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Is Influencer Marketing More than Persuasion? A SOR-Based Review of the Indian Consumer Mindset

Avisek Kundu [1], Priyakrushna Mohanty [1,*], Sanjay Tiwari [2], Seeboli Ghosh Kundu [2,*] and Saurabh Bharti [3]

[1] School of Business and Management, Christ University, Bengaluru 560001, India; avisek.kundu@christuniversity.in
[2] Symbiosis Centre for Management Studies, Bengaluru Campus, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune 412115, India; phdgrad.sanjay.tiwari@siu.edu.in
[3] Department of Hotel Administration and Hospitality, Welcomgroup Graduate School of Hotel Administration, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal 576104, India; saurabh.bharti@manipal.edu
* Correspondence: pkmohanty90@gmail.com (P.M.); seebolighosh.kundu@scmsbengaluru.siu.edu.in (S.G.K.)

Abstract

Influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant communication strategy in India's rapidly expanding digital marketplace, reshaping how brands engage with consumers across social media platforms. Despite growing scholarly attention, existing research remains fragmented across themes such as celebrity endorsements, influencer credibility, consumer engagement, and technology-driven communication practices. This study synthesizes the evolving body of literature on influencer marketing in India using bibliometric mapping, thematic analysis, and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling. The analysis reveals that the field's intellectual structure is defined by four major research themes and latent topic patterns: celebrity endorsements, influencer credibility, consumer engagement, and technology-driven communication practices. A central outcome of the study is the development of a conceptual framework grounded in Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) theory that explicitly demonstrates how influencer attributes and digital communication stimuli trigger consumer cognition and behavioral outcomes. The study's primary theoretical contribution is to integrate the previously disconnected research streams into a cohesive framework, providing a foundation for future theoretical development and scholarly inquiry. This systematic synthesis offers a structured understanding of the specific mechanisms driving influencer marketing in the Indian context.

Keywords: influencer marketing; social media influencers; celebrity; SOR framework; India; bibliometric analysis; systematic literature review; sentiment analysis

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1. Introduction

Influencer Marketing (IM, hereafter) in India has rapidly evolved from a peripheral digital tactic to a central force in the country's high-growth consumer ecosystem. This revolution symbolizes the change from old-fashioned celebrity endorsements to platform-based, algorithm-delivered influence integrated into social media marketing plans [1]. The IM market is expected to reach over $32.5 billion globally, and in India, it is at about $420 million, with projected 25 percent growth in 2026 [2]. This influx is directly linked to India's digital growth, affordable internet access, widespread smartphone use, and ubiquitous access to apps like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, thereby transforming brand-consumer relationships [3]. As a result, IM has been incorporated into consumer engagement, particularly in the growing e-commerce environment [4]. Industries such as

fashion, clothing, and tourism have especially capitalized on influencers, thereby increasing scholarly attention to the exploration of their effects [5]. Notably, attributes of an influencer, like trust, credibility, and authenticity, are highly responsive among Indian consumers, particularly Gen Z and millennials, who significantly influence purchase intentions [6]. Localized and trust-based content is also growing in dominance, even in rural markets, indicating the scope of the IM [7].

Nevertheless, as it grows, IM research remains disjointed at the theoretical, contextual, and methodological levels. In theory, researchers use various models, including the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) [1,8], Two-Step Flow Theory (TSFT), and Parasocial Relationships [9]. These disconnected lenses are valuable but do not give one a coherent view of influence. Methodologically, research on IM ranges from survey-based structural modeling to computational analytics and qualitative ethnographies [10], which contributes to further inconsistency. The SOR framework, discussed next, accounts for only a fraction of this broader theoretical landscape and is not presented here as the sole explanatory theory of IM.

Of the various behavioral frameworks linking marketing stimuli to consumer behavior, the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model offers a practical perspective on influencer-led persuasion. It is adopted here not as the only viable lens but as an integrative framework selected after the evidence synthesis, because it best captures the dominant behavioral mechanism identified across the bibliometric, thematic, and LDA findings: external influencer stimuli like attributes such as credibility, authenticity, and content quality, together with platform features and communication strategies, shape internal organismic states such as trust, perceived credibility, parasocial connection, and brand perception, which in turn produce behavioral responses such as purchase intention, engagement, advocacy, and electronic word-of-mouth. This mapping remains compatible with related constructs, including source credibility theory and meaning transfer, that recur throughout the reviewed literature.

In India, although the literature on IM has grown, several conceptual and methodological gaps remain. IM and its applications have been studied through many lenses, such as celebrity endorsements, the effectiveness of micro-influencers, technological affordances, and sector-specific uses [11–14]. The initial studies were mostly concerned with the economic and marketing consequences of celebrity endorsements, specifically the analysis of stock market reactions and brand value performance [15]. As digital platforms grew in size, research shifted to psychological processes such as credibility, authenticity, and the transfer of symbolic meaning to understand how influencers shape consumer perception and behavior [16,17]. More recent studies have highlighted the relevance of trust, relational engagement, and content authenticity in shaping consumer attitudes and purchase intentions in digital contexts [10,18,19]. Nevertheless, these views remain scattered across individual studies and lack a systematic synthesis of the intellectual framework of IM studies in India: the endorsement- and finance-oriented stream [15], the credibility- and meaning-transfer-oriented stream [16,17], and the trust- and engagement-oriented stream [10,18,19] each examine a distinct facet of IM in isolation, with no single study connecting them into one intellectual structure. This fragmentation is compounded by methodological limitations: a significant part of IM studies relies on conventional quantitative methods, such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), to test predetermined relationships among influencer qualities, trust development, and consumer reactions [1,20–22], leaving limited scope for computational methods such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to inductively surface latent thematic trends in large text datasets. Moreover, despite the widespread application of the SOR framework to describe influencer-driven persuasion, its use is often narrow, centered predominantly on

purchase intention as the primary outcome [1,23], leaving the broader range of Organism-stage psychological processes, such as trust, authenticity, and parasocial interaction, and Response-stage outcomes, such as engagement, advocacy, and socio-cultural influence, relatively underexplored in that narrower body of work.

To fill these conceptual and methodological gaps, a systematic synthesis of the literature is needed to trace the intellectual map of IM research, determine the prevailing themes and covert topic patterns, and combine these findings into a theoretics-based framework.

Accordingly, the present study aims to address the identified gaps through the following objectives:

1. To examine the intellectual structure and key characteristics of existing research on IM in India through bibliometric analysis.
2. To identify the dominant thematic patterns emerging from the existing literature on IM in India.
3. To uncover latent topic structures within the IM literature using LDA topic modeling.
4. To synthesize insights from the literature into a conceptual framework based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) theory.

By addressing this fragmentation, the academic contribution of this research lies in consolidating disconnected findings across themes such as micro-influencers, technology, and sector-specific applications into a clear disciplinary overview of Indian IM research. Its theoretical value lies in facilitating theoretical amalgamation by identifying disconnected research streams and providing a foundation for future theory development. It is important to clarify that the novelty of this study does not lie in any single analytical technique in isolation, since bibliometric analysis, thematic analysis, LDA topic modeling, and the SOR framework have each been used independently in prior IM research. Rather, the contribution lies in integrating these four approaches into a single, unified review, allowing quantitative mapping of the field's intellectual structure, qualitative identification of dominant themes, computational discovery of latent topic patterns, and theory-based synthesis to inform and reinforce one another within one coherent analytical pipeline. This integrative approach advances existing review studies on IM, which have typically relied on a single method or theoretical lens, by offering a more comprehensive and theoretically grounded account of the field.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Evolution of IM and Consumer Behavior

IM in India has evolved from its initial connection to traditional celebrity endorsement into a more complex ecosystem powered by social media, digital content producers, and technology-mediated influence. Initial studies in this field were primarily concerned with the financial and promotional implications of celebrity endorsements, such as the impact of IM endorsements on stock prices and brand value [15]. With the growth of digital platforms and the increasing use of consumer engagement in social media-like settings, scholarly interest shifted toward financial outcomes and the psychological and communicative processes that underlie influencer effectiveness. The Meaning Transfer Model (MTM) and Source Credibility Theory (SCT) have become significant conceptual frameworks for understanding how symbolic meanings associated with endorsers are transferred to brands and, so, change consumer attitudes and behaviors [16,17]. Research on digital commerce environments revealed that a set of attributes of influencers, including credibility, authenticity, interactivity, and brand alignment, greatly contributed to the engagement of consumers, which in turn contributed to the strengthening of brand trust. Studies further underscored the importance of value congruence in building trust in platform-mediated commerce environments, with influencer–brand alignment emerging

as the primary driver of engagement [24]. The current research on AI-powered virtual anchors has shown that increased visibility boosts consumers' purchase intent, and that professionalism, responsiveness, and personalization have the greatest impact on emotions such as pleasure and trust [25].

