

Social media influencers in China: A systematic review

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Abstract. Social media influencers (SMIs) and influencer marketing (IM) have been widely incorporated in China's marketing and advertising practices. The abundant academic literature is available in this area, featuring novel research based on American patterns. However, there is no systematic review to summarize these results, and scholarly work is inconsistent, incomplete, and fragmented. Moreover, due to differences in social culture and language, research results from China tend to be excluded from mainstream international discussion and are developing as an independent system, thus restricting research on SMIs/IM. In response, this study is the first systematic review of SMIs/IM research in China. Based on 91 studies from core Chinese journals, this study provides an overview of the current research and identifies five key themes. Using this analysis, the study synthesizes the findings, builds an integrative framework. Finally, future research directions and practical implications are presented.

Keywords: Social media influencers, influencer marketing, China, systematic literature review, live commerce, consumer behavior.

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, social media influencers (SMIs), or people who set trends and engage with a receptive audience on social media platforms, have been increasing their presence in marketing worldwide, thereby enabling firms to adopt influencer marketing (IM) (Farivar et al., 2021; Jia & Bie, 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021) to develop their brand on social media. Although both industry and academia have debated the effectiveness of IM, according to a 2018 study by the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), the advertising industry's oldest and largest trade association in the United States (US), at least 75% of companies engaged in IM are planning to use it going forward. In addition, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic led to higher traffic and engagement on influencer sites, boosting the importance of IM in practice. Social media and IM industries have evolved and matured; however, the theory of development cannot catch up with practice, as there are several gaps.

China has the largest number of internet users, and IM has been booming since 2016 (Jia & Bie, 2021; Xiao & Kang, 2016) with a huge market scale of over USD 38 million (2.5 billion RMB in 2019, data from Frost & Sullivan). Meanwhile, SMIs and IM are trending as important research topics leading to abundant accumulation of literature. However, we observe that China's SMIs/IM show characteristics that vary from the international mainstream pattern. In mainstream international journals, research on SMIs/IM seems to be overly reliant on American pattern, and the practical experience and theoretical results from other cultural contexts tend to be ignored. However, in many aspects, the Chinese IM pattern differs from American pattern. In a report, the ANA showed Facebook (86%) and Instagram (84%) to be the top social media channels for IM, with Instagram ranking as the single most important channel (36%), followed by Facebook at 20%.

We conducted this study because China has accumulated unique and abundant research on SMIs/IM; however, due to reasons such as language and culture, it has developed as an independent system, isolated from the international mainstream. Moreover, there is no systematic review or other meta-research on Chinese literature, so it is a complete research gap. We believe that this is a barrier that is impeding the development of SMIs/IM research. Thus, we conducted a systematic review of the current Chinese literature.

2. Methodology

We explored for relevant literature in three major Chinese electronic databases, namely CNKI, WANFANG DATA, and CQVIP. Using the Boolean OR operator, the search formula confirmed was: “Social media influencers” OR “Influencer marketing” OR “Influencer model” OR “EC social media influencer” OR “Social media influencer livestream” OR “Social media influencer livestream marketing” OR “Web live stream” OR “Live commerce of social media influencer.” Finally, the initial counts of hits from all three databases totaled 8595. To ensure the quality of this review, we limited our research to four standards: (a) peer-reviewed academic articles, (b) core Chinese journals, (c) coverage period, and (d) marketing/consumer study. Eventually, we selected 91 articles.

3. Descriptive Analysis

Before an in-depth analysis, we adopted descriptive analysis and converted the raw data into a form that will make it easy to understand and interpret, rearrange, order, and manipulate data to provide insightful information. This procedure offers a complete overview of the map and captures the trends, strengths, and weaknesses of existing works.

