

A cross-cultural critical review of social media user engagement and influencer marketing in Western and Chinese literature

Shuyun Chen^{1*} and Jicheng Bo²

^{1,2} School of Communication, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

**Corresponding author: Shuyun Chen, email johnnychen1623@hotmail.com*

Abstract

The prominent rise of social media platforms and its important role in modern marketing has seen the emergence of influencer marketing, revolutionising traditional offline-oriented marketing knowledge as the generation of content from influencers and stimulation of social media user/follower engagement are found to drastically influence the purchasing decision of online/ social media users. This study performs a critical literature review in a cross-cultural analysis on Chinese and Western literature conducted towards influencer marketing and social media user/ follower engagement. A preliminary literature review is firstly conducted to identify major research themes amongst empirical studies conducted in the field of influencer marketing, emphasising on the relationship between influencer marketing the social media follower engagement. The findings of the preliminary literature review were incorporated into the design of a two dimension thematic content-criterion method for the critical literature review, identifying the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western literature under 1) the levels of relationship between different types of influencer-type relationships and subsequent social media follower engagement, 2) the level of impacts caused from the context, content and creation of influencer generated content and its influence on the perception of followers.

Keywords: social media; influencer marketing; follower engagement; purchasing decisions; cross-cultural analysis; Chinese literature; Western literature;

1. Introduction

The prominent rise of social media platforms in the 21st century has revolutionised traditional branding and marketing activities, as modern consumer behaviours have shifted from the offline environment to a highly dynamic digital environment (Bognar et al, 2019). The unique features of the digital environment facilities by the internet platform enables a global reach to online consumer worldwide, reducing traditional physical and temporal barriers of communication between brands and their targeted consumers beyond geographical boundaries (Briffa, 2020). Therefore, the importance to engage in digital/ social media marketing has become widely recognised amongst both the academic and practitioner fields, as both small and large brands are actively developing their digital brand presence, collaborating with influencers with the goal to increase brand recognition, foster positive social media user engagement and ultimate increase conversion rates

Received: June 23, 2025. **Revised:** August 26, 2025. **Editorial decision:** September 3, 2025. **Accepted:** September 9, 2025

© The Author(s) 2025. Published by IA Global Publications Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

through adopting influencer marketing (Bakker, 2018; Jin et al, 2019). According to Statista (2021), influencer marketing has become one of the most cost-effective forms of online marketing in the modern digital landscape, harnessing the large social media user network for promoting brand related content, utilising the social network of peers to achieve viral marketing gains as it has become a necessity for all brands in the modern age.

Furthermore, industry report conducted by Statista (2021) claims that the global influencer marketing market value has more than doubled between 2019 and 2021, totalling at a value of \$23.8 billion USD that reflects its increasing importance for marketers. According to Oberlo (2022), approximately 93% of worldwide marketers have used or is currently using influencer marketing in 2022, as 90% of marketers believe that influencer marketing has achieved positive results for their brand and 62% plan to increasing future influencer marketing expenditures. Furthermore, Oberlo (2020) also found that for every \$1 spend on influencer marketing, an average of \$18 in publicity value return can be achieved through influencer influenced sales, representing the highest return on investment achieved in comparison to conventional marketing strategies. Throughout the booming global influencer marketing market, the influencer marketing market in China represents the largest and the fastest growing market as the market size has more than quadrupled between 2018 to 2021 from \$4.7 billion USD to \$14.47 billion USD in 2021 according to Statista (2022) reports. Therefore, it is of substantial research importance to explore the application of influencer marketing especially with focus on the Chinese market, offering greater insights to contribute to an emerging field that is forecasted to continue its rapid growth at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of more than 20% between 2022 and 2031 (Fact.Mr Industry Report, 2022).

1.1 Research rationale

The relatively nascent phenomenon of influencer marketing was emerged during the rise of social media platforms in the 21st centuries, receiving increasing research attention in recent years as multiple studies have attempted conceptualise the characteristics of influencer marketing (Mallipeddi et al, 2022), the types of influencers (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018; Rocamora, 2022), the difference between influencers and celebrities (Sudha & Sheena, 2017), exploring its influence towards followers via the generation of influencer-produced content (Chen & Chua, 2020) and stimulated social media follower engagements (Vrontis et al, 2021). However, the majority of empirical studies have been conducted in a generic approach that conceptualises influential marketing as a unified process that exists across all social media platforms (Padmanabhan, 2019). Furthermore, despite the unique differences of social media platform features and functions across different countries, Padmanabhan (2019) argues that minimal empirical studies have attempted to address the country specific differences in influencer marketing motives and the nature of facilitated social media follower engagements, representing a research gap for this study to address.

Furthermore, there is an apparent influencer marketing knowledge gap where empirical studies that adopts a generic approach to conceptualise influencer marketing fails to take into consideration of the rapid advancements of social media platform functions, representing a clear gap between literature knowledge and real-world applications (Srivastava, 2021; Chen & Chua, 2020). Additionally, increasing numbers of brands are engaging influencer marketing to follow suit as a mainstream marketing trend, despite possessing adequate knowledge to effectively identify suitable influencers or understand the needs of social media users (Oberlo, 2021). In consideration of the drastic growth of the Chinese influencer marketing market, this research study attempts to address the aforementioned gaps as there is a lack of empirical studies conducted to consider and compare the differences on how influencer marketing is used in social media user

engagement between different country contexts, particularly between Western cultures where substantial levels of empirical literature are focused on and the Chinese culture where apparent differences in influencer marketing is anticipated. This study attempts to critically review existing literature knowledge in the field of influencer marketing and social media engagement, performing a cross-cultural analysis between Western and Chinese literature, addressing the current research problem where the majority of studies are conducted toward case studies from one specific country or in a generic manner (globally).

1.2 Research aims & objectives

This research aims to conduct a critical review of empirical studies conducted towards influencer marketing, influencer-generated content and the stimulating social media follower engagement, addressing the apparent influencer marketing knowledge gap where empirical approaches to conceptualise influencer marketing and related social influences have been conducted in a generic manner, failing to consider country specific influences and the distinctive nature of influencer marketing practices between different countries. In order to achieve the research aim, the following research objectives will be fulfilled:

1. To critically review empirical academic studies published in reliable and credible academic journals, accessing through academically recognised databases including university online library, Google scholar, Scopus, Science Direct and SAGE.
2. To critically review the current themes in Western and Chinese literature that explores the relationship between influencer marketing and social media follower engagement.
3. To identify major themes established in Western and Chinese literature that explores the impact of influencer marketing on the context, content and creation of user engagement in social media.
4. To perform a cross-cultural analysis between Western and Chinese literature on the use of influencer marketing in social media user engagement, identifying similarities and differences.

1.3 Research questions

The following research questions will be answered to fulfil the aforementioned research objectives, the first research objective is achieved through the methodological design and data collection methods of the study, the remaining research objectives will be addressed via the following research questions:

1. What the major themes in Western and Chinese literature that explains the relationship between influencer marketing and social media follower engagement?
2. What the major themes in Western and Chinese literature that explains the impact of influencer marketing on the context, content and creation of user engagement in social media?
3. What are the key similarities and differences between Western and Chinese literature on the use of influencer marketing in social media user engagement?

2. Literature review

This chapter critically reviews empirical literature conducted in the field of influencer marketing, identifying key academic knowledge established in empirical studies with the aim to examine the current literature landscape with potential research gaps to contribute to. This chapter aims to identify key research patterns, themes and gaps in literature to aid the design of this research study to offer practical values to the academic field. The first section of this chapter critically reviews the current influencer marketing literature landscape, discussion attempts made to define influencer marketing and to distinguish different types of influencer marketing with traditional celebrity endorsement. The second section critically reviews the influence process of influencer marketing in the influencer-follower relationship, drawing upon key social network and influence marketing theories applied in empirical studies. Additionally, this section emphasises on current bodies of literature conducted on influencer generated content and social media user engagement, discussing the common theoretical foundations used when exploring the motives behind influencer content generation and how it affects social media engagement. The third section summarises major research trends in empirical literature, identifying a research gap for this study to contribute to.

2.1 The influencer marketing literature landscape

The increasing digitalisation needs of the modern society and the popular role of digital platforms have drastically impacted consumer behaviours in the 21st century, receiving substantial research attention from scholars to explore the how companies can effectively appeal to the dynamics needs of modern digital consumer behaviours (Vrontis et al, 2021; Farivat & Wang, 2021). As a result of the immense proliferation of social media platforms, the concept of influencer marketing has emerged as a new, dynamic process to endorse brand offerings and to directly interact with online consumers through social media activities (Padmanabhan (2019). However, there remains a lack of unified paradigms in literature when attempting to define its terminology and applications, resulting in a multidimensional approach in conceptualising its application in the digital landscape, including its use as a branding and marketing strategy (Ponirah, 2020), development of digital brand equity (Jun & Yi, 2020), improvement of brand awareness and sales (Ferina et al, 2021), brand-customer relationship management (Greeve & Schluuschen, 2018), creation of influencer generated content to foster positive social media user engagement.(Argyris et al, 2020) and the building of loyal online brand communities (Yesiloglu & Costello, 2020).

