

Global Research Trends in AI-Driven Influencer Marketing for Smes: A Bibliometric Analysis and Future Agenda

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Abstract

SMEs depend on digital marketing innovations to remain competitive in the dynamically changing global market. Amongst the various digital marketing approaches taken up by these businesses, influencer marketing has shown prominence in enabling SMEs to engage effectively with their targeted audiences. The incorporation of AI has further revolutionised how influencer marketing tactics are designed and executed. This paper carries out a bibliometric mapping analysis to map global research trends at the intersection of AI, influencer marketing, and SME consumer behaviour. Drawing on data retrieved from some of the most relevant scientific databases, the review analyses annual scientific production, influential publications, dominant authors, and key thematic clusters. By applying citation analysis, keyword co-occurrence mapping, Lotka's law and three-field plots, this research visualises the intellectual structure of the field and identifies emerging research fronts and niche thematic areas. The findings indicate how AI-driven tools improve SME marketing precision, enhance influencer selection, and influence consumer decision-making processes. Such global research patterns allow for a forward-looking research agenda and practical suggestions for SMEs, digital marketers, and scholars alike. To this end, through the analysis of results, readers of this study will obtain comprehensive insights into how the integration of AI in influencer marketing strategies affects buyer behaviour and consumer attitude in the SME sector, thus providing guidance on how to conduct further research and make appropriate evidence-based decisions in marketing practices.

Keywords: AI-Driven Marketing, Influencer Marketing, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Consumer Behaviour, Digital Consumer Engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing has undergone profound changes in the digital era, redefining how organisations connect with and influence their target audiences. Social media has been at the forefront of this shift, offering unparalleled opportunities for engagement, visibility, and brand interaction. To the SMEs, these platforms have become invaluable in providing cost-effective avenues for market access and brand awareness, despite constraints like limited financial resources, reduced technical capacity, and smaller workforce structures (Shareef et al., 2019). In turn, SMEs, due to such challenges, have increasingly adopted innovative digital strategies that can enhance competitiveness without imposing exorbitant costs. Influencer marketing has emerged as one such strategy, functioning as a levelling tool that allows

businesses of all sizes to effectively compete within the digital marketplace. By leveraging influencer credibility and social capital, SMEs are better able to reach niche audiences, stimulate brand engagement, and influence purchasing decisions through personalised socially validated communication (Dumas & Stough, 2022; Freberg et al., 2011). However, the rapid expansion of influencer ecosystems has introduced complexities related to authenticity, influencer reliability, content saturation, and the constantly evolving expectations of digital consumers (Sands et al., 2022; Baudier et al., 2022). These challenges are making it increasingly difficult for SMEs to design, manage, and optimise influencer marketing campaigns effectively. The accelerating integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the marketing landscape is reshaping these dynamics by providing advanced tools capable of supporting more precise and data-driven strategic decision-making. AI technologies, including natural language processing, machine learning, predictive analytics, and computer vision, give SMEs the robust mechanisms to manage the complexity of influencer marketing (Liu & Liu, 2025). Specifically, AI enables SMEs to:

- Find suitable influencers by using audience demographics and engagement analysis metrics, and authenticity indicators.
- Execute sentiment analysis on public perceptions of influencers and branded content
- Personalisation of content targeting consumer behaviours, preferences, and emerging trends.
- Optimise campaign performance in real time with predictive and adaptive analytics.

These capabilities enable the SMEs to undertake highly targeted and evidence-based marketing strategies that deepen consumer engagement, build trust, and positively influence purchasing behaviour. AI also supports the identification of micro- and nano-influencers whose communities are more aligned with SMEs' offerings and will further enhance the authenticity and relevance of marketing activities, as mentioned by Liu & Liu (2025).