3.1 Year of publication

This research stream is still in the initial stages of investigation. As mentioned earlier, we set the coverage period from 2009 and expect to collect papers for at least a 10-year period, however, the earliest article was published in 2010 (but not in the sample that was not published in core journals). In fact, Chinese scholars commonly believe that 2016 is the beginning of the “SMIs era.” (Shi & Wang, 2018; Wang & Liu, 2017; Xiao & Kang, 2016) Thus, the earliest study in our sample was conducted in 2016. Eventually, 2 papers in 2016, 4 papers in 2017, 7 papers in 2018, 9 papers in 2019, 31 papers in 2020, 38 papers in 2021.

3.2 Type of study

We divided the sample into four main types: meta-research, narrative research, explanatory research, and normative research. Meta-research is a scientific method to study the science itself using methods, reporting, reproducibility, evaluation, and incentives. Narrative research focuses on the existence of marketing phenomena that actually occurred, thus it is a historical study. Explanatory research is used to understand the relationships between multiple events (antecedent-sequence). In marketing research, the relationships are usually built and tested by hypotheses. We divided explanatory research into two types: hypothesis-making research and hypothesis-proving research. Hypothesis-making research aims to build a new relationship in a new research area, focusing on developing new theories or hypotheses. Hypothesis proving research tests and prove the relationship between antecedent and consequence.

The largest share was explanatory research (including hypothesis-making research and hypothesis-proving research, 89.2%). More specifically, hypothesis-proving research (84.6%) was the most common type. This finding also indicates that the present research on IM lacks original conceptual contributions; previous IM studies mostly used existing theories to explain phenomena, build theoretical models, and select data for testing. Only one report presented meta-research (1.2%) (Jia & Bie, 2021); however, it reviewed English papers only, and Chinese meta-research has yet to be undertaken. Hypothesis-making research that focuses on developing new theories is also limited (4.6%). Overall, IM research has few conceptual contributions, and this dilemma is not observed in China, and the same problem also exists in English studies (Vrontis et al., 2021); therefore, this is a worldwide dilemma in this field.

3.3 Research method

We further analyzed the research method and data type of empirical studies. 86.2% of explanatory studies relied on the quantitative method. A purely qualitative research method was deployed by 8.6%. Nearly 5.2% had used mixed methods. Further, when we checked data collection methods, most studies had conducted a questionnaire survey (81.0%), and campus investigation (student sample: 13.8%) is the most common method. Only two studies (N=2, 3.4%, Che et al., 2019; Tang, 2020) conducted an experimental research design, two studies had conducted interviews (N=2, 3.4%, Han & Xu, 2020; Liu et al., 2020), and one study has used web crawling to collect real SMIs post data (Zhu & Gui, 2020).

3.4 Publication outlets

Based on the subject categories determined by the CNKI, we defined the sample's field. The sample distribution was very scattered, and 91 articles were scattered in 65 journals. The majority of studies belong to economics and management (36.9%), followed by marketing (13.8%), and economy (9.2%)/business (9.2%). We also found that 6.2% of the Garment Industry had published most of the articles. Therefore, it is not surprising that many articles (15.4%) in the samples focused only on the garment industry.

We also listed journals with the highest number of articles. As noted, China Business and Market (ISSN: 1007-8266) carries the most number of articles, followed by Foreign Economics & Management (ISSN: 1001-4950), Soft Science (ISSN: 1001-8409), Journal of Silk (ISSN: 1001-7003), Journal of Commercial Economics (ISSN: 2095-9397), China Circulation Economy (ISSN: 2096-3157), Enterprise Economy (ISSN: 1006-5024), Management and Administration (ISSN: 1003-3475), Price: Theory & Practice (ISSN: 1003-3971).

