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Mapping the Social Media Influencer–Purchase Intention Literature: A Bibliometric Analysis and Conceptual Synthesis

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Abstract

Research on social media influencers (SMIs) and purchase intention has grown rapidly; however, the intellectual framework remains fragmented. This study is a bibliometric analysis of 182 journal articles (2020–March 2026) in English published in Scopus-indexed journals. It integrates R-based bibliometric analysis (performance analysis), keyword co-occurrence analysis, thematic mapping, thematic evolution analysis, bibliographic coupling analysis, and document co-citation analysis. The findings reveal a rapidly expanding body of research that centres on four themes that keep emerging: source credibility, parasocial and relational aspects, purchase outcomes and platform-specific contexts. The field seems to be moving away from credibility-based inquiry toward trust- and mechanism-based research across methods. Based on this, the paper posits that source credibility affects purchase intention through a dual pathway: a Stimulus–Organism–Response cognitive pathway, mediated by brand trust, and a Stimulus–Organism–Response affective pathway, mediated by parasocial relationship; platform affordance, disclosure, and social commerce friction are recurring moderators. The study complements previous reviews structurally, elucidates the field's theoretical organisation, and offers a focused agenda for future research.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Influencer Marketing, Purchase Intention, Source Credibility, Parasocial Relationship, Brand Trust, Bibliometric Analysis, Thematic Evolution

Introduction

Social media influencers (SMIs) are a significant middleman between brands and consumers due to their ability to blend endorsement, entertainment and peer-like communication into platform-native environments. However, beyond reach, this persuasive power also comes from perceived expertise, authenticity and relational closeness, which can make commercial messages more credible and personally relevant than conventional advertising messages (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020). With influencer marketing integrated into the shopping experience across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, the effect of SMI content on purchase intention has emerged as a key research question in marketing.

Purchase intention is the most commonly studied downstream behaviour in this literature because it reflects the transition from evaluative responses to actual marketplace behaviour. Meanwhile, the increasing amount of research has generated a disorganised evidence base. Without a quantitative map of the field, scholars lack a clear view of its conceptual centres, theoretical linkages, and emerging gaps. At the

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same time, managers struggle to distinguish robust mechanisms from context-specific findings.

Existing reviews are useful, but inadequate, for this purpose. Vrontis et al. (2021) defined influencer marketing broadly, not as a connection to purchase intention. Sardar and Vijay (2025) conducted a qualitative review of 76 articles by using the TCCM (Theory, Context, Characteristics, and Methodology) framework, developed by researchers Justin Paul and Alex Rialp-Criado, and also explicitly requested bibliometric work. Meta-analytic estimates of effect sizes were provided by Spörl-Wang et al. (2025), but no account of the intellectual structure or thematic development of the field. Sherief et al. (2025) did not map the SMI-purchase intention relationship, but rather SMI persuasiveness and influence. Hence, a bibliometric approach to the literature review within the domain of the SMI-purchase intention is still required, based on Scopus.

To fill this gap, the present study aims to conduct a bibliometric analysis of 182 articles published in Scopus-indexed journals from 2020 to March 2026. The research combines methods of performance analysis with keyword co-occurrence, thematic mapping, thematic evolution, bibliographic coupling, and document co-citation analysis to uncover the field's main knowledge structures and build a data-informed conceptual synthesis. The purpose is to build on previous qualitative and meta-analytical reviews rather than to supplant them with structural evidence of the domain's organisation and its direction of change.

The study aims to answer the following questions: What are the growth trends, influential contributors, and knowledge-production trends in the literature on social media influencers and purchase intention? What conceptual structure and thematic evolution can be identified in the literature? What research gaps and directions can be drawn from the bibliometric evidence?

The study has four contributions. It offers a current map of the literature in the SMI–purchase intention field, based on Scopus, identifies the conceptual pillars that prevail in the field, maps the evolution from a credibility-based to a trust–mechanism-based research tradition, and maps the conceptual synthesis and future research agenda for S–O–R.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

Traditional celebrity endorsers are distinct from social media influencers because, while the former are commonly accounted for within meaning transfer and symbolic association models (McCracken, 1989), the authority of the latter is often niche- and platform-specific and thus a function of ubiquitous interaction with followers through repeated exposure. This tool is particularly relevant to the persuasion processes when consumers interpret promotional messages from the informational and relational perspectives (Ki & Kim, 2019; Audrezet et al., 2020). This essay is presented within a theoretical framework, drawing on three distinct but useful perspectives from the literature.

According to Hovland et al., the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) (1953), indicates why individuality (and expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness) continued to prevail in influencer research. These attributes in the SMI context affect the extent to which a follower perceives an endorsement as knowledgeable, sincere, and actionable (Weismueller et al., 2020; Breves et al., 2021). Newer approaches have built upon this argument by separating informational credibility from relational credibility; influencers are persuasive because they not only seem competent, but also genuine and socially proximate.

