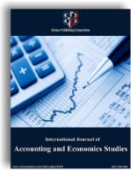
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Research paper



Bibliometric Analysis and Systematic Review of Social Media Marketing Research Trends, Identifying Thematic Clusters and Emerging Trends

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Abstract

The rapid growth of social media has significantly influenced marketing practices, making it a central topic of academic interest. This paper offers a comprehensive review of research in social media marketing (SMM) from 2010 to 2024. A total of 98 peer-reviewed articles were analyzed using a dual-method approach—systematic review, following PRISMA guidelines, and bibliometric mapping through VOSviewer software. The analysis highlights a clear increase in research output after 2015, reflecting the growing role of social platforms in marketing strategy. Four major themes are identified: consumer engagement, brand strategy development, platform-specific marketing approaches, and ethical considerations such as data privacy and algorithmic fairness. The review also reveals a shift toward more rigorous methodologies, with increased use of mixed methods and longitudinal studies. Geographical analysis shows a research concentration in North America and Europe, with limited contributions from emerging markets. By synthesizing past findings and identifying gaps, this study provides direction for future research and practical insights for marketers navigating an evolving digital landscape. It adds value by clarifying the structure of the field, highlighting key influencers, and suggesting areas where further investigation is both possible and needed.

Keywords: *Social Media Marketing(SMM); Consumer Engagement; Bibliometric Analysis; Systematic Review; Artificial Intelligence.*

1. Introduction

Social media marketing has become a part of modern business strategy for building brands for their product or services. As of 2023, there are 4.76 billion social media users (Statista, 2021), and social platforms are growing considerably. However, as brands try to add digital channels to their existing marketing mix, social media has emerged as a central focus of an expanding volume of academic research on every aspect of social media marketing (Harmeling et al., 2017).

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and TikTok are now becoming the leading platforms for brands to enhance their reach in marketing, from a communication tool to a sophisticated ecosystem of marketing in which marketers can connect their product penetration via the adoption of their products, to high penetration of a large number of people (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). It is a cue to study rapidly changing fields comprehensively and to study thematic development and methodological approaches in the field of social media marketing by Akar and Topçu (2011), Alalwan et al. (2017), Alves et al. (2016), and Aral et al. (2013).

The breadth of social media marketing research spans from consumer engagement and influencer dynamics to content strategies and the integration of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality. However, the rapid development of platforms and practices has created a fragmented knowledge base that requires consolidation. This review is timely for several reasons:

- It bridges traditional research on social media platforms and marketing strategies to provide an understanding of present trends and anticipate future directions.
- Few prior studies have combined systematic review with bibliometric analysis, and this study aims to fill that methodological gap.
- The review also offers critical insights into underexplored areas and emerging ethical issues, guiding future research and responsible marketing practice.

This paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 provides an extensive review of the domain, Section 3 details the methodology, including data collection and analytical techniques; Section 4 presents the findings from the bibliometric and thematic analyses; Section 5 discusses the implications and outlines future research opportunities; and Section 6 offers concluding remarks on the contribution and relevance of this study. Through this comprehensive examination, the paper aims to provide researchers, marketers, and policymakers with a deeper understanding of the current landscape and future trajectory of social media marketing research.

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1.1. Theoretical background

Several previous literature reviews have attempted to consolidate knowledge in this area. For instance, Lamberton and Stephen (2016) conducted a thematic exploration of digital, social media, and mobile marketing research from 2000 to 2015, analyzing keyword patterns and trends across five leading marketing journals. Their work provided critical insights into how the field was evolving, but was limited in disciplinary scope and timeframe. Likewise, Alalwan et al.(2017) surveyed the main ideas in social media marketing research up to 2016, touching on issues like eWOM, customer relationship management (CRM), and branding. Their work, along with other reviews, certainly helps frame earlier developments in the field. However, it doesn't include more recent developments, such as trends in influencer marketing or the rapid growth of platforms such as TikTok, which are not addressed. Additionally, neither review used bibliometric analysis to visualize connections across the literature. Given these gaps, this study takes a broader approach by including new themes, drawing from a wider range of sources, and using both qualitative and bibliometric methods.

It has been observed that interest in social media marketing has increased over the years. However, research in this area often remains divided, with few strong links between major topics (Berthon et al., 2012; Choi & Thoeni, 2016). Earlier studies have examined a variety of subjects, such as consumer engagement, branding, the influence of social media personalities, how people behave on specific platforms, and some ethical questions. However, as noted by Felix et al. (2017), Dolan et al. (2016), and Gensler et al. (2013), there is still no widely accepted framework that brings these areas together, which makes it harder to see how the different pieces of research fit or to draw clear conclusions from the overall literature.

- **TikTok and Emerging Platforms in Social Media Marketing**

There have been a lot of contemporary studies on SMM about different emerging digital platforms, and one of the crucial components is TikTok's groundbreaking role in it, as it creates massive audience engagement due to its short-form video format and algorithm-driven recommendations. According to the study of Zhang and Wang (2024), luxury brands face a threat of diluting exclusivity on TikTok, as it seems accessible to every common person, which can become a challenge, but this can be avoided if they are shown with self-deprecating reviews and humour. Another study by Meng et al. (2024) focuses on how TikTok's content characteristics affect the intentions of the audiences, as it identifies five important attributes of short-form video ads—trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, authenticity, and brand heritage. It shows there is a positive linear effect of trustworthiness and expertise, whereas a U-shaped relationship, indicating diminishing returns at higher levels of authenticity and brand heritage. Accordingly, it was found that among the young audiences, the effectiveness of the message gets a boost with TikTok's humour-oriented and hedonic environment (Barta et al., 2023).

The credibility of influencers is essential to the marketing ecosystem of TikTok. In a study by Alcántara-Pilar et al. (2024), influencer credibility promotes trust, which later enhances consumer loyalty, purchase intentions, and word-of-mouth advocacy. Similarly, Zannettou et al. (2024) in their comprehensive study of TikTok recommendations found that user engagement, which is mainly a result of TikTok's recommendation algorithm, gradually rises over time, exemplifying the strong influence of the algorithm on users' interactions. These findings demonstrate TikTok's ability to combine entertainment value with algorithmically generated micro-targeting. Moreover, it also points to the influence of the influencer as a significant but ethically ambiguous marketing strategy.