Despite the increasing use of AI-enabled influencer marketing, academic insight into its implications for SMEs remains fragmented. In particular, research lacks a consolidated view of global knowledge production, thematic trends, and emerging areas of inquiry within this fast-evolving field. There is an imminent need, as put by Arsel et al. (2025a), for a Comprehensive analysis of how AI-driven influencer marketing impacts consumer trust, engagement, and purchase intentions. Therefore, A bibliometric approach is thus essential for mapping the intellectual structure of the field, evaluating influential contributions, and identifying future research opportunities.

1.1 Objectives

1.2 General objectives

The objective of the study is to perform a comprehensive bibliometric assessment of global scholarly output on AI-driven influencer marketing for SMEs, underlining influential works, dominant research themes, and emerging opportunities to drive future studies and practical applications.

1.3 Specific Objective

- To examine the growth, distribution, and evolution of global research on AI-driven influencer marketing in the SME sector.
- To identify, by means of bibliometric and citation indicators, the most influential authors, institutions, journals, and countries contributing to this area.
- To analyse the pattern of keyword co-occurrence, thematic clusters, and emerging research fronts that reveal the trends in AI applications within influencer marketing for SMEs.
- To map the intellectual and collaborative structure of the field through co-authorship networks, co-

citation analysis, and source impact metrics.

- Identify research gaps, underexplored areas, and opportunities for future investigation to guide both scholars and practitioners operating at the nexus of AI, influencer marketing, and SMEs.

1.4 Research Question

- How has the global scholarly output on AI-driven influencer marketing for SMEs evolved?
- Which authors, institutions, countries, and journals are the major contributors to this area of research?
- What are the major themes, recurring notions, and new discussion topics of the literature?
- What are the relationships between authors, keywords, and sources of publication, as determined through the co-authorship, co-citation, and thematic mapping analyses?
- What are the research gaps and future directions to advance scholarship and practice in AI-driven influencer marketing for SMEs?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Transformation and SME Marketing Challenges

The development of marketing in the digital era has dramatically changed the way organisations reach their target audiences and influence them. Social media has become a driver in this, allowing unparalleled engagement, visibility, and interaction with brands. The social media platforms have actually made it easier, in some ways, for SMEs to access new markets, develop brand awareness, and customer loyalty, despite their usual resource constraints in the form of financial scarcity, lack of technical capacity, and reduced workforce structures (Shareef et al., 2019). To work around these disadvantages, SMEs are applying more innovative digital marketing strategies that allow them to enjoy competitive advantages while not burdening their business costs.

2.2 Emergence of Influencer Marketing as a Strategic Tool

Influencer marketing has evolved as a critical method whereby SMEs engage niche audiences and build brand credibility (Freberg et al., 2011). Through the social capital and trust that influencers possess, SMEs can activate engagement among their consumers and mould purchase decisions through personalised, socially authenticated communication (Dumas & Stough, 2022). Influencer marketing has a unique set of challenges, which includes content oversaturation, shifting consumer expectations, and authenticity risks. These complicate campaign design, execution, and optimisation, especially in resource-constrained SMEs (Sands et al., 2022; Baudier et al., 2022).

2.3 Integration of Artificial Intelligence in Influencer Marketing

The rapid adoption of Artificial Intelligence is shaping influencer marketing space, equipping SMEs with data-driven, accurate, and dynamic marketing strategies. AI technologies, which include natural language processing, machine learning, predictive analytics, and computer vision, empower SMEs in their ability to:

- Find suitable influencers based on audience demographics, engagement metrics, and authenticity indicators.
- Conduct sentiment analysis about the public view of influencers and branded content.
- Personalisation of marketing content in regard to consumer behaviour, consumption patterns, and emerging trends.
- Optimise campaigns in real time, using predictive and adaptive analytics.

These capabilities empower SMEs to undertake focused marketing initiatives that enhance consumer

engagement, trust, and purchase behaviour (Gabelaia, 2024). AI also enables the identification of micro- and nano-influencers with highly specific audience niches that better match the SME product or service offering, thereby improving authenticity and relevance (Liu & Liu, 2025).