3.5 Type of social media influencers

It is important to classify SMIs as they may show different types of behavior on Simple Notification Service (SNS), play a distinct role in marketing strategy, and influence consumer behavior in multiple ways. There are several ways to categorize SMIs (e.g., fan number, industry, post content), and our method is based on the comparison perspective of SMIs in Chinese and English literature. In English studies, SMIs are commonly used as key opinion leaders (KOL); they partner with brands and share their opinions to promote a product/brand, but rarely sell them directly. Although the KOL pattern is popular in China, SMIs have a deeper connection with e-commerce (EC). Some scholars believe that the mega impact of Chinese SMIs can be attributed to the diffusion and strong promotion of e-commerce, and Chinese IM is a new marketing model with "the E-commerce gene" (Huang & Xia, 2016). Thus, many Chinese SMIs sell products directly to their fans. From the above, we divided our sample into Recommend type (SMIs only offer opinion or information but do not sell products) and Sale type (SMIs promote direct sales). Most SMIs discussed in the sample are the Sale type (72.3%).

4. Thematic Analysis

This process revealed five research themes: (1) influence of SMIs' personal factors on consumer outcomes and nature of SMIs; (2) content factor and consumer outcomes; (3) support system factor/scene factor and consumer outcomes; (4) psychological-related factors and consumer outcomes; (5) consumer response.

4.1 Influence of SMIs personal factors on consumer outcomes and nature of SMIs

The first and most common theme is the discussion on SMIs' personal factors and nature. Studies on this theme attempt to answer these questions: Who are SMIs? Which characteristics of SMIs influence customers, and how? Based on these answers, what is the nature of SMIs? Using the sample research, Figure 1 concludes the related stimulus variables of SMIs' personal factors, lists some

highly relevant psychological variables, and for improving understanding, we provide some practical examples. As Figure 1 shows, personal factors of SMIs can be divided into two sub-categories: personal characteristics (endowed by the role or SMIs as human brands) and technology characteristics (endowed by internet/technology).