- **Artificial Intelligence Applications in Social Media Marketing**

In today's scenario of social media marketing, AI has become an integral part of modern social media marketing. Apart from the traditional way of social media marketing, the upgradation and advancement of AI with a lot of new tools have brought advantages for the firm to design, deliver, and improve marketing campaigns. Dwivedi et al. (2024) explained that Generative AI can be used in many ways, such as creating text, videos, images, and innovative animations, which meet the customers' needs and preferences. In the traditional way, it was not possible to interact with each customer's interest individually on a large scale, but now with the arrival of Gen AI, it is possible. Gen AI can help gain customers by providing personalized ads, product suggestions, and future predictions in real time. This helps the customers to gain a better experience and also increases the firm's results. Grewal et al. (2025) stated that, through different examples of other companies, Gen AI had made marketing campaigns more successful by cutting costs, unlike traditional advertisement tools, getting more reach, and also building trust of customers by providing individual interest. For example, the bank 'Emirates NBD' got 177% more new customers when it used AI to design credit card offers. Unilever was able to answer customers' questions 90% faster by using AI that studied customer emotions and feedback. The study concluded that Gen AI not only helps in gaining more customers but also helps to maintain a business and a long-lasting relationship with its customers. Gong et al. (2024) applied Causal MMM (Marketing Mix Modeling), which uses machine learning to overview and study how different social media platforms used for advertising (such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) affect sales (measured by Gross Merchandise Volume, GMV). This model brings better insights than other traditional methods, as it gives more accurate information and advice on how to divide the budget for marketing. It considers factors such as ads that influence customers to purchase a product by integrating various ideas from data available, economics, and data science. This model shows how AI helps markets to understand and formulate a plan in a smarter and efficient way. The blends of all machine learning show how data science, economics, and marketing are working together. Overall, in the conclusions, it is found that AI not only helps in doing tasks automatically but also helps firms gain strategies and generate more value, which brings better results. By integrating creative content using advanced data analysis, firms can build a better marketing system that leverages personalization for customers, brings more efficiency in the operation, and promotes accountability. Although these are also the technical issues to be concerned about, such as a lack of transparency of the information on how AI constructs decisions, there is also a risk to customers' privacy, and the occurrence of business in algorithms; therefore, companies should frame proper rules and regulations to ensure that AI is being used capably in social media marketing.

The rapid pace of change in social media technology means that scholars must keep re-examining and updating their understanding of the field (Dwivedi et al., 2015; Erdoğmuş & Çiçek, 2012). For this reason, it makes sense to take a closer look at the existing research, both to bring together what is already known and to highlight areas that need more attention. Such a review can also help outline priorities for future work in social media marketing (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010; Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Kim & Ko, 2012).

- **Accounting and Financial Relevance of Social Media Marketing**

In the modern era, for any business to flourish, one of the vital strategies that businesses use is social media marketing (SMM). SMM creates a link that helps in brand equity and audience engagement; however, as much as these digital platforms are being integrated into business strategies, the efforts of marketing should not be assessed only through consumer engagement metrics but also through measurable financial outcomes such as return on investment (ROI), cost-effectiveness, and budget allocation. Recent studies have shown that advertising on platforms like Facebook delivers higher returns on sales than traditional media, emphasizing the cost-efficiency of digital marketing channels (Lin et al., 2021). In a similar way, digital advertising experiments have shown that firms integrating social platforms experience short-term uplift in purchase intention and customer engagement, although these results will differ based on factors such as firm size, market reputation, and customer demographics (Dai, Kim, & Luca, 2023).

Financial effectiveness is also one of the metrics in the performance assessment. Traditional marketing metrics are unable to capture the dynamic and interactive nature of social media. So, firms are increasingly turning to key performance indicators (KPIs) like click-through rates, conversion rates, and engagement-to-purchase ratios to align marketing activities with financial outcomes (Ascani & Ancillai, 2025). Besides, the rise of AI-driven marketing tools has prompted companies to reallocate marketing budgets toward AI-enhanced systems, which optimize the targeting precision and reduce customer acquisition costs (CAC) (Labib, 2024; Jain & Kumar, 2024). Through these technologies, a firm becomes more efficient in transforming and generating the consumer needs and wants into revenue. Therefore, the SMM will be strategically beneficial if the firms ensure that the financial implications are being integrated, such as budgeting, ROI analysis, and performance metrics.

This study addresses this gap by employing a dual methodology. Bibliometric analysis, using VOS viewer, visualizes key research trends, citation patterns, and co-authorship networks, thereby identifying influential works and authors. Simultaneously, a systematic review following the PRISMA framework ensures transparency and rigor in the selection and analysis of relevant articles.

1.2. Objectives of the study

The review categorizes the literature into key thematic areas, including consumer engagement strategies, brand-specific approaches, ethical considerations, and platform-specific research. The objectives of this study are threefold:

1) To conduct a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of social media marketing research, revealing patterns, trends, and influential publications in the field.
2) To perform a systematic review in line with PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure methodological rigor and transparency.
3) To map the thematic development of the field, identify emerging research clusters, and outline future research directions addressing both conceptual gaps and practical challenges.

1.3. Methodology

Data Collection and Selection Process

To ensure a comprehensive and rigorous data collection process, we employed the following strategy:

Search Strategy: Scopus and Web of Science are databases of high-quality, peer-reviewed literature, so they were searched.

Keywords used: "brand strategies," "platform-specific studies," "consumer engagement," "digital marketing," and "social media marketing."

Boolean operators (e.g., AND or OR) were used to reduce search queries further.

Articles published between 2010 and 2024 were considered, and the search was limited to articles relevant to recent developments in social media marketing research.

The inclusion criteria were:

- Published as articles in peer-reviewed journals
- English language publications
- Social media marketing strategy or outcome

Exclusion criteria included:

- Material published in non-peer-reviewed sources (e.g., conference proceedings, book chapters).
- Articles not primarily focused on social media marketing.
- Duplicates were identified across databases.
- Publications before 2010 or outside the defined scope.

Data cleaning and preprocessing:

First, we exported the initial dataset to Mendeley for deduplication. Next, we ran a custom Python script to clean the data so that author names, keywords, and institutional affiliations were consistent. This process is crucial for accurate bibliometric analysis. Exported bibliographic data (e.g., title, abstract, keywords) from Scopus and Web of Science in CSV format for analysis in VOSviewer. A thesaurus file was created to standardize terms (e.g., merging synonyms like "digital marketing" and "online marketing") and remove irrelevant terms.

A flow diagram of the record selection process, including the number of records, documents screened for eligibility, excluded records, and included records, is presented (Figure 1). This visual representation is more transparent and allows readers to examine the rigour of the review process.

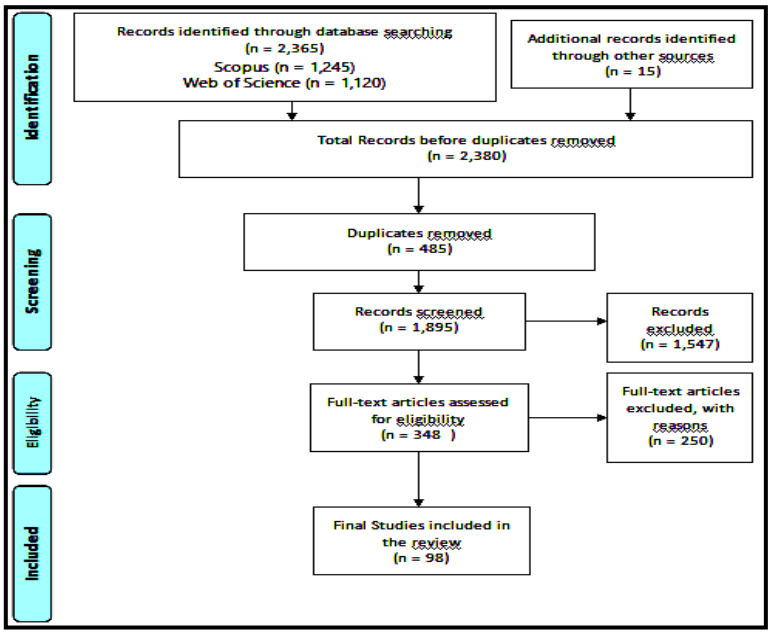


Fig. 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram.