These theoretical foundations formed the basis for investigating how influencer properties such as credibility, expertise, and attractiveness shape consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions. Recent scholarship mirrors the diversification of influencer types and the growing complexity of digital influence ecosystems. Currently, researchers focus on a wide variety of influencer types, such as lifestyle creators, finfluencers, wellness advocates, and grassroots innovators, who influence knowledge networks within communities. In this changing environment, a recurring argument concerns the relative effectiveness of celebrity influencers versus micro-influencers. Although celebrities have symbolic capital and social visibility, which can enhance parasocial relationships with followers [11,26], micro-influencers are perceived as more authentic and relatable, leading to increased engagement within niche communities [12].

This change is indicative of broader shifts in digital marketing practices, in which authenticity and community interaction are becoming more important than mass-media presence. Beyond their commercial activity, influencers have also been recognized as sociocultural agents who can shape online discourse, mobilize communities, and engage in online activism [27]. Moreover, the IM landscape has also changed due to technological developments. Social media platforms offer affordances that help influencers intertwine global formats with the cultural narratives embedded in the location, a process referred to as vernacular creativity [13]. A relevant study on Generation Z consumers in South Africa found that Instagram mega-influencers hold a significant influence on purchase intention, as these factors, such as attractiveness, expertise, perceived ease of use, and perceived usefulness, are important in digital marketing environments and reinforce the importance of source credibility and technology acceptance in digital marketing contexts [28]. Influencers adapt their communication patterns to platform algorithms, audience expectations, and cultural contexts to ensure the highest level of engagement. Influencer communication increasingly operates within algorithmic and analytics-driven environments where audience behavior is continuously monitored to optimize engagement and monetization strategies [29]. A recent study comparing human and virtual influencers among Thai Generation Z TikTok users found that both human and virtual influencers positively shape influencer attitude and purchase decisions; however, human influencers exert a significantly stronger effect on purchase-related outcomes due to greater perceived credibility and relational connection [30]. Another significant trend is the rise in Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based influencers and cyber avatars. A Social Media Influencer Value (SMIV) study indicates that AI-powered influencers could make digital communication more personalized, interactive, and more credible [14].

In addition, platform conventions can influence the efficacy of influencer communication, as companies and content producers can adjust message formats to audience expectations in certain social media settings [31]. These are signs of the gradual evolution of hybrid human-influencing systems, in which machine and human creativity influence and change each other in digital persuasion. There is also a volume of literature that explores the relationship between influencer communication and consumer decision-making. Empirical studies in fashion, cosmetics, and e-commerce reveal that influencer credibility, emotional appeal, and content quality are important factors influencing purchase intention and brand perception [10,18,19]. The same dynamics have been observed in higher education marketing, where social media communication is influenced by influencers who shape the institution's reputation and potential students' decision-making [32,33]. A recent meta-

analysis identifying the impact of Virtual Influencers (VIs) on purchase intention found that human-likeness is significantly affected by source credibility, customer engagement, and consumer attitudes. The study also found that variables like follower size and readiness for AI do not significantly affect purchase intention [34].

Quantitatively, a significant portion of IM work relies on techniques such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to examine relationships among constructs such as trust, hedonic motivation, brand attitude, and purchase intention [1,20–22]. Such studies have continued to highlight the significance of relational trust and perceived authenticity in enhancing the persuasive effect of influencers' communication. Although IM has potential commercial uses, it has also generated a growing academic interest in ethical and governance issues. The risks that researchers identify include misinformation, misleading promotional claims, and manipulation of consumer trust in influencer campaigns [35]. The concept of shadow politics explains how influencers can also be enlisted to informal political campaigns and digital propaganda networks [36]. Another significant issue of the Indian influencer ecosystem is disclosure transparency. Research shows frequent non-adherence to the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) regulations on the disclosure of sponsored content, as exemplified by the WOW Skin Science scandal [35,37]. Moreover, gender-based harassment and misogynistic trolling have become ongoing issues for female influencers, which means that more research is needed to study digital safety and governance systems in social networks [38].

2.2. SOR Framework and IM Research in India

To describe how influencer communication affects consumer behavior, several scholars have adopted the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model. The SOR model suggests that behavioral responses are produced by external stimuli that affect internal psychological states. In the context of IM studies, stimuli are typically associated with an influencer's quality traits (credibility, expertise, authenticity, and content factors), whereas organismic states encompass consumer beliefs (trust, perceived value, and emotional involvement). These behavioral responses can be in the form of purchase intention, brand loyalty, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM), or behavioral emulation. Several studies conducted in India demonstrate how this framework offers a systematic perspective on analyzing persuasion by influencers across various contexts. The empirical use of the SOR model reveals the pivotal importance of influencer credibility and content authenticity as key stimuli in consumer behavior. For example, a study on sustainable tourism behavior among Indian Gen Z consumers shows that authentic influencer content influences travel intentions through cognitive and motivational processes [1]. Likewise, research on e-commerce platforms shows that influencers' credibility and content quality elicit purchase intentions, with mediating variables such as perceived value [39]. Further cross-cultural studies comparing India with other markets indicate that the antecedents of consumer engagement are authenticity and perceived value, which are mediated by satisfaction and credibility [8]. The findings of the study in the fashion and cosmetics markets also demonstrate that influencer authority and credibility shape perceived information credibility and consumer intentions [10,18].

Some studies in this stream also explore the psychological processes underlying the association between influencer stimuli and behavioral effects. Key organismic variables that mediate the effect of digital endorsers are often trust, perceived credibility, brand attitude, and perceived value. For instance, research shows that trust and influencer credibility significantly influence online purchase intention through post-credibility perceptions and homophily between influencers and followers [23,40,41]. In other words, perceived risk is emphasized as a moderating factor between celebrity perception and consumer behavior, especially in small markets where trust is the primary determinant of consumer purchasing

behavior [42]. Previous studies based on the MTM also show how celebrities' symbolic meanings can be transferred to brand meaning and, in turn, to consumer reactions [16].

The growing range of SOR-based IM studies in India is also reflected by recent research. Theorists have considered culturally specific stimuli, such as spiritual leaders as brand endorsers, in which perceived value mediates the relationship between consumer purchase intention and rural and urban consumers [43]. The complementary theoretical approaches applied in other studies to compare the persuasiveness of celebrity influencers and social media influencers in brand attitude include the ELM [44]. Moreover, the recent literature uses the SOR framework in sustainability- and technology-driven marketing scenarios. To illustrate this point, research on the green smartphone buying process shows how environmental stimuli evoke ethical responsibilities that influence consumer buying behavior [45]. Studies analyzing AI-driven Instagram influencers also emphasize the impact of technological characteristics on brand trust and consumer purchase intentions [14]. The studies of beauty bloggers and wellness influencers also show how credibility, inspiration, and aspirational identification influence consumer reactions in online spaces [46,47]. Table 1 below synthesizes the dominant research themes identified in the IM literature.

Table 1. Synthesis of Dominant Research Themes in Influencer Marketing.

Theme	The Focus Area Existing Studies	Frequently Studied Variables	Representative References	Key Insight	Research Gap Identified
Theoretical Frameworks & Psychological Processes	Application of the SOR model and Meaning Transfer Model to understand consumer internal states.	Credibility, trust, perceived value, authenticity, brand attitude.	[17,48,49]	Influencer attributes serve as stimuli that shape organismic states (trust, value), thereby mediating behavioral responses such as purchase intent.	Limited exploration of cross-cultural psychological variances beyond India and Western markets.
Influencer Typologies & Relational Dynamics	Comparative effectiveness of celebrities, micro-influencers, and virtual avatars.	Relatability, expertise, human-likeness, parasocial interaction.	[50–52]	While celebrities provide visibility, micro-influencers drive higher engagement through perceived authenticity and trust within niche communities.	The long-term impact of "hybrid human influencing systems" remains under-researched.
Technology & Platform Affordances	Impact of AI, algorithms, and platform-specific features on communication strategies.	Perceived ease of use, personalization, interactivity, professionalism.	[53–55]	AI influencers enhance interactivity and personalization, though human influencers currently maintain higher relational credibility.	Understanding how rapidly shifting platform algorithms dictate "vernacular creativity" and content reach.
Ethics, Governance & Social Influence	Regulatory compliance, misinformation, and the socio-political role of influencers.	Disclosure transparency, perceived risk, digital safety, shadow politics.	[33,56,57]	Significant non-adherence to ASCI transparency guidelines exists; influencers are increasingly acting as socio-cultural agents of mobilization.	Lack of appropriate governance frameworks to address gender-based harassment and digital safety for influencers.
Sectoral Consumer Behavior	Efficacy of IM across diverse industries (Fashion, Education, Green Tech).	Purchase intention, hedonic motivation, information credibility.	[58–60]	Influencer credibility and content quality are universal drivers of intent, even in high-involvement sectors like higher education.	Research is heavily skewed toward short-term commercial outcomes rather than long-term brand loyalty.