Parasocial Interaction Theory introduces the affective dimension. Followers establish a one-way relationship with influencers that mimics feelings of intimacy and emotional connectedness, so advertisements are not perceived as advertisements but rather as recommendations from a knowledgeable other (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Shan et al., 2020; Taillon et al., 2020). Moreover, this logic also helps account for mixed effects of disclosure: if activated, persuasion knowledge still protects consumers, but also erodes the intimacy on which influencer persuasion relies (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Evans et al.).

The Stimulus-Organism-Response framework was initially established by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and can serve as an integrative framework linking these perspectives. In SMI research, source-credibility cues act as stimuli, trust and parasocial relationship are the internal organism states (cognitive and affective) that mediate the relationship. At the same time, purchase intention serves as the response. Because purchase intention itself does not always translate into purchase

behaviour, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) provides a useful complement when later studies attempt to close the intention–behaviour gap." This logic becomes progressively apparent across the literature and provides the theoretical rationale for the bibliometric-derived S-O-R framework discussed next.

Method

Research Design

A bibliometric analysis was used to examine the field's intellectual structure, development, and thematic composition (Donthu et al., 2021). This is a quantitative study that follows Aria and Cuccurullo (2017) and Zupic and Čater (2015) and aims to be a supplementary study to previous narrative and systematic reviews.

Data Collection and Search Strategy

Scopus was selected as the sole data source because it offers strong coverage of peer-reviewed marketing research and avoids duplicate-merging distortions common in multi-database bibliometric studies (Donthu et al., 2021; Hoang, 2025). The following search string was used:

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TITLE-ABS-KEY ("social media influencer*" AND ( "purchase intention*" OR "buying intention*" OR "purchase behavio*" ) ) AND PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2027 AND ( LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA , "BUSI" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( DOCTYPE , "ar" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE , "English" ) )
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The search was run on 30 March 2026. To maintain conceptual precision, the query used the exact term "social media influencer*" rather than broader alternatives such as "content creator" or "digital influencer." This choice narrowed coverage, but it improved interpretive coherence for the bibliometric map.

Sample Construction

A total of 182 English-language journal articles were retrieved using the search. The language, subject area, document type, and period filters were applied directly in Scopus, and the export was only the last step of checking the relevance of the titles and abstracts with the SMI–purchase intention domain. No duplicates or substantively irrelevant records were kept.

A final check confirmed that all 182 records remained in scope.

Analytical Tools, Parameters, Transparency, and Robustness Checks

All analyses were performed with R (version 4.5.3) utilising bibliometrix and its Biblioshiny interface (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). This analysis included performance metrics for annual output, top sources and authors and their contributions, contributions by country, and top-cited documents. The unit of analysis after the conservative thesaurus harmonisation was the author keywords in science mapping [40–42]. These and other parameters used in the Scopus query, analysis parameters, thesaurus logic and robustness checks are reported in the manuscript to ensure transparency, and the Scopus export and analysis script should be uploaded as supplementary files, if journal policy and database licensing allow. Semantically identical: Only singular/plural variants and direct lexical equivalents were merged. Co-occurrence across similar studies did not lead to the collapse of distinct constructs (such as trust, credibility, authenticity, and parasociality).

(a) Keyword co-occurrence: A network of 50 nodes was created, with an equivalence index normalisation and Louvain clustering, and a minimum of 2 edges.

(b) Thematic map: This was based on a minimum cluster frequency of 5 and 250 words.

(c) Thematic evolution: Two time slices were analysed (2020–2022 and 2023 – 2026) with an inclusion index and cluster frequency of 5.

(d) Bibliographic coupling: Fractional counting was performed and then Louvain clustering.

(e) Document co-citation: A network consisting of 30 nodes and at least one edge and association normalisation.

The node count range (40-60), edge threshold range (1-3), and cluster-frequency threshold range (4-6) were tested with robustness checks. The same four-pillar structure was apparent in each specification, indicating that these were the key interpretive findings rather than artefacts of the parameters selected.