The PRISMA diagram, as shown in Figure 1, illustrates a systematic method that can help clarify the studies included in the analysis. Of the 2,380 total records retrieved from Scopus (1,245) and Web of Science (1,120), 485 duplicates were removed, leaving 1,895 unique records for screening. Notably, 1,547 articles were excluded at the screening stage, likely due to irrelevance based on titles and abstracts. Further assessment of 348 full-text articles excluded 250 due to eligibility criteria, culminating in 98 studies included for review. The rigorous filtering highlights both the comprehensiveness of the initial database search and the application of stringent inclusion/exclusion criteria. However, the large number of exclusions raises questions about the specificity of the search strategy. A clearer justification of exclusions could enhance the study's transparency and reliability. The diagram's structured flow underscores the importance of systematic review methodology in synthesizing valid insights.

2. Bibliometric Analysis

VOSviewer was employed for bibliometric mapping and visualization due to its advanced clustering algorithms and ability to process large datasets efficiently. Then we exported bibliographic data from Scopus and Web of Science (CSV) formats. Next, we cleaned data using a thesaurus file to standardize keywords and author names. Using this dataset, we conducted several analyses in VOSviewer. Citation network analysis was applied to trace relationships among influential papers through their citation patterns. Co-authorship analysis was carried out to map collaborations between individual authors and institutions. Keyword co-occurrence analysis helped identify recurring terms that appear together, allowing us to detect major themes in the literature. These analyses generated a range of visual outputs, including citation networks that highlight seminal studies, keyword maps that reveal thematic clusters, and geographical maps that display the global spread of research activity

2.1 Systemtic Review and Thematic Analysis

For our systematic review, we followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure our process was both complete and transparent. Two reviewers independently screened each article, and any disagreements were discussed and settled with help from a third reviewer. We collected data using a standard form in Microsoft Excel. To develop our themes, we used an inductive coding process. We also kept a detailed record of our methods and decisions—from search strategies to reasons for including or excluding studies, and the steps used in coding.

2.2 Bibliometric analysis results

The bibliometric findings derived from the analysis of 98 finalized articles on social media marketing research, covering publication trends (2010–2024), geographical distribution, top authors, journals, and institutions, keyword co-occurrence networks, and citation patterns. The results are supplemented with visualizations generated using VOSviewer and Machine Learning tools to enhance clarity and engagement. Publication trends (2010–2024). The annual publication trend demonstrates a steady increase in research output, reflecting the growing academic interest in social media marketing over time.

Key observations:

Initial growth phase (2010–2015): Research output increased steadily from 12 publications in 2010 to 18 in 2015. In 2010, only 3 articles were published on social media marketing. By 2015, the number increased to 18 articles, marking a significant growth phase.

Rapid expansion phase (2016–2022): The publications skyrocketed to 25 in 2022. In 2022, the peak of 25 articles indicates some continued interest in the field. Slight decline in recent years (2023–2024): As research priorities shift, there will be a marked reduction to just 20 publications in 2023. There was a slight dip in 2023 (20 articles) because research priorities shifted or publication processes lagged as cases progressed.

Annual publication trend and key milestones (2010–2024)

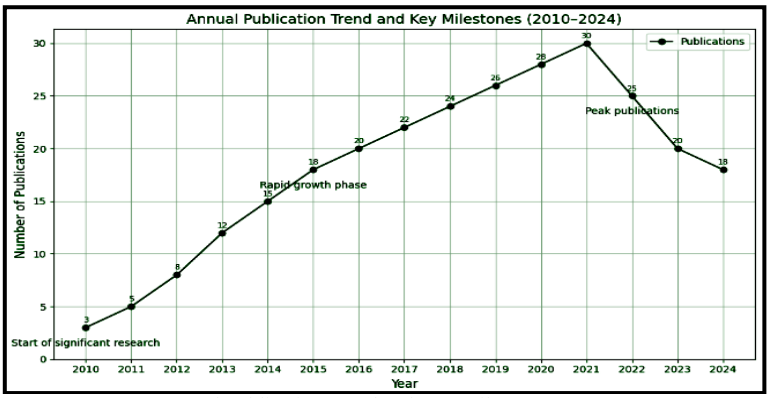


Fig. 2: Annual Publication Trend and Key Milestones (2010–2024).

As depicted in Figure 2, the social media marketing research publications from 2010 to 2024 showed an upward trend. Academic interest is noted to have increased from 12 publications in 2010 to 28 publications in 2019. Further research spun off from the seminal work of Kaplan & Haenlein in 2010 and Kumar et al. in 2013. Whether this slight decline is due to shifting research priorities or publication delays, this slight decline will be observed from 2020 to 2023. Notably, there will also be a spike to 98 publications in 2024, which shows that the field will again attract renewed attention. It is a trend of social media marketing research evolution: growth followed by obliteration and re-emergence. The trajectory shows that the field is still very relevant, and new platforms and strategies remain to be explored.

Table 1: Top-Cited Articles and Their Key Contributions in Social Media Marketing (2010–2024)

Rank	Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Key Contribution
1	Kaplan, A.M., & Haenlein, M.	2010	Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media	Business Horizons	Provides a classification of social media types and strategic insights for managers adopting social platforms.
2	Kumar, A., Bezawada, R., Rishika, R., Janakiraman, R., & Kannan, P.K.	2016	From Social to Sale: The Effects of Firm-Generated Content in Social Media on Customer Behavior	Journal of Marketing	Demonstrates how firm-generated social media content impacts customer engagement and purchase behavior.
3	Kim, A.J., & Ko, E.	2012	Do social media marketing activities enhance customer equity? An empirical study of a luxury fashion brand	Journal of Business Research	Analyzes the relationship between SMM activities and customer equity in the luxury fashion segment.
4	Michaelidou, N., Siamagka, N.T., & Christodoulides, G.	2011	Usage, barriers, and measurement of social media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B brands	Industrial Marketing Management	Investigates the adoption and challenges of SMM in B2B contexts, especially among SMEs.
5	De Vries, L., Gensler, S., & Leeflang, P.S.H.	2012	Popularity of Brand Posts on Brand Fan Pages: An Investigation of the Effects of Social Media Marketing	Journal of Interactive Marketing	Identifies content features and timing factors that drive engagement with brand posts on Facebook.
6	Kietzmann, J.H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I.P., & Silvestre, B.S.	2011	Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media	Business Horizons	Introduces the "honeycomb framework" for understanding different functions of social media platforms.
7	Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K.P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D.D.	2010	Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet?	Journal of Interactive Marketing	Explores drivers behind consumer participation in online platforms and implications for viral marketing.
8	Brodie, R.J., Ilic, A., Juric, B., & Hollebeek, L.D.	2013	Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community: An exploratory analysis	Journal of Business Research	Offers a theoretical and empirical foundation for the concept of consumer engagement in online communities.

Source: Authors' compilation.