Source: Author's Creation.

Taken together, this body of literature proves the increased applicability of the SOR framework for describing influencer-based persuasion in the Indian online environment. These studies present a theoretical basis for examining how digital influence shapes consumer attitudes, trust formation, and decision-making across different marketing scenarios by identifying the role of influencer attributes as stimuli that influence consumer psychological states and decision-making.

3. Materials and Methods

In the current paper, the authors have adopted a hybrid systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, combining bibliometric analysis and computational text mining like LDA to investigate the intellectual organization and thematic development of IM research in the Indian context. The methodological orientation in this research is neither descriptive mapping nor a structured synthesis, which is in line with recent appeals of the marketing literature to abandon descriptive mapping in favor of the theoretically informed generation of knowledge [61,62]. The analysis findings are then integrated with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) perspective, yielding a conceptual model grounded in patterns and existing theory.

3.1. Research Design

The paper uses a multi-method analytical framework in which each methodology addresses a distinct epistemological aspect of the corpus. The initial step is a bibliometric analysis of the literature's structural and performance properties, including publication streams and keyword frequency distributions. This phase defines a macro-level mapping of the field's progress over the set review period. Secondly, an author keyword co-occurrence analysis is conducted to reveal prevailing conceptual groups and to trace the development of key constructs. Third, LDA, a probabilistic topic modeling method, is used to identify latent thematic structures that would not be apparent through standard reading or manual coding. LDA has proven to be a dependable tool in knowledge mapping and marketing scholarship, useful for highlighting key research themes and their interrelationships across a large collection of documents [63]. Fourth, the full papers are analyzed for sentiment using the VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and Sentiment Reasoner) lexicon to describe the evaluative orientation of the scholarly discourse. VADER is a sentiment analyzer (lexicon- and rule-based) that can identify emotions in textual data and has proven effective in a variety of applications, including marketing, social media monitoring, and customer feedback analysis [64].

This is a multi-layered design that fits a new field like IM in India, where conceptual boundaries are still fluid, and constructs span heterogeneous studies. Importantly, the LDA results are not treated as independent; they are triangulated with thematic constructs from keyword and content analyses, thereby enhancing the internal validity of the SLR. The intersection of these analytical strands is the empirical foundation of construct identification and theoretical mapping during the framework development stage. The data source, search and curation strategy will be presented in Section 3.2.

3.2. Data Source, Search and Curation Strategy

The Scopus database was the primary data source because it has a large, continuously indexed collection of peer-reviewed scholarship in the fields of marketing, digital communication, and consumer behavior. To reduce coverage gaps in the databases, additional searches have been conducted in Web of Science and JSTOR. To include the entire spectrum of terminological variants of influencer ecosystems, a structured Boolean search query was built:

(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("IM" OR "social media influencer" OR "digital influencer*" OR "online influencer*" OR "internet celebrity" OR "key opinion leader*" OR KOL OR "micro-influencer*" OR "celebrity endorsement" OR "blogger marketing" OR "vlogger marketing")) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (India OR Indian OR "Republic of India") AND (DOCTYPE(ar) OR DOCTYPE(re) OR DOCTYPE(cp)) AND PUBYEAR > 2014 AND PUBYEAR < 2026.*

The timeframe (2015–2025) was chosen to capture the years of the digital platforms boom in India, over which influencer-mediated communication has become a significant field of academic interest. The types of documents were limited to journal articles, review papers, and conference proceedings. The inclusion criteria were defined to ensure scholarly rigor and thematic relevance. Conversely, the exclusion criteria removed documents outside this temporal range, studies focused on geographic locations other than India, and document types that did not meet the specified peer-review standards.

3.3. Study Selection: PRISMA 2020 Framework

The results were selected based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol [65], which provides systematic reviewers with a clear guide to what was reviewed, how it was reviewed, and what was found. The selection was conducted in four sequential phases, i.e., identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, as shown in Figure 1.

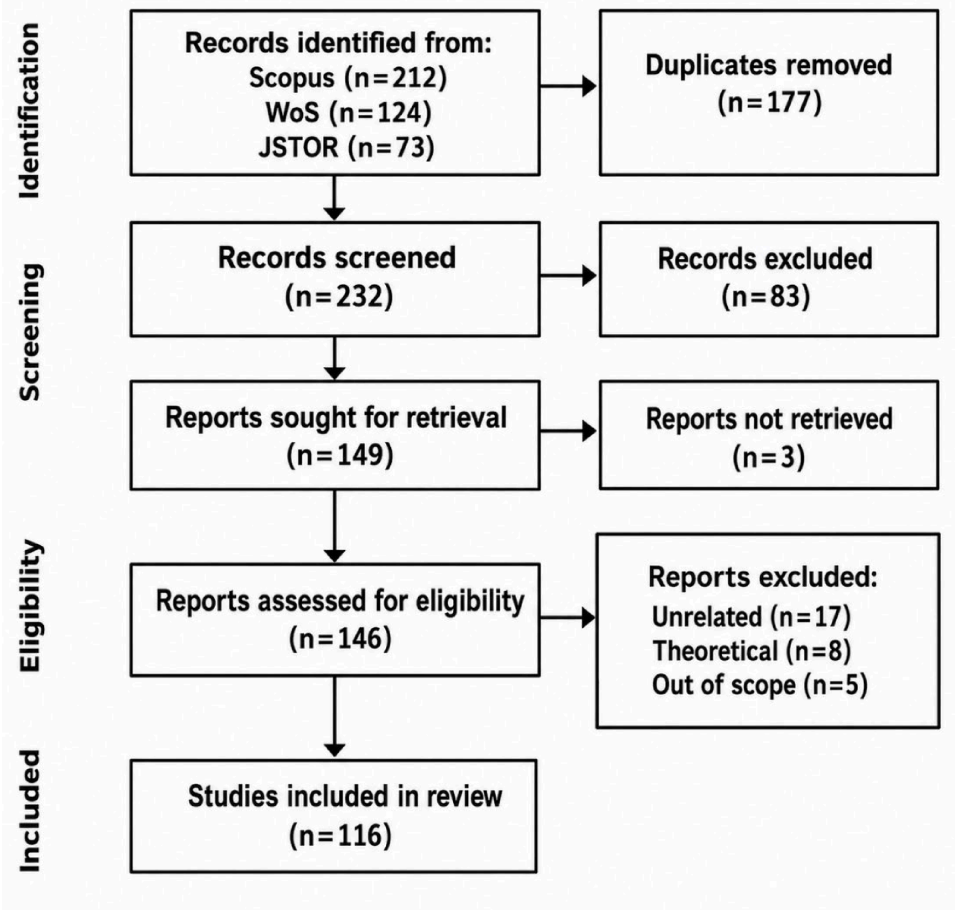


Figure 1. Study Selection using PRISMA Framework. Source: Author's Ideation based on PRISMA Framework.

In the initial identification stage, the combined search results yielded a pre-screening pool of 409 records (Scopus: n = 212; Web of Science: n = 124; JSTOR: n = 73). Following this, 177 duplicate records were identified and removed using the *Bibliometrix* Package in R, leaving 232 unique records for further evaluation. To address potential inconsistencies in

metadata across the three databases, a systematic data-cleaning and harmonization procedure was undertaken. Country-name inconsistencies were standardized by consolidating regional classifications, such as England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, under the "United Kingdom" heading. Specific metadata fields, including DOI, title, and publication year, were used for duplicate matching. Furthermore, author affiliations and institutional names were reviewed to resolve variations in names, spellings, and abbreviations, such as "Indian Institute of Management" and "IIM," under a single consistent institutional name.

Left out 232 documents; went into the two-layer screening process. First, title and abstract screening assessed conceptual alignment with the study's focus on IM constructs. This stage led to the removal of 83 records considered out of scope. Second, the remaining 149 records were retrieved for full-text review. However, three documents in this set were inaccessible, leaving 146 studies for the eligibility assessment phase. During the full-text review, an additional 22 articles were excluded based on specific exclusion criteria: 17 papers lacked substantive relevance to the core constructs of IM, while 5 fell outside the predetermined geographic or temporal boundaries.

The ultimate analytical corpus consisted of 116 studies, which served as the basis for subsequent bibliometric analysis, LDA topic modeling, and VADER sentiment analysis. This curated dataset ensured that the resulting conceptual framework, rooted in the SOR perspective, was derived from high-quality, relevant empirical evidence. In order to filter and sort the data, EndNote X9 software was used to remove the duplicates and create the reference list.

3.4. Conceptual Framework Development

The conceptual framework was constructed through an iterative, data-driven process grounded in thematic analysis and theoretical congruence. Multi-word phrases and high-frequency keywords identified from the reviewed literature underwent a standardization process that included lowercasing all words and stop-words, and the union of similar phrases. For example, purchase intention, buying intention, and consumer intention variants were combined into a single construct, and divergent influencer typologies were grouped under a broader category of influencer characteristics. This generated a workable set of central constructs structured around influencer qualities, social media communication signals, consumer-associated cognitive processing, brand-related judgments, and behavioral consequences.