2.4 Virtual Influencers and Storytelling Dynamics

Virtual influencers are one of the cutting-edge implementations of AI in marketing. Using sophisticated storytelling, personalisation, and emotional and immersive narratives, virtual influencers increase consumer engagement and product favorability even without human-like authenticity (Zeng et al., 2024). A strategic narrative approach can help to bridge the gaps in trust, build emotional connections, and finally enhance the effectiveness of marketing (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Jain et al., 2024). Scientific credibility combined with emotional storytelling increases engagement and the sharing of content, featuring authenticity, expertise, and personalisation as key drivers for influence (Ballestar et al., 2022).

2.5 Human vs AI-Driven Influencers: Trust and Effectiveness

While virtual influencers provide novelty, scalability, and data-driven precision, human influencers still generate higher levels of trust, relatability, and emotional resonance qualities considered essential for purchase decisions and brand loyalty. According to Kholkina et al. (2025) and Sorosrungruang et al. (2024), perceived autonomy for virtual influences increases their persuasiveness, while content seen as overly brand-driven may be viewed with scepticism by consumers, thus reducing the effectiveness of marketing. Allal-Chérif et al. (2024), Zheng et al. (2024), and Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula (2023) also argue in the same direction. Adoption by an influencer of AI-related tools is influenced by perceived reliability, innovativeness, and personal branding opportunities, moderated by ethical and authenticity concerns (Simay et al., 2023).

2.6 AI, Consumer Behaviour, and Engagement

With the help of AI-powered tools such as chatbots, recommendation engines, predictive analytics, and sentiment analysis, SMEs can talk in real time with customers, personalise each touchpoint with them, and optimise targeting precision for increased consumer engagement (Malthouse & Copulsky, 2023). External shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated AI adoption among SMEs and helped SMEs be more agile and resilient while continuing customer interactions (Ameen, Viglia, et al., 2023). In industries such as tourism, the integration of AI capabilities with digital human influencers has been found to increase consumer appeal by merging aesthetic sophistication with technological innovation (Huang et al., 2025).

2.7 Ethical Issues and Research Gaps

Ethical and strategic issues continue to be at the heart of the impact of AI on influencer marketing. Indeed, "transparency and authenticity will remain important factors for continued consumer trust and engagement with AI-enhanced influencer marketing" (Agostino et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2023). Past works have emphasised that future research needs to focus on issues about the long-term efficacy of AI-powered influencers in terms of consumer trust and ethical issues related to the integration of human influencers with AI (Arun Kumar, 2021; Sharma et al., 2023).

2.8 Rationale for a Bibliometric Approach

Despite the increasing penetration of AI-enabled influencer marketing, scholarly knowledge on the subject remains fragmented, and there is limited consolidated evidence on global knowledge production, thematic trends, and emerging research areas. A bibliometric approach provides an organised method of mapping the intellectual structure of the field, identifying influential publications as well as authors, and thus unveiling research gaps. This will give a more forward-looking perspective on AI-driven influencer

marketing for SMEs, offering practical insights and directions for future research agendas (Arsel et al., 2025a).

3. Methodology

This study will adopt a systematic review approach, amalgamating qualitative content analysis with the synthesis of secondary data to explore the evolving integration of Artificial Intelligence into the influencer marketing strategies of SMEs and the consequential changes in consumer behaviour. Relevant academic publications were identified through major electronic databases like Scopus, Web of Science, and Emerald Insight in order to capture practical insights. The search was conducted using combinations of the following keywords: "Artificial Intelligence," "influencer marketing," "SMEs," "consumer behaviour," "virtual influencers," and "digital engagement." The time span considered was from 2015 to 2025, since that reflects the period during which AI-enabled marketing practices came into prominence.

Data Extraction

Data was retrieved systematically from selected databases with keywords and filters defined, exporting data in compatible formats. Records were cleaned and de-duplicated, and merged into a single dataset for bibliometric assessment.