Results

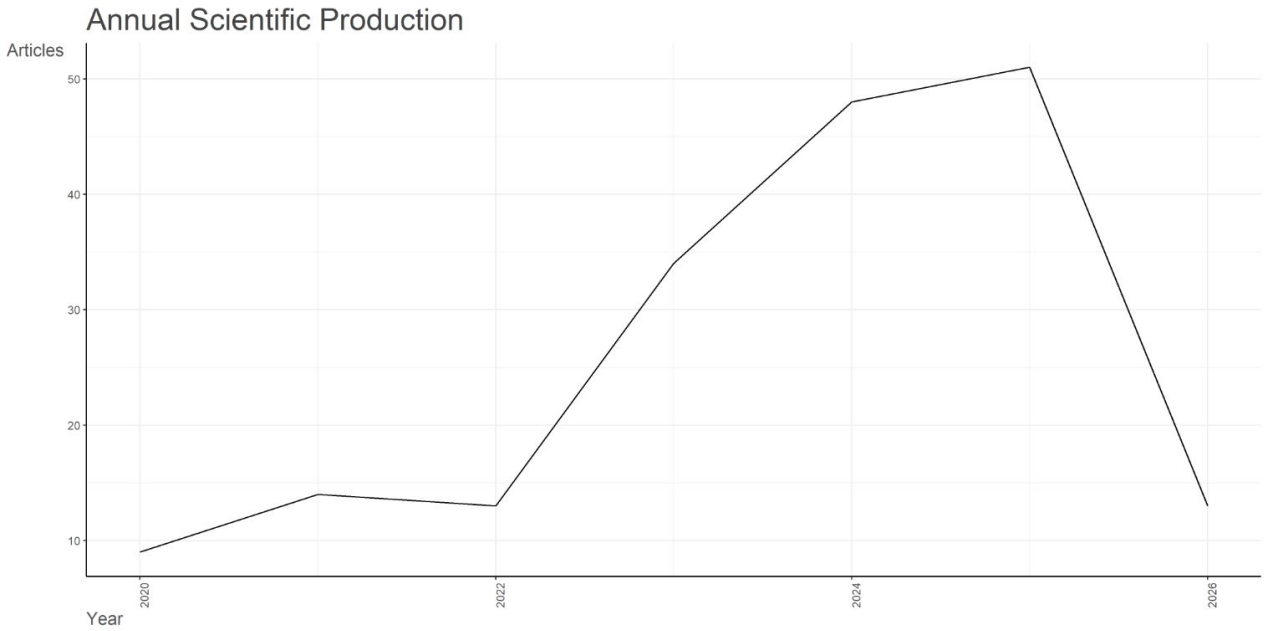


Figure 1. Annual scientific production in the SMI–purchase intention corpus, 2020–2026.

Figure 1 shows an upward trend in annual scientific production. The dataset includes 182 articles published between 2020 and 30 March 2026. The number of articles increased from 9 articles in 2020 to 14 in 2021, dipped to 13 in 2022, then increased to 34 in 2023, 48 in 2024, and 51 in 2025, with 13 articles already recorded for the partial year of 2026.

This path reveals that research on social media influencers and purchase intention has shifted from an early exploratory phase to steady, sustained accumulation. The sharp rise after 2022 confirms that purchase intention has become a central focus in the broader influencer-marketing literature.

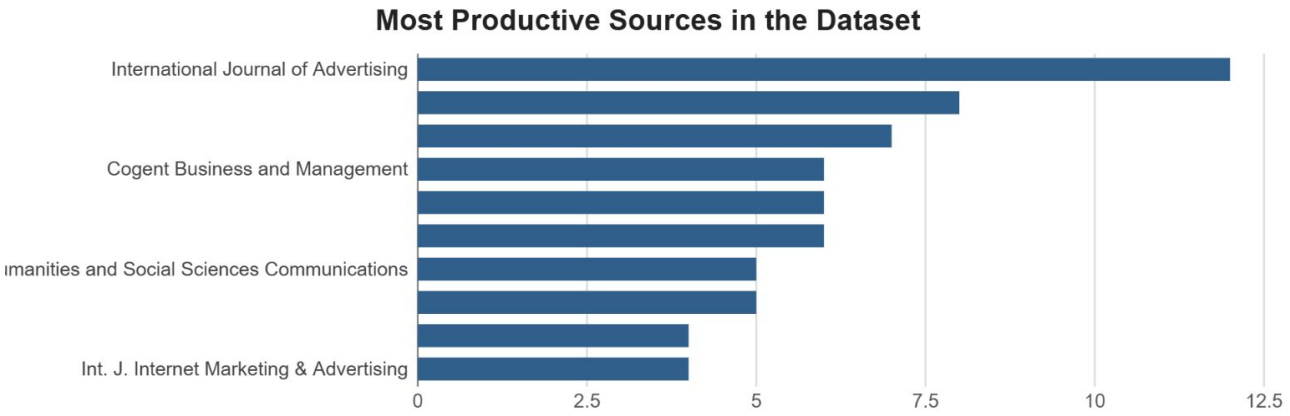


Figure 2. Leading publication outlets in the corpus.

The International Journal of Advertising is the leading journal with 12 articles, followed by the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services (8) and Innovative Marketing (7). The number of publications in advertising, marketing, and consumer behaviour journals confirms that the field remains anchored in the disciplinary core of marketing research.

K. Y. Koay was the most productive author, with 6 publications, followed by W. M. Lim with 4. Still, authorship remains quite scattered. It looks like the field is taking its time to build a stable group of core experts, and ideas are being generated by a broad range of people rather than just a few key names

Most Globally Cited Documents

Table 1. Top 10 documents by global citations.