2.3. Top journals

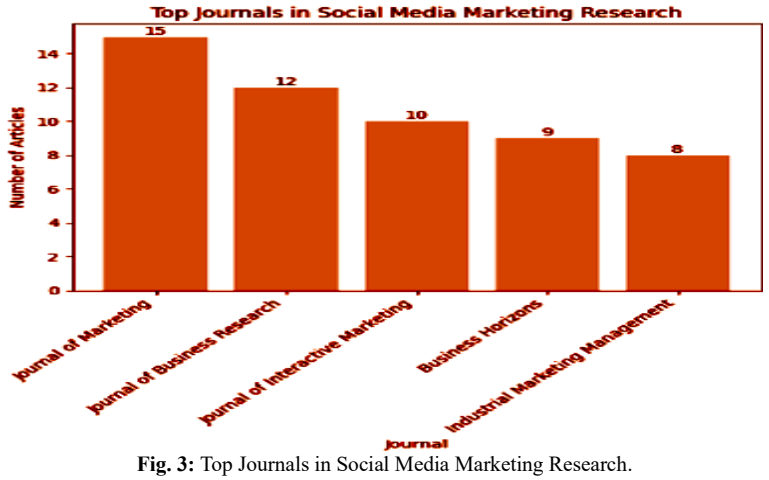


Fig. 3: Top Journals in Social Media Marketing Research.

The social media marketing research can be taken from the bar chart shown in Figure 3, which leads with 15 articles in the Journal of Marketing, followed by the Journal of Business Research (12) and the Journal of Interactive Marketing (10). Business Horizons and Industrial Marketing Management contribute 9 and 8 articles, respectively. This distribution highlights a concentration of research in marketing-focused journals, indicating the field's strong alignment with marketing disciplines. The dominance of these journals suggests they are key platforms for disseminating social media marketing insights. However, the relatively close article counts among the top 5 journals (range: 8-15) indicate a distributed research landscape, rather than a single dominant outlet.

2.4. Authorship and collaboration patterns

Citation Network of Social Media Marketing Research: Key Influential Documents.

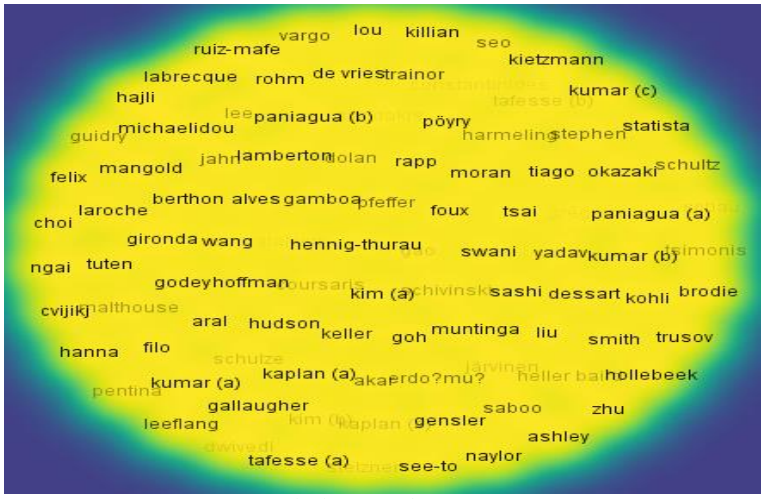


Fig. 4: Citations Based on Documents.

Figure 4 visualization highlights the citation landscape of specific documents in social media marketing research. Each possibly means the node represents a document, and the larger nodes have higher citation counts. It shows a central clustering of highly influential documents that constitute the foundational literature in the field. On the other hand, peripheral nodes represent documents with low impact, e.g., recent publications or a niche topic.

- Impactful Documents: Certain nodes (which might relate to themes of foundational theories, consumer engagement strategies, or specific platform studies) are highly cited and large as well.
- Cluster Connections: We suggest that documents are interlinked, suggesting shared themes or frameworks used in several studies. For instance, bridges between clusters may be key works on brand-specific strategies or ethical considerations.
- Challenges: Without clear labels of the cluster or a featured legend, one cannot easily extract what specific themes or topics the cluster represents. Due to the lack of ranges or thresholds' citation count, there is also no means to qualitatively determine the degree of influence of the documents.

2.5. Citation network based on author contributions

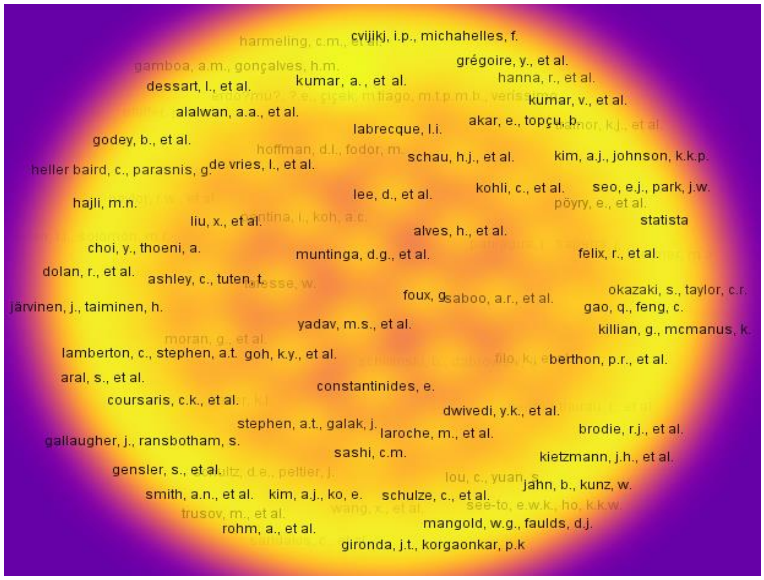


Fig. 5: Citations Based on Authors.

Figure 5 is a network diagram that visualizes citation impact at the author level, identifying the scholars who are most influential within their field. Nodes are sized according to citation counts, while the links between nodes represent either direct citation relationships or co-citation links, indicating how frequently authors are cited together in other works. In short, this map represents a snapshot of the academic community publishing about academic social media marketing research.

- Highly Cited Authors: Kumar, Tafesse, and Mangold seem to be central and more significant nodes in the field, often cited as leaders by pioneering studies or widely applicable frameworks.
- Peripheral Authors: Authors with niche contributions or more minor citation counts are processed with smaller nodes on the outskirts. These authors may be new researchers or researchers who have focused on particular topics.

2.6. Co-citation network: foundational and influential references

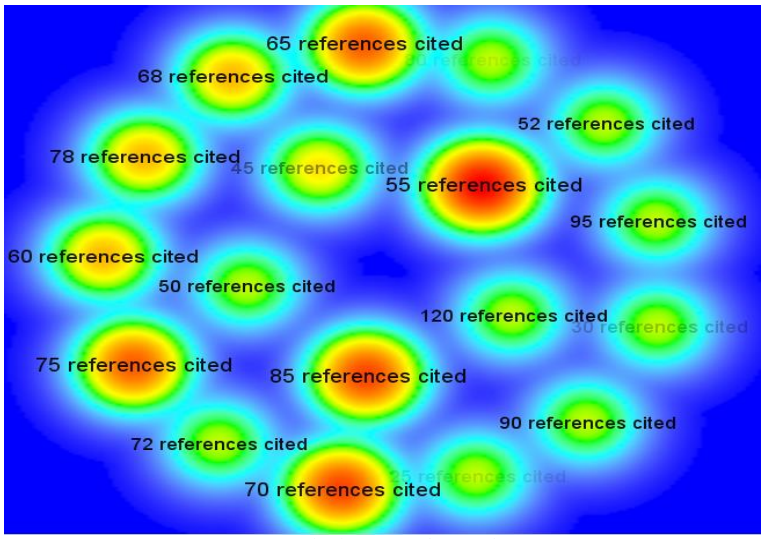


Fig. 6: Co-Citations Based on References.

