

Abstract

While Influencer Marketing (IM) has gained widespread recognition and generated extensive discussion in research circles, significant gaps persist in the understanding of this complex and multifaceted domain. This paper addresses these gaps by focusing on the challenges in mainstream IM research: uneven regional theory distribution, incomplete applicability of traditional theories, and the absence of a comprehensive framework and consensus.

In response to these challenges, this study shifts its focus to the Chinese Wanghong—a unique and influential domain within IM research. The primary aim is to conduct a comparative analysis, integrating literature on Chinese Wanghong economy with the existing international literature on IM. This approach allows us to identify both commonalities and disparities between these two bodies of literature, deepening our understanding of the IM phenomenon while considering its universal aspects and regional nuances. Furthermore, we endeavor to address theoretical integration and development by assessing the applicability of existing theories within the Chinese market context. Through these efforts, we aim to provide a roadmap for future research endeavors and lay the foundation for advancing the field.

This comprehensive research effort is structured into seven chapters. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction, providing an overview of the research. Chapter 2 scrutinizes the dominance of the theory-first paradigm in IM research and categorizes prior IM theories into four approaches: Media and Communication, Marketing, Sociological, and Technological. It critically evaluates the existing research landscape, thereby establishing the study's theoretical positioning. Chapter 3 is a conceptual review, which addresses cross-cultural challenges in comprehending Chinese Wanghong and English SMIs. It analyzes 67 English and 71 Chinese articles, proposing integrated concepts and discussing knowledge transfer potential. Chapter 4 conducts a systematic review of 106 papers related to the Wanghong economy, identifying key themes and constructing an integrated framework. It offers insights into the distinctive patterns within China's IM landscape. Chapter 5 quantitatively explores the alignment and divergence of IM and Wanghong research by analyzing 1,808 papers from WOS and 2,174 papers from CNKI by bibliometric analysis. In Chapter 6, a comprehensive meta-analysis of 91 empirical studies is conducted to assess the relationship between key IM antecedents and their impact on consumer trust, purchase intention, and brand attitude. Chapter 7 is a comprehensive discussion.

The theoretical significance of this research lies in its contribution to addressing the "Western-centric" bias in IM research, facilitating a deeper understanding of IM in non-Western contexts. On a practical level, this study provides valuable insights for marketers and advertisers by distinguishing Chinese Wanghong from Western IM patterns, guiding strategic decision-making, and consolidating IM effectiveness findings. Ultimately, this research contributes to the ongoing development and enrichment of the IM field on a global scale.