Paper	Total Citations	Key Theoretical Contribution
Schouten et al. (2020).	1,097	Celebrity vs influencer credibility and identification
Kim & Kim (2021)	482	Trust formation in influencer marketing
Reinikainen et al. (2020)	433	Parasocial relationships and credibility
Masuda et al. (2022)	404	Influencer attributes and characterisations
Kay et al. (2020)	388	Macro vs micro influencer disclosure effects
Weismueller et al. (2020)	370	Source credibility and advertising disclosure
Shan et al. (2020)	328	Self-influencer congruence and parasocial identification
Aw & Chuah (2021)	239	Self-discrepancy and parasocial relationships
Taillon et al. (2020)	236	Closeness as moderator
Pittman & Abell (2021)	209	Follower counts and green orientation

Note. The "Key theoretical contribution" column summarises each paper's primary conceptual focus.

Many citations are concentrated on a few articles, with Schouten et al. (2020) being the article that has been cited most. The top papers are grouped around three themes that are recurring in the literature: (1) the effectiveness of credibility and endorsement, (2) parasocial and relational mechanisms, and (3) trust-mediated consumer responses. This pattern is quite representative of the integrative pattern, which is developed later in the manuscript, but is not a test of the pattern itself.

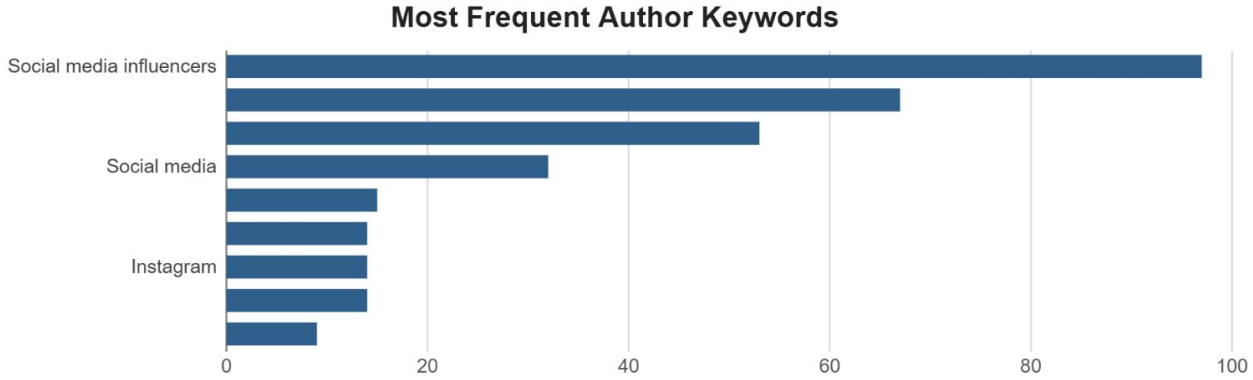


Figure 3. Most frequent author keywords after thesaurus harmonisation.

Note. Keyword frequencies reflect thesaurus-based merging of singular and plural variants.

The keyword analysis confirms that the literature is built on four pillars: influencer marketing and social media contexts, purchase-related outcomes, credibility-based mechanisms, and relational dynamics. Compared with broader influencer marketing reviews, the current study focuses on purchase intention, trust, and credibility constructs.

Trend Topics

Trend-topic analysis shows that the focus of concerns has changed over time, from persuasion, knowledge, and disclosure to credibility, parasocial relationships, and brand trust. Whereas before the question was, "Does influencer marketing work?", the field is now turning to how and when it seems to work.

Table 2. Trend topics in the corpus.

Term	Frequency	Median Year
Persuasion knowledge	6	2022
Instagram	14	2023
Credibility	9	2023
Parasocial relationship	14	2023
Social media influencers	97	2024
Purchase intention	67	2024
Influencer marketing	53	2024
Brand trust	6	2025

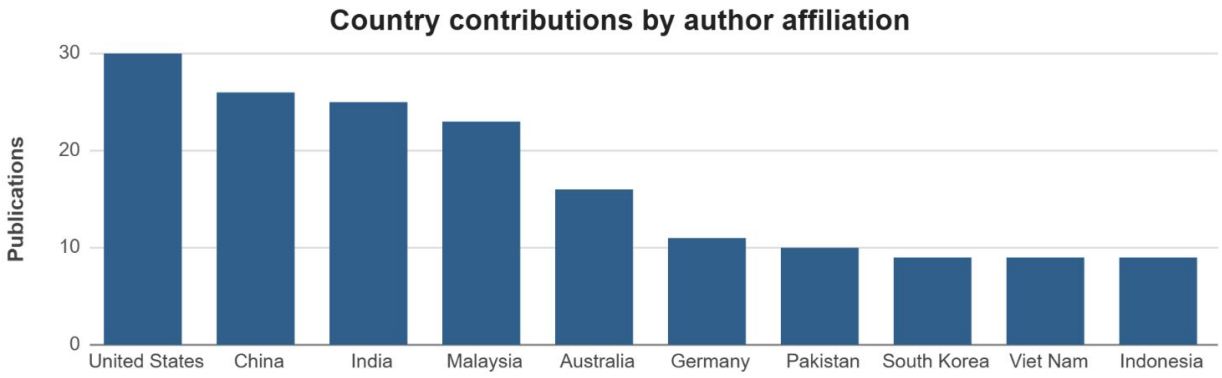


Figure 4. Country contributions by author affiliation.

