

DIGITAL INFLUENCERS AND BRANDING: A BIBLIOMETRIC AND SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE FIELD FROM 1945-2019

INFLUENCIADORES DIGITAIS E BRANDING: UMA REVISÃO BIBLIOMÉTRICA E SISTEMÁTICA DO CAMPO NO PERÍODO DE 1945-2019

INFLUENCERS DIGITALES Y BRANDING: UNA REVISIÓN BIBLIOMÉTRICA Y SISTEMÁTICA DEL CAMPO EN EL PERÍODO 1945-2019

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To map and evaluate the field of study of Digital Influencers and Branding, in order to provide an overview of research that brings the two topics together, and to propose future research agendas based on the gaps highlighted at the end of the analysis.

Design/methodology/approach: A bibliometric review, using the *Web of Science* database, including publications from 1945 to 2019. A systematic review using thematic analysis.

Results: It was possible to map the main indexed keywords, the primary research and publication poles, cluster the leading references on the searched terms, systematically organize the dispersed knowledge, and identify research opportunities based on the accumulated knowledge.

Theoretical implications: This systematic review contributes theoretically by providing systematic evidence for the overall development of the chosen theme, establishing research trends obtained by joining bibliometric and systematic analysis, identifying research gaps, and proposing future research.

Originality: The work is original in that it is the first, if not the best, to carry out a literature review and systematically analyze articles that deal with branding strategies and digital influencers, a field that has been acquiring marketing and advertising relevance, driven by the expansion of social networks and their role in people's buying decisions.

Keywords: Digital Influencers, Branding, Social Networks, Influence Marketing.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Mapear e avaliar o campo de estudo dos Influenciadores Digitais e do Branding, para fornecer uma visão global das pesquisas que reúnem os dois temas e para propor agendas de pesquisas futuras baseadas nas lacunas evidenciadas ao término das análises.

Design/metodologia/abordagem: Revisão bibliométrica, utilizando a base Web of Science, em um período de publicações de 1945 até 2019. Revisão sistemática utilizando a análise temática.

Resultados: Foi possível mapear as principais palavras-chaves indexadas, os principais polos de pesquisa e de publicação, clusterizar as principais referências sobre os termos pesquisados, bem como organizar o conhecimento disperso de forma sistemática e identificar oportunidades de pesquisa embasadas no conhecimento acumulado.

Implicações teóricas: Essa revisão sistemática contribui teoricamente ao entregar evidências sistemáticas para o desenvolvimento global da temática escolhida; ao estabelecer tendências de pesquisa obtidas com a junção da análise bibliométrica e sistemática; ao identificar lacunas de pesquisa e propor pesquisas futuras.

Originalidade: O trabalho tem sua originalidade por ser o pioneiro, salvo melhor juízo, a realizar uma revisão bibliométrica e analisar sistematicamente artigos que versam sobre estratégias de branding e digital influencers, campo esse que vem adquirindo relevância mercadológica e publicitária, impulsionado pela expansão das redes sociais e seu papel na tomada de decisão de compra das pessoas.

Palavras-chave: Influenciadores Digitais, Branding, Redes Sociais, Marketing de Influência.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Mapear y evaluar el campo de estudio de Influencers Digitales y Branding, proporcionar un panorama de la investigación que reúne los dos temas y proponer futuras agendas de investigación basadas en las brechas evidenciadas al final de los análisis.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Revisión bibliométrica, utilizando la base de datos Web of Science, en un período de publicaciones de 1945 a 2019. Revisión sistemática mediante análisis temático.

Resultados: Fue posible mapear las principales palabras clave indexadas, los principales polos de investigación y publicación, agrupar las principales referencias sobre los términos buscados, así como organizar el conocimiento disperso de forma sistemática e identificar oportunidades de investigación a partir del conocimiento acumulado.

Implicaciones teóricas: Esta revisión sistemática contribuye teóricamente entregando evidencia sistemática para el desarrollo global del tema elegido; estableciendo tendencias de investigación obtenidas mediante la combinación de análisis bibliométrico y sistemático; identificando lagunas en la investigación y proponiendo investigaciones futuras.

Originalidad: El trabajo tiene su originalidad por ser pionero, hasta donde sabemos, en realizar una revisión bibliométrica y analizar sistemáticamente artículos que tratan sobre estrategias de branding e influencers digitales, campo que ha ido adquiriendo relevancia comercial y publicitaria, impulsado por la expansión de las redes y su papel en la toma de decisiones de compra de las personas.

Palabras clave: Influenciadores Digitais, Branding, Redes Sociais, Marketing de Influência.

1 INTRODUCTION

Social networks are already a reality of half the world's population, comprising around 3.5 billion users (Abril, 2019). Given this context, Brazil is the country with the third highest volume of online purchases, totaling R\$61.2 billion in 2018, with around 80 million e-commerce consumers (Nielsen, 2019).

With this new cyber reality, new consumer realities have emerged. These include Digital Influencers who, since 2015, have been gaining space in the market (Karhawi, 2017). These influencers, previously called bloggers or vloggers, start producing content for various platforms to connect and engage their followers (Karhawi, 2017).

Digital influencers can easily engage and mobilize their followers (Silva & Tessarolo, 2016), sharing their daily lives and creating a closer relationship with their audience than traditional celebrities (Jin, Mugaddam & Ryu, 2019), as well as conveying an idea of identification. Consequently, the lifestyle desired by their followers becomes more feasible and real. It is because they have a closer relationship with their followers that these influencers are able to have more significant influence over their followers' consumption habits, as the recommendation of an influencer is much like that of a trusted friend (Jin, Mugaddam & Ryu, 2019). The influencer marketplace had a turnover of \$2.3 billion in 2019 (ConsumidorModerno, 2019), and 68% of companies set aside \$500,000 for marketing using influencers in 2019 (Influency, 2019).

Thus, digital influencers have become critical players for promoting brands through digital media, especially social media, providing an alternative to traditional means of marketing (Batista, Heber, Luft & Silva, 2020) and contributing to the purchase decision-making and companies' positioning in digital media, especially in social media (Benazzi & Faria, 2017). Branding is a brand positioning strategy that goes beyond design and visual identity, conveying to the public the essence and purpose of the brand (Aaker, 1998) and prompting the consumer to remember it when thinking about a product or service (Busche, 2014). Therefore, branding strategies build and increase the intangible market value and work on market recognition of the brand.