Additionally, the definition of influencer marketing has also received multiple attempts to conceptualise its characteristics and functions, as many scholars have defined influencer marketing with a marketing focus, recognised as the digital equivalent of word of mouth (WOM) marketing (Mohcine et al, 2022) or through using key opinion leaders (KOLs) to drive branding messages to the online community (Byrne et al, 2017). A summary of academic definitions on influencer marketing is shown in table 1 below, as many scholars have identified influencers as a “new type of 3rd party endorser” that influences the perception of other social media users/ online consumers across social media activities (Freberg et al, 2011; Ha et al, 2019; Enke & Borchers, 2019). However, there exists two school of thoughts in the motives for influencers to engage in brand related endorsement activities, as scholars such as Freberg et al (2011), Khamis et al (2017) and Mohama (2021) argues that influencers engage in self-driven/ self-branded activities toward their followers to provide honest reviews of brand offerings, differentiating from traditional celebrity endorsement where only positive reviews and brand associations are constructed and communication. This highlights the motives for influencers to achieve obtain social capital from their followers in forms of trust and respect, establishing credibility and authenticity in influencer

generated content that can help to influence the perception of brand offerings on other social media users (Ki et al, 2020).

Table 1: A sample of definitions of influencer marketing (Adopted from Mohcine et al, 2022)

Authors	Definition
Freberg et al (2011)	The emerge of a new type of 3 rd party endorser who can influence consumer perceptions through generated content across social media activities in order to stimulate social capital in return.
Booth & Matic (2011)	Key opinion leaders who employ an innovative approach to access a wide range of social media users and followers they have established with close contact.
Khamis et al (2017)	A previously ordinary Individual who performs self-branded practices across digital platforms, gathering fame and reaching the status of micro-celebrities on the online sphere.
Berryman & Kavka (2018)	Individuals who offer highly entertaining and charismatic approaches to endorse brand offerings, motivating the desire of their followers to pay attention and engage with the promoted brands.
Mohamad (2021)	Online social media users who have achieved a micro-celebrity status amongst the online community, actively sharing their opinions and experiences through content generation on social media platforms, differing from traditional celebrity endorsement as honest reviews are given and hence trust is established with their followers.
De Veirman et al (2017)	An online user who has successfully attracted a large follower base on social media platforms.
Ha et al (2019)	A new type of modern digital micro-celebrities who frequently exhibit their personal lives and engages with their followers through practice of self-presentation.
Raun & Christensen-Styno (2021)	The state of becoming a well-known and trusted individual with recognised expertise in a particular niche, influencing other consumers interested in the niche segment.
Ki et al (2020)	Independent 3 rd party endorsers who actively shares their opinion to the online public, demonstrating strong knowledge and credibility in a particular segment that other followers aspire to.
Vrontis et al (2021)	Key opinion leaders with multiple roles that serves self and brand related interests through influencing the purchase intentions of their large follower base.
Enke & Borchers (2019)	A new type of endorsers who is highly influential in the shaping of consumer attitude through generated social media content across multiple social media channels
Campbell & Farrell (2020)	A well established and recognised individual who often produces self-generated content on social media platforms in exchange for economic rewards from collaborated brands.

Alternatively, another school of thought points to the motives of economic incentives offered by brands to encourage influencers to produce positive brand related content, delivering opinions and reviews that positively stimulates the purchase intention of their followers (Vrontis et al, 2021; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). The two schools of thoughts established in literature highlight apparent differences in the motives for influencer marketing toward social media followers, despite both school of thoughts to recognise the importance of influencer generated content beyond traditional

brand advertisement efforts when appealing to social media users (Mohamad, 2021), leveraging the established follower base due to the influencer's reputation and credibility on a particular niche segment (Raun & Christensen-Styno, 2021) or through adopting innovative (Booth & Matic, 2011) and highly entertaining/ charismatic approaches to review brand offerings (Berryman & Kavka, 2018). Influencer marketing is also commonly defined under the status of a "micro-celebrity", drawing associations to the marketing effects of celebrities but differentiates in the manner of which their fame and notability is achieved (Khamis et al, 2017; Mohamad, 2021; Ha et al, 2019). According to Khams et al (2017), influencers differ to conventional celebrities as their fame is generated through the internet platform, benefiting from the rise of social media platforms that has facilitated their reach toward a global audience, obtaining famous statuses within a niche group of followers across social media platforms.

2.1.1 Difference between influencers/ celebrities and types of influencers

A large body of empirical literature has attempted to differentiate the role of influencers and conventional celebrities in marketing and branding practices, highlighting the differences in the nature of participating in marketing activities (Schouten et al, 2020), the generation of marketing/endorsement content (Grave, 2017) and the context of interactions facilitated with followers (Nouri, 2018). According to Schouten et al (2020), influencers are perceived to have a higher product-endorser fit in comparison to celebrities, finding an apparent relationship between influencer marketing and higher levels of identification (perceived similarity and wishful identification) and credibility (trustworthiness and expertise) toward followers. Sudha & Sheena's (2017) study also reinforced this argument as modern social media users are found to identify more with influencers in contrast to celebrities, as they can draw associations to influencers due to their "ordinary consumer" nature and establish higher levels of trust in comparison to celebrities that are known for endorsing products for financial rewards. Grave's (2017) study further illustrated the differences between influencers and celebrities in the perspective of marketing/ endorsement content generated, arguing that the self-generated content of influencers would increase perceived trustworthiness and similarity to oneself amongst followers, as opposed to brand-generated content that are used for celebrity endorsement.

Agnihotri & Bhattacharya's (2021) study also founded similar results in the endorsement effectiveness of influencer against celebrities in the highly materialistic cultural environment of India, arguing that the traditional materialistic and social acceptance motives for followers to purchase products endorsed by brands are no longer as prevalent for modern social media users, as influencers can offer higher economic values whilst enabling the materialistic and social acceptance needs of the younger online consumer demographic. Additionally, Nouri (2018) argues that influencers and celebrities differ in their power of influence to followers, contributing to the academic debate where influencers can exert high levels of influence when stimulating positive branding effects and attitudes toward their followers in comparison to traditional celebrities, especially in the context of the beauty and fashion markets where influencers are found to offering far more influence to the purchase decisions of online consumers. In order to understand why influencers are highly effective in influencing the attitudes and consumption behaviours of followers beyond traditional celebrities, it is of research importance to understand the types of influencers that currently dominate the digital environment as illustrated by Gross & Wangenheim's (2018) big four typologies of influencers as shown in table 2 below.

Table 2: Big four typologies of influencers (Adopted from Gross & Wangenheim, 2018)

Influencer type	Influencer motivation	Characteristics of generated content	Nature of follower interactions
Snoopers	Passion to create and share content, self-fulfilment	Offer personal and practical insights	Follower specific and regular
Informers	Knowledge and expertise sharing	Inform and educate followers	Follower specific and regular
Entertainers	Offer high levels of entertainment	Provide entertainment and offer personal/practical insights	Mass communication and semi-regular
Infotainers	Knowledge and expertise sharing, offer high levels of entertainment	Inform and educate followers, provide entertainment and offer personal/practical insights	Mass communication and semi-regular

According to Gross & Wangenheim (2018), four types of influencers include snoopers, informers, entertainers and infotainers, differing due to the motivation to engage influencer marketing, their levels of interaction with social media followers and the nature of generated content. The snooper influencer is referred to as new discoverers of social media platforms who have a passion to create and share content regardless of available financial rewards or the size of the follower base (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018). Snoopers are driven by the motivation to connect with like-minded peers on social media platforms, achieving self-fulfilment desires with the creation of content that offers personal and practical insights on a field of interest, closely managing follower relationships with individual follower-specific and frequent interactions (Djurica & Mendling, 2020). The informer influencer refers to individuals who have substantial levels of knowledge and expertise in a particular field of interest, actively sharing their knowledge toward followers through the provision of informational, educational and insider insights (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018). It is argued that informers are characterised by high levels of industry expertise and domain knowledge on their interested field, being perceived as highly credible and reliable experts by followers, often engaging in individual follower-specific interactions to ensure that all individual queries are met and fulfilled according to Farivar et al (2019).

An entertainer type of influencer is defined by Gross & Wangenheim (2018) as influencers who are passionate to share amusement and enjoyment through the creation of entertaining content. Entertainers tend to incorporate higher levels of creativity in storytelling narratives to fulfil the increasingly demanding gratification needs of modern social media users, including escapism, diversion and entertainment values on top of educational/ information needs particular for the younger millennial demographic (Martin & Bush, 2000). However, given the need for high levels of creativity in the delivery of entertainment values in generated content, a mass communication approach is adopted by entertainers with lower rates of interaction frequencies with followers unlike snoopers and infotainers (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018). The infotainer type of influencer was recently emerged in the growing popularity of interactive social media platforms like Tiktok and Instagram, as this type of influencer combines the roles of informers and entertainers to deliver informative yet entertaining content in their respected domains, offering a mass communication approach with lower rates of interaction frequencies with followers similar to entertainers (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018).

Another common categorisation of influencer types is determined by quantitative measures in relation to the size of follower fan base according to Rocamora’s (2022) quantification of influencers types framework in the fashion industry as shown in table 3 below. Influencer can be categorised under nano, micro, midi, macro and mega types in an ascending nature determined by the volume of follower based, reflecting their level of influence for brands and marketing purposes (Rocamora, 2022). However, this approach has been criticised by Brewster & Lyu (2020) as the social media user population differs across social media platforms, particularly for specific domains where fashion influencers will have substantially higher follower base than niche topics like blockchain de-fi which would influence the number of followers despite representing similar or even higher levels of influence due to recognised influencer expertise and credibility. Nonetheless, the current literature shares a mainstream consensus over the unique characteristics and types of influencers across social media platforms, recognising their differences to traditional celebrities in relation to the nature of generated content shared amongst followers and the types of interactions/ engagement they engage with followers (Grace, 2017; Thornton, 2018).