Figure 4 shows that the United States led the corpus with 30 publications, followed by China (26), India (25), and Malaysia (23). The distribution confirms the field's international spread but also shows concentration in a relatively small set of national research communities.

Corresponding-author collaboration patterns were uneven. India recorded 19 corresponding-author papers, of which 18 were single-country publications and one was a multiple-country publication (MCP% = 5.3). The equivalent MCP% values were 60.0 for Malaysia (9/15), 35.7 for China (5/14), 18.8 for the United States (3/16), and 66.7 for South Korea (4/6). Productivity and international collaboration, therefore, do not move in parallel across leading countries.

Thematic Map Analysis

Figure 5 places social media influencers, purchase intention, and source credibility in the basic-theme zone, indicating that they form the conceptual centre of the field. Brand trust, purchase behaviour, and platform-oriented topics appear as motor themes, while parasocial relationships and persuasion knowledge occupy a transitional position that suggests centrality without full thematic consolidation.

Keyword Co-Occurrence Network

Figure 6 shows a keyword co-occurrence network centred on "social media influencers," "purchase intention," "influencer marketing," and "social media." Rather than isolated constructs, the network shows combinations of source cues, relational mechanisms, and response variables.

One cluster focuses on source-related factors such as credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, disclosure, and Instagram. A second cluster links authenticity, brand trust, parasocial interaction, and homophily, capturing the cognitive and affective processes that shape consumer decisions. A third cluster highlights purchase behaviour, attitude, TikTok, and broader consumer outcomes. Overall, the network shows a clear shift from studying isolated source effects toward more integrated, mechanism-based explanations of conversion.

Thematic Evolution

Figure 7 maps the thematic evolution from 2020–2022 to 2023–2026. Early dominant themes included credibility, influencer marketing, purchase intention, parasocial relationships, and social media influencers. Later, purchase

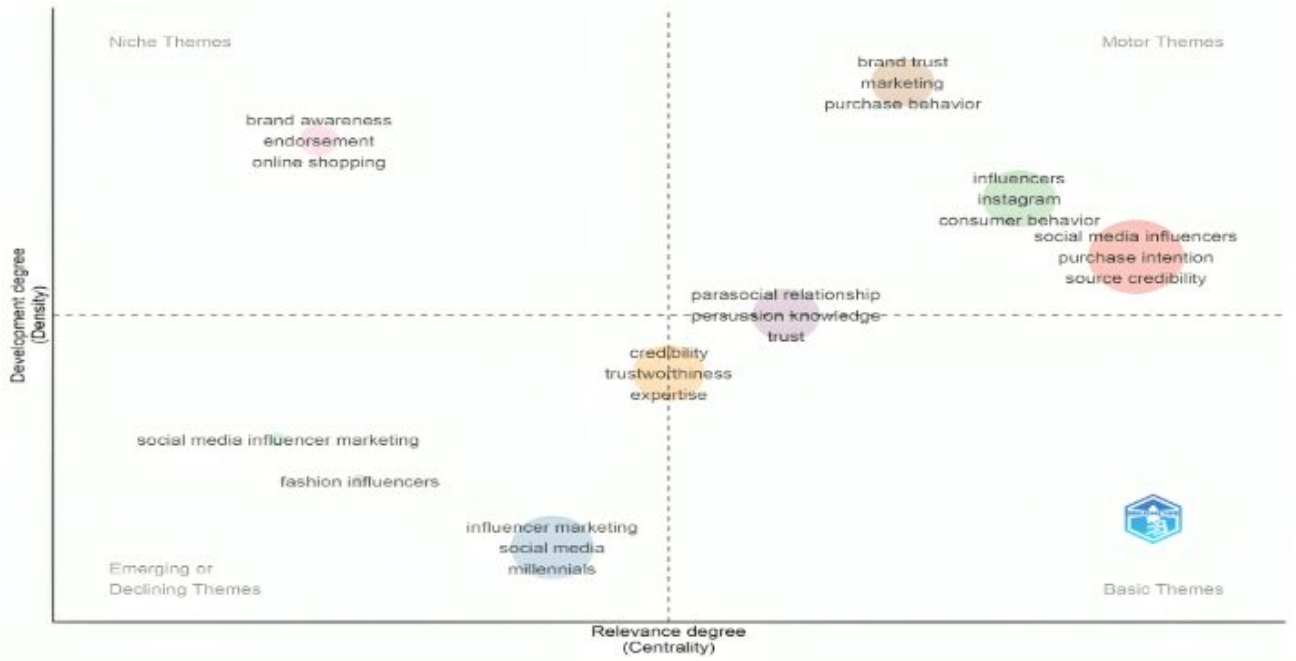


Figure 5. Strategic thematic map of the SMI–purchase intention literature.

