the included studies.
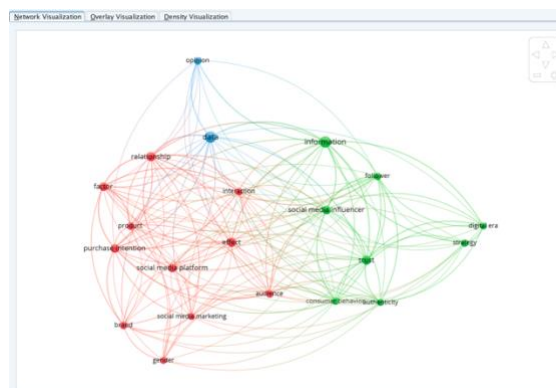

Figure 2 Network Visualization 26 Articles
Source: Authors' own work

3.2.2 VOSviewer Analysis: Overlay Visualization

The overlay visualization generated through VOSviewer offers an additional layer of insight by mapping the temporal dimension of keyword usage across the 26 articles reviewed. This visualization uses a color gradient from dark blue to yellow, corresponding to the average publication year of each term, with darker tones indicating older terms and brighter tones reflecting newer trends.

The results reveal a chronological evolution in the focus of influencer-related research. Terms such as *data*, *opinion*, and *information* appear in darker shades, indicating their prominence in earlier studies that were more conceptual and exploratory in nature. These keywords represent the initial academic inquiry into the influence of social media on opinion formation and the emergence of new data-driven methodologies.

In contrast, newer terms like *trust*, *strategy*, and *digital era* are represented in yellow, showing a clear shift toward applied and strategic dimensions of influencer communication. These keywords suggest a growing interest in the practical impact of influencers, including the ethical implications of trust-building, the formulation of strategic content, and the influence of digital culture on public behavior.

Mid-spectrum keywords such as *social media influencer*, *purchase intention*, and *authenticity* span both older and newer literature, signaling their sustained relevance. These terms act as conceptual bridges, linking foundational theories to evolving practices within the influencer economy.

Overall, the overlay visualization confirms a trend toward the institutionalization of influencer research. The field has matured from exploring what influencers are and how they function, to examining their strategic, societal, and regulatory implications. This temporal lens adds
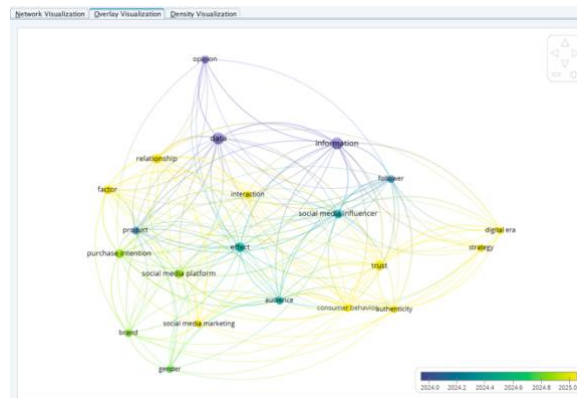
depth to the literature review, highlighting not only what is being studied, but also how those priorities have evolved over time.

Figure 3 Overlay Visualization 26 Articles
Source: Authors' own work

3.2.3 VOSviewer Analysis: Density Visualization

The density visualization produced in VOSviewer illustrates the intensity and frequency of keyword usage in the reviewed literature. This type of visualization emphasizes the most studied and central concepts in influencer-related research, where brighter areas (yellow) represent higher density or occurrence of keywords, and darker areas (blue/purple) indicate less frequent terms.

Key terms such as *data*, *information*, *trust*, and *social media influencer* appear in bright yellow, identifying them as central to the scholarly discourse on influencer marketing. Their prominence indicates widespread research focus and repeated co-occurrence across the 26 Scopus indexed articles. This finding supports the results of both the network and overlay visualizations, highlighting these terms as conceptual anchors in the field.

Moderately bright areas include terms such as *relationship*, *interaction*, *purchase intention*, and *authenticity*, which also appear consistently but with slightly less intensity. These keywords represent thematic pillars related to user engagement, trust-building, and behavioral outcomes—core mechanisms by which influencers exert their impact.