Table 3: *Quantification of influencer types framework (Adopted from Rocamora, 2022)*

Influencer type	Size of follower base
Nano	>10,000
Micro	10,000 – 50,000
Midi	50,001 – 500,000
Macro	500,001 – 1,000,000
Mega	1,000,001+

2.2 The influence process of influencer marketing

A core focus of empirical literature on influencer marketing is conducted on exploring its impacts and relationships with social media followers (Mallipeddi et al, 2022; Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Srivastava, 2021). According to Mallipeddi et al (2022), the process of influencer marketing can be modelled in relation to the network size and the strength of influence achieved by the influencer, determined by the number of followers and the subsequent strength of length exercisable through social media engagements. Furthermore, the influence of influencers toward level 1 followers can be transmitted to connected peers of level 1 followers, resulting in a multiple exposure effect where the generated content of the influencer is circulated to a wider reach of followers via the networks of existing followers across social media platform as shown in the social network framework of influencer and followers in figure 1 below (Mallipeddi et al, 2022, p5). Srivastava’s (2021) study performed a systematic bibliometric analysis on the influence of influencer marketing toward its followers, further conforming to the social network influence of followers as persuasive cues of the influencer-follower relationship including the likeability of influencers, the authenticity of influencers and the capability to understand followers were highly influential to enhance the peer influence between level 1 and level 2 followers.

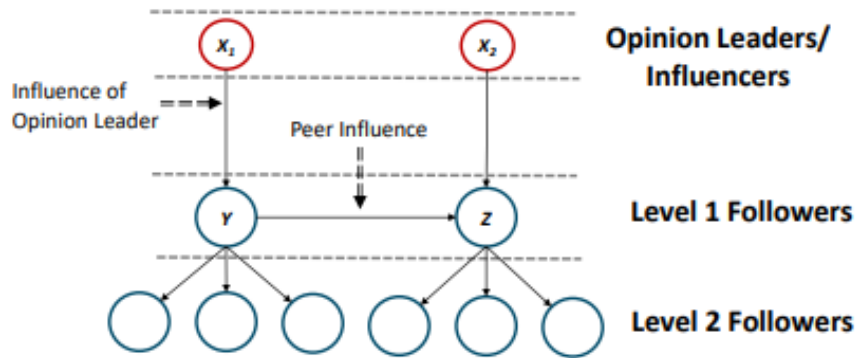


Figure 1: Social network framework of influencer and followers (Mallipeddi et al, 2022, p5)

The social network influence process of influencer marketing is also highlighted in Brown & Fiorella’s (2013) study, as the paradigm of influencer marketing positions the influencer in the centre of the digital marketing sphere under the application of Fisherman’s influence marketing model as shown in figure 2 below. Brown & Fiorella (2013) further expanded on the influencer-follower relationship and proposed a 4Ms model to measure the level of influence achieved by influencers through influence marketing, including the dimensions of make, manage, monitor and measure. According to Brown & Fiorella (2013), the influencer-follower process is initiated by the “making” of suitable content that matches to the interests of the targeted follower segment, requiring the influencer to identify and activate the interests of followers with compelling content that addresses their needs. The influencer-follower process is then shifted toward a “manage” phase as the established relationship, trust and mutual understanding between the follower and the influencer is maintained through frequent interactions and engagements (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). The influencer can then “monitor” and “measure” the results of the influencer-follower relationship through metrics including follower satisfaction, churn rates, frequencies of repeated engagement and referral rates toward level 2 followers as also reinforced in Ki et al’s (2020) study.

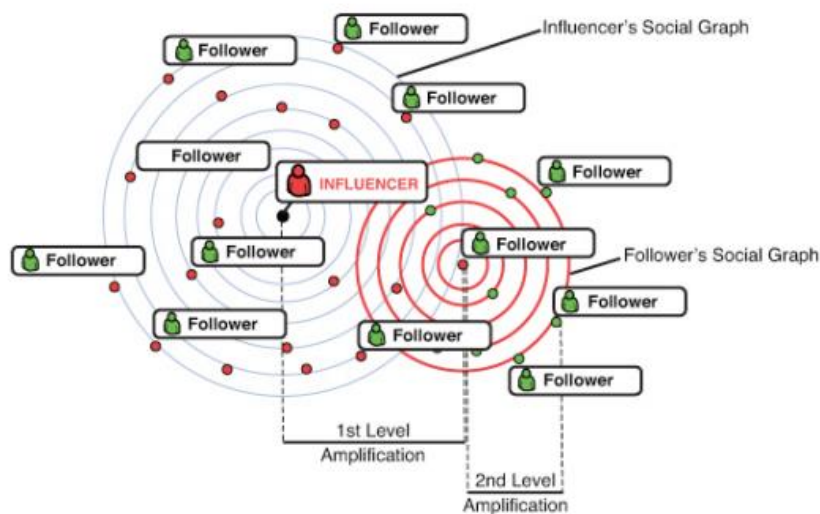


Figure 2: Fisherman’s influence marketing model applied to influencer marketing (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p77)

2.2.1 Bodies of literature on influencer generated content and social media user engagement

Numerous empirical studies have attempted to apply existing consumer behavioural and social science theories on the relationship between influencer marketing and social media engagement (Bentley et al, 2021; Delbaere et al, 2021; Chen & Chua, 2020). A major research theme is identified in the application of theoretical foundations when exploring the nature of generated content by the influencer and how it effects social media engagement (Bentley et al, 2021). In a systematic review conducted by Chen & Chua (2020) over 167 academic articles conducted on influencer marketing, five major theories are commonly applied as summerised in table 4 below. Scholars such as Trammell & Kesehlashvili (2005), Shao (2009) and Gao & Feng (2016) applied the self-presentation theory to explore the self-presentation intentions of influencers to establish a desirable and positive impression to their followers, as it is found to encourage the generation of accurate and honest content/ review of brand offerings, fostering positive engagements and interactions with followers due to the lack of perceived commercial intentions likewise to traditional branding efforts. The online information processing theory is also applied to explain the motivations of influencers to produce content and engage with followers to achieve their intrinsic and extrinsic desires (Audrezet et al, 2020), as their content is processed and circulated through word of mouth in accordance to the strength of the established influencer-follower relationship (Kay et al, 2020).

Table 4: Common theories applied on influencer marketing and social media engagement (adopted from Chen & Chua, 2020, p245)

Theoretical foundations	Authors	Key implications/ findings
Self-presentation theory (SPT)	Trammell & Keshelashvili (2005); Shao (2009), Gao & Feng (2016)	Influencers often engage in self-presentation practices to establish a desirable and positive impression to their followers, establishing trust and credibility in the generation of honest and accurate content in order to effectively simulate positive engagements/ interactions.
Online information-processing theory (OIPT)	Audrezet et al (2020), Ki & Kim (2019); Kay et al (2020)	Influencers generate content in relation to the fulfilment of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, processing content through word of mouth and strong influencer-follower relationship.
Knowledge persuasion theory (KPT)	Subramani & Rajagopalan (2003), Cheung et al (2008), Li & Du (2011)	Influencers actively employ marketing tactics in the generation of content to persuade followers to engage in certain behaviours like making purchases, repeated purchases and referral to friends in order achieve extrinsic rewards.
Signalling theory (ST)	Case & Given (2016); Kozinets et al (2010), De Veirman et al (2017)	Influencers often engage with followers through directly and indirectly sending signals over the provided values in content generated to achieve desired follower behaviours.

Warranting theory (WT)	Cheung et al (2014), Wang & Yu (2017), Chua & Banerjee (2016)	Influencers play upon the role of a gatekeeper to generate content that filters low quality products/ services, enabling followers to reduce opportunity costs with highly efficient recommendations given by influencers, enhancing their perceived levels of credibility and reliability amongst the follower base.
------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

The knowledge persuasion theory is applied in the study of Li & Du (2011) and Cheung et al (2008), as the content generated by the social media influencer is found to often integrate marketing tactics, persuading and shaping particular follower behaviours through their high levels of established credentials and expertise knowledge in the relevant domain. Furthermore, this is found to effectively persuade and influence follower behaviours including making purchases (repeated), referring to connected peers/ friends and circulating the generated content that enhances the achievable extrinsic rewards for the influencer (Li & Du, 2011). Similarly, the signalling theory is also adopted in empirical studies, as Case & Given (2016) argues that influencers would send out direct and indirect signals to their followers over the values offered in their generated content, stimulating desired follower behaviours as they fear of missing out (FOMO) and wants to contribute to the two-way influencer-follower relationship by supporting influencers through demonstrating positive and supportive social media interactions (De Veirman et al, 2017). The warranting theory is used to explain the gatekeeper role of influencers, generating content that filters low quality products/ services to reduce potential opportunity costs for followers (Cheung et al, 2014). The high levels of perceived credibility and reliability of influencers in their respected domains are found to be highly influential in the engagement of followers, as followers would engage in impulse purchase from recommendations made by highly reputable influencers (Chia & Banerjee, 2016).