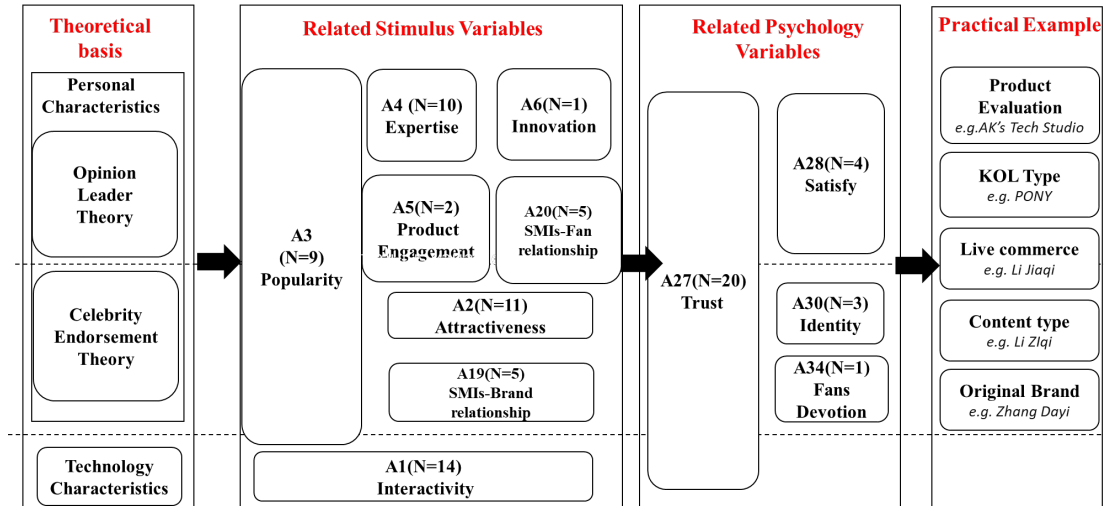


Figure 1. Type of SMIs, studied variables, and theoretical basis

Source: Authors

Most discussions focused on SMI interactivity (N=14), and it is commonly defined as the willingness and ability of SMIs to bond and build interrelations with fans, which is characterized by frequent/sufficient communication, customer engagement, (Guo & Li, 2018; Liu & Shi, 2020), and information exchange. In the questionnaire design, we observe that the measurement of SMIs' interactivity includes two dimensions: (a) SMIs' willingness, intensity, and frequency to interact (Guo & Li, 2018; Liu & Shi, 2020; Yan et al., 2018), and (b) fans' willingness, intensity, and frequency of interaction (Liu & Shi, 2020; Shi & Wang, 2018; Yan et al., 2018). We believe that this characteristic is mainly attributed to technological progress. In particular, the development of information and communication technology (ICT) has dismantled barriers and has made the world smaller, thus making frequent and sufficient communication becomes possible. With the rapid development of live broadcasting technology, SMIs can interact with fans online in real time, involving a two-way communication, and magnifies other personal characteristics (e.g., attractiveness, expertise, innovation). High SMI interactivity can decrease consumers' anxieties, reduce the perceived risk (Liu et al., 2020), and boost trust (Liu & Shi, 2020). Meanwhile, increasing cognition and emotional value experience (Wang et al., 2019) positively influences purchase intention (Guo & Li, 2018; Liu et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019), further increasing customers' willingness to co-create (Liu & Shi, 2020).

Regarding personal characteristics, scholars tend to use traditional marketing theory to leverage SMIs' nature. Farivar et al. (2021) identified the opinion leadership of influencers and parasocial relationships with influencers as two focal constructs affecting fans' behavior. In fact, researchers in China also tend to use traditional opinion leader theory or celebrity endorsement theory (including parasocial relationships) to seize the nature of SMIs. However, Figure 1 shows which one to choose depends on the specific type of SMI. Key opinion leaders (KOL) (SMIs partner with brands and recommend the brand or product, e.g., PONY) and product evolution type (SMIs test the performance of products in a professional field and provide a fair evaluation, e.g., AK's Tech Studio) are closer to the opinion leader theory. Content type (SMIs become famous due to interesting content and agent advertising, e.g., Li Ziqi) and "SMIs+EC" type (SMIs start up and create their own brand on EC). For example, Zhang Dayi is closer to celebrity endorsement. Some types have both characteristics. (e.g., live commerce, Li Jiaqi). Based on these traditional theories, the main variables are discussed. The

definitions of these variables are basically the same as traditional theories, so scholars tend to use mature scales to measure them.

4.2 Content factor and consumer outcomes

Unlike traditional celebrities, who use movies or music to attract fans, the relationship between SMIs and fans depends on what either SMIs post on the live streaming show, making the information selection strategy important. Therefore, some scholars have focused on discussing the provided content factor and consumer outcomes. Scholars are presently considering two specific perspectives: content quality and content classification.

Content quality focuses on the appealing characteristics of the posted content and attempts to answer which characteristic makes the post more attractive. Scholars further divided content quality into three dimensions: content relevance, content credibility, and content vividness. Content relevance can be defined as the degree to which the posted content satisfies the requirements of both consumers and fans (Yan et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2019). If the information provided by SMIs is deficient or cannot meet consumers' needs, the transaction cost will increase because consumers are then compelled to search for information by themselves (Lin & Qu, 2019), thus diminishing both their cognitive and emotional attitude (Meng et al., 2020), and this could have a negative effect on their consumption experience and purchase intention (Dan & Wu, 2018; Meng et al., 2020). In addition, when content relevance is not remarkable, consumers question the ability and authenticity of SMIs, which could affect the trust relationship (Li & Ye, 2020; Liu et al., 2020). Credibility research is a crucial theme in English studies on SMIs and is also an important factor in traditional opinion leadership and celebrity endorsement research. Therefore, it is not surprising that it is a crucial variable here. In SMIs, content credibility mainly depends on whether the information is easy to understand, reliable, objective, and professional (Hou & Gong, 2021). Empirical studies have proved that consumer purchase intention in the internet context is significantly influenced by content credibility (e.g., Hou & Gong, 2021; Liu et al., 2021). Content vividness is defined as the representational richness of a mediated environment, as defined by its formal features—the way in which an environment presents information and as perceived by consumers (Liao, 2021; Steuer, 1992)—or the extent of details the posted content shows (Wang et al., 2021). Content vividness depends on the development of technology and media and can be linked to a broader discussion on virtual reality (VR). Steuer (1992) identified two technological dimensions that contribute to telepresence, vividness, and interactivity. The media of SMIs has evolved from the era of text and graphics to short videos, and currently to live streaming (Jia & Bie, 2021; Xiao & Kang, 2016). Indisputably, compared with simple text or images, live streaming can effectively stimulate consumers' perception to build VR (customers feel they are interacting with SMIs in real time and even can handle the products) (Liu et al., 2021; Zhu & Gui, 2020). This form of VR enhances customers' immersion experience (Liao, 2021) and pleasure (Fu, 2020), which can positively impact their purchase intention (Fu, 2020; Xu et al., 2020).