The SOR model, postulated by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) [66], is often used to measure consumers' perceptions and intentions regarding behavioral change within a single, integrated framework, and its flexibility enables the inclusion of a variety of variables in such research. In this structure, the influencer attributes and platform-based communication variables were plotted as external stimuli; internal psychological conditions of trust, parasocial interaction, and attitude formation comprised the organism layer, and purchase intention, engagement, and electronic word-of-mouth were the response dimensions. The topic clusters obtained using LDA served a triangulating role, as they confirmed the thematic clusters derived from the keywords and ensured the theoretical consistency of the SOR-based mapping. The resulting framework, therefore, employs the empirical patterns observed in the corpus as well as the conceptual logic of an existing theoretical paradigm, thereby offering a systematic outline for future empirical research.

4. Analysis & Findings

4.1. Characteristics of Research on IM in India

A descriptive macro-level picture of the structural and intellectual features of the Indian IM research is offered by the bibliometric analysis of the final corpus of 116 studies.

The consolidated summary of the main descriptive indicators, shown in Table 2 below, is discussed across six dimensions: annual publication output, journal contributions, prolific authors, institutional affiliations, geographic distribution of contributing countries, and key author keywords. Collectively, the studies explain the discipline's developmental path and show the areas of disciplinary concentration, geographic focus, and conceptual fixation through which it has developed during the period under review. The trends observed at this point form the empirical basis of the more detailed thematic and computational analytic methods to be used in further sections.

Table 2. Summary of Descriptive Bibliometrics Analysis.

Year	N	Source	N	Author	N
2025	24	Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies	5	Roy, S.	6
2024	17	Indian Journal of Marketing	4	Agnihotri, A.	3
2023	11	Journal of Content Community and Communication	4	Bhattacharya, S.	3
2022	8	Global Business Review	3	Ghuman, M.K.	3
2021	6	Humanities and Social Sciences Communications	3	Mann, B.J.S.	3
2020	12	Journal of Creative Communications	3	Parmar, Y.	3
2019	2	Journal of Promotion Management	3	Alam, F.	2
2018	11	Indian Journal of Science and Technology	2	Bailey, A.A.	2
2017	7	Journal of Product and Brand Management	2	Bakshi, A.	2
2016	7	Journal of the Textile Association	2	Banerjee, N.	2
Keyword	N	Paper Reference	N	Funding Sponsor	N
India	29	[41]	202	National Natural Science Foundation of China	2
Celebrity Endorsement	19	[67]	197	Oklahoma State University	2
Social Media	16	[68]	115	Aalto-Yliopisto	1
Celebrity Endorsements	14	[21]	113	European Commission	1
IM	13	[69]	112	European Regional Development Fund	1
Purchase Intention	9	[70]	71	European Research Council	1
Social Media Influencers	7	[71]	67	Horizon 2020 Framework Programme	1
Celebrity	6	[19]	65	Junta de Castilla y León	1
Advertising	6	[41]	64	Kingdom University	1
Source Credibility	5	[67]	53	Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación	1
Country/Territory	N	Affiliation	N	Subject Area	N
India	102	Indian Institute of Management Udaipur	7	Business, Management and Accounting	63
United States	16	Symbiosis International Deemed University	5	Social Sciences	54
Australia	6	MICA, India	4	Economics, Econometrics and Finance	20

Table 2. *Cont.*

Country/Territory	N	Affiliation	N	Subject Area	N
China	4	Guru Nanak Dev University	3	Arts and Humanities	11
Estonia	3	Jamia Millia Islamia	3	Psychology	11
United Kingdom	3	Penn State Harrisburg	3	Medicine	6
Netherlands	2	University of Delhi	3	Computer Science	5
Singapore	2	Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad	3	Environmental Science	5
Spain	2	XLRI, Jamshedpur	3	Multidisciplinary	5
Austria	1	Institute of Management Technology, Ghaziabad	3	Decision Sciences	4

Source: Author's Creation.

4.2. Publication Trends

The temporal distribution of publications in the resulting corpus demonstrates a nonlinear upward trend in IM research in the Indian context. The number of scholarly publications did not exceed 7 in 2016 and 2017, indicating the field's early institutionalization. The growth was moderate between 2018 and 2020, with 11 and 12 publications annually, accompanied by the active expansion of creator-driven content systems in India and the rapid development of social media platforms. The 2021 output of 6 publications was likely due to broader disruptions in research pipelines in the post-pandemic period, and output increased rapidly to 8 and 11 publications in 2022 and 2023, respectively. The most intense growth is seen in 2024 and 2025, with publication counts of 17 and 24, respectively, indicating that scholarly interest in the field was growing faster. The recent years' spike indicates that IM in India is no longer a marginal issue in the marketing and consumer behavior literature. This trend aligns with broader trends in the discipline, whereby the advent of digital marketing has elicited increased scholarly interest due to its growing commercial and sociocultural importance [61].

4.3. Source and Journal Analysis

The division of publications into journals reflects the field's interdisciplinary nature and the topic's growth within specific marketing sources. The most prolific sources were Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies (n = 5 publications), followed by the Indian Journal of Marketing (n = 4 publications), and the Journal of Content, Community and Communication (n = 4 publications). The other well-known sources were Global Business Review (n = 3), Humanities and Social Sciences Communications (n = 3), Journal of Creative Communications (n = 3), and Journal of Promotion Management (n = 3). The fact that Humanities and Social Sciences Communications and even domain-specific marketing journals exist is an indication that IM studies in India are no longer viewed exclusively within disciplinary siloes and involve the participation of scholars in the field who study communication, sociology, and consumer psychology. The journal diversity also suggests that no single outlet has been playing a gatekeeping role in the field, which could help clarify the scope of theoretical and empirical approaches used in studies. Similarly, the absence of top-tier journals in IM may reflect the field's relative novelty, its alignment with digital- and social-media-focused outlets, and the dominance of niche journals in the publication, rather than traditional marketing journals [72,73].

4.4. Authorship and Institutional Contributions

Roy, S., was the most prolific contributor to the corpus with six publications, followed by Agnihotri, A., Bhattacharya, S., Ghuman, M.K., Mann, B.J.S., and Parmar, Y., each with three publications. This pattern of output concentration among a comparatively

small group of authors suggests an emergent scholarly community rather than a fully established research network, which is typical in rapidly developing intellectual fields. At the institutional level, the Indian Institute of Management (IIM)-Udaipur was the most-contributing affiliate (n = 7), followed by Symbiosis International Deemed University (n = 5) and MICA India (n = 4). The presence of several IIMs, such as IIM Ahmedabad, XLRI Jamshedpur, and Jamia Millia Islamia, among the best affiliates, indicates the growing integration of IM scholarship into elite management education systems in India.

4.5. Geographic and Subject Area Distribution

The geographical diversity of the affiliated authors demonstrates the prevalence of India-based scholarship in shaping this literature, with 102 of the records linked to institutions in India. The main contributors to international contributions are the United States (n = 16) and Australia (n = 6), followed by China (n = 4), Estonia (n = 3), and the United Kingdom (n = 3). The comparatively small international presence supports the corpus's contextually groundedness and the need to develop structures that can explain the unique Indian digital consumption environment rather than definitively breaking with adopted Western frameworks. Some subject-area classifications: Business, Management and Accounting had the highest number of disciplinary categories (n = 63), followed closely by Social Sciences (n = 54) and Economics, Econometrics and Finance (n = 20). The presence of Arts and Humanities (n = 11) and Psychology (n = 11) demonstrates the pluralist nature of the theoretical approach to the field in which constructs based on persuasion theory, parasocial interactions, and identity formation coexist with more conventional marketing outcome variables.

4.6. Keyword Analysis

India (n = 29) was the most frequent author key term, which demonstrated the corpus's geographic specificity and intentional contextualization. The next most frequent words were "celebrity endorsement" (n = 19) and "social media" (n = 16), then there were the words "celebrity endorsements" (n = 14), "IM" (n = 13), and "purchase intention" (n = 9). The popularity of the term celebrity endorsement, compared to IM, suggests that a significant part of the literature conceptualizes influencer-mediated communication through the lens of traditional endorsement theory, highlighting an ongoing theoretical debate between existing frameworks and the new online phenomenon.

The continued prominence of "celebrity endorsement" in academic and marketing discourse, despite the rise in IM, can be interpreted as a form of "theoretical inertia". This persistence reflects the enduring relevance of traditional endorsement theories and their adaptation to new digital phenomena, as well as the challenges in fully transitioning to frameworks that address the nuances of influencer-mediated communication. Social media influencers often function as "micro-celebrities," blurring the lines between traditional celebrity endorsements and IM. It also demonstrates that both traditional celebrities and influencers rely on similar attributes, such as credibility, attractiveness, and congruence with the endorsed product, to influence consumer behavior [74,75].