2.3 Summary of empirical literature associated with influencer marketing and identification of research gap

As a recently developed phenomenon due to the rise of social media platforms in the 21st century, influencer marketing has received increasing research attention in the academic field due to its prominent rise in the modern digital landscape and its influential role toward online consumer behaviours (Vrontis et al, 2021; Farivat & Wang, 2021). However, the relatively nascent nature of influencer marketing has been explored with generic approaches to defining its characteristics and conceptualising the process of influencer marketing (Mallipeddi et al, 2022), particularly towards generation, sharing of content and stimulated social media follower engagements (Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Srivastava, 2021). Numerous studies have attempted to explore the types of influencers and their unique characteristics that differ from traditional celebrity endorsements in the modern digital landscape, as the application of social network frameworks have contributed to the understanding of influencer-follower relationships (Mallipeddi et al, 2022; Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Also, a range of theoretical foundations such as the self-presentation theory (SPT), online information processing theory (OIPT), knowledge persuasion theory (KPT), signalling theory (ST) and warranting theory (WT) have been applied to explore the nature of generate content and how social media engagement is facilitated (Chen & Chua, 2020).

Nonetheless, it is apparent from several systematic reviews of empirical influencer marketing by Vrontis et al (2021), Srivastava (2021); Chen & Chua (2020) that empirical studies have adopted a generic approach to conceptualise influencer marketing, despite the apparent and rapid changes

in practice due to the advancements of new social media platforms, interactive functions/ features and thus represent a clear gap between literature knowledge and real-world applications. Furthermore, the effects of influence marketing are found to differ amongst different country contexts as a result of culturally influenced preferences and consumer behaviours (Padmanabhan, 2019). However, the majority of empirical studies have been conducted on a generic approach that fails to distinguish the different effects of influencer marketing toward social media users of different countries (Padmanabhan, 2019), thus representing a research gap and raises strong research need to conduct a cross-cultural analysis to gather greater insight on the relationship between influencer marketing and social media engagement in the real practice of different countries. Therefore, this research attempts the research gap by performing a cross cultural analysis in influencer marketing literature between Western and Chinese literature, driven by the increasing popularity of Chinese social media platforms where influencer marketing has become a central part of branding practices (Chen et al, 2021).

3. Methodology

In chapter two, the definitions and key research themes of influencer marketing was identified in a preliminary review of literature, addressing current academic knowledge associated to influencer marketing, influencer generated content and social media user engagement concepts. This chapter discusses the chosen critical literature review strategy adopted to review empirical studies conducted in Western and Chinese literature within the identified key research themes, presenting a framework for classifying and critically analysing empirical studies chosen for the review.

3.1 Critical review of literature (Data collection)

This study adopts critical literature review research strategy in accordance to the guidelines of critical literature review developed by Jesson & Lacey (2006), three research phases are conducted in the collection of relevant literature data that can contribute to proposed research objectives as discussed in the following sub-sections.

3.1.1 Planning the review

According to Jesson & Lacey (2006), the planning stage of critical literature reviews require the selection of keywords that relate to the chosen research area of interests, as the researcher conducted a combination of keyword searches on academic databases including “influencer marketing”, “Influencer generated content”, “social media user/follower engagement”, “Chinese social media” and “Western social media”, selecting articles for careful reviews to understand their understanding and application of influencer marketing concepts on social media user/ follower engagements. A preliminary literature review was conducted in chapter two to obtain foundation knowledge over current major research themes in the field of influencer marketing, aiding the design of the latter review processes.

3.1.2 Research strategy design

In order to gather accurate data and obtain a clear understanding on empirical literature knowledge, the research strategy to review empirical studies that was conducted between 2010 and 2022 was used to ensure higher levels of applicability to the relatively nascent field of influencer study. Furthermore, Trinh (2018) argues that a secondary data analysis research strategy based on

findings of empirical studies require the selection of highly credible and reliable data sources, as failure to do so would result in lower accuracy and applicability of research findings. Therefore, to ensure credibility and reliability of data gathered and reviews, only academic recognised articles/ studies are used from databases including university online library, Google scholar, Scopus, Science Direct and SAGE. Upon identifying a range of relevant papers, a reference list is created to review for potential duplicates and to aid latter analysis.

3.1.3 Critical literature review process

According to Snyder (2019), there are various types of literature reviews including narrative/ traditional literature reviews, systematic reviews, meta-analysis review and critical literature reviews. A critical literature review differs from other forms of literature review as it extends beyond a summary of different topics or concepts addressed in literature, requiring the researcher to reflect and critique of empirical academic knowledge in question, presenting opinions, perspectives and approaches to improve upon identified problems in literature (Snder, 2019). According to Jensen & Lacey (2006), a critical literature review would require the researcher to take upon an objective role in the review process, raising questions and identifying outstanding issues that needs to be addressed in future studies due to the identified gaps in empirical literature. It is acknowledged that the current generic approaches used in empirical literature without considering country specific differences toward influencer marketing and social media user/ follower engagement has limited the generalisability, applicability and accuracy of academic knowledge on real-life influencer marketing practice, as identified in the preliminary literature review in chapter two.

Therefore, the researcher adopts a pragmatism research philosophy in a “dynamic and research customised” approach to identify the most suitable and relevant studies (Morgan, 2014), particularly in Chinese and Western literature that best fulfils the formulated research questions. Upon conducting a preliminary literature review, the critical literature review process begins from outlining the review aims, objectives and questions as aforementioned in section 1.2 and 1.3, guiding the critical review process with a defined scope. On the basis of the review aims and objectives, a review protocol is developed and incorporated to guide the search for suitable literature as the next section discusses in detail. A combination of keyword search on academically recognised databases is used and the main qualitative data patterns are stored and analysed via thematic analysis on identified key themes from both Chinese and Western literature in relation to influencer marketing, influencer generated content and social media user/ follower engagement.

3.2 Thematic content-oriented criterion method (Data analysis)

In order to critically review empirical literature and identify key themes that contributes to the research questions, a thematic content-oriented criterion method is used to enable the researcher to address the dynamics of influencer marketing, social media user/ follower engagement and influencer generated content in relevant literature. According to Liao & Hitchcock (2018), a content-oriented criterion method enables the researcher to design a multi-dimensional approach to literature content analysis, facilitating an in-depth review with multiple levels of analysis of key themes to enhance the validity and richness of qualitative data reviewed. Therefore, a two-dimensional content-oriented criterion method is used to aid the collection and analysis of key themes in literature in alignment to research goals.

3.2.1 Dimension one – Levels/ nature of relationship analysis

The literature examined in association with influencer marketing and social media user/ follower engagement concerns different types of influencer-follower relationships established through the process of influencer marketing (Mallipeddi et al, 2022; Brown & Fiorella (2013). Therefore, it is proposed that the first dimension used for classifying suitable literature is based on the levels/ nature of relationship between the influencer and the social media user/follower engagement, limited to three levels according to key research themes in Western and Chinese influencer marketing literature:

- 1) The most common types of influencers and their relationships with first level and second level followers (Brown & Fiorella, 2013).
- 2) The role of the influencer toward social media user/ followers and how their relationship is maintained (Mallipeddi et al, 2022)
- 3) The frequency and nature of social media user/ follower engagement stimulated between influencers and followers (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018)

3.2.2 Dimension two – Level of impacts analysis

The literature examined in association with influencer marketing and social media user/ follower engagement also concerns different context, content and creation of influencer generated content, particularly influencing the perception of followers with positive or negative purchase intentions (Ki et al, 2020). Therefore, it is proposed that the second dimension used for classifying suitable literature is based on the levels of impact on the influencer generated content and its effects on social media user/ follower engagement, limited to three levels according to key research themes in Western and Chinese influencer marketing literature:

- 1) The most common types/ characteristics of influencer-generated content and its effects on social media user/ follower engagement (Argyris et al, 2020).
- 2) The level of trust, credibility and authenticity established by influencers and subsequent impacts on the perception of influencer self-generated content (Ki et al, 2020).
- 3) The nature of influencer-generated content created and its influence on social media user/follower engagement (Chen & Chua, 2020)

4. Findings & Discussion

This chapter presents the key findings of the critical literature review conducted through thematic content-oriented criterion method across two-dimension levels on 1) the level/ nature of relationship analysis between influencer marketing and social media/ follower engagement, 2) the level of impact analysis on the context, content and creation of influencer generated content on perception of followers, purchasing intentions and their relationship with influencers. This chapter incorporates a critical discussion on major themes identified in Western and Chinese literature, discussing in relation to research questions. Given the minimal research attention conducted on influencers in a country-specific research scope, this review incorporates all suitable and relevant articles returned from a combination of keyword searches from recognised academic databases including the university online library, Google scholar, Scopus, Science Direct and SAGE.

4.1 Influencer marketing relationship with social media user engagement

In order to address the first and third research questions, a critical review of literature that explains the relationship between influencer marketing and social media follower engagement is summarised in table 5 (Western literature) and 6 (Chinese literature) below. When reviewing Western literature under the first level of analysis on the common types of influencers and their relationships with first and second level followers as highlighted by Brown & Fiorella (2013) to explain the dynamics of influencer and social media user engagement relationships. All four types of influencers proposed by Gross & Wangenheim (2018) was identified despite minimal numbers of related studies.