Content classification focuses on how different types of information that stimulate distinct responses from fans. Zhu & Gui, (2020) analyzed the content of 30 Weibo bloggers' posts and found that different types of information have a distinct impact on fan behavior. They summarized three specific matching patterns: attribute information—forwarding behavior, interactive information—comment behavior, and experience information-like behavior. In addition, Meng et al. (2020) divided the SMIs content into two types, informational content (e.g., brand, product, transaction method, price) and emotional content (e.g., brand personality, values, life story of SMIs, talent), and confirmed that in a live streaming situation, informational content can evoke consumers' purchase behavior more than the emotional content.

4.3 Unique variables in live commerce: support system and scene factors

Earlier, we mentioned that most Chinese scholars focus on live commerce type of SMIs because of their significant impact on society. In live commerce, SMIs/live broadcasters create an online sales

scenario through live broadcast technology, which is characterized by real-time interaction, entertainment, and visibility (Liu et al., 2020). Notably, SMIs/live broadcasters demonstrate the attractiveness of products, answer customers' questions, and communicate with them in real time, similar to online salesmen. Thus, this new type of SMIs brings new variables that are rarely seen in current mainstream SMIs/IM research published in English journals: support system and scene factors.

In a live commerce situation, SMIs are not the only source of influence; there are other support system factors that cannot be fully controlled by them. For example, regardless of the attractiveness of SMIs, if the quality of products they recommended or sold is low, customers will not be satisfied (Tao & Zi, 2017). The impact of the support system factor includes product, price, brand and background system. All these support system factors can contribute toward increasing UX (user experience) and influencing purchase intention because customers tend to evaluate purchase experience based on a comprehensive feeling. Most existing research discusses multiple factors simultaneously. For example, Tao & Zi, (2017) built a multiple regression model and found that among a series of environmental factors (EC shop professionalism, platform reputation, brand image, product quality, influence of SMIs), product quality is highly significant for consumers' purchase intention.

Scholars who focus on scene factors believe that live commerce can stimulate consumers' consumption behavior because it constructs a consumption scene characterized by entertainment, community, and interaction (Shen & Zhao, 2018). There are various scene stimuli that can promote consumers' willingness to consume in this scene, especially irrational consumption (e.g., impulsive buying, herd buying). The scene factors discussed include scene interaction, social presence, eWOM, incentive rule, and time pressure.

4.4 Psychological factors and consumer outcomes: cognition factors and affective factors

In our sample, many studies focused on consumers' internal psychological variables. The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model has been widely adopted, and psychological factors are considered as moderators or mediators between SMIs' stimulus and consumer behavior. Further, we divided psychological factors into cognition factors and affective factors.