The emergence of the source credibility (n = 5) and social media influencers (n = 7) as discrete clusters also shows that issues of credibility, authenticity, and influence mechanisms continue to dominate the academic agenda. These keyword patterns are the basic starting point to construct identification in the following thematic analysis and SOR-based framework development.

4.7. Citation Structure and Funding Landscape

The highest citation (n = 202) levels in the corpus were observed in [41], [67], and [68], respectively. The pre-eminence of these works, as measured by citation counts, implies that

few foundational studies have had an inordinate impact on the discipline's theoretical paths and methodological orthodoxies. Regarding funding, most studies in the corpus lacked an external sponsor, and those that did had only one. Two studies were funded by the National Natural Science Foundation of China, two by Oklahoma State University, and several by European organizations, such as the European Commission, the European Research Council, and the Horizon 2020 Framework Program. The short-term and geographically dispersed funding environment also underscores the highly investigator-driven character of this new discipline and suggests the prospect of more methodical research investment in the Indian digital marketing setting.

4.8. Author Keywords Co-Occurrence Analysis

Figure 2 shows five clusters of themes in the corpus, based on the keyword co-occurrence map.

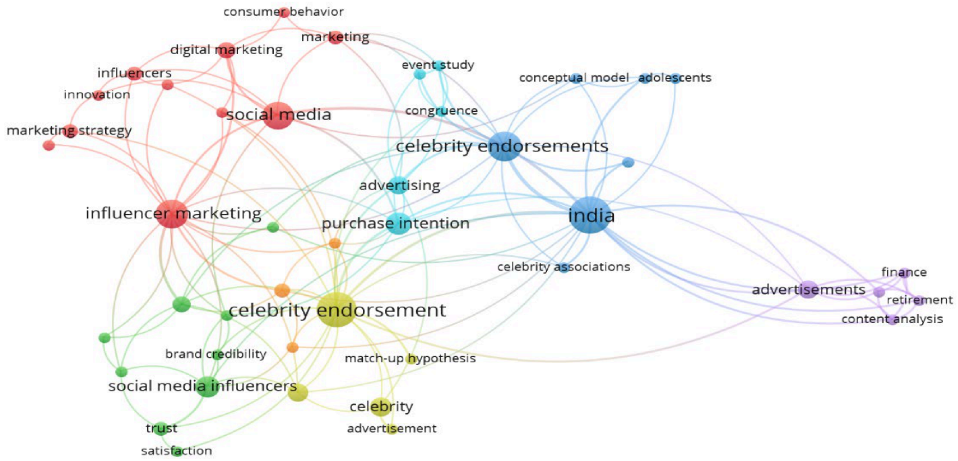


Figure 2. Author Keywords Co-Occurrence Analysis. Source: VOSviewer 1.6.21 (Author's Creation).

Platform-level communication and digital strategy constructs are captured in the red cluster anchored by the term IM and social media. The green cluster encompasses social media influencers, trust, brand credibility, and satisfaction, reflecting a consumer-psychology orientation. The yellow group focuses on celebrity endorsement and celebrities, including the match-up hypothesis and advertising-related terms. The blue cluster, led by "India" and "celebrity endorses," ties together contextual and endorsement-specific constructs such as congruence and adolescents. The smaller purple cluster connects advertising, content analysis, and finance, suggesting an emergent stream that addresses regulatory and financial aspects. The fact that Purchase Intention (PI) and advertisement are central nodes connecting clusters of nodes highlights their cross-cutting theoretical applicability across the literature.

The analysis also demonstrates a pronounced Stimulus (S) heavy bias. The largest thematic clusters, viz. Red (social media/IM) and Yellow (Celebrity Endorsement), primarily focus on external environmental triggers and marketing strategies, confirming that the "Stimulus" layer is the primary preoccupation of current scholarly discourse. In parallel, other critical aspects of the SOR framework, such as "Organism (O)" and "Response (R)," remain underexplored in the literature. While Organism (O) factors like "trust" and "brand credibility" appear in the green cluster, this internal mediating stage lacks consistency, suggesting a lack of academic consensus on how these internal psychological states are defined and measured. Similarly, the "Response" (R) layer is heavily anchored in "purchase intention (PI)" and sidelines more nuanced behavioral outcomes such as e-WOM, brand advocacy, and socio-political mobilization. The Purple cluster (finance and content

analysis) remains peripheral, suggesting that ethical, regulatory, and financial stimuli are still emerging and under-researched compared with mainstream marketing tactics.

5. Systematic Literature Review

5.1. Dominant Themes and Keywords

The word cloud in Figure 3 highlights the core pillars of the research domain.

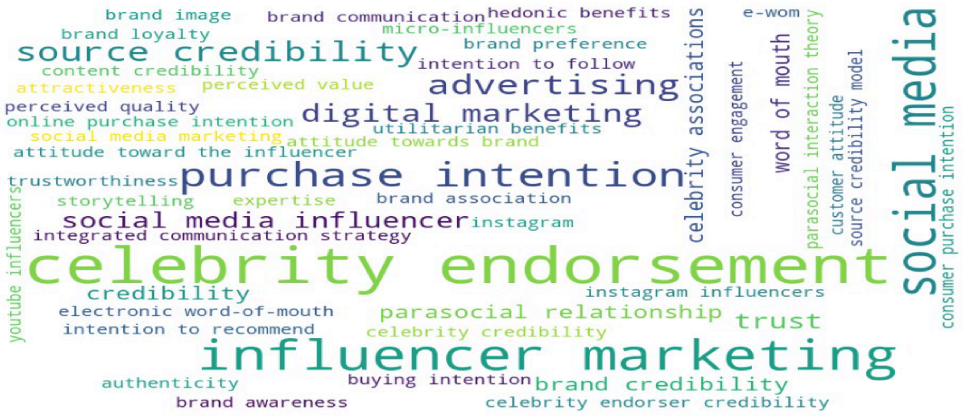


Figure 3. Dominant Themes and Keywords. Source: Author's Creation using Python 3.14.6.

In the word cloud of dominant themes and keywords, "celebrity endorsement," "purchase intention (PI)," "social media," and "IM" emerge as the most dominant keywords. These terms align closely with the SOR framework. For instance, "source credibility," "authenticity," "attractiveness," and "expertise" represent the external stimuli (S) provided by influencers. The organism (O) phase is reflected through psychological mediators such as "trust," "parasocial relationship," "perceived value," and "brand association". The final response is primarily centered on "purchase intention (PI)" but also includes critical outcomes such as "e-WoM," "brand loyalty," and "intention to recommend." Furthermore, keywords such as "micro-influencers," "Instagram," and "storytelling" demonstrate a transition from traditional mass-media endorsements toward more personalized, platform-specific digital strategies. This thematic structure emphasizes the integration of hedonic and utilitarian benefits to shape modern consumer attitudes toward brands [39,76].

5.2. Key Words Timeline Trend

The bubble plot in Figure 4 illustrates a significant thematic shift within the Indian digital marketing landscape over the last 1 decade.

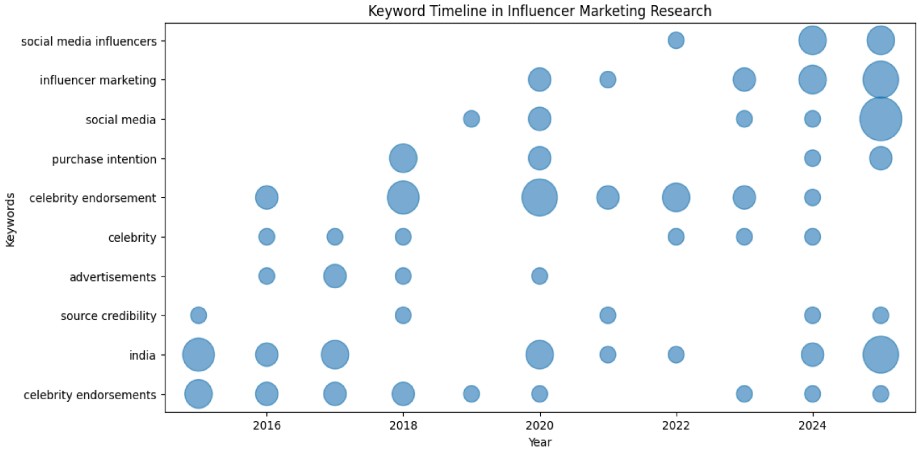


Figure 4. Bubble Plot Keywords Timeline in IM. Source: Author's Creation using Python.

