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A bibliometric analysis of online influencers: Setting a research agenda

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Abstract

Influencers in online platforms and social media have become prevalent in our current societies, and research on this topic has accordingly come along with this phenomenon during past two decades. Although there are some reviews of this vast literature, they are very limited and do not cover all potential issues and fields of investigation, such as de sports industry. With the aim of covering this gap, the current research presents a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of this topic in the Web of Science Journals. A set of 1740 papers about online influencer marketing have been retrieved, from 1997 to 2021, to be analysed in terms of (1) measuring the impact of online influencers

marketing scientific production (most cited authors, journals and topics), through a performance analysis; and (2) analysing the structure of the most relevant scientific topics in this field of research, along with its evolution along time. Expected results will help to better understand the state of the art for online influencer marketing literature, while show the most promising lines for future investigation.

Keywords: online influencers, bibliometric analysis, industry, theories, source, message, audience

Introduction

Online influencers, or social media influencers, have been the topic of research of many studies during past two decades, as they were gaining importance among consumers. They have been described as “online personalities with large numbers of followers, across one or more social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, or personal blogs), who influence their followers” (Lou and Yuan, 2019 p. 58). Also known as popular social media users, social media stars, or micro-celebrities (Hudders, De Jans, and Veirman, 2020).

Some studies have partially reviewed existing research on online influencer marketing. For example, in 2019 three revisions were carried out: one focused on the ethics of influencers’ marketing in the tourism industry, which analyzed 49 different articles, internet columns, conference and book reviews (Nafi and Ahmed, 2019); a second that reviewed 39 papers about the role of influencers for strategic communication. And a third, that was focused on influencing marketing on the children segment (De Veirman et al., 2019). One year later, Hudders and colleagues (2020) provided a review of 154 peer-reviewed papers of the Scopus database during last three years (2018-2020), focused on virtual influencer marketing. These revisions, although of high interest, only cover some specific topics of what has been addressed in the influencer marketing literature, resulting thus in partial and incomplete evidence about the real field of this research topic. In addition, despite research on celebrities’ endorsement is old, the study of online influencers remains under-investigated (Lou and Yuan, 2019). A deep bibliometric analysis is thus needed to cover research gaps and to identify promising future lines of investigation in this field of research.

Two main goals are specifically pursued in this work: first, measuring, through a performance analysis, the impact and visibility of the scientific production in influencers marketing literature (most cited authors, journals, and themes); and second, understanding which are the most important topics of research within this field through a visual analysis of their structure and time evolution. To reach them, a sample of 1703 indexed papers was considered: (i) from 1997 to 2012 (649 papers), (ii) from 2013 to 2016 (540 papers) and (iii) from 2017 to 2021 (514 papers).

Several contributions are proposed from the results of this research. First, those derived from the longitudinal approach: we consider a vast period of time (24 years of literature, from 1997 to 2021), that we expect show us different subperiods based on turning points in the literature analyzed (showing thus the structure of change, or evolution, within this research topic). Second, to guarantee the rigour and relevance of the works analyzed, only indexed papers' in Web of Science were considered in this study. The suitability of this procedure can be seen in works published in high impact journals (Rodríguez-López, Alcántara-Pilar, Del Barrio-García and Muñoz-Leiva, 2019). Third, we will present visual dynamic scientific maps using perceptual representations to show in a simple way the outstanding topics, their relationships and their evolution. Finally, and compared to previous works, this research adds value as long as a multidisciplinary approach is adopted, including works from business and management, computer science, communication and sociology journals, among others.

Theoretical framework

Existing literature on influencers' marketing first differs according to (1) the industry or sector analysed (e.g., food industry, service, leisure activities, tourism, sports, among others) (some examples of these works are Basuroy et al., 2003; Cheung et al., 2008; Lotan et al., 2011; Wu, 2015; Nafi and Ahmed, 2019), and (2) the theories used to explain how influencers work (e.g., social learning theory, persuasion theory, identification theory, subjective source effect theory, among many others) (e.g., Kozinets et al., 2010; De Veirman et al., 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019). In addition, its research evidences may be classified into three main categories: studies focused on the source of the message, on the content of the message itself, and on its audience (we are not providing a more detailed discussion of this literature review for space constraints, but authors are glad to provide any additional information on this topic that reviewers may request).

In sum, extant research on online influencer marketing has been developed from different approaches. Following previous bibliometric analysis on this field (Kim and McMillan 2008; Díaz et al. 2018), the two main objectives presented in the introduction were concretized in three research questions. The first two questions addressed our first objective (measuring the visibility/impact of the scientific production), and the last question addressed the second objective (identifying the scientific structure and evolution of the principal themes):