Understanding the relationship between branding and influencers is essential because using digital influencers for brand endorsement is already a regular practice in the market, and is essential in most digital marketing strategies adopted by companies. Influencers affect in buying behavior and purchase decisions, and, consequently, the economy. The influencers' market had a turnover of R\$2.3 billion in 2019 (CONSUMIDOR MODERNO, 2019). The average amount influencers receive ranges from U\$100 (nano- influencers with up to 10k followers) to U\$ 10,000 (mega influencers with more than 1M followers) per post. Moreover, 68% of companies have set aside \$500,000 for influencer marketing in 2019 (INFLUENCY, 2019). Thus, the ongoing research problem is: How has the field of branding and digital influencers been studied in the marketing literature?

Due to the remarkable rise of digital influencers in contemporary marketing strategies, this study seeks to understand the relationship between Digital Influencers and Branding, how this field is configured, and how the literature deals with these terms. It aims to map the main authors and publications on "digital influencers" AND "branding" in the Web of Science database, the countries mostly involved in this theme internationally, and the keywords (indexing). After filtering for Administration, the articles found were read in full to determine their focus of study within the theme, their main conclusions, and suggestions for future research, informing of gaps for future academics and professionals.

The paper will be divided into five sections. The second section gives a theoretical overview of the two terms researched: branding and digital influencers. The third section describes the methodology used, which consists of a bibliometric and systematic review using the *Web of Science* database and the *CiteSpace software*, with a cut-off period of 1945 to 2019, within the Administration-oriented fields. The fourth section gives the results of the bibliometric review. The importance of the theme for the fields of Administration and Communication/advertising is highlighted, as well as the contemporaneity of the theme, with the number of publications increasing from 2015 onwards. In this field, themes are highlighted focused on concepts such as loyalty, engagement, source credibility, and identification, among others, in the area of consumer behavior; and themes focused on the analysis of media and social networks within the area of advertising. The fifth section gives the results of the systematic review, focusing on the field of Administration. Advances aligned with the bibliometric review are perceived, both in consumers' perceptions on the power of influencers on their purchase decision-making, and in the essential characteristics that must be present in the influencer to support the endorsement of the brand; models for measuring their effectiveness; the consequences of sponsored posts for consumers and influencers; the relationship between the popularization of social networks and influencers; and a suggestion of four research agendas.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Branding

The term brand, according to Keller (2003), originated with the Old Norse "*brandr*", which refers to the branding, or marking of cattle to show ownership. The term evolved to the modern English term brand, denoting the quality, or idea associated with a commodity, which simplifies the consumer's decision-making. A well-positioned branding confers competitive advantage, as the consumer's experience of the brand is always unique, the result of a history and relationships with marketing that cannot be replicated, becoming an intangible value that is added to the actual value of the brand (Keller, 2003; Martins, 2007; Jucá & Jucá, 2009; Medrado, 2019).

Aaker (1998) defines the brand as a unique name or symbol that identifies the goods or services of a company, differentiating them from the competition. Its positive effects support the manufacturer because it ensures word-of-mouth dissemination, attracting the interest of consumers (Costa, 2013). The brand goes beyond the product's physical characteristics; it conveys emotional and social associations to the consumer (Vásquez, 2007). According to Jucá and Jucá (2009), brand building occurs in four steps: (i) who: defining the target audience; (ii) what: what is the perceived value that the brand is selling; (iii) preference: consumer loyalty; and (iv) encounter: the sales channels through which the consumer can access the brand.

The concept of branding, however, is not only used by companies; it can also be used by individuals, in which cases it is known as personal branding. The idea is that individuals also benefit from having unique selling points and a public identity that is charismatic and sensitive to the needs of the target audience, using a set of brand positioning strategies, where the brand is the individual him/herself (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Ritossa, 2009). In this context, social networks function as a projection of the individual's image and consolidation of their brand, helping to popularize the concept (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). A person with a consolidated and well-positioned personal brand can lend their name to big brands by running campaigns and sponsorships to encourage purchase decision-making (Khamis, 2017). One of the primary goals of personal branding is to convey a relevant image in order to acquire contacts and develop meaningful relationships (Rhame, 2017).

It is argued that social media has popularized the concept of personal branding, which can be used to gain notoriety and a considerable number of followers, from which digital influencers also emerge; these are people who use their brand to influence their audience, especially when it comes to consumer decision-making, with the potential to reach even larger audiences than television (Marwick, 2015).

2.2 Influencers

For Karhawi (2017), the term digital influencers emerged around 2015 to refer to those previously known as bloggers or vloggers. Specializing in a particular subject, these digital influencers ended up forming opinions and influencing the consumption of their followers. When these bloggers began to offer a multiplatform experience, using YouTube and Instagram, digital influencers became popular. Digital influencers stand out on social networks and manage to engage, influence, and mobilize many followers, establishing direct communication with their audience (Silva & Tessarolo, 2016).

According to Silva and Tessarolo (2016), the emergence of influencers resulted from the evolution of information and communication technologies when the digital culture of sharing and the virtual connection was established. In this context, organizations pay more and more attention to the role played by these individuals and their potential power to communicate brands (Maden, 2018). A new marketing format emerged in the market, characterized by the use of digital influencers to propagate the brand's message, influencing the purchase decision-making of their followers (Ferreira, 2018).

Digital influencers, and the brands that use them, use a marketing strategy called Influence Marketing. For Medrado (2019), influencers lend the credibility they have with their followers to the brands, and in return, they use this visibility to strengthen their image, linking their values to the company's values and reinforcing their positioning with the public. In influencer marketing, digital influencers use their branding to validate branding actions for brands, which becomes an effective communication tool, due to the "proximity" between the influencer and their followers (Benazzi & Faria, 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

This work aims to map, categorize, and advance the field of study of Digital Influencers and Branding. The following steps were carried out: (i) a bibliometric review to gain an overview of the field, the principal authors involved, the main

fields of research, and the main subjects researched within the fields, enabling research trends to be indicated (Chen, 2014; Li, Ma & Qu, 2017; Xiang, Wang & Liu, 2017; Fang, 2015); (ii) a systematic review to deepen what has been discussed academically on the subject, pointing out the contributions that already permeate the field during the period analyzed, and suggesting new research agendas aimed at filling in gaps pointed out by the studies (Sampaio & Mancini, 2007).