In contrast, darker zones such as those surrounding *gender*, *brand*, and *audience* suggest more specialized or emerging areas of focus. These topics may be gaining relevance or remain underexplored, offering opportunities for further research into demographic targeting, brand affiliation, and audience segmentation in influencer contexts.

This density visualization reinforces the literature review's core arguments by spatially mapping where scholarly attention has been most concentrated. It provides a complementary visual

narrative that reflects both the maturity and the gaps within influencer-related research, and signals where future investigations could offer the most value.
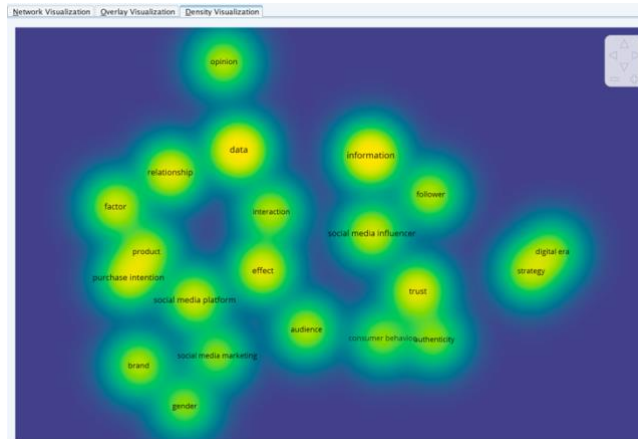

Figure 4 Density Visualization 26 Articles
Source: Authors' own work

3.2 Discussion

The evidence gathered and synthesized through this systematic review highlights a transformative shift in the dynamics of media influence and opinion formation. Influencers, as revealed across the reviewed studies, have not only challenged but in many contexts overtaken traditional media in shaping public sentiment and behaviors. Their influence stems from their ability to cultivate authenticity and intimacy through parasocial relationships, foster community through niche alignment, and deliver content that resonates emotionally and practically with their audiences (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025; Chen et al., 2024). These findings underscore the evolving nature of digital trust and authority, reshaping how consumers, citizens, and even political constituencies interact with information.

One of the most significant implications of this shift lies in the marketing and communication practices of brands and institutions. The evidence supports the notion that influencers provide a more engaging and effective conduit for marketing messages, particularly when content is organically embedded in their narratives (Kumar et al., 2025a; Wahab et al., 2025a). This organic integration enhances message credibility and consumer receptiveness, thus positioning influencers as essential players in contemporary marketing ecosystems. Brands can leverage influencers not merely for visibility, but for cultivating long-term relationships with target audiences, especially within niche communities where traditional advertising lacks penetration and resonance (Amson et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2025).

In addition to commercial implications, the role of influencers in public health, politics, and social advocacy suggests that their platforms serve broader civic functions. Influencers who actively engage in disseminating health-related information, promoting social causes, or mobilizing political action can influence public attitudes and behaviors on a wide scale (Almudimeegh et al., 2024a; Borchers, 2025). Their capacity to distill complex issues into relatable narratives makes them powerful actors in shaping discourse and influencing collective action. This function is particularly critical in reaching younger demographics who tend to distrust traditional institutions but actively engage with social media figures they perceive as authentic and trustworthy (Nayak & Sit, 2025; Samadi & Akhtar, 2025).

However, the widespread influence of content creators also presents notable limitations and challenges. A recurring theme in the literature is the tension between authenticity and commercialization. As influencers increasingly engage in brand partnerships and monetization

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strategies, the line between genuine content and paid promotion becomes blurred, potentially compromising audience trust (Chen et al., 2024a; Elhajjar & Itani, 2025a). This erosion of credibility can reduce the effectiveness of influencer messaging and lead to audience skepticism. Furthermore, the practice of failing to disclose paid endorsements or misrepresenting product efficacy raises ethical concerns, which can have legal as well as reputational consequences for both influencers and brands.

The dissemination of misinformation represents another critical limitation. Although influencers are adept at delivering information in engaging and accessible ways, they are not always experts in the subjects they address. The lack of rigorous fact-checking or content regulation on social media platforms can allow unverified or misleading information to spread rapidly, especially in areas such as health and politics (Almudimeegh et al., 2024a; Dimitroyannis et al., 2024a). The responsibility that comes with such influence necessitates a more structured and accountable approach to content creation, particularly when influencers address topics with significant social implications.