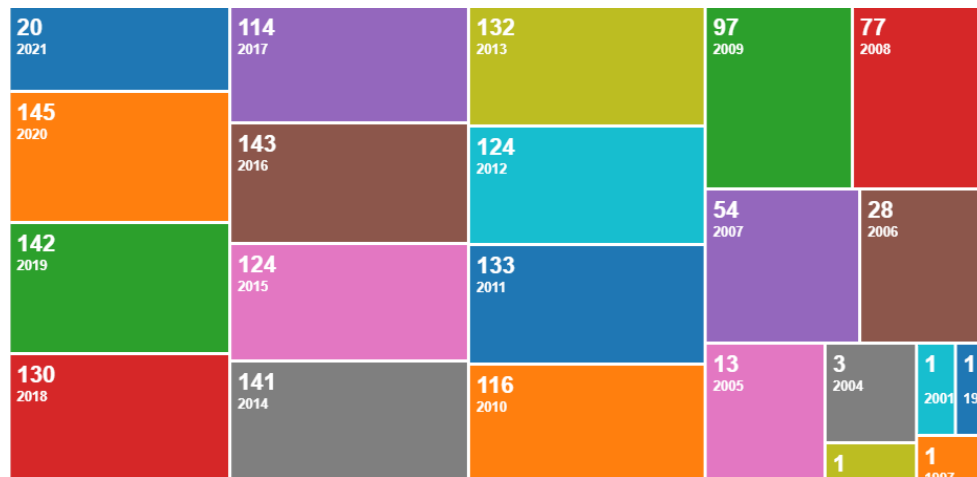
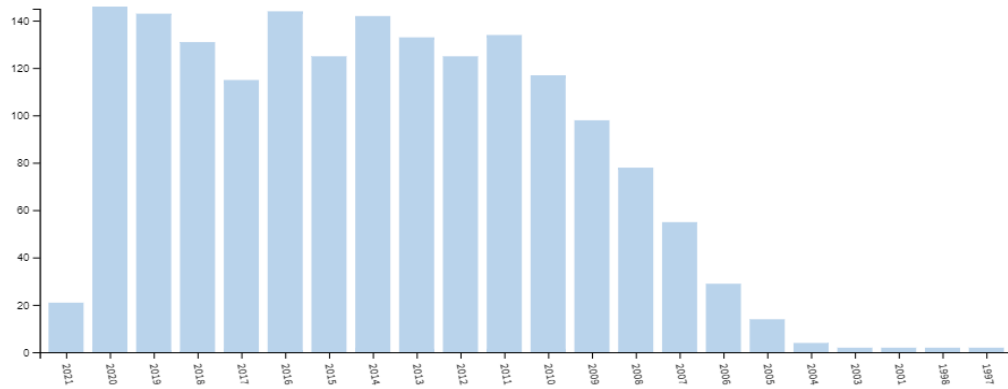
- RQ1: Which are the top researchers in the field of influencer marketing?
- RQ2: Which are the top journals in the field of influencer marketing in the Web of Science?
- RQ3: Which themes have obtained the highest visibility and impact from a longitudinal perspective?

Methodology

Our bibliometric analysis is based on SCIMAT software (Cobo et al. 2013). This has been widely used to analyse the evolution of many other research topics, such as product packaging (Vila and Küster, 2020), product placement (Vila and Küster, 2021a), sharing economy (Vila and Küster, 2021b), or complains in B2B contexts (Küster and Vila, 2020 2022). This software uses co-work analysis to identify the interests and aspirations of academic researchers, reducing “a large set of descriptors (or keywords) to a set of network graphs that effectively illustrate the strongest associations between descriptors” (Muñoz-Leiva et al., 2015; p. 682).

This software thus allowed a quantitative analysis of all scientific publications indexed in the Journal Citation Reports. In order to select them, we used the key-words "virtual influencers" or "online influencers" or "foodies" or "bloggers" or "Youtubers" or "peer endorsement" or "virtual endorsers" or "online endorsers". This procedure was based on Cobo et al. (2013), applying a de-duplicating process over the keywords. The author's keywords and the Keywords Plus were considered to group words representing the same concept. Some keywords meaningless in this context, such as stop words or words with a very broad and general meaning, were removed (for example, the generic themes “influencer” or “communication”) (Cobo et al. 2013).

Figure 1. Number of papers per year



A final set of 1740 papers containing these keywords were retrieved and are going to be analysed. Citation counts to April 1, 2021 (15773 citations within those papers were recorded and analysed). The period embraced was from 1999 (when the first indexed paper was published) until 2021. Based on the number of papers per year three main periods were identified (figure 1): (i) from 1997 to 2012 (649 papers), (ii) from 2013 to 2016 (540 papers) and (iii) from 2017 to 2021 (514 papers). The idea was to analysed a comparable number of papers per period. In 2013, an augment of documents was observed until 2016, because technologies advanced and social networked multiplied; then in 2017 a second turning point was identified (see Figure 1).

To answer RQ1 and RQ2 citation analysis was used. This is a method of tracking publishing patterns based on the assumption that a heavily cited author, paper, or book is considered important by many scholars in a discipline (Kim and McMillan, 2008). To solve RQ3, three scientific maps were obtained and compared for three consecutive periods.

Initial results

We are now working with our bibliometric analysis by using SciMAT software, which is based on co-work analysis to identify the main interest and trends within the considered field of research. This methodology allows a quantitative analysis of all scientific publications indexed in the Journal Citation Reports containing the key-words "virtual influencers" or "online influencers" or "foodies" or "bloggers" or "You tubers" or "peer endorsement" or "virtual endorsers" or "online endorsers" (Muñoz-Leiva, Porcu and Barrio-García, 2015). Final results related to our three research questions will be presented at the conference.

Initial contributions

Our results are going to first provide detailed information about the most prolific and cited authors on the research topic of influencer marketing (RQ1) and also about the most prolific journals (RQ2). Quantitative and graphical are provided to answer these two research questions. In addition, by analysing the structure and evolution of the most important research topics within this field (RQ3), this work provide a comprehensive analysis of its trending topics (liking them to the most important keywords used), its motor themes (those with high density and centrality) and, most important, its most important or promising emerging themes. Along with this, the graphical analysis also allows us to show what are those topics that are declining in interest, as well as what are those with a more transversal approach. All of these, ultimately, should provide researchers with an actualized framework summarizing most important current (and past) research issues, main contexts and theoretical approaches, and what are the more promising paths to address future research.

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