The articles indexed in the *Web of Science database* were used for the bibliometric analysis. The search terms used were "Brand*" AND Influencers OR "Brand*" AND Influencer. A cut-off period of 1945 to 2019 was used for the analyses. Two hundred articles were retrieved, and the metadata was downloaded for use in *CiteSpace*. We also analyzed which authors were more productive, and the volume of publications on the topic in the *Web of Science database*. For this, the "Analysis of results" tool of the database itself was used. According to Chen (2014), this *software* visualizes emerging trends and identifies patterns through the bibliographic references of the collected articles. *CiteSpace* provides, as *outputs*, rounded (or cross-shaped) nodes that vary in diameter/length according to their citation frequency; and their links, together with their centrality, determine how central and relevant the node is to the analyzed field, by presenting values equal to or greater than 0.1 (Li, Ma & Qu, 2017). Centrality is determined by the thickness of the purplish rim that surrounds the nodes. Keywords, research fields, cited authors, research centers by countries, and journals were analyzed this way. *CiteSpace* also provides the option of cluster analysis, which is used to group into clusters the references of articles whose abstracts and keywords had the most significant similarity and homogeneity (silhouette) while being differentiated from other groups, with well-defined boundaries between the *in-group* and *out-group* (modularity) (Fang, 2015; Xiang, Wang & Liu, 2017). The modularity ranges from 0 to 1, where the closer to 1, the greater the modularity (Fang, 2015); the silhouette is measured between -1 and 1, with 0.1 representing perfect internal homogeneity (Xiang, Wang & Liu, 2017; Fang, 2015).

Having gained a panorama of the theme, we sought to go deeper into how the field of administration discusses and proposes to advance in the field. A systematic review was conducted with the 200 articles. First, the filters *business*, *management*, and *business finance* were applied, leaving 92 articles. For these remaining articles, the titles, abstracts, and keywords were read as a final screening, identifying those that discussed *digital influencers* and *branding* strategies. After excluding those that did not cover these topics, 42 articles remained. After this step, the authors read all the articles in depth, and 11 were discarded because they did not fit the theme of the intended discussion. The final number of articles analyzed was 31.

The systematic review seeks "to gather and synthesize research results on a limited theme or issue, in a systematic and orderly manner, contributing to the deepening of knowledge of the subject investigated" (Mendes, Silveira & Galvão, 2008, p. 759). It allows the researcher to participate in discussions of existing research results, contributions of previous authors, and the gaps in knowledge that require further study, suggesting new research agendas (Mendes, Silveira & Galvão, 2008; Sampaio & Mancini, 2007). Mendes, Silveira, and Galvão (2008) suggest six steps of the review, which were followed in this work: (i) identifying the theme and selecting the hypotheses or research question - the relationship between *branding* and *digital influencers*; (ii) establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria - focus on studies within Administration; (iii) defining the information to be extracted - what the articles were about, their main conclusions, contributions and limitations/suggestions for future research; (iv) evaluating the articles, which comprised reading the titles, abstracts and keywords, in addition to an in-depth reading; (v) interpreting the results; and (vi) presenting/summarizing the knowledge. Steps (v) and (vi) are described in topic 5.

4. BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

4.1 Publication Volume

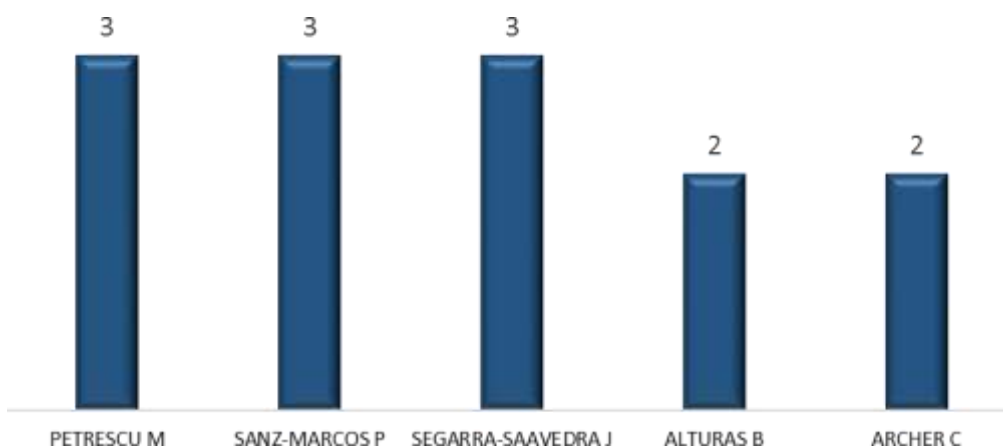
The first analysis of the bibliometric review will focus on the 200 articles published on the *Web of Science* that make up the sample. The volume of publication shows how many articles have been published on the topic, over the years. The ratio of articles published per year is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.Total publications indexed in the *Web of Science* (2006/2019)Source: *Web of Science* (2020).

We found 200 publications focusing on the two study themes. The temporal cut-off was 1945 to 2019, but it was found that first publication addressing the themes was not until 2006. The initial years of the analyzed period had an insignificant volume of publications, with all those published 2006 to 2014, a period of nine years, representing only 11% of the total sample. From 2015 on, the number of publications on the themes grew significantly, four times higher than the previous year. The years with the most significant volume of publications were last two, 2018 and 2019, representing 64% of all the indexed publications.

4.2 Main Authors

This section analyzes the most prominent authors according to the number of articles published on the *Web of Science*, among the 200 analyzed. The primary authors are highlighted in Figure 2.

Figure 2.Most published authors in the *Web of Science* (2006/2019)Source: *Web of Science* (2020).

The first author of note is Maria Petrescu, an associate professor of marketing at the *ICN Business School Marketing* at the University of Colorado and co-editor of the *Journal of Marketing Analytics*. Her main areas of study are digital marketing, cross-cultural marketing, and analytical marketing. Petrescu's most cited article is "Consumer initial trust toward internet-only banks in France," with 11 citations. The article published in the *International Journal of Bank Marketing* investigates consumer adoption of digital banks in France.

The second author of note is Paloma Sanz-Marcos, a professor in the audiovisual communication department at the *Universidad de Sevilla* in Spain. Her main areas of study are advertising and *branding*. Her most relevant article is *"Influencers, personal branding and political ideology on Twister,"* with four citations and published in *Cuadernos Info*. The article analyzes the persuasion, topics discussed, and ideologies contained in 790 tweets posted by influencers.