The bubble plot shows that research from 2015 to 2020 was primarily anchored in "celebrity endorsement," "celebrity," and "advertisements," reflecting a traditional mass-media focus on high-status endorsers. However, a clear transition occurs from 2020 onwards, with "IM" and "social media influencers" emerging as the most prominent keywords, peaking in 2024 and 2025. Throughout the decade, "India" remains a foundational keyword, appearing consistently alongside "purchase intention (PI)". The expansion of the "social media" bubble in 2025 underlines the field's evolution toward platform-centric research, prioritizing digital-native influence over traditional celebrity models [18,41,77,78].

5.3. LDA-Topical Model Analysis

The Topical Model Analysis (TMA) in Table 3 below was generated using LDA, which identifies the underlying thematic structures (latent topics) within a large body of research. Each topic in the TMA represents a cluster of related keywords that frequently appear together in the literature [79].

Table 3. Analysis of LDA-Topic Modeling.

Topic Number	Label	Top Keywords	Keyword Probability Weights (β)	Theme Probability Weight (Σβ)	Coherence Score (UMass)
Topic 1	Social Media Marketing Strategy	marketing	0.0185	0.0631	−1.9427
		media	0.0143		
		social	0.0130		
		influencer	0.0104		
		study	0.0067		
Topic 2	Consumer Brand Perception	study	0.0169	0.0597	−0.8055
		celebrity	0.0137		
		brand	0.0111		
		consumers	0.0100		
		consumer	0.0081		
Topic 3	Celebrity & Influencer Branding	celebrity	0.0163	0.0541	−1.2687
		brand	0.0121		
		study	0.0089		
		influencers	0.0088		
		social	0.0081		
Topic 4	Regional Celebrity Impact (India)	study	0.0142	0.0442	−1.4359
		celebrity	0.0096		
		impact	0.0071		
		India	0.0069		
		influencer	0.0064		
Topic 5	Celebrity Endorsement Credibility	study	0.0164	0.0543	−4.611
		celebrity	0.0159		
		India	0.0085		
		brand	0.0072		
		credibility	0.0063		

Source: Author's Creation.

Based on the probability weights (β) and thematic weights (Σβ), here is a detailed interpretation of the five identified topics in the TMA:

- **Topic 1-Strategy of Social Media Marketing:** Topic 1 has the greatest number of words in the corpus and the maximum theme probability weight (0.0631). It is the Stimulus (S) in SOR. Here, there is an emphasis on the strategic use of social media and influencers as the primary methods in contemporary marketing research. It indicates that the study is heavily focused on strategic planning for digital campaigns.

- **Topic 2-Consumer Brand Perception:** Topic 2 is the stage of the process which is the Organism (O), which is concerned with the inner psychological condition of the consumer. The main aim of this research is to understand how consumers compare and view a brand when it is associated with a celebrity. The high probability weight of the study and celebrity shows that this is a fundamental field of investigation in consumer psychology.
- **Topic 3-Celebrity/Influencer Branding:** Topic 3 emphasizes the overlap of traditional and digital-native influence. It demonstrates that scholars are increasingly interested in studying the contributions of celebrities and social influencers to brand building. This indicates a change in branding, in which the distinction between conventional "star power" and digital relatability is becoming increasingly blurred.
- **Topic 4-Impact of Regional Celebrities in India**: The geographic and cultural context of the study is described in Topic 4. It pays particular attention to the effects of influence in India, underscoring that the effectiveness of an influencer or celebrity is strongly tied to the peculiarities of socio-cultural contexts in the Indian market.
- **Topic 5-Celebrity Endorsement Credibility:** The critical qualitative mediator in the literature is Topic 5, which is Celebrity Endorsement Credibility. The use of the term credibility implies that in India, the celebrity's perceived reliability and knowledge are crucial to the effectiveness of a brand endorsement, a finding supported by multiple studies [18,41,80]. Interestingly, the coherence score for this topic is very low (−4.611), suggesting that credibility is a complex, multifaceted variable that varies widely across research papers. However, the emergent themes found in the literature do not align with the balanced system of the SOR framework, which presupposes a linear and equal flow of the three stages under the LDA-TMA [81]. The Stimulus-heavy bias and Organism fragmentation are proven by the research corpus. Some of these mismatches are pointed out in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Emergent Themes and Mismatches with SOR Balanced Approach.

Emergent Theme in LDA-Topical Model Analysis	Mismatch Factors with Balanced Approach of SOR.
Stimulus-Driven Preoccupation	The LDA model identifies Topic 1 (Social Media Marketing Strategy) as having the largest theme probability weight (0.0631). It means that the literature is mainly devoted to the Stimulus (S) layer, such as the tactical use of digital platforms and the types of influencers, but not to subsequent stages of psychology or behavioral aspects.
Theoretical Incoherence in the Organism Layer	The SOR framework makes the Organism (O) the central mediator, yet the LDA results indicate that this layer may be unstable. The main organismic state, Topic 5 (Celebrity Endorsement Credibility), is characterized by a very low coherence score (−4.611), which embodies the mismatch in the fact that, though being a central concept in the SOR model, the notion of credibility is talked about in a highly fragmented and disjointed manner in the research corpus.
The "Response" Vacuum in Topical Modeling	A drastic divergence is noticed in the Response (R) layer. Although the VOSviewer map and the word cloud indicate that the term purchase intention is a hub in the field, it is not among the five keywords that appear in the top positions across all five major LDA topics. This indicates that, despite researchers' desire to achieve behavioral results, the discourse's thematic framework is oriented towards the Stimulus (strategy) and Organism (perception) stages, without forming a unified thematic block concerned with real behavioral reactions.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Emergent Theme in LDA-Topical Model Analysis	Mismatch Factors with Balanced Approach of SOR.
Contextual Complexity vs. Linear Framework	The fact that Topic 4 (Regional Celebrity Impact in India) became a separate thematic group (Σ2 = 0.0442) demonstrates that the Indian context is not merely a background "Stimulus". This topic reveals a "mismatch" with the linear SOR model, as India's socio-cultural environment functions as its own complex thematic entity that influences the entire process, rather than being a single point in the S→O→R chain.
Sentiment and Variability Mismatch	The sentiment analysis shows a difference in variability of the "Organism" layer. Negative states may be incorporated into the SOR framework (e.g., perceived risk or skepticism), although the entire corpus is mostly positive (107 positive papers versus 7 negative). This optimism bias, in effect, leads to the dark side of the SOR model, such as perceived risk or gender trolling, being regarded as under-researched anomalies rather than critical parts of the theme.

Source: Authors' Analysis through Python.

5.4. Composite Sentiment Score Distribution

An overview analysis of the 116 research papers provides a collective impression of a very positive attitude toward IM in India. Figure 5, Distribution of Compound Sentiment Scores, shows a right-skewed distribution, with the greatest frequency in the range of 0.75 to 1.0, indicating the presence of highly optimistic and constructive language in the academic corpus. The trend is quantitatively supported by the Frequency of Sentiment Types, which found 107 positive papers and 7 negative ones.

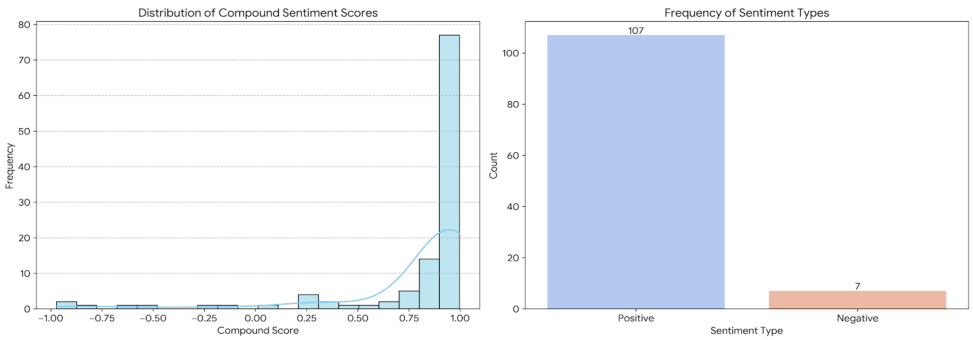


Figure 5. Distribution of Compound Sentiments and Frequency of Sentiment Types. Source: Author's Creation using Python.

In the context of the SOR framework, the dominant positive sentiment in Figure 5 suggests that the existing literature primarily views influencer-led stimuli (S) as effective triggers for favorable organismic states (O) and beneficial behavioral responses (R), such as trust and purchase intention. Nevertheless, a stark lack of negative sentiment scores confirms an earlier-established research gap, i.e., the need to conduct more critical research on the dark side of influence, such as consumer skepticism and influencer fatigue [35,36].

Such a high positivity bias is probably due to a more general publication bias, in which empirical evidence with significant positive results is more likely to be selected and published in academic databases. Publication bias is a systematic tendency for research studies to be published based on the nature, direction, or significance of their findings, rather than on how well they are carried out methodologically and scientifically. This bias can lead to overrepresenting statistically significant or otherwise interesting results in the published literature and underrepresenting null, negative, or less interesting results [82]. Moreover, the field's industry orientation is evident in the popularity of topics

such as "Social Media Marketing Strategy" (Topic 1), which features high thematic content and a focus on maximizing the usefulness of digital stimuli to increase brand sales and market share.