Figure 3.1 Data Extracted from Different Databases

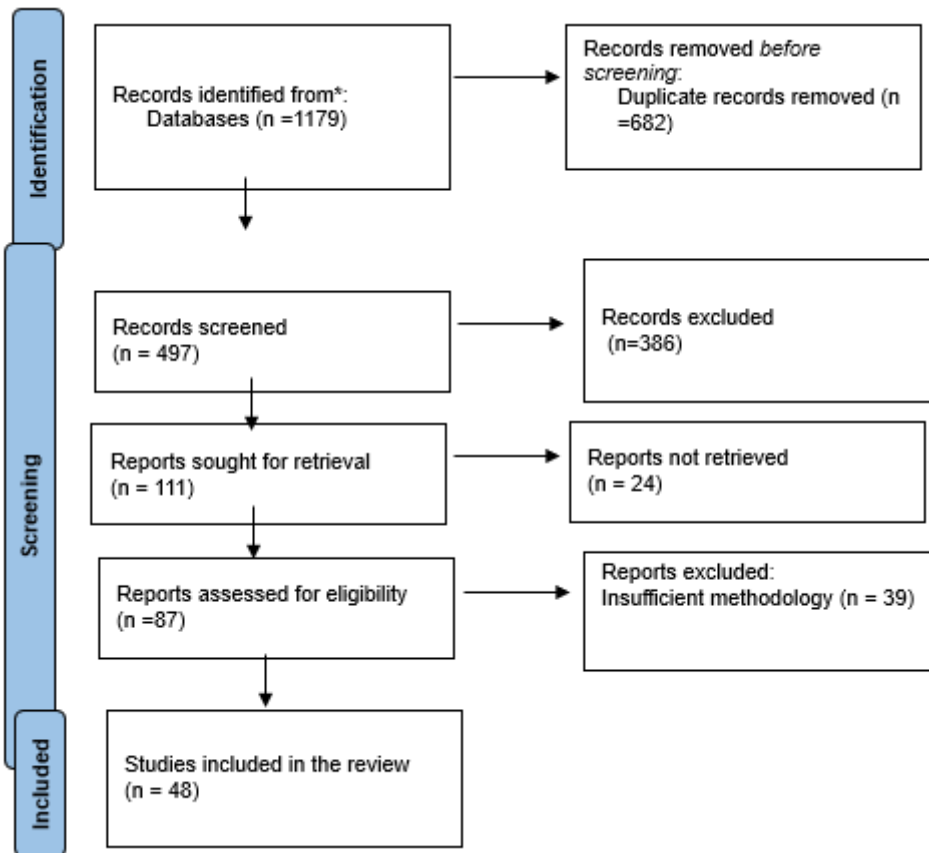
Search words used: ("Artificial Intelligence" OR AI OR "Machine Learning") AND ("Influencer Marketing" OR "Social Media Influencers") AND ("Consumer Behaviour" OR "Purchase Intention" OR "Buying Behaviour") AND (SME OR "Small and Medium Enterprises")	
Database	No of Journals
Scopus Journals	305
Web of Science	411
Emerald Insight	463
Total	1,179

The review process followed PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews, ensuring transparency and replicability. Titles, abstracts, and keywords were screened for relevance, and full texts were analysed for thematic content. A total of 48 studies were shortlisted after removing duplicates and applying the inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Data extraction:

- De-duplication, cleaning, and merging of records.
- PRISMA guidelines ensured transparency and reproducibility.
- A total of 48 studies were shortlisted after inclusion/exclusion screening.

Figure 3.2 Prisma Flow Chart



4. Data Analysis and Results

The data collected was then systematically analysed for patterns, trends, and relationships relevant to artificial intelligence in SME influencer marketing and consumer behaviour. The literature reviewed shows an increasing trend of attention after 2020, concurrent with the acceleration of AI adoption during the COVID-19 era, reflecting how SMEs quickly adapted to AI in marketing strategies under conditions of uncertainty.

Descriptive analysis - summarising publication trends, geographical distribution, and research contexts.