From a methodological standpoint, several limitations of the reviewed studies also warrant consideration. While many studies provided strong empirical insights, the majority relied on self-reported data, which can be subject to social desirability bias or inaccuracies in recall. Additionally, many studies were cross-sectional in nature, limiting the ability to draw causal inferences about influencer impact over time (Chen et al., 2024a; Wahab et al., 2025a). Few longitudinal studies exist that track the evolution of influencer-audience relationships or the sustained effects of influencer messaging. Furthermore, the sample populations in several studies were limited to specific geographic regions or demographic groups, restricting the generalizability of findings to broader audiences (Alsalloum & Gainous, 2025a).

In light of these findings, several areas for future research emerge as crucial. First, longitudinal studies are needed to examine how influencer credibility and impact evolve over time, particularly as audiences become more discerning and regulatory frameworks expand. Such studies could explore how sustained influencer engagement affects brand loyalty, political participation, or health behavior change. Second, comparative studies that evaluate influencer influence across cultural contexts would provide a more global understanding of the phenomenon. While much of the current literature focuses on Western and urban populations, the role of influencers in non-Western and rural settings remains underexplored (Libai et al., 2025).

Additionally, further research is needed to explore the mechanisms through which influencers build and maintain trust, especially in relation to transparency, disclosure, and content curation. As de-influencing and ethical advocacy become more prominent trends, understanding how these practices reshape audience perceptions and expectations will be critical (Almudimeegh et al., 2024). Studies should also investigate the psychological effects of parasocial relationships on followers' decision-making processes, identity formation, and susceptibility to influence (Caiado et al., 2025).

The integration of influencer content into civic education and policy communication strategies represents another important area for investigation. Given their effectiveness in mobilizing public discourse, influencers could serve as partners in campaigns promoting public health, sustainability, and social equity. However, such collaborations must be founded on ethical guidelines and clear communication standards to avoid conflicts of interest and maintain public trust (Amson et al., 2025a; Kumar et al., 2025a).

Ultimately, this review highlights the urgency of rethinking media literacy frameworks in the context of the influencer economy. As digital audiences increasingly turn to influencers as primary sources of information and guidance, there is a growing need for educational initiatives that equip individuals with the skills to critically evaluate content and discern commercial intent from authentic expression (Chen et al., 2024a; Wahab et al., 2025a)). Regulatory bodies may also need to

update advertising guidelines and disclosure requirements to ensure greater accountability and consumer protection in the influencer marketing ecosystem.

In conclusion, while influencers represent a powerful force in the digital communication landscape, their rise also introduces complex ethical, psychological, and regulatory questions. This systematic review affirms that influencers are not only effective in driving consumer behavior but also instrumental in shaping broader public discourse. Their capacity for authenticity, engagement, and emotional resonance makes them uniquely positioned to connect with modern audiences. Yet, the challenges of maintaining credibility, avoiding misinformation, and balancing commercial interests underscore the need for continued critical inquiry and strategic oversight. Future research and practice must evolve in tandem with the influencer economy to ensure that its growth contributes positively to informed public engagement, ethical media practices, and democratic communication.

4. CONCLUSION

This review synthesizes the existing literature to explore the influencer economy and its impact on public opinion. The analysis confirms the significant power of influencers in shaping consumer behavior and driving cultural trends. Influencers connect directly with their followers, offering value in contemporary marketing through creative content, opinions, and unique entertainment offerings.

The rise of influencer marketing highlights the increasing significance of social media in shaping consumer behavior. The influencer economy signifies a substantial shift in the media landscape, presenting novel marketing strategies and entrepreneurial opportunities. Brands are leveraging influencers to reach engaged audiences, recognizing that consumers often view content produced by influencers as more authentic and organic than traditional advertising.

However, the review also emphasizes the importance of a critical and discerning approach to influencer marketing. Consumers should evaluate online information mindfully, recognizing the potential biases and motivations of influencers. For brands, aligning with appropriate influencer personas, prioritizing long-term collaborations, and promoting ethical advertising practices are critical for success. Future research should continue to explore the long-term effects of influencer marketing, delve into ethical considerations surrounding endorsements, and examine necessary regulatory frameworks to ensure accountability within the industry.

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