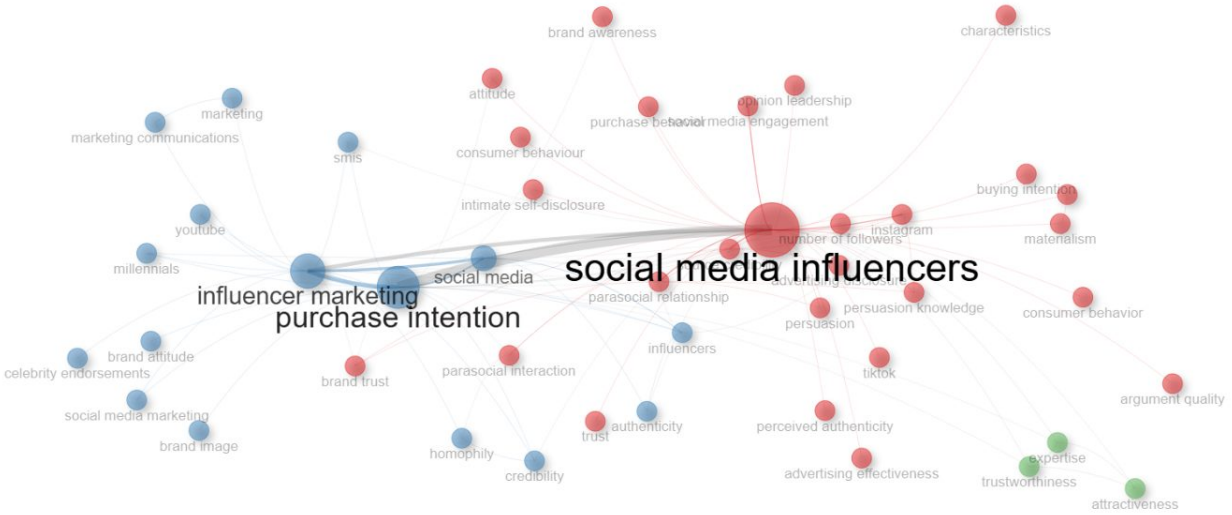


Figure 6. Keyword co-occurrence network of harmonised author keywords.

intention and social media influencers remained core, with brand trust and expertise rising sharply.

This pattern indicates theoretical deepening, early credibility work is expanding into trust-oriented and mechanism-based themes, purchase intention shows strong continuity, and the growing focus on brand trust and expertise signals interest in explanatory pathways and boundary conditions.

Bibliographic Coupling

Figure 8 identifies two active research fronts. The larger cluster of studies integrates influencer attributes, trust, parasocial relationships, and purchase intention into broader explanatory models. A second cluster gathers more recent work applying credibility perspectives in specific cultural or product contexts. The pattern suggests the field is becoming more cohesive, yet still needs tighter synthesis across different contexts.

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Figure 8. Bibliographic coupling map of the contemporary research front.

Document Co-Citation Analysis

Figure 9 shows the document co-citation network, which reveals the intellectual foundations most frequently cited together in the field. The structure is summarised in Table 3.