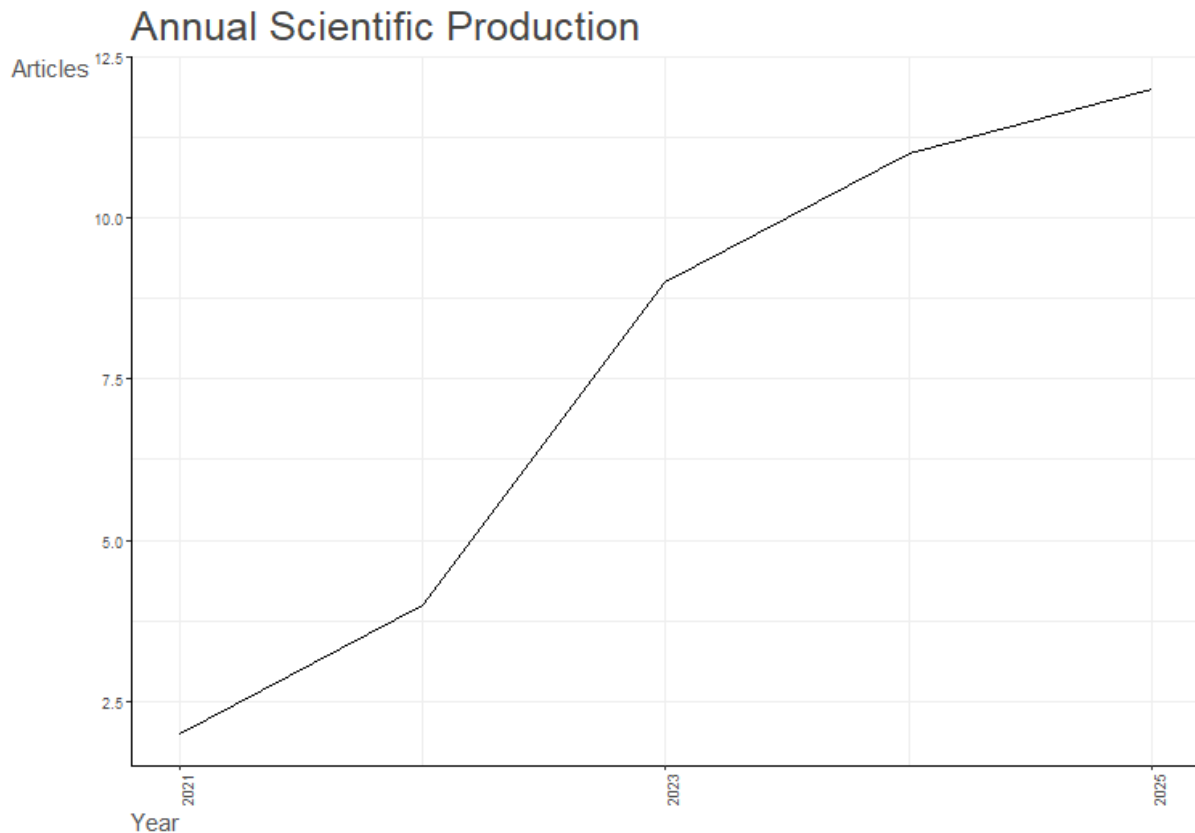
Thematic analysis: Categorising findings into thematic clusters, for example, AI-driven influencer selection, personalisation and sentiment analytics, consumer trust and authenticity, and AI-augmented engagement.

Bibliometric mapping: Co-authorship, co-citation, three-field plots, Lotka's law, and thematic maps were incorporated in this study to visualise research patterns, influential authors, and keyword co-occurrence structures.

4.1 Annual Research Growth:

The sharp increase in publications post-2020 reflects the acceleration of AI adoption during COVID-19. Accordingly, the compound annual growth rate for this period surpasses 35%, reflecting growing academic and industry interest.