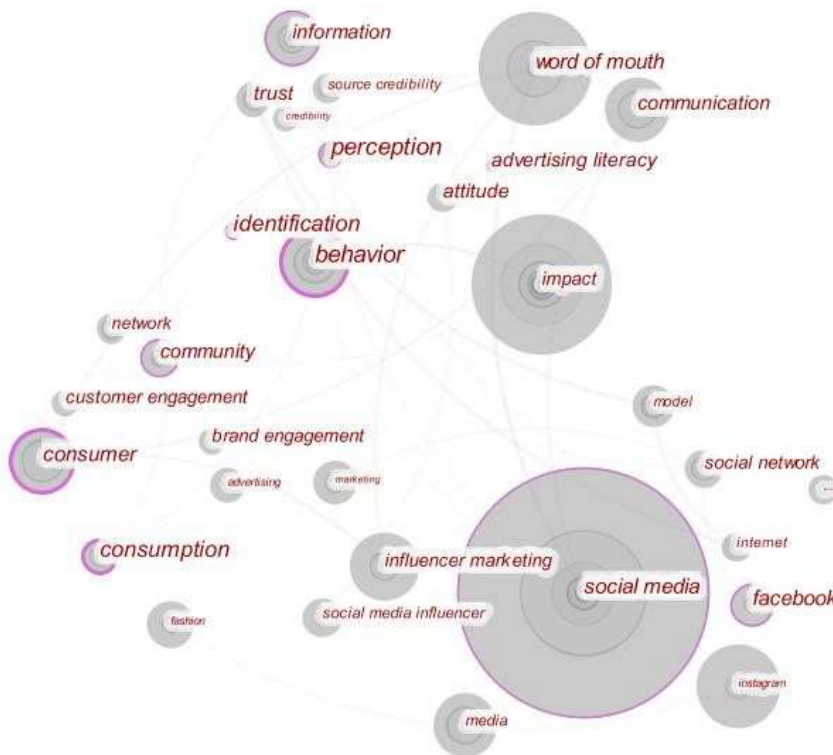
The third author, with three publications, is Jesus Segarra-Saavedra, a lecturer and professor of Communication and Social Psychology at the *University of Alicante* in Spain. His main areas of study are social network marketing, tourism, and communication. The most mentioned article, with eight citations, is *"Influencers, female fashion, and Instagram: the power of prescription in 2.0 age,"* published in *Revista Mediterranea Communication - Journal of Communication*. The text analyzes the strategies used by the 13 fashion influencers considered most relevant in Spain.

4.3 Keywords

The analysis of the frequency and centrality of keywords allows us to understand the fields of investigation of the analyzed sample, using the software program *Citespace*. Keywords are terms that reflect the main content of a study (Xiang, Wang & Liu, 2015). Frequency comprises the number of indexations of keywords, while centrality comprises keywords with large numbers of citations and correlations (Li, Ma & Qu, 2017). The words with the highest frequency were *"social media"* (57), *"impact"* (32), *"word of mouth"*(26), *"Instagram"*(19), and *"behavior"*(16), while those with the highest centrality were *behavior* (0.32), *advertising literacy* (0.22), *consumption* (0.21), *consumer* (0.21) and *perception* (0.20).

Figure 3 shows the network of correlations between the most frequent and most central keywords, where the larger the diameter of the circle, the greater the frequency, and the larger the purplish rim around the circle, the greater the centrality.

Figure 3.
Keywords with the highest frequency and centrality and their correlations (1945- 2019)



Source: Research data (2020).

The lines in the image show how the keywords are related to each other. *"Social media"*, which is the most frequent keyword (57), is directly linked with words related to the network and the internet: *"influencer marketing"*, *"marketing"*, *"communication"*, *"community"*, *"behavior"*, *"perception"* and *"world of mouth"*. As for *"behavior"*, which is the most central keyword (0.32), it is related to: *"social media"*, *"consumer"*, *"consumption"*, *"impact"* and *"internet"*. The second most frequent word is *"impact"* (32) and relates directly to the words *"behavior"*, *"network"*, *"source credibility,"* and *"communication"*. The third most frequent word is *"word of mouth"* (26) and is related to *"information"*, *"identification"*, *"consumer"*, *"communication"*, *"social media"* and *"influencer marketing"*.

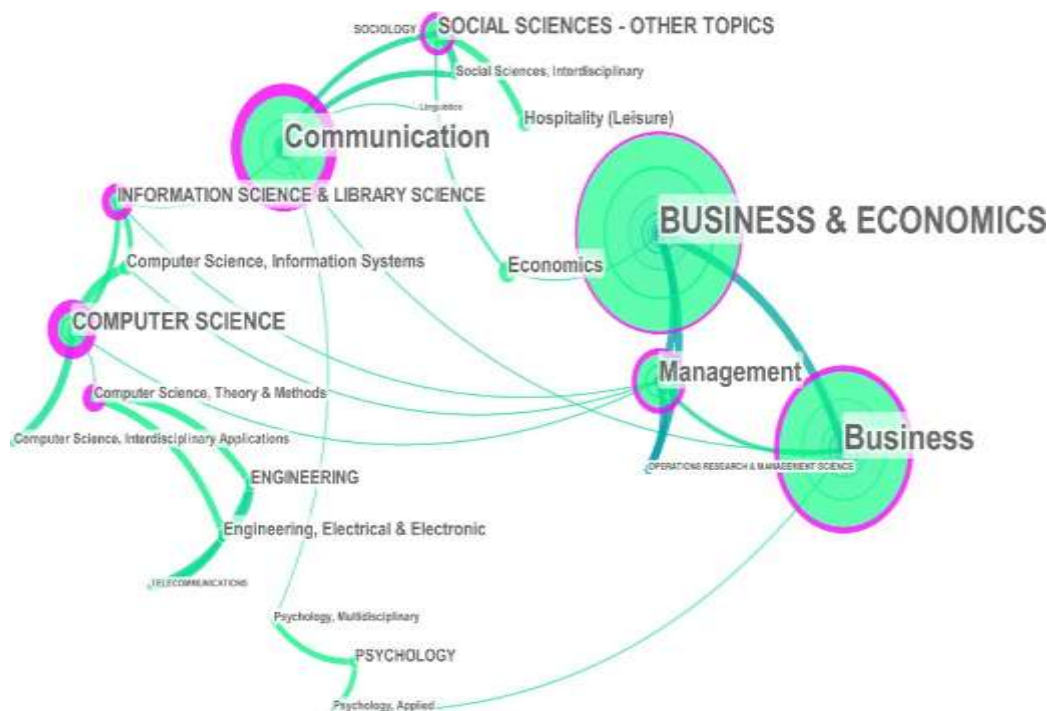
From here on, we analyze the most central words. "Advertising Literacy" is the word with the second highest centrality (0.22) and relates only to "consumer". The words "consumer" and "consumption" have the same centrality (0.21), the word "consumer" relates to "advertising literacy", "community", "behavior", "word of mouth", "communication" and "influencer marketing"; while the word "consumption" relates to "community", "behavior", "perception" and "fashion". The fourth most central word is "perception," which relates to the words "trust", "community," and "consumption".