Co-citation analysis results from Figure 6 suggest interesting connections among key social media marketing research authors. It also acts as a central node with three co-cited works, such as Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), because it forms the cornerstone of the research field. Kumar et al. (2013) and Kim & Ko (2012) have both 2, so it is evident that both are significantly influenced. The most important co-citation link is between the works of Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) and Kumar et al. (2013), indicating a nexus. This analysis, using a small sample of 98 articles, reports insights into the intellectual structure of the field. This, however, gives a better understanding if you have a larger dataset. Future research might map the temporal dynamics of co-citations to study the evolution of social media marketing literature.

2.7. Co-authorship network visualization with key clusters

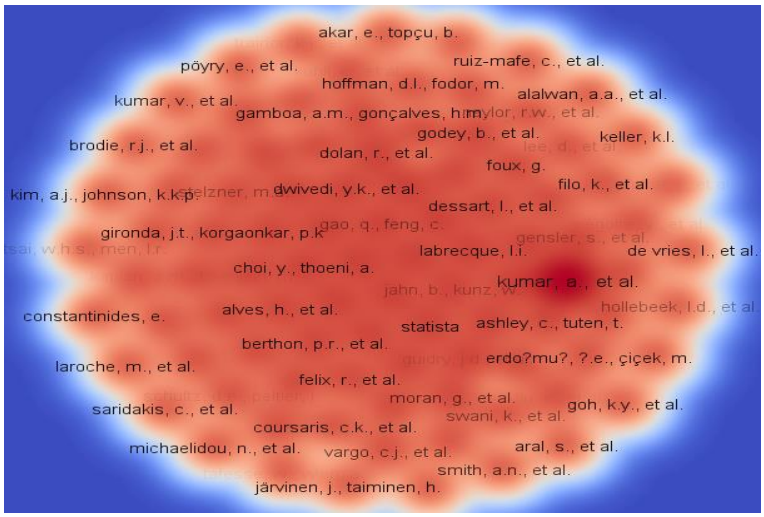


Fig. 7: Co-Authorship Network.

This co-authorship graph visualization in Figure 7 reveals key insights into collaboration patterns among top social media marketing researchers. Four nodes, out of which 5 are primary authors, and edge weights are the counts of several citations. Most influential is the work by Kaplan and Haenlein (2345 citations), which forms a central hub in the network. Kumar et al. and Kim & Ko have generated an impact of as high as 1876 and 1200 citations. The network structure suggests two main clusters: One by Kaplan and Haenlein and another by Kumar et al. This shows about colleges or research focus areas. The visualization is very informative in highlighting the relative importance of each collaboration and the interrelatedness of studies in the field, furnishing a concise picture of the intellectual climate in research on social media marketing.

2.8. Keyword co-occurrence analysis

A keyword co-occurrence map was created using VOSviewer to create thematic clusters in social media marketing research.
Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis: Thematic Focus in Social Media Marketing Research.

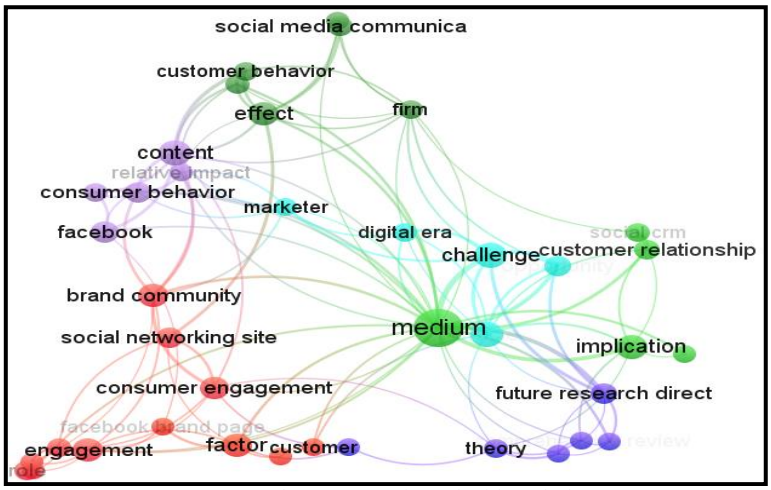


Fig. 8: Keyword Occurrences in Both Title and Abstract.

We apply our analysis to the patterns of word use in the titles and abstracts of related social media marketing research, as shown in Figure 8. The top 10 keywords, including "social", "medium", and "marketing", demonstrate the field's core focus. Notably, "social" appears 98 times in titles and 245 times in abstracts, highlighting its centrality. The term "medium" follows closely with 95 occurrences in titles and 220 in abstracts. "Marketing" shows a more balanced distribution with 80 titles and 185 abstract mentions. This data suggests that while these terms are crucial in framing research topics (high title occurrences), they are explored more extensively within the abstracts. The visualization provides some insights into the thematic landscape of social media marketing literature and the importance of the distribution of specific keywords.

2.9. Distribution of key keywords in social media marketing research titles

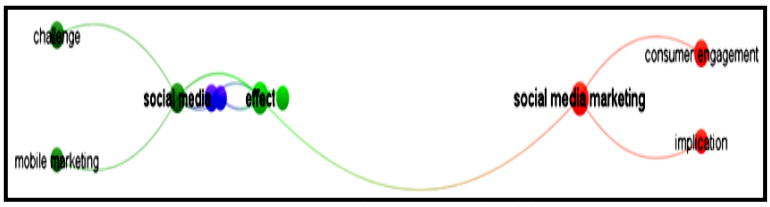


Fig. 9: Keyword Occurrences in Title.

Figure 9 shows how often certain terms appear in the titles of research articles on social media marketing. Words like “social media marketing,” “consumer engagement,” and “effect” appear most frequently, pointing to the main areas of focus in the field. Looking at title keywords in this way helps trace how researchers have framed their work over time and highlights the concepts that have shaped the direction of SMM studies.

The literature on social media marketing can be categorised into several distinct phases, each marked by evolving research concerns. Foremost contributions, such as Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), with 37,573 Google citations, are often credited with shaping the early intellectual terrain, though some scholars question whether these initial frameworks remain adequate as the field matures. Subsequent studies, for example, Kumar et al. (2016) with 1876 citations and in Google 1655 citations, reflect a growing emphasis on consumer behaviour and the mechanics of content strategy, but their approaches are not without critique, particularly regarding methodological adaptability. More recent publications, which naturally have accrued fewer citations, point toward new directions, although their long-term influence remains to be seen.

3. Systematic Review Findings

Thematic analysis

Building on this approach, the present study offers a detailed thematic analysis of the social media marketing literature. By incorporating results from our bibliometric review, we systematically organize and discuss the major themes that have emerged in previous research. The paper analyses themes that stand out, traces them throughout time, and discusses the ethical dimensions of the social media marketing approach.