Djurica & Mending's (2020) study identified a snoop type of influencer in the Western country context of Austria, recognising the emphasis of personal beliefs, experiences and feelings to established close relationships with all followers. Wils' (2021) study founded a clear relationship between micro-influencers and their capability to establish strong relationships with Dutch female followers, evoking higher purchase intentions and leveraged the social network effects of followers to reach second level followers and encouraged the sales of sports clothing products. Voskaite's (2020) study identified the sharing of emotional content in entertaining manners to develop strong relationships with US social media followers, increasing followers' intention to engage in Instagram post evaluations through commenting, discussing and sharing influencer content. Declercq et al's (2019) study founded a relationship between influencers and their capability to inflict attitudinal changes of Twitter and Facebook followers in Belgium, increasing their perception on food & health related products and likely acceptance on recommended products. Despite minimal amounts of research, Western literature conducted on country specific focuses of influencer marketing conformed to the existence of all four influencer types proposed by Gross & Wangenheim (2018), also raising research need for more future studies with Western country specific focuses to effectively understand the most popular type of influencer marketing styles used to generate practical research values.

When reviewing Western literature under the second level of analysis on the role of influencer toward followers and how their relationship is maintained as highlighted by (Mallipeddi et al, 2022). An expert role of influencers with high levels of credibility is identified in the study of Anongdeth & Imam Barrer (2019), as recognised influencer expertise in respective domains would increase follower trust, increasing likelihood of accepting recommendations from highly perceived authenticity of influencers. Janseen et al's (2022) study founded the influencer role to increase the product knowledge/ awareness of followers, as reflected amongst Dutch Instagram followers from influencers with strong product-influencer fit in the health and fitness market, evoking higher likelihood of purchases and establishing long term influencer-follower relationships. Heming (2020) found that millennial Dutch social media followers to be highly influenced by the trusted gatekeeper role of influencers, favouring their high levels of transparency and perceived benevolence/ integrity. These findings correlate to empirical academic knowledge performed in generic approach to examine the role of influencers on social media follower perceptions and attitudes (Mallipeddi et al, 2022).

When reviewing Western literature under the third level of analysis on the frequency and nature of social media follower engagement stimulated between influencer and followers as proposed by (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018). Frequent influencer and social media follower engagement is identified as shown in Declercg et al (2019), Heming (2020) and Voskaite's (2020) studies. The tendency for influencers in Western countries to upload interactive social media content on a daily basis is recognised, differing from Gross & Wangenheim's (2018) recognition of interaction frequencies from influencer types. Furthermore, the use of mass communication methods to communicate to all followers (Djurica & Mending, 2000; Wils, 2021; Voskaite, 2020), referring them as a community and offers limited interactions in produced content showcases a lack of individual follower focus adopted by influencers in Western cultures, against challenging the generic conceptualisation of influencer types and the nature of their interactions with followers proposed by Gross & Wangenheim (2018).

Table 5: Thematic content-criterion analysis – Dimension One (Western literature)

Level of analysis (Ref: Section 3.2.1)	Major themes	Authors	Descriptions
1	Snoopers	Djurica & Mending (2020)	Austrian snoopers influencers are found to focus on emotional relationships, emphasising on personal beliefs, experience and feelings about their opinions to establish close relationships with all types of followers.
	Infotainers	Wils (2021)	A micro-Infotainer type of influencer is able to establish the strongest relationship with Dutch female followers, evoking higher purchase intentions which are transmitted to connected peers of followers in sports clothing.
	Entertainers	Voskaite (2020)	Entertainer influencers is found to possess strong relationships with social media users in the US through sharing emotional content, resulting in followers' intention to engage via Instagram post evaluation.
	Infotainers	Declercq et al (2019)	Infotainer influencers is able to effect the attitudinal changes of followers in the perception of food and health related products toward Twitter and Facebook users in Belgium, reacting positively to the recommendations from influencers.
2	Expert role with credibility	Anongdeth & Imam Barre (2019)	Millennial Instagram users in the US found that influencers offered more authentic and credible recommendations due to their expertise in the field, demonstrating strong trust in the values provided, favours long term influencer-follower relationship.
	Increases product knowledge	Janssen et al (2022)	Dutch Instagram users founded that influencers with strong product-influencer fit in the health and fitness markets is more likely evoke higher likelihood of purchases, followers have higher trusts on recommendations, improving their product knowledge and establishes long term influencer-follower relationships.
	Trusted gatekeeper role	Heming (2020)	Millennial Dutch social media users/ students to be driven by the trusted gatekeeper role of influencers due to high perceived levels of authenticity, similarity/ share values, perceived competence, perceived benevolence and integrity, transparency and

			clear sponsorship disclosures as they engage in long term influencer-follower relationships with trusted influencers.
3	Frequent	Declercq et al (2019), Heming (2020), Voskaite (2020)	Influencers conduct frequent interactions with their followers through uploading social media content on a daily basis, interacting via posting of blogs, videos and competitions to stimulate engagement with followers.
	Mass communication	Djurica & Mending (2020), Wils (2021), Voskaite (2020)	Influencers commonly interact with their followers in a mass-communicated approach, sharing blog and videos that appeal to all their targeted/ connected followers, referring to their followers in the content as a community but rarely interacts through private messages (PM) or comments.

Alternatively, when reviewing Chinese literature under the first level of analysis, major differences are identified in comparison to Western literature as shown in table 6 below. Chinese influencers are found to commonly represent a micro-snooper type or a mega-infotainer type, illustrating apparent characteristics that combines empirical influencer type frameworks of Rocamora (2022) and Gross & Wangenheim (2018). In the studies of Gretzel (2017), Zhang & Zhao (2020) and Hung et al (2021), the terminology of micro-influencers are used and a common theme is identified over the high levels of acceptance amongst Chinese social media users to follow smaller, passionate and enthusiastic influencers. This is also evidential amongst diaspora Chinese micro-influencers that engages followers on an emotional and cultural level, conveying the “being Chinese” spirit to co-construe emotional experience with culturally specific content generated for Chinese followers, resulting in the establishment of strong emotional connections (Zhang & Zhao, 2020).

Chinese micro-influencers on Tik-Tok are found to affect the opinions of social media audience through passionately discussing with positive and negative identifications of products through live streaming content delivered, communicating with users during live streams and converting social media audience into followers (Hung et al, 2021). These identified themes opened up new insights on the dynamic characteristics of Chinese influencers beyond traditional generic conceptualisations proposed by Rocamora (2022) and Gross & Wangenheim (2018). Furthermore, when reviewing Chinese literature under the second and third level of analyses, new insights are also identified as studies from Li & Feng (2002) and Zhang et al (2021) identified the importance for Chinese influencers to adopt an ethical role that further enhances their perceived levels of authenticity amongst followers. The generation of value-based content within ethnical communication mechanisms and honest, lower self-discrepancy content are found to increase perceived authenticity and subsequent positive influence on follower decision makings.

Lie et al (2021) and Ge & Gretzel (2018) also identifies the friendship role of influencers to offer affectionate, sympathetic and good virtue intentions to increase persuasive appeals and maintenance of a positive influencer-follower relationship. The stimulation of frequent social media interactions with followers through sharing of content and facilitation of parasocial interactions are found to improve influencer-follower engagements (Liu et al, 2021). The passionate and enthusiastic approach to generate individual follower specific engagements during live streams in a real-time manner also positively effects influencer-follower relationships (Gretzel, 2017; Zhang et al, 2021). The empirical studies conducted on influencer marketing in China highlights apparent differences with generic concepts, raising the research need in future studies to establish Chinese influencer specific models to conceptualise their own unique characteristics and relationship with Chinese social media followers.

Table 6: Thematic content-criterion analysis – Dimension One (Chinese literature)

Level of analysis (Ref: Section 3.2.1)	Major themes	Authors	Descriptions
1	Micro influencer/snooper	Gretzel (2017). Zhang & Zhao (2020), Hiung et al (2021)	<p>Micro-influencer Yao Chen is found to have established prominent influence in early influencer marketing in Chinese tourism, establishing a large follower base over time through his passionate and enthusiastic approach in interacting with followers, quickly expanding his follower base with referrals from existing followers to connected peers.</p> <p>A study on six diaspora Chinese YouTube micro influencers with their passionate approach of conveying the “being Chinese” spirit, inviting followers to co-construe emotional experience with culturally specific content for Chinese followers have established strong emotional connections with followers, as followers have high acceptances on their delivered public health recommendations during the COVID pandemic.</p> <p>Chinese micro-influencers on the Tik-Tok social media platform are found to rely strongly on a product demonstration approach to sustain their starter career, as positive or negative identifications from the live comments of the online audience would substantially affect the opinions of other audiences, the conversion of audience into followers is dependent on number of likes/ shares</p>
	Mega infotainers	Wang et al (2022), Li & Feng, 2022)	<p>Mega influencers across Chinese live streaming platforms are found to substantially affect the online traffic of live stream viewers, demonstrating a signalling and drainage effect as the followers are greatly influenced by influencers, reflected by massive drops of traffic when influencer leaves the platform, demonstrating strong controlling effects and manipulation of follower behaviours.</p> <p>Chinese mega-influencers with over one million followers commonly combine strong informational details in innovative content creation approaches to raise awareness in the digital space, establishing strong emotional bonds with followers in the promotion of mega sporting events.</p>