Therefore, there is a need for deeper insights that go beyond just functional success and explore the disruptive aspects of influence. The constructs that are important to analyze, including perceived risk, skepticism toward claims, and excessive commercialization, are essential to a comprehensive application of the SOR framework [83]. These variables are necessary to ensure that the framework considers the full range of consumer psychological states and the severe societal effects, including gender trolling, invasion of privacy, and exploitation of goodwill, which are underrepresented in the existing academic literature [84].

6. Framework Building Using SOR Theory

The authors propose an IM Framework Development (IMFD) embedded with SOR. The framework, shown in Table 5 below, explains how SOR themes and subthemes arise from representative keywords. In the context of IM, this framework outlines a sequential flow from digital triggers to consumer response behavior.

Table 5. Framework Development from the SOR Theory Perspective.

Themes	Subthemes	Items (Representative Keywords)
Stimulus: Influencer and Communication Factors	Influencer attributes	credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, authenticity
	Influencer type	social media influencer, digital influencer, micro-influencers, Instagram influencers, YouTube influencers
	Celebrity endorsement	celebrity endorsement, celebrity credibility, celebrity endorser credibility, celebrity associations
	Social media communication environment	IM, social media, social media marketing, digital marketing, Instagram
	Marketing communication strategies	advertising, brand communication, integrated communication strategy, storytelling
Organism: Consumer Psychological and Brand Evaluation Processes	Consumer trust and credibility perception	trust, source credibility, source credibility model, content credibility
	Parasocial interaction and relationships	parasocial interaction theory, parasocial relationship, influencer–follower relationships
	Consumer attitudes	consumer attitude, customer attitude, attitude toward the influencer, attitude towards brand
	Brand perception and evaluation	brand perception, brand image, brand credibility, brand association, brand awareness
	Consumer value and perceived benefits	perceived value, perceived quality, hedonic benefits, utilitarian benefits

Table 5. *Cont.*

Themes	Subthemes	Items (Representative Keywords)
Response: Consumer Behavioral Outcomes	Purchase behavior intentions	purchase intention, consumer purchase intention, online purchase intention, buying intention
	Engagement and interaction	consumer engagement, intention to follow, intention to recommend
	Word-of-mouth behaviour	word of mouth, electronic word-of-mouth, e-WoM
	Brand relationship outcomes	brand loyalty, brand preference

Source: Authors' Own Ideation.

The Organism component of the proposed framework warrants further explanation, since it is here that external stimuli are converted into internal states before manifesting as behavioral responses. Four interlinked psychological and emotional processes underpin this conversion. First, trust and source credibility develop as consumers evaluate an influencer's perceived expertise, honesty, and reliability, forming the cognitive basis on which subsequent judgments rest. Second, perceived authenticity, the sense that an influencer's endorsement reflects genuine belief rather than paid promotion, shapes how favorably these cognitive evaluations are interpreted, and is a key reason micro-influencers can outperform celebrities in relatability despite lower reach. Third, parasocial interaction, the one-sided sense of intimacy and familiarity that followers develop with an influencer over repeated exposure, generates an emotional and relational bond that goes beyond simple credibility judgments and fosters attachment to the influencer as a quasi-social contact. Fourth, this trust, authenticity, and parasocial bonding combine to produce affective engagement and emotional attachment to the influencer and, by extension, the endorsed brand, which in turn shapes attitude formation, the consumer's evaluative stance toward the influencer and brand, that ultimately determines whether the Organism state translates into a favorable behavioral Response. These four processes are not sequential in a strict sense but operate iteratively, with trust and authenticity reinforcing parasocial interaction, and parasocial interaction deepening engagement and attitude formation over the course of the relationship between influencer and follower.

Schematic Presentation of Proposed SOR Model for Influential Marketing

Using IMFD from Table 5 above, the proposed SOR model for IM has been created as a simple sequential model with action points that lead to stimulus (S) cues, mediated by the organism (O), which influence the consumer's psychological state to elicit an appropriate response (R), shown in Figure 6 below. It also has three potential moderators, namely platform type, influencer category, and region.

Platform type moderates the (S) and (O) relationship in the model by influencing how social media communication environments are perceived and processed, with visually driven platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, facilitating parasocial interactions. The influencer category also mediates this relationship by shaping how influencer characteristics and recommendations are perceived. Micro-influencers are more likely to enhance trust and credibility, but celebrities have a more pronounced impact on brand perception. The (O) and (R) relationship is moderated by region because socio-cultural contexts moderate the extent to which the internal states, attitude, are converted to behavioral consequences, purchase intentions, and word-of-mouth, in particular market settings.

The combination of these moderators addresses the issue of contextual fragmentation, shifting the model from a less linear process to a more detailed, more realistic portrayal of the contemporary Indian digital market.

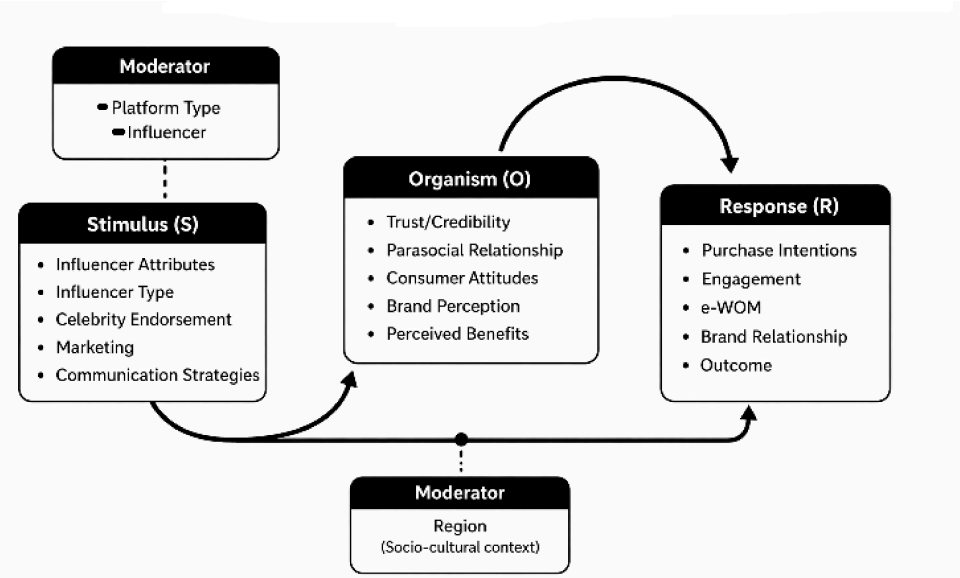


Figure 6. Proposed SOR Model for IM. Source: Author's Ideation.

7. Discussions and Scope for Future Research

Read together, the findings below illustrate the study's central theoretical contribution: whereas prior reviews of IM have typically relied on a single method, such as a purely bibliometric mapping or a purely qualitative thematic synthesis, or a single theoretical lens, the integration of bibliometric, thematic, LDA, and SOR-based analysis pursued here allows the four analyses to corroborate and refine one another, producing a more complete and theoretically grounded account of the field than any one method could offer alone. The combined results of bibliometric, thematic, and LDA analyses indicate that IM studies in India have grown fast in the last ten years and still rely heavily on conventional endorsement theory. The bibliometric findings indicate a significant increase in publications since 2020, corresponding to broader changes in digital marketing systems in which influencer-led communication is a key element of brand strategy. The emergence of social media has empowered people to act as powerful agents between brands and consumers, thereby transforming conventional promotional frameworks and marketing communication flows [41,71]. As companies increasingly turn to influencers as an integral part of marketing campaigns, academic interest in this domain has risen in parallel, especially in emerging markets where the adoption of digital and social media is still gaining momentum. The studies indicate that influencer-driven communication significantly impacts consumer awareness, brand perception, and purchase behavior, underscoring the growing economic and cultural importance of influencer ecosystems in modern marketing settings [74,75]. Simultaneously, the spread of publications to various journals and the concentration of studies in the hands of a comparatively limited number of researchers leads to the assumption that the field is passing through a phase of theoretical consolidation, where conceptual experimentation and interdisciplinary thinking continue to occupy the research space [61,72,85].