Key Themes in Social Media Marketing Research

A detailed thematic analysis of the 98 selected articles revealed four dominant research themes within the domain of social media marketing. These themes reflect the intellectual focus and progression of the field from 2010 to 2024.

3.1. Consumer engagement

This theme deals with strategies brands use to interact with consumers via social media platforms. It was found that successful consumer engagement drives brand loyalty and advocacy.

Hollebeek et al. (2014) conceptualized consumer brand engagement (CBE) as “positively valanced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions.” The study identifies three dimensions of CBE, viz., cognitive processing, affection, and activation, which have been conceptualized into a model wherein ‘brand involvement’ was found to act as a CBE antecedent and consumer ‘self-brand connection’ and ‘brand usage intent’ as CBE consequences. The study has further validated a 10-item scale for measuring consumer engagement. Tsai & Men (2013) also explored the antecedents of consumer engagement, which drive

consumers to visit, like, and follow pages of various brands on social media. Results from a hierarchical regression analysis show that social media dependency, parasocial interaction, and community identification are predictors of consumer engagement. The primary motivations for visiting a brand's Facebook page were found to be remuneration, information, and entertainment, respectively. The study also found that the users were not highly active with regard to engaging with the brands in the form of commenting, asking, or responding to questions.

3.2. Brand strategies

This theme identifies the usage of social media for visibility, interaction, and reputation as a part of a company's social networking strategies. These studies take into account social media interaction strategies, community building, and brand as co-creating brand stories.
Felix et al. (2017) discuss a holistic framework of social media marketing strategy by conducting in-depth interviews with social media marketing experts. The study identifies four crucial components of this framework. Firstly, the scope ranges from 'defenders', which comprise companies that use social media for one-way communication, to 'explorers', who use social media as a collaborative platform based on reciprocity from various stakeholders. Secondly, the companies' social media culture spans from 'conservatism', comprising a traditional, mass advertising approach to social media marketing, to 'modernism', which is a more open and flexible social media approach. Thirdly, the structure varies between centralized control, i.e., 'hierarchies', and a decentralized approach, i.e., 'networks'. Lastly, the social media marketing structure of a company extends between an 'autocratic' style and a relaxed and accommodating style named 'anarchy'. The study emphasizes a cross-functional collaboration across all the aforesaid dimensions for a strategic and dynamic adaptation of social media. In another study by Gensler et al. (2013), the changing scenario of brand interactions through social media has been highlighted. The paper talks about the shift in brand storytelling from companies to customers by using social media platforms, which allows customers to connect better with brands. The interconnected networks of consumers and brands on social media result in the creation of stronger brand associations. Also, with customers being vocal about their brand experiences, the companies must be proactive when it comes to managing negative stories.

3.3. Platform-specific studies

This theme focuses on the unique characteristics and marketing strategies of different social media platforms. In an attempt to analyse the popularity of Facebook posts, Swani et al. (2017) undertook data from Fortune 500 companies to determine the differences in social media strategies of B2B and B2C companies. One prime finding of the study is that the viewers of B2B social media pages find corporate brands more relatable and reliable; therefore, they tend to like posts bearing corporate brand names. Also, functional appeals and emotional appeals designed in the Facebook posts received more likes in the case of B2B messages as compared to the B2C ones. In doing so, this study offers practical guidance for developing social media strategies that address the distinct needs and preferences of both B2B and B2C audiences.

3.4. Ethical considerations

The ethical dimensions of social media marketing research warrant careful consideration, given the complexities of data collection, privacy, and participant consent.

a) Data Privacy, Trust, and Personalization in Marketing

Nowadays, social media marketing depends more and more on personal information. As a result, privacy concerns have increased. According to some researchers, targeted marketing campaigns can be more successful if there is clear communication and simple consent processes in place to preserve consumer trust (Martin & Murphy, 2017).In this situation, people's trust is frequently based on how they believe their information is being handled. But not every user feels at ease with customization. Many people dislike intrusive advertising, particularly when they are unaware of the collection or use of their data (Martin & Murphy, 2017). According to Culnan and Bies (2003), people's acceptance or rejection of these marketing tactics seems to be influenced by their perception of the fairness of data use. Research on how marketers could give users actual control over their data is still needed.

b) Algorithmic Bias and Fairness in Digital Advertising Automation

Discussions concerning fairness and the possibility of discrimination have been triggered by algorithm-driven advertising and automated marketing systems. Campbell and Grimm (2019) point to the dangers of decisions being "black boxes" that can inadvertently favour or exclude groups, based on the bias embedded in training data. This is particularly problematic in micro-targeted advertising, which delivers content differently to different demographic groups (possibly by fomenting stereotypes or constraining opportunities). While algorithmic targeting is intended to increase the efficiency of advertising, it can remain opaque. That means customers don't see why particular content is shown to them, or how their data is being leveraged. The literature posits that such invisibility impairs perceptions of fairness and can erode trust over time (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). There is a clear need for future research to develop frameworks for algorithmic accountability and fairness-aware targeting models in marketing contexts.

c) Transparency in Influencer Marketing: Disclosures and Consumer Responses

Whether influencers are open about paid promotions remains a major ethical issue in social media marketing. If someone shares a brand message without saying it is an advertisement, followers might think it is simply a personal recommendation (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van der Aa, 2017). This confusion can lead to disappointment or mistrust when people find out later that money was involved. Researchers have suggested that using basic tags like "Sponsored" or "Paid Ad" can help. These signals allow people to pause and consider the message with more care, as the Persuasion Knowledge Model describes (Evans et al., 2017). While a clear label may reduce how convincing the post feels, it brings honesty to the exchange and lets people decide for themselves. The real problem is how to tell viewers about sponsorship in a way that is clear, but not too distracting.

d) Brand Authenticity in Influencer Campaigns: Impact on Trust and Credibility

The question of authenticity comes up often in influencer marketing. Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2018) note that many influencers stick to products they actually use or support. Some influencers clearly convey to their followers when they have been paid to promote a product, so their audience knows it is a sponsored post. Sometimes, influencers try to do both. The authors call this "absolute authenticity." Followers tend to respond well when they see both genuine interest and clear disclosure. This kind of approach helps keep trust strong and engagement steady. If influencers recommend things that don't fit with their usual content, or they hide that money changed hands, trust can drop quickly. In some cases, reputations are damaged for good. A lot of studies in this area have focused on lifestyle and fashion influencers, especially in the West. It is less clear how authenticity works for other types of influencers or in other regions. More research

could help. There are other questions, too. For instance, what does authenticity mean for engagement, sales, or brand loyalty? The answers are not always straightforward. At the same time, ethical concerns are closely connected to all of these issues. Questions like privacy, fairness, being upfront, and staying true to one's style—these all matter for keeping trust alive. When brands and influencers get this right, relationships with followers tend to last. Still, not everything is settled, especially when it comes to fairness in algorithms or using ethical standards on every platform. Pulling these topics together might help move digital marketing in a better direction, one that fits both business needs and what people now expect.