2	Authentic & ethical role	Li & Feng (2002), Zhang et al (2021)	<p>The use of value-based content, interactivity, creativity and intrinsic motivation within ethnical communication mechanisms is found to generate high levels of authenticity and influence on follower decision makings.</p> <p>Young Chinese social media followers are positively influenced by influencers that offer honest, authentic and realistic recommendations in relation to personal health (body images), establishing long term trusts and respect for influencers that does not express personal ideals and demonstrated lower self-discrepancy levels.</p>
	Friendship & affectionate	Liu et al (2021), Ge & Gretzel (2018)	<p>Chinese influencers have the tendency to develop strong psychological relationships with followers, resulting in followers considering influencers as their friends regardless of apparent limitations in physical interactions, positively maintaining the influencer-follower relationship through purchasing the recommended products from followers.</p> <p>Chinese influencers that commonly interacts with followers through positive emoji rhetoric and content are found of have increased persuasive appeals, conveying ethos, virtue, good will, expertise, knowledge, friendship and sympathy toward followers with affectionate content shared.</p>
3	Frequent interaction	Liu et al (2021). Zhang & Zhao (2020), Ge & Gretzel (2018)	<p>Chinese micro-influencers are found to enhance followers' purchase intentions through the mediation of parasocial interactions, facilitating frequent interactions with followers.</p> <p>Frequent sharing of content and interaction with Chinese social media users are vital in the highly competed influencer market landscape, requiring constant engagement to maintain relationships</p>
	Individual-specific	Gretzel (2017), Zhang et al (2021)	<p>The passionate and enthusiastic approach of micro-influencers and the establishment of strong influencer-follower relationships is driven by answering follower questions and providing personalised recommendations.</p> <p>The provision of individual follower specific recommendations on personal health during live streams is found to encourage influencer-follower engagement in a real time manner.</p>

4.2 Context, content and creation of social media user engagement impacts from influencer marketing

In order to address the second and third research questions, a critical review of literature that explains the relationship between influencer marketing and social media follower engagement through the context, content and creation of influencer generated content is summarised in table 7 (Western literature) and 8 (Chinese literature) below. When reviewing Western literature under the first level of analysis on the common types/ characteristics of influencer generated content and its effects on social media user/ follower engagement addressed by Agruris et al (2020). Each of the identified influencer types proposed by Gross & Wangenheim (2018) was reinforced and reflected in the characteristics of generated content by influencers in Western countries. Djurica & Mending (2020) echoed the use of personal & practical insights from Austrian snoop-influencers in generated content, as Dutch informer-influencers offered informative & educational content (Wils, 2021), US Instagram entertainer-influencers offered entertainment & emotional content (Voskaite, 2020) and Belgium Twitter & Facebook infotainers created content with entertainment values and informational insights, all resulting in positive influence on social media follower engagements.

When reviewing Western literature under the second level of analysis on the levels of trust, credibility and authenticity established by influencers and the impacts on perception of influencer generated content (Ki et al, 2020). Empirical literature knowledge is reinforced as Anongdeth & Imam Barre's (2019) study identified the recognised expertise of US influencers in their respective fields to generate high levels of authenticity on their produce contents, increasing purchase intentions and long-term followings. Janssen et als' (2022) study founded that Dutch Instagram influencers with strong product-influencer fit to evoke higher purchase intentions, as followers are driven by high levels of credibility perceived in the recommendations and product analysis given by reputable followers. Heming's (2020) study founded that the highly trusted gatekeep role of influencers amongst Millennial Dutch social media users due to high levels of transparency and clear sponsorship disclosures to reduce potential negative perceptions of commercial branding efforts in the content created by influencers. These findings correlate to the generic conceptualisation of influencer generated contents but more future studies are also needed to explore the field further with focus on other types of influences stimulated by generated content with country specific focuses.

When reviewing Western literature under the third level of analysis on the levels on the nature of influencer generated content created and its influencer on social media follower engagement according to common theoretical foundations applied as proposed by Ki et al (2020). The generation of content by Dutch influencers is found to relate to the warranting theory approach, as influencers play upon the role of informative, reliable gatekeepers to produce high quality content that filters our poor-quality products (Heming, 2020), minimising potential opportunity costs for followers with established of high credibility perceptions, encouraging higher levels of trust and commitment from followers to purchase influencer recommendations (Janssen et al, 2022). Additionally, the values of the self-presentation theory are found amongst Austrian, Dutch and US influencers, as influencer generated content are commonly produced via positive self-representation practices to achieve a desirable impression to the followers (Djurica & Mending, 2020), stimulating higher perceptions of the credibility of influencers particularly amongst strong product-influencer fit influencers that offer practical personal experience, evoking long term follower relationships (Wis, 2021; Voskaite, 2020).

Table 7: Thematic content-criterion analysis – Dimension Two (Western literature)

Level of analysis (Ref: Section 3.2.1)	Major themes	Authors	Descriptions
1	Personal & practical insights	Djurica & Mending (2020)	Austrian influencers self-generated content that offered personal values, opinions and practical insights based on consumption experiences, establishing close relationships and high levels of authenticity amongst followers.
	Informative & educational content	Wils (2021)	Dutch influencers generated informative and educational content on the product attributes of sports clothing products, resulting in higher purchase intentions amongst Dutch female followers, the combination of both positive and negative feedbacks created strong trust amongst followers.
	Entertainment & emotional content	Voskaite (2020)	US Instagram influencers combined the use of entertaining content and sharing of emotional contents from personal experiences, achieving high levels of social media follower engagement via Instagram post evaluation, participating in discussion and co-creating reviews via the previous consumer experiences of followers.
	Entertainment & informational insights	Declercq et al (2019)	Twitter and Facebook influencers in Belgium created content through offering entertainment and informational insights, resulting in desirable attitudinal changes of followers on the perception of food and health related products, as followers would also recommend to friends and other peers.
2	High levels of authenticity	Anongdeth & Imam Barre (2019)	The recognised expertise of US influencers in their respected fields had generated high levels of perceived authenticity and credibility amongst followers, as they demonstrated strong trust with increased purchase intentions and increased rates of long-term followings.
	High levels of credibility	Janssen et al (2022)	Dutch Instagram followers were positively driven by the high levels of credibility established amongst influencers with strong product-influencer fit, evoking higher purchase intentions and have grown in reliance on follower recommendations due to their trusted perceptions on understanding and providing justified evaluations of product qualities.

	Highly trusted content	Heming (2020)	The highly trusted gatekeeper role of influencers is found to positively influence the long-term influencer-follower relationship amongst Millennial Dutch social media users/ students, as high levels of transparency and clear sponsorship disclosures reduces the negative perception of commercial branding efforts in the content created by influencers.
3	Warranting theory approach	Heming (2020), Janssen et al (2022),	Influencers play upon the role of informative, reliable gatekeepers to generate high quality content that filters out poor-quality products for followers, evoking high levels of trust and commitment amongst the followers to continue following and purchasing from influencer recommendations
	Self-presentation theory	Djurica & Mending (2020), Wils (2021), Voskaite (2020)	Influencers generate content on the basis of positive self-representation to achieve a desirable and positive impressions to their followers, establishing higher levels of credibility with strong product-influencer fit and via offering practical personal experiences to establish close relationships with high increasing rates of long-term followings.

Alternatively, when reviewing Chinese literature under the first level of analysis, major differences are identified in comparison to Western literature as shown in table 8 below. It is apparent that two major types/ characteristics of influencer generated content exists amongst Chinese influencers, as the findings of Gretzel (2017), identified that influencers generated content through offering personal and practical insights, particularly for passionate influencers that wants to foster long-term influencer-follower relationship. Zhang & Zhao (2020) founded that the generation of personal content that draws upon the similarity in cultural values of Chinese followers would help to establish strong emotional connections and acceptances amongst followers. The generation of content that offers both negative and positive informative insights of products amongst Tik Tok influencers during highly interactive live streams would influencer follower attitudes and perceptions (Hung et al, 2021).

Alternatively, Wang et al (2022) founded that the generation of highly informative and educational content in entertaining fashions from mega influencers would substantially influence follower behaviours, as reflected by the surge and drops of live stream traffic when followers go online/ offline. Li & Feng's (2022) also founded that the generation of highly informative content in an innovative approach would substantially increase the awareness of brand offerings amongst followers in the sports market, enhancing long term follower relationships as they grow closely akin. These major themes reinforce the types of characteristics in influencer generated content according to Gross & Wangenheim's (2018) big four typologies of influencers, however, a more accurate model is required to conceptualise the types of Chinese influencers in relation to the characteristics of their produced content.

When reviewing Chinese literature under the second level of analysis, the identified major themes reinforced empirical literature knowledge as Li & Feng (2002) and Zhang et als' (2021) recognised the importance of high levels of authenticity established by influencers to evoke positive influencer perceptions on influencer recommendations. Similarly, the establishment of high levels of trust is also identified in Liu et als' (2021) study as the need to form friendships and strong psychological relationships help to increase the purchase intentions of followers. Ge & Gretzel's (2018) study also founded increased persuasive appeals and affection to influencer generated content that transmits into higher levels of trust amongst followers. When reviewing Chinese literature under the third level of analysis, Chen & Chua's (2020) recognition of the knowledge persuasion theory and online information processing theory are reinforced and reflected in the active employment of marketing tactics to generate content designed to leverage the influencer's' recognised expertise in the domain, resulting in higher purchase intentions, repeated purchase behaviours and referral likelihoods of followers (Liu et al, 2021; Ge & Gretzel, 2018).