4.4 Categories

The following analysis refers to the indexing categories. These demonstrate the most relevant fields of study for *digital influencers* and *branding*, and can guide future researchers by indicating areas requiring further research. Figure 4 presents the network of correlations between the most frequent and most central categories for the theme. The most frequent categories are: "Business & Economics" (84), "Business", "Communication" (67), and "Management" (43); and the most central are: "Communication" (0.68), "Computer Science" (0.68), "Information Science & Library Science" (0.43) and "Computer Science, Theory & Methods" (0.44).

Figure 4.

Top frequency and centrality categories of indexing and their correlations (1945-2019)



Source: Research data (2020).

In the image, the categories are grouped according to the field of study they represent. It is possible to see four main fields of study: *Business*, *Computer Science*, *Communication*, and *Social Sciences*. *Business* is a cluster that studies areas related to management, Administration, and economics. *Computer Science* is related to technology such as computing, engineering, data analysis, and information science. *Communication* is all the categories related to communication, such as telecommunications and advertising.

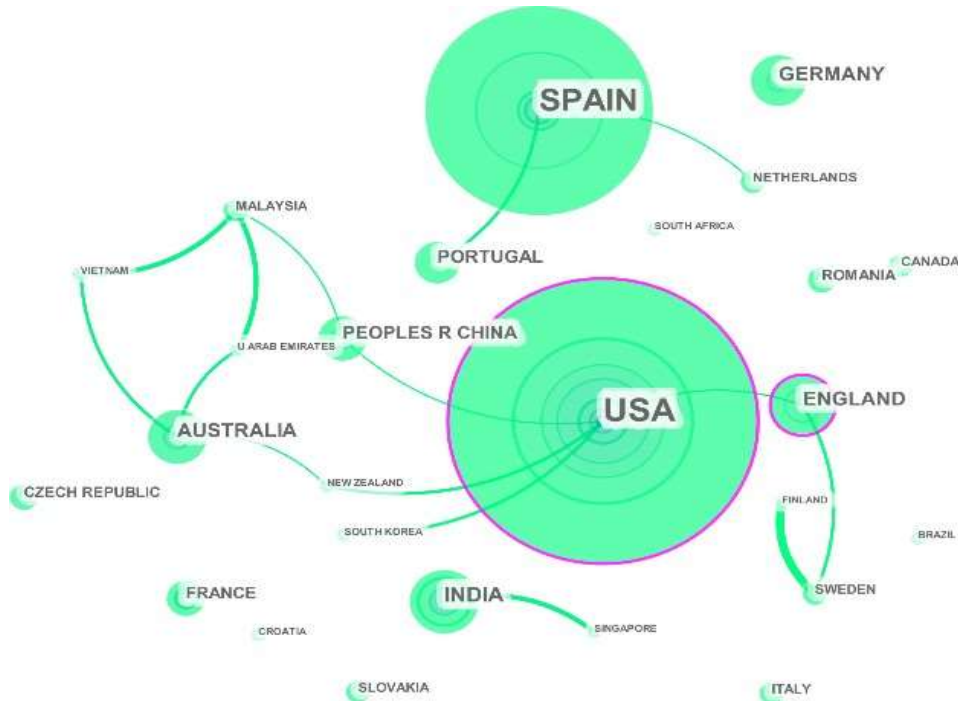
The area of studies *Social Sciences* comprises everything related to social relations, such as sociology, psychology, and behavior. The figure shows that *Communication* and *Computer Science* are the most central clusters, since they have the strongest purple rims, and the most frequent cluster is *business*, as it has the most prominent circles. The indexing years of the most frequent words are "Business & Economics" (2007), "Business" (2009), "Communication" (2015), and "Management" (2007). Although *Communication* only began to be explored in 2015, it is one of the most central categories, showing a strong relationship with the studied theme.

4.5 Countries

The analysis of the countries allows us to indicate the research poles, i.e., where the studies on *digital influencers* and *branding* are clustered. The thirty countries with the highest frequency and centrality were analyzed. Most studies on this theme are concentrated in the United States and Europe. The analysis of these countries can be seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5.

Countries with the highest frequency and centrality and their network of correlations (1945-2019)



Source: Research data (2020).

In the image, the green circles represent the most frequent countries; the larger the diameter, the more frequent the countries, as exemplified by the USA, Spain, and England. Likewise, it is underlined that the purple rings represent the major countries around the circles; the thicker the ring, the more central the countries, such as USA and England. One can see in this analysis that the countries with the highest frequency (number of publications) are also the most significant countries for the research (with the highest number of correlations and citations).

The most relevant country for the field is the United States, as it is the country with the highest frequency (38) and also the highest centrality (0.19). The indexing year of this country is 2007, and it is linked to the following countries: China, New Zealand, South Korea, and England. England is also relevant, as it is the fourth most frequent country (8) and the second most central (0.11). Its indexing year is 2017, and its relationship is with Sweden and the United States. Another country of relevance is Spain, which, despite presenting a low centrality of 0.01, is the second most frequent country (28), with an indexation year in 2015 and linked with Portugal and the Netherlands.

The last country to be analyzed is Australia, the fifth most frequent country (8) and the sixth most central one (0.05). Its indexing year is 2016, and it is linked with Vietnam, New Zealand, and the United Arab Emirates. Through the analysis of these countries, it can be seen that studies on the subject are usually conducted within the country, and there is not much exchange, given that only two countries, the United States and England, have centrality greater than 0.10.