Figure 4.1



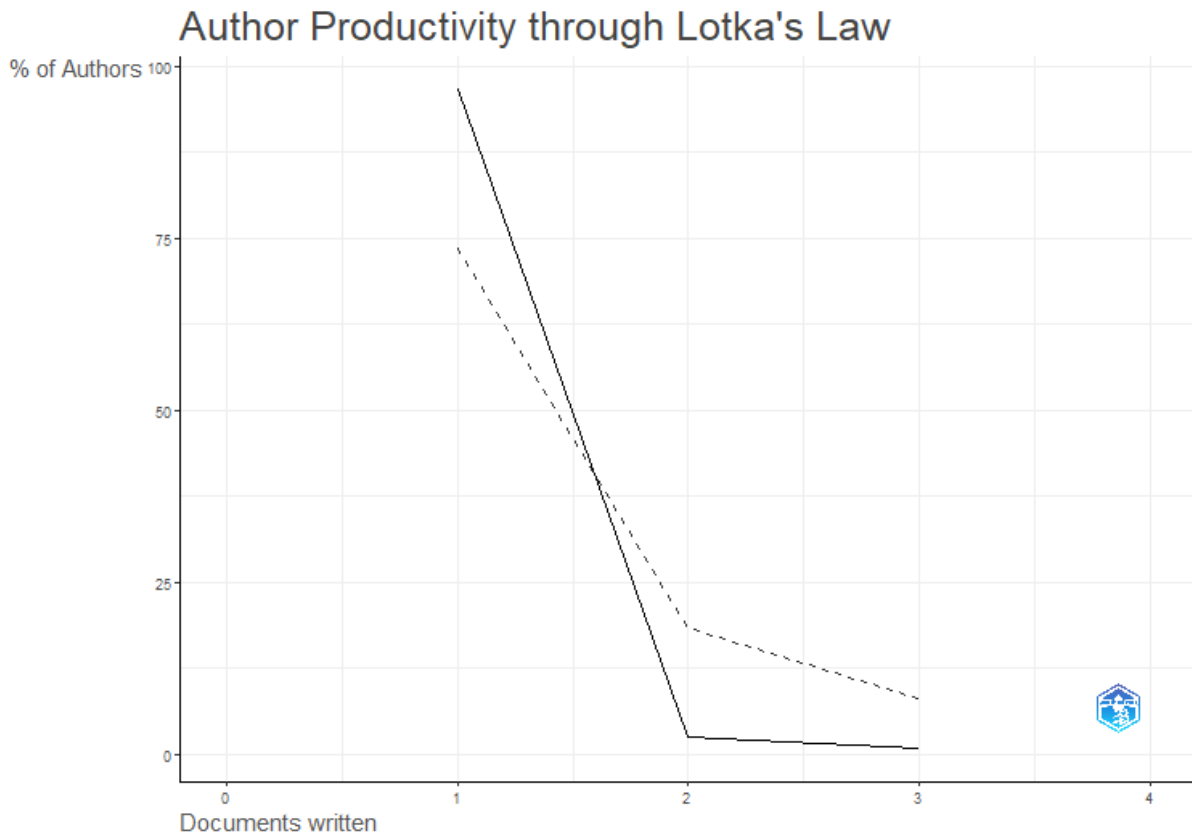
4.2 Influential Contributions:

A few seminal works that shape the current debates on AI-driven influencer marketing in SMEs: Zeng et al. (2024) highlight how storytelling increases the engagement of virtual influencers, bridging the gap in trust. Sands et al. (2022) compare human and AI influencers and note the former's strength in terms of authenticity and trust, but the latter offers novelty and efficiency. Ameen et al. (2023) link exogenous shocks such as COVID-19 to accelerated AI adoption, with strong overtures towards the resilience and agility of SMEs. Simay et al. (2023) examine the willingness of influencers to use AI for personal branding, but sound caution over customer scepticism. Conjointly, these form the intellectual core of this field and have been widely cited for views on narrative strategies, authenticity trade-offs, crisis-driven adoptions, and influencer agency.