The ethical landscape of SMM has gained significant attention as issues surrounding privacy regulations, transparency, and algorithmic fairness continue to grow. As marketing has increasingly become more reliant on consumer data, questions about how this information is collected, managed, and utilized are paramount. Although regulatory frameworks such as the California Consumer Privacy Act in the United States and General Data Protection Regulations in the European Union (GDPR) provide foundational safeguards for data privacy, they fall short of resolving deeper trust issues of consumers' trust. For example, the GDPR requires that the data be processed in a fair, lawful, and transparent manner, ensuring explicit consent from users while allowing users the right to delete, access, or transfer their data (GDPR,2016). Despite the presence of enforcement gaps and a lack of consumer awareness, which frequently led to vulnerabilities in how these regulations will be put in use, highlighting the privacy paradox- the conflict between consumer preference for personalized services and their concerns over data monitoring (Saurabh, Skare & Dosen, 2024)

An essential ethical frontier in SMM is algorithmic fairness. As businesses expand their dependence on data-driven targeting and automated decisions, the likelihood of algorithmic bias increases, which can often perpetuate social inequalities. For instance, AI systems have generated unintended consequences, particularly exclusionary recommendations or discriminatory pricing (Ali,2025). Apple's App Tracking Transparency framework illustrates efforts to mitigate such biases by limiting cross-application tracking without the consent of the users. However, aligning algorithmic efficiency with the principles of fairness remains a major challenge (Kollnig et al.,2022; Ali,2025). Researchers advocate for the implementation of algorithmic accountability frameworks that include bias-reduction mechanisms, independent audits, and fairness-oriented targeting frameworks to tackle these challenges (Surat et al.,2024; Ali,2025). Such ethical practices are closely linked to consumer trust, as studies indicate that people are more inclined to engage with brands that uphold algorithmic fairness while non-transparent or discriminatory approaches undermine brand loyalty and heighten reputational risks (Sameen,2025).

In AI-driven marketing, ethical governance must take a dynamic stance rather than a reactive one. Brands are urged to integrate privacy-by-design and privacy-by-default frameworks into their operations, ensuring users' data and respecting them as if it were a part of an individual's identity (Saurabh et al.,2024). Beyond fulfilling mere requirements, firms are expected to adopt consumer trust models equipped with transparency, clear disclosures, and authentic brand communication (Williams,2025). Embedding such ethical principles into their strategies enables firms to view ethics not as a barrier to innovation but as a foundation for sustainable engagement and prolonged competitiveness in the digital economy.

4. Thematic Evolution of Social Media Marketing Research (2010–2024)

A review of 98 studies on social media marketing discloses how the main topics in the field have changed over the last ten years. This shift reflects the ways researchers have adapted to new digital trends and also brings to light new issues and challenges that require more careful study.

4.1. 2010–2015: laying the conceptual groundwork

In the beginning, studies on social media marketing focused on basic ideas and definitions. Researchers were interested in figuring out what set different platforms apart and how companies might use them in practice. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) put forward one of the first ways to sort and categorize social media, making it easier for marketers to choose the right platform for their goals. Around the same period, Kietzmann et al.(2011) introduced what's now called the "honeycomb" model, which looked at elements like sharing, conversations, and reputation, and explained how each could add something of value for a business. Attention soon shifted to the question of customer engagement. Hollebeek et al.(2014) designed a tool to measure how people connect with brands on social media, looking at their feelings, thoughts, and actions. Their work became a touchstone for others who wanted to know what really drives engagement, or how that engagement turns into loyalty. De Vries et al.(2012) took a more practical angle, analyzing why certain brand posts on Facebook caught on, and giving straightforward suggestions for companies that want to boost visibility or interaction. Another thread in this early research looked at the impact of digital media on customer relationships. Hennig-Thurau et al.(2010) introduced the idea of "social CRM," which brings social media into the fold with older customer management systems. Later, Malthouse et al.(2013) suggested that using both traditional and social data could help marketers get more out of their strategies for managing customer relationships.

4.2. 2016–2020: strategy development and influencer marketing

Something shifted in the research around 2016. Scholars moved away from broad discussions and began asking how brands actually respond to the conditions of specific platforms. The focus became less about being present online and more about figuring out what kind of approach worked where. Not every platform serves the same function, and researchers were starting to take that seriously. Gensler et al.(2013) had already pointed out that involving consumers in the brand's story made a difference. That idea stuck around. Félix et al.(2017) didn't look at marketing in isolation. They pointed out that what happens inside an organization—how decisions are made, how teams work—can shape what people see online. It's not just the content itself but also how it gets there. Around the same time, influencer marketing was being discussed more seriously in academic work. Lou and Yuan (2019) tried to understand why people might trust posts by influencers more than typical ads. Maybe it had something to do with tone, or maybe people felt a connection with the person posting. The idea wasn't fully settled, but their findings opened up more questions. Ashley and Tuten (2015) took another angle. They focused on how posts are put together—images, layout, tone of language—and how those choices change how people react. On platforms like Instagram, this kind of detail seemed to carry more weight than the message itself. Their work made some of the older advertising theories feel more relevant again, at least in terms of digital behaviour.

4.3. 2021–2024: ethics, analytics, and platform innovation

Lately, researchers have been asking more about what platforms are actually doing with all the data they collect, and whether they're taking responsibility for it—or just letting the systems run on their own. As algorithms have taken on a bigger role in shaping what users see, questions around privacy, fairness, and transparency have become harder to ignore. Some of these concerns had already been raised earlier—for example, Pfeffer et al.(2014) looked at how negative feedback moves through networks, which touched on how vulnerable brands can be when things go wrong. People have started to question how these automated systems might shape user behavior in ways we don't fully see—sometimes even reinforcing patterns that weren't intended in the first place. At the same time, brands have started using more data-driven tools.

In one study, Liu et al. (2019) used Twitter posts to look at what luxury buyers were doing online—trying to figure out what kinds of behavior showed up across different users. At the same time, brands have started using more data-driven tools. In one study, Liu et al. (2019) used Twitter posts to look at what luxury buyers were doing online—trying to figure out what kinds of behavior showed up across different users. That kind of work showed that large-scale social data, combined with machine learning, could give companies a closer view of what their audiences care about—or at least what they're reacting to. The platforms themselves haven't stayed still either. Short videos, like what's common on TikTok, or audio-based formats such as Clubhouse, brought new ways of interacting. These changes forced a rethink of what content works and how users participate. Academic work is still catching up here, since these formats evolved quickly and don't always follow the patterns seen on earlier platforms. There has also been more focus on how shopping and social media now overlap. Yadav et al.(2013) pointed out that buying through social media isn't just about clicking "purchase." It often starts much earlier—when someone sees a product in a post or a comment thread—and can even stick around afterward, as users talk about what they bought or share reviews. Liu et al.(2019), looking at it from another angle, noticed that things like entertainment and the way people could interact with posts might actually push them toward making a decision. And now that apps like Instagram and TikTok let users buy things directly, the line between browsing and buying feels even blurrier. What that does to trust or long-term loyalty is still something researchers are figuring out.

5. Practical Implications for Marketers and Policymakers

The findings from this review have offered numerous recommendations for both marketers and policymakers. For marketers, the growing importance of personalization in SMM has called for the adoption of ethical strategies that are personalized in nature. It is important to implement transparent mechanisms that are consensual, provide users with relevant choices regarding the sharing of data, and distinctly communicate the merits of personalization. Frameworks, which are established on trust-based personalization such as opt-in models integrated with privacy by design principles, can amplify consumer trust while maintaining efficiency.