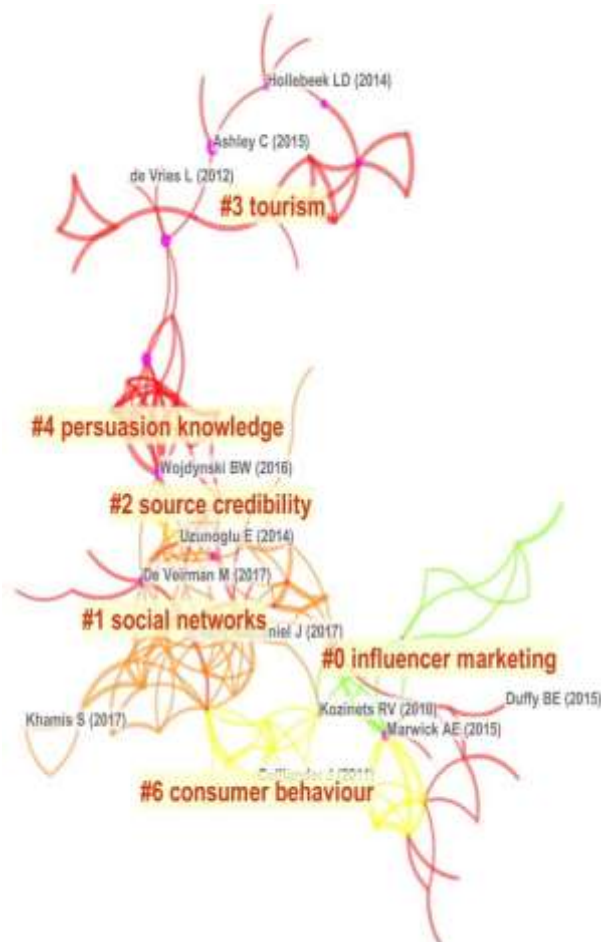
4.6 References

A new publication cannot be developed solely based on its content. It must always build on published articles, using them as references (Li, Ma & Qu, 2017). The analysis of reference will, therefore, comprise clusters that group the leading references on *digital influencers* and *branding*. For the cluster analysis, it is necessary to understand the concept of modularity and silhouette. Modularity is a value between 0-1 that measures the relationships and similarities between clusters, where the closer to 1, the more similarities and less acceptable the cluster - acceptable value from 0.4 to 0.8.

Silhouette, in turn, measures the similarity within the cluster, ranging from -1 to 1. The closer to one, the more consistent and similar the content is (Li, Ma & Qu, 2017). Figure 8 demonstrates the main clusters, considering that there are 5 of them: #0 Influencer marketing, #1 Social Networks, #2 Source Credibility, #3 Tourism, #4 Persuasion Knowledge, and #6 Consumer Behavior.

Figure 8:

The cited references and their groupings (1945-2019)



Source: Research data (2020).

The *influencer marketing* cluster addresses *influencers*, *digital models*, and *digital labor*. Its silhouette is 0.839, which started to be worked on around 2012. The *social networks* cluster addresses the themes *social media*, *content marketing*, *brand communication*, and *celebrity endorsement*. The silhouette value is the smallest, 0.761, and started to be worked on in 2014. The *source credibility* cluster has a silhouette of 0.775 and started to be worked on in 2014. It addresses *information credibility*, *message quality*, *product promotion*, and *influencers*.

Cluster #3, *tourism*, has the highest silhouette, of 0.97 and was the one that started to be worked on later, in 2015. It addresses the themes of *customer engagement*, *practical attitude*, and *price perception*. Cluster #4, *persuasion knowledge*, addresses the themes of *advertising campaign intention*, *social media platforms*, *influencer marketing*, and *social network sites*. It has a silhouette of 0.942 and started to be worked on in 2014. Cluster #6, *consumer behavior*, has a silhouette of 0.877 and started being worked on earlier, in 2011. It develops the themes of *social commerce*, *social media*, *e-commerce*, *Facebook*, and *consumer behavior*.

With the bibliometric review, some trends can be indicated in the relationship between *branding* and *digital influencers*. These are contemporary studies that began in the 2000s and grew exponentially up to 2015. The prominent authors belong to the broad areas of Administration and Social Communication, focusing on studies on consumer behavior and social media/networks. There are studies about engagement, loyalty, trust, identification, persuasion, and source credibility within the first field. In the second, there are studies focusing on different social networks and social media types, such as Facebook, Instagram, and word of mouth within networks. The cluster analysis demonstrated the importance of the

topic within the field of tourism and for the subject persuasion and reliability of sources. In view of these results, the next topic will address the articles within the Administration that focus on the relationship between *branding* and *digital influencers*.

5. SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

For the systematic review, 31 articles indexed in the *Web of Science* were analyzed within the Administration field, which dealt with the relationship between *branding* and *digital influencers*. As in the bibliometric review, two major fields of concentration were detected: consumer behavior and advertising. Within consumer behavior, studies are divided between consumer perception of the power of influencers on their buying power, factors that contribute to the choice of *influencer* and its effectiveness, and *influencer* characteristics that help in the brand endorsement. As in the bibliometric review, we see the importance of concepts such as persuasion, credibility, reliability, and knowledge, among others. In advertising, there are works about the consequences for the consumer and influencer of sponsored posts, the relationship between the development of social networks and media, and the power of influencers.

5.1 Consumer Behavior

The studies found sub-area analyzed the characteristics found in consumer behavior that are most relevant to brands' positioning strategies through *influencers*. Consumers' perceptions about *influencers* were analyzed, how they manage to influence consumption, and whether consumers are aware that they are being influenced in this way.

Folkword, Bevelander, Rozendaal, and Hermans (2019) analyze the relationship between *vlogs* and child followers, examining the amount of time spent by children, their perception of the promoted brands and products, and their susceptibility to persuasion. It was concluded that the amount of time spent depends on how closely they identify with the *vlogger* and that these children remembered the promoted brands and products, especially food and drinks, and considered themselves persuaded to endorse and consume these brands.