4.3 Author Productivity (Lotka's Law)

From the Lotka's Law plot, it can be observed that most authors in AI-driven influencer marketing and SME research have only one publication, while a small percentage have two or more. This large drop in productivity is common in emerging domains of research, where a broad base of contributors explores the field but only a few establish sustained research programs. The pattern indicates that the knowledge base is still fragmented and dispersed, with a couple of prolific scholars leading the way toward continuity, and the majority of contributions are still either exploratory or context-specific.

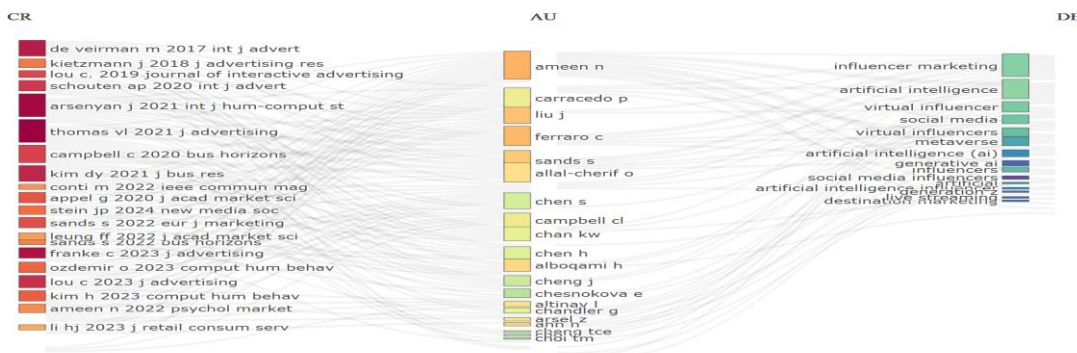
Figure 4.3



4.4 Three-Field Plot:

The CR–AU–DE plot visualises the interlinkages between key references, prolific authors, and dominant keywords-influencer marketing, AI, virtual influencers, and generative AI-that indicate the amalgamation of foundational advertising research with AI-driven marketing trends. The influential works of De Veirman et al. (2017) and Kietzmann (2018) anchor the field, while prolific authors like Ameen N, Carracedo P, Liu J, and Sands S link such foundations to emerging research on AI adoption and virtual influencers. On the descriptor side, keywords like influencer marketing, artificial intelligence, virtual influencer, social media, metaverse, and generative AI are dominant, reflecting a focus shift from traditional influencer studies toward technology-enabled immersive and AI-powered marketing approaches.