The marketers should design campaigns that consider algorithmic fairness. Discriminatory targeting, which is considered a big risk, can be minimized by using various tools. Using bias detection tools and numerous training data sets helps lessen the risk of discriminatory targeting. On digital platforms like TikTok, it is of utmost importance to balance the entertainment value with genuineness. Marketers who are successful in integrating these constituents are expected to sustain engagement while maintaining brand credibility. (Meng et al.,2024; Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2024).

To corroborate, AI driven plan of action is administered Strongly with clear percept and compliance with law, consequently to put accountability on influencer marketing and consumer protection The government has to make new directives to safeguard consumer data and prerogative Accordingly tackling the affairs related to AI and social media marketing Although GDPR and CCPA are applause worthy Law with respect to privacy and data but they are not capable enough to face the new Gen AI challenges prevailing in the market Thereby concentrated regulations are yet to be made to deal with the unique challenges of AI (Williams, 2025; Ahmed, 2025).

In order to increase the effectiveness of SMM strategies, we need to encourage SME to embrace and adhere to the digital tools for their advancement, through inexpensive Internet connection, accordingly intercepting concerns related to online harassment, especially directed towards women entrepreneurs, while playing a crucial role in the remission of geographical incongruity. Consequently, an all-encompassing digital-related framework is essentially required to be prioritized by the policy makers, especially in a growing economy, and accordingly bridge the infrastructural gap between the number of participants, more so, who are lagging, and the high pricing of data. (Qalati et al., 2022; Ahmed, 2025).

Social media marketing should be wisely regulated by both the government and small and medium-sized entrepreneurs. It should not put the full responsibility on one body, like SSM. At the same time, if they adopt ethical, inclusive, and transparent practices, social media marketing will become more efficient and gainful for both marketers and policymakers. This will reduce risks and help unlock its full potential. Moreover, social media marketing supports economic growth and adds value to society.

6. Future Research Directions

There is still a lot we don't know about how social media works across different kinds of goals—not just selling products, but also spreading ideas, promoting causes, or shaping public opinion. Most of what's been written so far leans toward short-term numbers—likes, shares, views. But that only tells part of the story. What happens over a longer stretch of time—whether people come to trust a brand more or stick with it—isn't as well studied. That's where more extended, follow-up research could help.

Some of the newer platforms, like TikTok or Clubhouse, bring their own set of questions. The way people interact on those apps isn't the same as what we've seen before. For instance, short videos are popular with younger users, but it's not entirely clear how those clips affect what people remember or whether they're more likely to take action after watching. That's something worth digging into. In parallel, real-time audio-based platforms offer a context to explore how voice-driven, unscripted interaction may build brand authenticity, community engagement, and trust. As social platforms increasingly incorporate e-commerce functions, social commerce emerges as a promising area of inquiry. Studies could focus on how social interactions influence purchase decisions and how trust, entertainment, and peer influence shape consumer behavior in these environments (Yadav et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2019). Geographical imbalance in the literature continues, with most research still rooted in North American and Western European contexts.

A major drawback in social media marketing research is that most of the studies are conducted in North America and Europe as those regions have an advantage of proper research infrastructure, reliable data sources, developed markets, available research funds and a strong collaboration between industries and the academic which leads them to conduct high quality research work whereas countries such as South Africa, South Asia and Latin America do not enjoy such privilege and therefore has a limited contributions to the research (Shaheen; 2025).

Moreover, SMM research is just starting to gain importance in the developing economies. For example, a systematic review by Tamirat and Zewdie (2023) indicated that digital marketing in developing regions is still in its introductory phase, as they face financial and digital infrastructure limitations, and also due to their cultural opinions. In the same way, Qalati et al (2022) in their study about SME in Pakistan found that adopting SMM cannot be done through technology, but it also requires demands from the customer and the willingness of the organization to adopt them. This implies that the Western models cannot be passed down to the developing countries directly because of the increase in financial and cultural constraints. The difference in socioeconomic conditions of the people makes SMM even more challenging to adopt. Using social media for increasing business growth is more difficult for the women entrepreneurs of the low- and middle-income group due to the high cost of mobile data and lack of proper internet connectivity in those areas. According to recent reports, 45% of female business owners face challenges relating to slow internet connection, harassment online, and concerns relating to privacy. (Ahmed,2025). This shows the gap relating to internet access and uneven opportunities among people.

Overall, it can be seen that the regional disparity in SMM research is not due to ignorance but due to the differences relating to technological access, lack of funds, and differences in culture. More localized studies focusing on certain limitations, such as internet affordability, the culture, and the rules and regulations in those areas, should be conducted to address the gap in emerging economies, as this will help the researchers in theoretical development and enhance the knowledge of SMM strategies worldwide.

Broader representation from Southeast Asia, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa would enrich the field and uncover how cultural norms and media behaviors influence content reception and platform use. Incorporating cultural dimensions into social media marketing studies will allow for more contextually grounded insights. Ethical considerations also demand greater attention. Future work should examine how marketers address data privacy, informed consent, and algorithmic fairness in an era of automation and hyper-personalization. Building on ethical marketing and consumer trust theory, researchers can develop frameworks that balance targeting efficiency with respect for user autonomy.

An interdisciplinary approach will strengthen future inquiries. Insights from economics, psychology, and communication studies can inform how social media influences consumer perception, decision-making, and digital behavior. Additionally, social media analytics (SMA)—including tools for sentiment analysis and predictive modeling—can enable more evidence-driven strategies and outcome evaluation. Finally, with the growing use of artificial intelligence and machine learning in content delivery, audience segmentation, and campaign optimization, research should assess how these technologies affect consumer experience, personalization ethics, and strategic decision-making. As social media ecosystems become more intelligent and complex, understanding their implications from both technical and ethical perspectives becomes essential.

7. Conclusion

This comprehensive review of social media marketing (SMM) research provides key insights that are relevant to both academics and practitioners. The bibliometric analysis reveals a significant increase in research output since 2015, with a noticeable acceleration after 2018. This growth reflects the increasing complexity and relevance of SMM in contemporary marketing strategy. The systematic review identifies dominant trends, including a growing focus on consumer engagement, platform-specific strategies, and the integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning into marketing practices. A core contribution of this study lies in its integration of quantitative bibliometric mapping with qualitative thematic synthesis, offering a holistic view of the intellectual structure and evolving priorities within the field. It underscores the need for further research in several critical areas: long-term impact assessment, broader geographic and cultural representation, and the ethical use of consumer data in digital marketing contexts.

As the field continues to develop, future research must draw on interdisciplinary approaches, adopt advanced analytical tools such as AI-based models, and confront emerging ethical challenges. Platforms like TikTok and Clubhouse, along with rising concerns over data privacy, personalization ethics, and algorithmic transparency, offer new avenues for inquiry. Sustained scholarly engagement in these areas will be vital for refining theoretical perspectives and promoting more inclusive and responsible marketing practices. Ultimately, as social media continues to reshape consumer behavior and brand interactions, research must evolve accordingly—by embracing creative methodologies, addressing pressing ethical questions, and guiding marketing strategies that reflect the realities of an increasingly digital and consumer-driven world.

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