Devigili, Pucci, Fiorini, and Zanni (2018) aim to define the main factors that impact on consumer's experience and performance in online shopping within the fashion market, in which the primary influencer, when it comes to purchasing, is trust in the group, followed by trust in partners (brands and influencers), trust in other consumers, and trust in the brand online and offline. The impact of *influencers* proved positive in the 18 to 23 age group, insignificant in the 24 to 27 age group, and negative in the 28 to 35 age group.

Gannon and Prothero (2016) analyze the influence of beauty bloggers' selfies on transmitting authenticity to the consumer, confirming their hypothesis by pointing out that authenticity occurs, in a positive way, with bloggers recording their experience with the product, their life story, and activities in groups and events.

Makkar and Yap (2017) seek to develop the question: how do consumers construct meaning in their experiences in the luxury fashion industry? they address imperceptible consumption, claiming status without brand prominence. It was concluded that several consumer symbols are considered motivational factors for imperceptible consumption of luxury goods: influencers, trendsetters, fashion followers, and conservators of luxury.

Finally, Esteban-Santos, Medina, Carey, and Bellido-Pérez (2018) investigate the influence of fashion bloggers on the consumption intention of *millennials* in Spain. The results found were that the primary motivators that lead consumers to follow fashion bloggers are entertainment and information seeking. Consumer attitudes are influenced by the credibility of bloggers, which is determined by trustworthiness, social interactions, experience, and credibility of the message.

These studies show the great significance of influencers for children and young people (18 to 23 years old), persuading them to consume certain brands, including luxury brands. When these influencers show authenticity and credibility, and the consumer can identify with them, their efficiency in marketing strategies is even more promising.

5.2 The choice of influencer

The studies grouped in this category aim to propose models or characteristics that brands should consider when choosing digital influencers to advertise their products, seeking to provide information to help brands strategically choose these influencers.

Li, Lai, and Lin (2017) created a model with positive results in the study that seeks to measure the effectiveness of an influencer in the application of a given campaign, helping in the choice of influencers and guiding them assertively in the execution of the work. The efficiency measurement took into account the click-through rate, the rating (5 stars), and the messages sent. Kupfer, Holte, Kübler, and Hennig-Thurau (2018) developed a conceptual model on the influence

of partner brand social media on brand alliance success, and found that the effectiveness of this relationship depends on the power of social media of partner brands in relation to their products. Also testing models, Kumar and Mirchandani (2012) propose seven steps to guarantee the success of marketing campaigns: (i) monitor conversations about the brand on social networks; (ii) identify influential individuals to get the message across; (iii) identify common factors among them; (iv) locate potential influencers who have an interest in the brand; (v) recruit them; (vi) encourage them to spread a positive message, and (vii) harvest and analyze the results of the campaign. The model was validated at an Indian ice cream parlor, which increased its brand awareness by 49%, its ROI by 83%, and its revenue by 40%, after using the method and running the campaign.

Torres, Augusto, and Matos (2019) analyze 307 followers of digital influencers from different segments to build and validate a model regarding the relevance and effectiveness of these influencers in brand endorsement. The results show that attitudes towards the brand and consumption intention are influenced by the attractiveness of the digital influencer, in particular, their likability and familiarity. Arora, Bansal, Kandpal, Aswani, and Dwivedi (2019) use regression to measure the index of influence ability of influencers on various platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, in which the main factors are engagement, reach, sentiment, and growth. Finally, Shalev and Morwitz (2012) outline a new process of influence ability through comparison-based self-assessment and restoration (CDSER). For further differentiation, low economic power (SES) users were analyzed, with the author demonstrating that individuals with low economic power can influence other people's purchase intentions.

Having analyzed the articles in this section, it was seen that there is a gap in the literature regarding the best way to choose a digital influencer for brand positioning campaigns. The authors of the present study seek to fill this gap by building models that brands can be applied. Most of the results of the suggested models were positive, therefore, it can be inferred that there is no single, universal model for choosing the right influencer; it will depend a lot on the brand, its market niche, its location, and the campaign objectives.

5.3 Brand Endorsement

The articles analyzed here seek to raise the main characteristics that a digital influencer must have in order to endorse and promote a brand effectively. Jin, Mugaddam, and Ryu (2019) analyze the effectiveness of marketing campaigns for luxury brands conducted by Instagram celebrities (influencers) compared to those conducted by traditional celebrities, and found that influencers generate greater credibility and a positive attitude toward brand endorsement, by conveying more significant social presence. Trivedi and Sama (2019) also found that experienced influencers generate greater persuasion in online purchase intention than traditional celebrities. Thomas and Johnson (2019) argue that celebrity credibility in intention to purchase jewelry is linked to a mediating effect of attitude toward the ad, with brand fit with the celebrity and attitude toward the brand having a direct impact on celebrity credibility. Finally, Cooley and Parks-Yancy (2019) argue that for millennials, whether celebrities or influencers, it is the relationship of trust with those recommending the products that influences their purchase decisions.

Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack, and Zahid (2018) argue that influencers can persuade their followers, due to expertise, trustworthiness, likability, similarity, and familiarity, with trust being the most prominent factor. Kapitan and Silvera (2015) also demonstrate the persuasiveness of the influencer over their followers. For Ki and Kim (2019), the influential factors are attractive content, interaction, prestige, experience, and information.

Breves, Liebers, Abt, and Kunze (2019) analyze the impact of fit between the influencer and the brand being endorsed, validating the impact of congruence and pointing out the moderating role of social effect in the relationship. Shan, Chen, and Lin (2019) also found high levels of congruence between the influencer's image and the consumer's ideal self-image, which contributes to practical brand endorsement in a social media context in China.

Araújo, Neijens, and Vliegenthart (2016) investigate how different types of users can influence the dissemination of branded content through retweets. He categorizes these users into influencers, information brokers, and strong-relationship users. Influencers had the same level of response, and their mention in the brand's tweets increased the number of responses. Information brokers, on the other hand, are associated with higher levels of retweets.

Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted (2018) employ a heuristic-systematic model and reveal that reliability, social influence, quality argument, and engagement affect consumer-perceived credibility of information on YouTube. Furthermore, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) study influencer effectiveness, with the number of followers affecting consumer attitude due to perceived popularity, as well as the number of people the influencer follows, which can negatively impact their likability.

It is possible to conclude, then, based on the articles analyzed here, that the use of influencers is more effective for brand endorsement than the use of traditional celebrities. The main influencing factors are connection/familiarity, credibility, trust, and identification. Another important criterion is the influencer's fit with the brand and the follower.