The conceptual framework of this growing literature is better understood in both the thematic and LDA analyses of this research. The prevalence of celebrity endorsement, social media, IM, and purchase intention as keywords suggests that IM studies are firmly rooted in the endorsement-based persuasion framework. IM does not seem to be a radical break in theory, but rather a digitalization of old celebrity-endorsing frameworks. Influencers have been conceptualized as micro-celebrities with persuasive power that relies on qualities such as credibility, authenticity, and attractiveness, which are traditionally linked to the

effectiveness of celebrity endorsement [74,75]. These theoretical patterns are similar to the design of the SOR model. Attributes, platform environments, and marketing communication strategies are external stimuli that trigger consumer cognitive and emotional processing. Mediation of psychological states, like trust, parasocial interaction, perceived value, and brand association, which in turn lead to subsequent behavioral reactions such as purchase intention, electronic word-of-mouth, and brand loyalty, reflects the organism stage. The research also supports the view that the development of trust and relational intimacy between influencers and followers is a key factor mediating the effectiveness of influencer messages [39,76]. The analysis of the timeline indicates a conceptual shift in the literature: earlier authors paid much attention to the subject of celebrity endorsement and advertising, but more recent researchers show an increasing number of platform-based forms of digital influence (micro-influencers, Instagram-based engagement, and storytelling-oriented marketing approaches) [77,78]. This change is indicative of the overall trend of digital marketing as it moves to more personalized and community-based types of brand communication.

Nevertheless, the composite sentiment score analysis reveals a critical imbalance in the current research conversation. The literature is overwhelmingly positive and indicates that it widely views influencer-driven stimuli as effective at producing positive psychological and behavioral effects. Although this optimism can support the growing strategic relevance of IM, it also suggests a possible publication bias in the discipline, whereby research with positive or statistically significant results has a higher probability of publication than research with negative or inconclusive results [82]. Consequently, potentially significant areas of digital impact, such as influencer fatigue, consumer skepticism, over-commercialization, and reputational risks, are relatively under-researched. Emerging research has begun to highlight the importance of examining these darker dimensions of IM, particularly as audiences become increasingly aware of commercial partnerships and sponsored content [36,83]. Such perspectives would enhance the explanatory power of the SOR framework since organismic states can involve more than trust and admiration, potentially skepticism, perceived risk, or resistance. Typically, these neglected dimensions are thus critical in creating a more balanced and context-driven interpretation of IM within the changing Indian digital ecosystem. The present review further strengthens the understanding of influencer marketing in India by proving that the consumer's response is a phenomenon that is more complex due to the interaction between all the marketing stimuli, psychological activities of the individual, and socio-cultural contexts [86]. The traditional Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model has proven useful in understanding the effects of the characteristics of influencers on the cognitive and affective response of consumers; however, the evidence reviewed in this study indicates that its explanatory power can be significantly increased by adding contextual moderators that are especially relevant to the emerging market of India. An important discovery is the impact of cultural orientations on the effectiveness of influencers. India remains very collectivist in nature, and family members, peers and reference groups still have significant influence on consumption decisions, rather than just individual preferences [87]. As a result, the influencers serve not only as information providers, but as digital opinion leaders whose recommendations are given credence when they coincide with social norms and group expectations. Trust in India is not only perceived as expertise of influencers but also as social validation and acceptance [88]. This observation extends the SOR framework by implying that internal evaluations (organism) are social constructs and not just individual psychological responses. The finding implies that not only do consumers' psychological evaluations affect the behavioural response in the SOR framework, but also interpersonal validation in households. Reliability, transparency, social responsibility, and long-term value are likely to be more effective at driving behavioral

reactions than relying solely on entertainment, aspirational imagery, and celebrity appeal in campaigns. The proposed framework also highlights the moderating role of platform characteristics, a topic which has not been discussed in much depth in previous marketing literature on influencers. Social media platforms can help create various types of content consumption, interaction, and relationship-building patterns. Platform algorithms also shape how visibility of content, interaction rates and parasocial relationships are formed, impacting consumers' reception of marketing stimuli. As a result, the same characteristics of an influencer can evoke very different psychological reactions based on the platform that consumers are on to access the content. The addition of platform type as a moderator, therefore, further expands the SOR framework by recognizing the technological context in which the cognition of the consumer happens. In a similar way, the review points to the fact that the type of influencers is an essential moderator between the marketing stimuli and consumers' internal evaluations. The current evidence shows that there is a significant difference between the ability of celebrity influencers, macro, micro, nano, and domain experts to build credibility, authenticity, expertise, and relational closeness with followers. This result supports the reporting of inconsistencies across previous empirical studies and indicates the need to explicitly represent the type of influencer as a contextual moderator when applying SOR in future studies. The study also highlights that there is a significant impact of linguistic and regional diversity on consumer response to influencer marketing in India. However, the consumer responses to these cultural and economic differences vary across the region, resulting in the need to consider more diverse responses that cannot be included in the models that are aggregated at the national level. The proposed framework thus sees the role of the region and socio-cultural context as a moderator determining the relationship between the consumers' internal evaluation and the behavioural outcomes. Finally, the review indicates that influencer marketing in India is not merely a stimulus–response mechanism, as consumer behaviour is influenced by a combination of psychological mechanisms, socio-cultural factors, platform features, types of influencers, and regional variations across India. The incorporation of these contextual moderators in the SOR model makes the proposed model more complete and context specific with regard to the Indian consumers' responses and thus provides a better theoretical groundwork for further research and practices in influencer marketing in the emerging Indian market. Future studies could build upon the existing body of knowledge on IM by addressing some of the conceptual and methodological gaps identified during this review. To begin with, the tendency toward a high concentration of studies on endorsement-based constructs implies that theory should be diversified beyond traditional perspectives on persuasion. Additional insights into how influencers shape consumer meaning-making in platform ecosystems could be gained by incorporating perspectives from consumer culture theory or digital sociology. Second, future research can examine unexplored factors, including influencer fatigue, consumer skepticism, and the risk of credibility being over-commercialized in social media content [36,83]. Comparative empirical research across various categories of influencers, especially micro- and nano-influencers, might also help elucidate differences in trust-building and audience responses [41]. Lastly, cross-cultural and longitudinal research would help explain how relationships between influencers and consumers develop over time and change in fast-evolving digital contexts.

8. Implications and Conclusions

8.1. Theoretical Implications

The results of the present research have a number of theoretical and practical implications for the changing role of IM in the Indian consumer ecosystem. Theoretically, the review shows that support for endorsement-based models of influencer-mediated per-

suasion remains. Although these views remain useful, the combination proposed in this paper recommends expanding current theories to explain the relational and platform-based dynamics that define contemporary digital influence. Using the results of bibliometric mapping, thematic clustering, and topic modeling as components of the SOR lens, the study illustrates how the attributes of influencers, communication tactics, and platform contexts combine to produce consumer perceptions and behavioral responses. This integrative viewpoint contributes to the body of knowledge by providing a systematic conceptual framework that future empirical research can use to examine the mechanisms linking influencer stimuli to consumer cognition and behavioral reactions. In sum, the study's theoretical contribution is not any single method but the integration of bibliometric, thematic, LDA, and SOR-based analysis into one unified review, a combination that positions this work as more comprehensive than prior single-method or single-theme reviews of IM.

8.2. Practical and Managerial Implications

The results indicate the managerial implications of credibility, authenticity, and relational engagement in marketing media that employ influencers. Influencers are becoming increasingly significant brands in digital spaces, not only as promotional tools but also as communicative brokers who can build trust and shape brand stories in online communities. The prominence of the constructs of trust, parasocial interaction, and perceived value in the literature indicates that success in IM lies not merely in visibility and reach but in meaningful relationships formed between influencers and their audience. This implies that influencer partnerships can be leveraged by marketers seeking authenticity, transparency, and long-term audience engagement rather than short-term promotional exposure. The popularity of micro-influencers in the literature also suggests that niche audiences and community-based methods of interaction may be more sustainable options for brand communication in online markets. At a greater level, the study raises the importance of studying IM within its socio-digital context. The rapid development of influencer ecosystems in India can be viewed as a manifestation of deeper shifts in media consumption, consumer culture, and platform-mediated communications. As social media platforms are expected to continue affecting consumer discovery, evaluation, and interaction with brands, IM will remain a significant part of contemporary marketing practice. However, the ability to maintain credibility and transparency in the relationships between influencers and the brand will determine the long-term sustainability of this ecosystem. Lastly, the study's findings point to a rapidly expanding yet conceptually emergent area of research that continues to contribute to conventional endorsement models while gradually introducing platform-based perspectives on digital power. By organizing these insights using the SOR framework, the research offers a coherent conceptual framework that can guide future research on the complex relationships among influencers, online platforms, and consumer behavior.

8.3. Future Research Directions

Building on the theoretical and managerial implications above, future research should, as outlined in Section 7, diversify beyond endorsement-based persuasion theory, examine under-researched Organism states such as skepticism and resistance, and pursue comparative and longitudinal designs across influencer categories and cultural contexts, so that the integrative SOR-based framework proposed here can be empirically tested and refined over time.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

IM	Influencer Marketing
LDA	Latent Dirichlet Allocation
SOR	Stimulus–Organism–Response
SCT	Source Credibility Theory
TPB	Theory of Planned Behavior

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