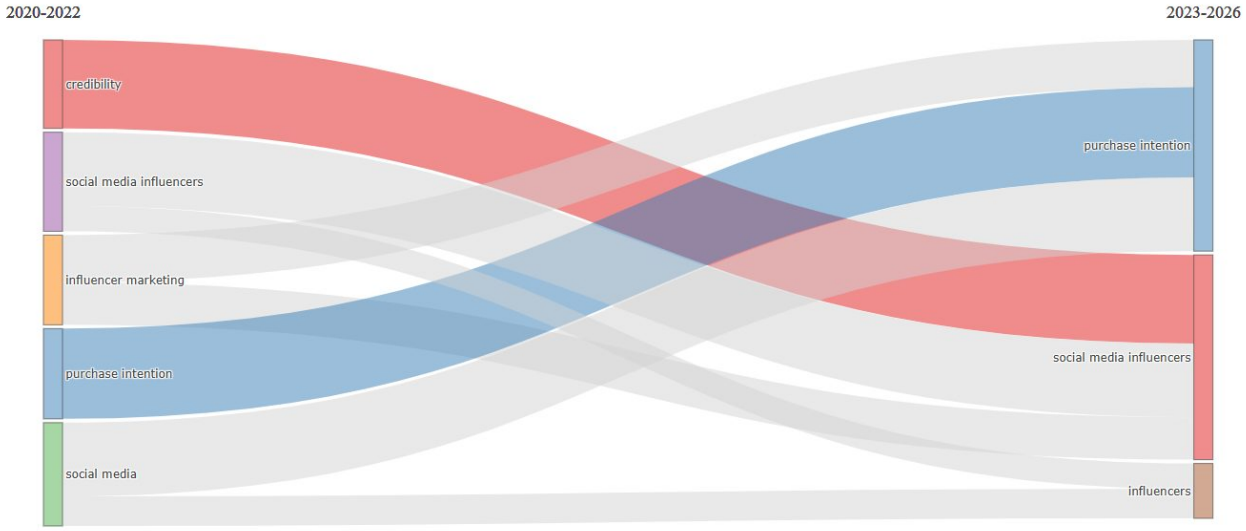


Figure 7. Thematic evolution of the SMI–purchase intention literature, 2020–2022 versus 2023–2026.

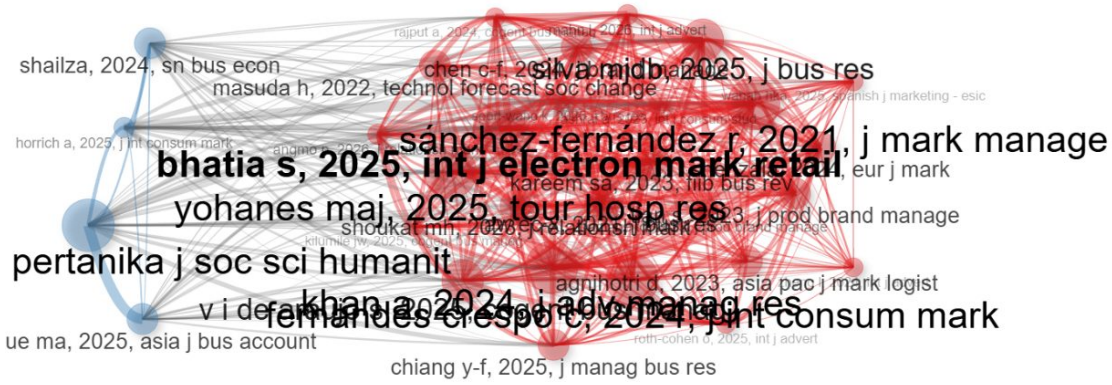


Table 3. Document co-citation clusters and key foundational references.

Cluster	Theme	Key Foundational References
1	Source credibility and endorsement	Ohanian (1990); Lou & Yuan (2019); Schouten et al. (2020); Weismueller et al. (2020)
2	Influencer effectiveness and parasociality	Reinikainen et al. (2020); Masuda et al. (2022); Shan et al. (2020); Taillon et al. (2020)
3	Digital marketing and social media strategy	Vrontis et al. (2021). De Veirman et al. (2017); Djafarova and Rushworth (2017)

The co-citation structure aligns closely with S–O–R logic. One cluster anchors the stimulus layer through work on source credibility and endorsement effectiveness; a second captures organism-level processes such as parasociality, characterisation, and trust; and a third provides the broader digital marketing context in which these processes unfold. The links across clusters suggest increasing theoretical integration, though not yet full convergence.

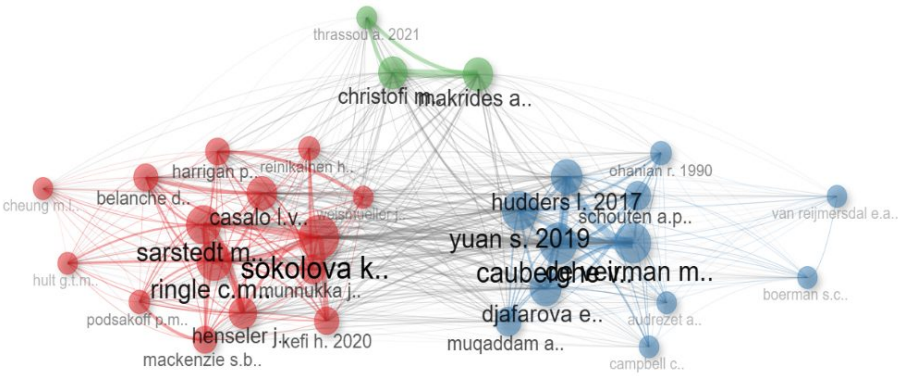


Figure 9. Document co-citation network of cited references.

Discussion

Results highlight the field's shift from descriptive proliferation to stronger theoretical consolidation. Key takeaway: all major mapping approaches converge on the same architecture, credibility cues, relational dynamics, trust processes, and purchase outcomes linked as a full persuasion system. The literature is increasingly organised around mechanisms and boundary conditions rather than isolated influencer predictors.