Figure 4.4 Three-Fields Plots



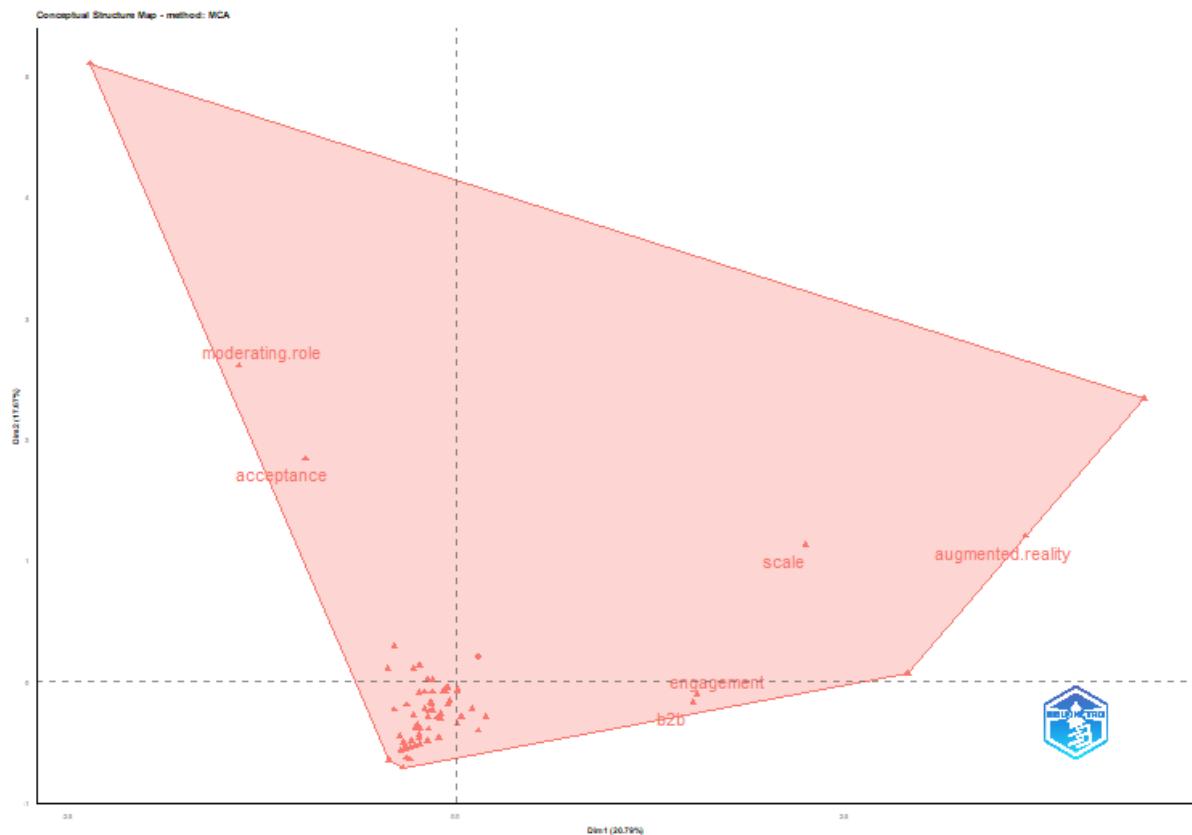
4.5 Thematic Map:

The thematic map generated through co-word analysis highlights several keyword clusters

- **Emerging/Declining themes:** Acceptance, moderating roles.
- **Basic/transversal themes:** Engagement, B2B, SME scale.
- **Niche themes:** Moderating roles, virtual influencers.
- **Motor themes:** Augmented reality, immersive AI applications.

Collectively, the map illustrates a field that is consolidating its foundations while simultaneously expanding toward immersive and technologically advanced approaches.

Figure 4.5 Thematic Map



1. Future Research Directions

Future studies should:

1. Investigate balancing authenticity and efficiency in AI-driven influencer marketing for SMEs.
2. Compare human vs AI-generated influencers across generational and cultural contexts.
3. Examine ethical considerations such as transparency, privacy, and responsible AI use.
4. Explore immersive technologies (AR/VR, generative AI) for enhanced consumer engagement.
5. Conduct longitudinal studies on AI's sustained impact on consumer trust, engagement, and SME performance.
6. Identify adoption barriers, including cost, skill gaps, and infrastructure limitations.

Conclusion

This bibliometric analysis highlights the rapid evolution and growing significance of AI-driven influencer

marketing for SMEs. The study reveals a marked increase in scholarly output post-2020, driven by accelerated AI adoption during the COVID-19 pandemic and the expansion of digital marketing technologies. Influential contributions underscore the dual role of AI and human influencers in shaping consumer engagement, with AI offering precision, personalisation, and scalability, while human influencers sustain trust and relatability. Thematic mapping identifies foundational concepts such as engagement and SME scale, alongside emerging areas like virtual influencers, augmented reality, and immersive AI applications, indicating a field that is both consolidating and expanding toward technologically advanced strategies. Despite these advances, research remains fragmented, with gaps in understanding the long-term effects of AI on consumer trust, ethical considerations, and effective integration with human influencers. Future studies should focus on balancing authenticity and efficiency, exploring ethical AI adoption, and investigating immersive technologies to enhance SME marketing effectiveness. Collectively, these insights provide a roadmap for scholars and practitioners seeking to leverage AI to optimise influencer marketing strategies, strengthen consumer engagement, and drive SME competitiveness in the digital era.

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