Alternatively, Chinese influencers are found to demonstrate strong extrinsic motivation to generated content with marketing intentions for collaborated brands (Gretzel, 2017), encouraging sales during live streams and to manipulate the behaviours of followers, leveraging their established levels of authenticity and trust with followers to increase purchase attentions (Zhang et al, 2021), conforming to the application of the online information processing theory. Overall, it is apparent that major differences exist in the nature of influencer-generated content between Chinese influencers and influencers in Western countries, as future studies should adopt country-specific models to conceptualise the nature and intentions behind influencer generated content.

Table 8: Thematic content-criterion analysis – Dimension Two (Chinese literature)

Level of analysis (Ref: Section 3.2.1)	Major themes	Authors	Descriptions
1	Personal and practical insights	Gretzel (2017). Zhang & Zhao (2020), Hiung et al (2021)	<p>The generation of content based on passionate and follower-oriented interactions by micro-influencer is found to foster strong long-term influencer-follower relationship, as reflected by high levels of referred second level followers over time.</p> <p>Diaspora Chinese micro influencers with the generation of personal content that draws upon the same cultural values of Chinese followers is found to co-construct emotional experiences and strong emotional connections, increasing the acceptances on recommended public health advices and services during the COVID pandemic.</p> <p>The generation of content based on personal experiences and informative practical insights (negative and positive) amongst Tik Tok influencers have resulted in highly interactive live stream interactions with followers, influencing follower attitudes and perceptions.</p>
	Informative, educational and entertaining content	Wang et al (2022), Li & Feng, 2022)	<p>Mega influencers generate highly informative and educational content in entertaining fashions to impose strong influence on the behaviours of followers, as reflected by surge of live stream traffic when influencers go online.</p> <p>The generation of highly informative content in an innovative approach has raised substantial awareness over brand offerings amongst followers in the sports market, establishing strong emotional bonds with long term relationships.</p>
2	High level of authenticity	Li & Feng (2002), Zhang et al (2021)	<p>The provision and generation of value-based content within ethnical communication mechanisms has generated high levels of perceived authenticity amongst followers, influencing their purchasing likelihoods.</p> <p>The offering of honest, practical and authentic recommendations driven by positive and negative personal experiences is found to increase the perceived levels of authenticity</p>

			amongst followers in relation to personal health product advices, increasing followers' purchasing intentions.
	High levels of trust	Liu et al (2021), Ge & Gretzel (2018)	<p>The tendency for Chinese influencers to emphasis on developing strong psychological relationships with followers has resulted in the forming of online friendships between influencers and followers, increasing the levels of established trust and purchase intentions</p> <p>Increased persuasive appeals and affection in the design of generated content and methods of communications/ interactions used between influencers and followers have established higher levels of established trust, showing of good will and sympathy toward followers have increased this further.</p>
3	Knowledge persuasion theory	Liu et al (2021). Zhang & Zhao (2020), Ge & Gretzel (2018)	It is evidential that influencers across Chinese social media platforms actively employ marketing tactics in the generation of content through leveraging their recognised expertise in the domain, influencing higher purchase, repeated purchase and referral likelihoods
	Online information processing theory	Gretzel (2017), Zhang et al (2021)	Chinese influencers commonly demonstrate the strong extrinsic motivation to engage in marketing practices for collaborated brands, encouraging sales during live streams and exert direct manipulative control through leveraging their established levels of authenticity and trust with followers, evoking higher purchase intentions.

5. Conclusion and implication for future studies

This study performed a preliminary literature review to identify major research themes amongst empirical studies conducted in the field of influencer marketing, emphasising on the relationship between influencer marketing and social media follower engagement. The findings of the preliminary literature review were used to design thematic content-criteria in a two-dimension approach to analyse 1) the levels of relationship between different types of influencer-type relationships and subsequent social media follower engagement, 2) the level of impacts caused from the context, content and creation of influencer generated content and its influence on the perception of followers. A critical literature review is performed with a cross cultural approach to examine the similarities and differences between influencer marketing and social media follower engagement amongst Chinese and Western literature.

The findings of the critical literature review reinforced several aspects of empirical academic knowledge on influencer marketing, particularly amongst Western literature where all four types of influencers proposed by Gross & Wangenheim (2018) were found with corresponding types/ characteristics of influencer generated content and subsequent effects on social media follower engagement. However, the unconventional classification of influencer types identified in Chinese literature and the different nature of influencer generated content between Chinese and Western influencers highlight the need for future studies to develop country-specific models, conceptualising the culturally influenced preferences/ characteristics of influencer-follower relationships and the different social media follower engagement needs/ processes in different countries.

Received: June 21, 2025. **Revised:** August 24, 2025. **Editorial decision:** September 1, 2025. **Accepted:** September 8, 2025

© The Author(s) 2025. Published by IA Global Publications Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

6. References

- Agnihotri, A., & Bhattacharya, S. (2021). Endorsement effectiveness of celebrities versus social media influencers in the materialistic cultural environment of India. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 33(3), 280-302.
- Anongdeth, A., & Imam Barre, H. (2019). Instagram profile's effect on influencer credibility: A qualitative study on how the influencer-follower relationship is affected by the influencers credibility in relation to their Instagram profile.
- Argyris, Y. A., Wang, Z., Kim, Y., & Yin, Z. (2020). The effects of visual congruence on increasing consumers' brand engagement: An empirical investigation of influencer marketing on instagram using deep-learning algorithms for automatic image classification. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 112, 106443.
- Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J. G. (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of business research*, 117, 557-569.
- Bakker, D. (2018). Conceptualising influencer marketing. *Journal of emerging trends in marketing and management*, 1(1), 79-87.
- Bentley, K., Chu, C., Nistor, C., Pehlivan, E., & Yalcin, T. (2021). Social media engagement for global influencers. *Journal of Global Marketing*, 34(3), 205-219.
- Berryman, R., & Kavka, M. (2018). Crying on YouTube: Vlogs, self-exposure and the productivity of negative affect. *Convergence*, 24(1), 85-98.
- Bognar, Z. B., Puljic, N. P., & Kadezabek, D. (2019). Impact of influencer marketing on consumer behaviour. *Economic and Social Development: Book of Proceedings*, 301-309.
- Booth, N., & Matic, J. A. (2011). Mapping and leveraging influencers in social media to shape corporate brand perceptions. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 16(3), 184-191.
- Brewster, M. L., & Lyu, J. (2020, December). Exploring the parasocial impact of nano, micro and macro influencers. In *International Textile and Apparel Association Annual Conference Proceedings* (Vol. 77, No. 1). Iowa State University Digital Press.
- Briffa, D. (2020). *Digital media and traditional media in event marketing in the 21st century: an empirical study* (Bachelor's thesis, University of Malta).
- Byrne, E., Kearney, J., & MacEvilly, C. (2017). The role of influencer marketing and social influencers in public health. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 76(OCE3).
- Campbell, C., & Farrell, J. R. (2020). More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. *Business Horizons*, 63(4), 469-479.
- Chen, K. J., Lin, J. S., & Shan, Y. (2021). Influencer marketing in China: The roles of parasocial identification, consumer engagement, and inferences of manipulative intent. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 20(6), 1436-1448.
- Chen, X., & Chua, A. Y. (2020, March). Reviewing the landscape of research on influencer-generated content. In *2020 6th International Conference on Information Management (ICIM)* (pp. 244-248). IEEE.
- Cheung, C. M., Lee, M. K., & Rabjohn, N. (2008). The impact of electronic word-of-mouth: The adoption of online opinions in online customer communities. *Internet research*.

- Cheung, C. M., Xiao, B. S., & Liu, I. L. (2014). Do actions speak louder than voices? The signaling role of social information cues in influencing consumer purchase decisions. *Decision support systems*, 65, 50-58.
- Chopra, A., Avhad, V., & Jaju, A. S. (2021). Influencer marketing: An exploratory study to identify antecedents of consumer behavior of millennial. *Business Perspectives and Research*, 9(1), 77-91.
- Chua, A. Y., & Banerjee, S. (2016). Helpfulness of user-generated reviews as a function of review sentiment, product type and information quality. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 54, 547-554.
- De Veirman, M., Hudders, L., & Nelson, M. R. (2019). What is influencer marketing and how does it target children? A review and direction for future research. *Frontiers in psychology*, 10, 2685.
- Declercq, J., Tulkens, S., & Van Leuven, S. (2019). The produsing expert consumer: Co-constructing, resisting and accepting health-related claims on social media in response to an infotainment show about food. *Health*, 23(6), 602-620.
- Delbaere, M., Michael, B., & Phillips, B. J. (2021). Social media influencers: A route to brand engagement for their followers. *Psychology & Marketing*, 38(1), 101-112.
- Djurica, D., & Mendling, J. (2020). Impact of Influencer Type and Advertisement Disclosure on Perceived Trust, Credibility and Purchase Intention. In *AMCIS*.
- Enke, N., & Borchers, N. S. (2021). Social media influencers in strategic communication: A conceptual framework for strategic social media influencer communication. In *Social Media Influencers in Strategic Communication* (pp. 7-23). Routledge.
- Fact.Mr Industry Report (2022), Influencer marketing to grow significantly by more than 20% CAGR, available at: <https://www.factmr.com/report/influencer-marketing-market>, last accessed 01/08/2022
- Farivar, S., & Wang, F. (2021, June). Influencer marketing: Current knowledge and research agenda. In *Digital Marketing & eCommerce Conference* (pp. 201-208). Springer, Cham.
- Farivar, S., Wang, F., & Yuan, Y. (2019). Meformer vs. informer: Influencer type and follower behavioral intentions.
- Ferina, N., Sri, G., & Putu, L. (2021). Does Influencer Marketing Really Improve Sustainable Brand Awareness and Sales?. *Inovbiz: Jurnal Inovasi Bisnis*, 9(1), 167-174.
- .
- Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public relations review*, 37(1), 90-92.
- Gao, Q., & Feng, C. (2016). Branding with social media: User gratifications, usage patterns, and brand message content strategies. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 63, 868-890.
- Ge, J., & Gretzel, U. (2018). Emoji rhetoric: a social media influencer perspective. *Journal of marketing management*, 34(15-16), 1272-1295.
- Gräve, J. F. (2017, July). Exploring the perception of influencers vs. traditional celebrities: are social media stars a new type of endorser?. In *Proceedings of the 8th international conference on Social Media & Society* (pp. 1-5).