Theoretical Contribution and Positioning Against Prior Reviews

This study focuses on the research field of social media influencers and consumers' purchase intention. Building on prior reviews and meta-analyses, it introduces a structural bibliometric perspective to remedy the limitation of previous research that only centered on thematic synthesis and effect size estimation. This study adopts performance analysis and scientific mapping techniques to sort out the clustering, evolutionary and co-citation characteristics of the field. It finds that source credibility is not an isolated predictor variable, but is consistently associated with multiple types of core variables. The S–O–R framework pulls these patterns together and shows how cognitive and affective mechanisms connect credibility to purchase intention while highlighting conditions for future theory.

S–O–R Conceptual Fram

This study draws on the classic Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework in marketing, and integrates bibliometric analysis results from three approaches keyword co-occurrence, thematic evolution, and co-citation patterns to construct the integrated domain framework presented in Figure 10. In the stimulus stage, source credibility consists of three dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. In the organism stage, two distinct pathways emerge: a cognitive pathway mediated by brand trust, and an affective pathway mediated by parasocial relationships.

Figure 10 also highlights three standard conditions: platform affordances, advertising disclosure, and social commerce friction. These shows how credibility are interpreted, how commercial intent affects parasocial attachment, and whether favourable intentions convert into actual purchase behaviour. Because the framework is drawn from bibliometric patterns rather than direct causal testing, it should be viewed as a theory-building scaffold rather than a fully tested model.

S-O-R conceptual synthesis

Evidence anchors: keyword co-occurrence, thematic evolution, bibliographic coupling, and co-citation analysis

Stimulus (S)		Organism (O)		Response (R)
Source Credibility Expertise Trustworthiness Attractiveness	-> 	Brand Trust Cognitive route | later thematic salience	-> 	Purchase Intention dominant response keyword
Source credibility and endorsement cluster	-> 	Parasocial Relationship Affective route | relational mechanism	-> 	Purchase Intention convergent downstream response
		Recurrent moderators/boundary conditions		
Platform affordances where cues are expressed		Advertising disclosure persuasion knowledge		Social commerce friction intention-to-action conditions

Note. Vertical placement indicates moderating conditions observed in the bibliometric structure; the model is a theory-building scaffold, not a tested causal model. ***Figure 10.*** *Stimulus–Organism–Response conceptual synthesis of influencer effects on purchase intention.*

Managerial and Practical Implications

The results show that influencer campaigns are most effective in instigating purchase intention when credibility cues, relationship-building content, disclosure practices and social-commerce design align perfectly. As a result, expertise, trustworthiness, authenticity, and product-influencer fit should be strategic campaign variables rather than background traits that managers must account for. improper disclosure will damage the parasocial bond between audiences and influencers.

Future Research Agenda

There are three directions for future research on social media influencers and purchase intention. First, there is a need for more theoretical work on under-researched topics such as virtual influencers, de-influencing, disclosure timing and format, as well as the darker side of influencer persuasion, e.g., scepticism, misinformation, and unethical endorsement practices. Second, richer contextual comparisons are needed across platforms, product categories, emerging markets, and sustainability or green endorsements; the effects of influencers may differ by platform, depending on its context and the level of consumer engagement. Third, future studies should build on cross-sectional and self-reported measures of purchase intention and extend to a more longitudinal, experimental and behaviour design that will be better suited to capture the intention-behaviour gap and actual conversion outcomes. Generally, future research should be comparative, platform-sensitive, behaviourally oriented, and theoretically integrated.

Conclusion and Limitations

The study analysed 182 journal articles in Scopus published from 2020 to March 2026 on social media influencers and purchase intention. The analysis of performance and several science-mapping methods reveal that four key elements of the field are present: source credibility, parasocial and relational dynamics, purchase-oriented outcomes and platform-specific conditions. Thematic evolution shows that the focus of the studies has gradually shifted from the credibility of early studies to mechanisms, trust, and context moderators. The patterns indicate that the S–O–R model is a dual pathway, with the credibility of the influencer affecting purchase intention via both cognitive and affective pathways.

The study complements previous reviews and meta-analyses by providing a structural bibliometric perspective, interpreting the patterns, and translating them into a focused agenda for future research. The evidence indicates that conversion is most likely when credible influencers deliver the advertising, the content is relationship-building, clear disclosure is used, and the design is low-friction, social commerce.

There are a few points to be noted. The analysis is limited to English-language journal articles in Scopus, so articles in other languages or from other databases that may be relevant may not have been included. The search targeted the exact term "social media influencer," increasing precision but potentially excluding related terms such as "content creator" or "digital influencer." Furthermore, the 2026 count is partial (search conducted on 30 March 2026), and the

use of keywords to map, even with conservative harmonisation, is bound to introduce some conceptual nuances.

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