Cognition factors consist of information and perceptions that are found through a combination of experiences with attitude objects. The most commonly discussed cognition factors are perceived value and perceived risk. The former is commonly discussed as a positive mediator and the latter as a negative mediator. Subsequently, two variables, namely perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, are derived from the TAM (technology acceptance model). The TAM was proposed by Davis (1989), which further advanced perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as the two main factors when users accept new technologies. Scholars have proved that in the context of live commerce, whether consumers can obtain the required information (perceived usefulness) and consider the functions provided by the live broadcast as simple and easy to learn, or if the operation is convenient (perceived ease of use) affects consumers' usage attitude (Gu & Li, 2020; Weng et al., 2020). In addition, some scholars developed the TAM and included perceived entertainment as the third cognition factor (Wang et al., 2021).

Affective factors comprise an individual's feelings or emotions regarding the attitude object. It is an individual's subjective perception of positive or negative feelings of attitude generated by interactions with their surroundings. In our sample, trust was the most frequently studied psychological variable. Trust can play an important role in both impulsive and purposeful purchasing (Liu et al., 2020), and it can also affect some long-term behavior, such as repeat purchases (Lin & Qu, 2019). In addition, flow theory is also used in research on SMIs (e.g., Fan et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020). Flow theory was first proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1988) to explain how complete engagement in an activity induces a special mental state in which the level of concentration allows the participant to eliminate other unrelated perceptions. In a live stream situation, flow experience refers to concentration, full engagement, and inner pleasure, (Feng & Lu, 2020) which may allow

consumers to make unplanned purchases (Fan et al., 2020). Other traditional psychological factors in consumer research have also been discussed, including satisfaction, identity, and pleasure.

4.5 Consumer response

We can see that some scholars have studied the impact of SMIs on the willingness to co-create (e.g., Wang et al., 2019; Zhu & Gui, 2020), brand attitude (e.g., Che et al., 2019; Yang, 2021), and advertising avoidance (Huang et al., 2020), most of the research focuses on short-term purchase intention and buying behavior. (N=40, 61.5%). In contrast, international mainstream research has paid greater attention to long-term influences, such as brand attitude, brand trust, brand awareness, and brand liking.

In the context of IM, both rational and irrational buying behaviors coexist (Che et al., 2019). Moreover, discussions about irrational buying are often connected with consumer cognition (e.g., perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, perceived benefit) and specific affective factors (e.g., flow, fan devotion, arousal), which usually lead to irrational buying behavior. Perceived value, perceived risk, trust, and satisfaction are neutral psychological variables that affect both emotional and rational buying behavior. Liu et al. (2020) found that irrational buying behavior is mainly related to the psychological factors of arouse and perceived entertainment, while rational buying behavior is influenced by trust. In addition, some scholars have paid attention to two specific irrational buying behaviors: impulsive buying (e.g., Gong et al., 2019; Shen & Zhao, 2018) and herd buying (e.g., Xie et al., 2021). Gong et al. (2019) proved that the positive effect of atmospheric cues on impulsive purchase is mediated by consumer affect flow. In this process, time pressure plays the role of positive moderators, and the moderation tendency of customers acts as a negative one. Moreover, herd buying is proved to be affected by social presence mediated by arousal or trust (Xie et al., 2021). The moderator function of the strength of the fan-SMIs relationship has also been proved (Xie et al., 2019).

5. Integrative framework of SMI research

The integrative framework presented in Figure 2 is derived from a synthesis of the findings of this systematic review and by making some adjustment to practical reality. In the IM context, stimulation of SMIs to customers/fans is achieved through the interaction between them. Among these, SMIs personal characteristic and content characteristic are attached to SMIs as his own and can be controlled by themselves, but the support system and underlying mechanism are related to the external environment and social/cultural background. Likewise, in the live streaming situation, scene factor cannot be ignored. Meanwhile, the relationship/fitness between SMIs—Brands/SMIs—Fans is also important. All these stimulating factors influence customers' perception, arouse certain impact, and influence their response .