- Gretzel, U. (2017). Influencer marketing in travel and tourism. In *Advances in social media for travel, tourism and hospitality* (pp. 147-156). Routledge.
- Greve, G., & Schlüschen, A. (2018). From customer relationship management to influencer relationship management. In *Diverse methods in customer relationship marketing and management* (pp. 80-91). IGI Global.
- Ha, M. Y., Lee, Y. J., Kwon, S. J., Kang, Y. S., & Chae, J. W. (2019). Effect of Perceived Rewarded Referral on Instagram Influencer Marketing: Centering on Instagram Posts on Cosmetic Products. *Journal of Digital Contents Society*, 20(1), 75-88.
- Heming, L. (2020). *Can I trust you@ influencer?: Reasons why followers build a trusted relationship with influencers* (Master's thesis, University of Twente).
- Hung, K., Tse, D. K., & Chan, T. H. (2021). E-Commerce Influencers in China: Dual-Route Model on Likes, Shares, and Sales. *Journal of Advertising*, 1-16.
- Janssen, L., Schouten, A. P., & Croes, E. A. (2022). Influencer advertising on Instagram: product-influencer fit and number of followers affect advertising outcomes and influencer evaluations via credibility and identification. *International journal of advertising*, 41(1), 101-127.
- Jesson, J. K., & Lacey, F. M. (2006). How to do (or not to do) a critical literature review. *Pharmacy education*, 6(2), 139-148.
- Jin, S. V., Muqaddam, A., & Ryu, E. (2019). Instafamous and social media influencer marketing. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*.
- Jun, S., & Yi, J. (2020). What makes followers loyal? The role of influencer interactivity in building influencer brand equity. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*.
- Kay, S., Mulcahy, R., & Parkinson, J. (2020). When less is more: the impact of macro and micro social media influencers' disclosure. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(3-4), 248-278.
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity studies*, 8(2), 191-208.
- Ki, C. W. C., & Kim, Y. K. (2019). The mechanism by which social media influencers persuade consumers: The role of consumers' desire to mimic. *Psychology & Marketing*, 36(10), 905-922.
- Ki, C. W. C., Cuevas, L. M., Chong, S. M., & Lim, H. (2020). Influencer marketing: Social media influencers as human brands attaching to followers and yielding positive marketing results by fulfilling needs. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 55, 102133.
- Brown, D., & Fiorella, S. (2013). *Influence marketing: How to create, manage, and measure brand influencers in social media marketing*. Que Publishing.
- Kozinets, R. V., De Valck, K., Wojnicki, A. C., & Wilner, S. J. (2010). Networked narratives: Understanding word-of-mouth marketing in online communities. *Journal of marketing*, 74(2), 71-89.
- Leung, F. F., Gu, F. F., & Palmatier, R. W. (2022). Online influencer marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 50(2), 226-251.
- Li, F., & Du, T. C. (2011). Who is talking? An ontology-based opinion leader identification framework for word-of-mouth marketing in online social blogs. *Decision support systems*, 51(1), 190-197.

- Li, X., & Feng, J. (2022). Influenced or to be influenced: Engaging social media influencers in nation branding through the lens of authenticity. *Global Media and China*, 20594364221094668.
- Liao, H., & Hitchcock, J. (2018). Reported credibility techniques in higher education evaluation studies that use qualitative methods: A research synthesis. *Evaluation and program planning*, 68, 157-165
- Liu, G. H., Li, Y., & Lee, N. C. A. (2021). Size does Matter: How do Micro-influencers Impact Follower Purchase Intention on Social Media?. In *Conference on Electronic Business* (Vol. 21, pp. 402-412).
- Mallipeddi, R. R., Kumar, S., Sriskandarajah, C., & Zhu, Y. (2022). A framework for analyzing influencer marketing in social networks: selection and scheduling of influencers. *Management Science*, 68(1), 75-104.
- Martin, C. A., & Bush, A. J. (2000). Do role models influence teenagers' purchase intentions and behavior?. *Journal of consumer marketing*.
- Mohamad, S. M. (2021). Micro-celebrity practices in Muslim-majority states in Southeast Asia. *Popular Communication*, 19(3), 235-249.
- Mochine, Y., Bakach, H., & Ouidad, S. (2022). Influencer Marketing and Behavioral Outcomes in Social Media: Systematic Literature Review. *International Journal of Accounting, Finance, Auditing, Management and Economics*, 3(3-1), 15-32.
- Morgan, D. L. (2014). Pragmatism as a paradigm for social research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 20(8), 1045-1053.
- Nouri, M. (2018). The power of influence: Traditional celebrity vs social media influencer.
- Oberlo (2022), 10 Influencer marketing statistics, available at: <https://www.oberlo.com/blog/influencer-marketing-statistics>, last accessed 01/08/2022
- Padmanabhan, A. (2019). *Influence, or get influenced!: A systematic literature review on the effect of influencers, product-related content and sponsorship disclosure on purchase intention* (Master's thesis, University of Twente).
- Ponirah, A. (2020). Influencer Marketing as a Marketing Strategy. *Journal of Economic Studies*, 4(1), 11-16.
- Raun, T., & Christensen-Strynø, M. B. (2021). 'We belong to something beautiful': Julie Vu's and Madeline Stuart's use of minority identity as a popular feminist self-branding strategy on Instagram. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1-18.
- Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2020). Celebrity vs. Influencer endorsements in advertising: the role of identification, credibility, and Product-Endorser fit. *International journal of advertising*, 39(2), 258-281.
- Shao, G. (2009). Understanding the appeal of user-generated media: a uses and gratification perspective. *Internet research*.
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of business research*, 104, 333-339.
- Srivastava, M. (2021). Mapping the influence of influencer marketing: a bibliometric analysis. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*.

- Statista (2021), Influencer marketing worldwide – statistics & facts, available at: https://www.statista.com/topics/2496/influence-marketing/#dossierContents__outerWrapper, last accessed 01/08/2022
- Statista (2022), Market size of influencer marketing in China from 2018 to 2020 with an estimate for 2021, available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1307443/china-key-opinion-leader-market-size/#:~:text=In%20China%2C%20influencer%20marketing%20was,year%2Dover%2Dyear%20growth.>, last accessed 01/08/2022
- Subramani, M. R., & Rajagopalan, B. (2003). Knowledge-sharing and influence in online social networks via viral marketing. *Communications of the ACM*, 46(12), 300-307.
- Sudha, M., & Sheena, K. (2017). Impact of influencers in consumer decision process: the fashion industry. *SCMS Journal of Indian Management*, 14(3), 14-30.
- Thornton, C. E. (2018). *Intimacy issues: a content analysis of intimacy levels and engagement rates between celebrities and influencers* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Trammell, K. D., & Keshelashvili, A. (2005). Examining the new influencers: A self-presentation study of A-list blogs. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(4), 968-982.
- Case, D. O., & Given, L. M. (2016). Looking for information: A survey of research on information seeking, needs, and behavior.
- Trinh, Q. D. (2018, April). Understanding the impact and challenges of secondary data analysis. In *Urologic Oncology: Seminars and original investigations* (Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 163-164). Elsevier
- Voskai t , S. (2020). The impact of content type posted by influencer on consumer behaviour. The moderating effect of influencers type, ISM University of Management and Economics
- Vrontis, D., Makrides, A., Christofi, M., & Thrassou, A. (2021). Social media influencer marketing: A systematic review, integrative framework and future research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 45(4), 617-644.
- Wang, H., Li, G., & Wu, S. (2022). What’s the Role of Mega-influencers in Live Streaming E-commerce—A Natural Experiment. In *International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction* (pp. 274-285). Springer, Cham.
- Wang, Y., & Yu, C. (2017). Social interaction-based consumer decision-making model in social commerce: The role of word of mouth and observational learning. *International Journal of Information Management*, 37(3), 179-189.
- Wils, S. (2021). The Power of Influencer Marketing: The Most Suitable and Valuable Influencer Type for Sports Clothing Brands.
- Yesiloglu, S., & Costello, J. (Eds.). (2020). *Influencer marketing: building brand communities and engagement*. Routledge.
- Zhang, L. T., & Zhao, S. (2020). Diaspora micro-influencers and COVID-19 communication on social media: The case of Chinese-speaking YouTube vloggers. *Multilingua*, 39(5), 553-563.
- Zhang, X., Zhu, W., Sun, S., & Chen, J. (2021). Does influencers popularity actually matter? An experimental investigation of the effect of influencers on body satisfaction and mood among young Chinese females: the case of RED (Xiaohongshu). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12.