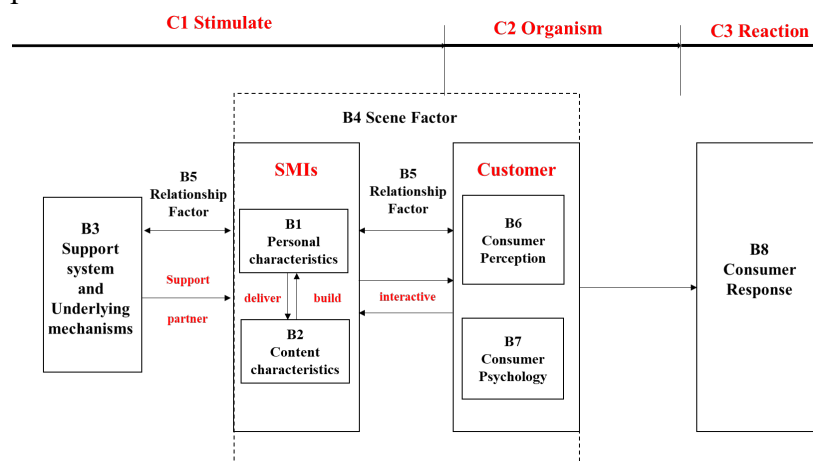


Figure 2. Integrative framework

6. General Discussion and limitations

SIMs and the concept of IM are new phenomenon that emerged during the era of digital marketing. A core topic of early descriptive research in China is that the rise of SIMs/IM is a short-term temporary trend or a long-term future direction. We believe that the worldwide development of SIMs/IM has already provided the answer: IM represents the future development direction of digital marketing and will continue to grow with the advancement of ICT in the future.

To review this topic from a broader perspective, more insights can be obtained if we combine SIMs/IM with the history of marketing. Based on Kotler P et al. (2019), a review of the various stages of marketing development shows that Marketing 1.0 is product-driven, Marketing 2.0 is consumer-centric, and Marketing 3.0 has brought “into the arena human aspirations, values, and spirit (human-centric). Subsequently, with the digital revolution, Marketing 4.0 is based on big data technology, community, and value marketing. The focus of marketing has ultimately shifted to strengthening customer engagement, complementing machine-to-machine connectivity with human-to-human touch. From this perspective, the human brand characteristics of SIMs, improved interactivity, and precise positioning based on common interest/value of IM are highly consistent with the characteristics of Marketing 4.0.

From the discussion on SIMs, we divided SIMs into two sub-categories: personal characteristics (endowed by the role or human brands from SIMs), and technology characteristics (endowed by internet/technology). We believe that personal characteristics have not changed significantly. In fact, personal characteristics have been fully discussed in the traditional opinion leader theory and celebrity recommendation theory (e.g., attractiveness, expertise, product engagement). We believe that what makes SIMs/IM an interesting developmental theme are the various factors due to technology characteristics. With the development of ICT, from text (Twitter) to figure/image (Instagram), short videos (TikTok), live streaming, is currently the method of online communication, and interactivity is getting closer to real (offline) communication. In future, fully integrating the traditional human-to-human interaction pattern with digital technology and applying it to marketing practices seems to be the emerging theme for scholars and practitioners.

The study limitations include sample size. Although we are confident of covering most of the published studies, only 91 samples were found suitable because this field is still relatively new. Second, we only selected peer-reviewed journal articles and omitted books, conference articles, and theses because of quality issues that cannot be guaranteed. Third, we observed that some Chinese scholars prefer to publish research in international English journals and considered including this part of the research in our sample, however, we abandoned for two reasons. (1) It is difficult to decide the criteria that must be adopted to determine if it is Chinese research or the author's nationality? Data source (empirical research), or the institution? (2) To publish in international journals, authors often adopt expressions and theories that are closer to Western perspectives rather than Chinese perceptions. Nonetheless, we are confident that our research covers the complete paradigm of IM-related research in China at this stage.

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