5.4 Sponsored Posts

The articles in this category seek to validate the use of sponsored posts from perspectives of both influencers and consumers. From the influencer's perspective, the articles analyze the veracity and credibility that the influencer conveys when advertising online. From the consumer's perspective, the articles study their perception of sponsored posts, and whether using this tool stimulates consumption.

Petrescu, O'Leary, Goldring, and Mrad (2018) argue that marketing campaigns carried out by influencers have a significant impact on the number of product reviews, creating trends and increasing "word of mouth" referrals, which contributes to the growth of product visibility. Van Esch, Arli, Castner, Talukar, and Northey (2018) follow the same line, showing the efficiency of advertisements on blogs, since, due to the follower's interest in the blogger, there is a tendency for the blogger to support the publicity, and, the greater the identification, the greater the perception of credibility, authenticity, and probability of consumption. Furthermore, Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks (2019), examining the motivation of sponsored bloggers, argue that the characteristics of the blogger and the characteristics of the content influence the level of engagement, and the platform and the intention of the campaign are also crucial for the success of the campaign. On the flipside, De Jans, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2019) conclude that recognition of sponsored content had no negative impact on the advertiser, the influencer, or the message, but that the existence of a sponsored ad causes attitudes toward it to be negative.

Reading of these studies, it can be concluded that influencers can encourage their audience to consume the products, provided they transmit credibility. Thus, influencers should not only endorse a brand purely for monetary incentive, but because they identify with it and actually use the products they are recommending. It is also concluded that most consumers are aware that advertisements and ads by influencers do influence them, but they are more receptive to these when they happen organically, as part of the influencer's daily life.

5.5 Social Networks

The studies in this section focus on social media, and how influencers can position themselves to leverage brand positioning digital. Chae, Stephen, Bart, and Yao (2017) investigate the effects of seed marketing campaigns beyond word-of-mouth referrals, considering what other effects this technique can have on brand perpetuation. They conclude that the first few weeks of seed campaigns generate the most word-of-mouth, but campaigns that do not include seed tend to be more prevalent.

Canhoto *et al.* (2015) develop a model for dealing with crises in social networks, The steps of this model are as follows: (i) monitor the content generated by consumers; (ii) monitor changes in their behavior; (iii) analyze the content qualitatively and contextually; (iv) evaluate the immediate responses in the analyzed channels; (v) develop congruent messages, and engage *influencers* outside the already established brand communication. The study concludes that creating a specific model for each platform is impossible, as their use varies according to their function, industry, and geography.

Voorveld (2019) promotes an agenda for future studies in the field of brand communication in social media, presenting six research directions: digital influencers, personalized branded content in social media, ethical questions about the nature of content in social media and consumer empowerment, platform characteristics, the integration of social media into the marketing mix and the customer journey, and the use of accurate data in social media. Also, from a theoretical perspective, Halvorsen (2019) comments on the article "*How fashion blogs function as a marketing tool to influence consumer behavior*," analyzing how the immersion of new technologies and the social media era has impacted the blogging sphere and increased bloggers' influence over consumers.

Based on the analysis of this section, it can be concluded that digital marketing is growing increasingly, and it is up to brands to adopt new strategies to position themselves in the digital world, one example of these strategies being seed marketing. It should also be noted that, even though influencers were not the main focus of this section, the authors conclude that they are essential for branding strategies in social networks.

In summary, the systematic review presented so far brings critical theoretical contributions to the field of digital influencers and branding. Within the field of Administration, the most influential field of study, studies were found that: discussed the consumers' perceptions about influencers and their power in purchase decision making; outlined models for measuring efficiency in influencer choice; focused on influencer characteristics that support brand endorsement; analyzed the consequences for the consumer when faced with sponsored posts; and examined the relationship between social networks and influencers.

Within the studies on consumer behavior, the focus was on consumers' perceptions of influencers, how these influencers influence consumption, and whether consumers are aware of when they are influenced to consume. It was found that children considered themselves persuaded to endorse and consume brands advertised by digital influencers, and that time spent depends on factors such as identification with the influencer (Folkword et al., 2019). Besides children, the impact of influencers is positive in the 18-23 age group (Devigili et al., 2018), and trust in the influencer and brands influences online clothing purchases (Devigili et al., 2018). Consumers can also detect the authenticity and credibility of the influencer by reading about their consumption experiences, life stories, and activities in groups and events (Gannon & Prothero, 2016; Esteban-Santos et al., 2018). Digital influencers are drivers of symbols and meanings that motivate the consumption of luxury goods (Makkar & Yap, 2017).

Articles also focused on selecting influencers, proposing models and characteristics that organizations should pay attention to. The models suggest measuring the efficiency in choosing a digital influencer through the click-through rate, the rating (5 stars), and the messages sent (Li, Lai & Lin, 2017) and measuring the strength of alliances between brands according to the social media power of partner brands about their products (Kupfer et al., 2018). Kumar and Mirchandani (2012) propose seven steps to ensure the success of marketing campaigns involving influencers. One of these is the dissemination of positive messages and checking the congruence between these messages and the product offered. Most of the results of the suggested models were positive, therefore, it is inferred that there is no single universal model for selecting influencers.

In studies about brand endorsement, there is a search for the main characteristics a digital influencer must have to endorse and promote a brand effectively. It has been realized that digital influencers generate greater credibility, positive attitude, and persuasiveness when compared to traditional celebrities because they convey greater social presence, expertise, likability, reliability, similarity, and familiarity (Jin, Mugaddam & Ryu, 2019; Trivedi & Suma, 2019; Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack & Zahid, 2018; Kapitan & Silvera, 2015; Xiao, Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2018), with trustworthiness being the most prominent (Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack & Zahid, 2018). Cooley and Parks-Yancy (2019) argue that regardless of being a celebrity or influencer, what is essential for the millennial generation is the relationship of trust that is established. The similarity was also pointed out by Breve et al. (2019) and Shan, Chen, and Lin (2019) under the fit or congruence between the influencer and the endorsed brand. The number of followers also influences their credibility; inversely, the number of people they follow influences them negatively (deVeirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Posts sponsored by influencers have a significant impact on the number of product reviews, increasing "word of mouth" publicity, which contributes to the growth of product visibility (Petrescu et al., 2018), as well as the level of engagement (Hughes, Swaminathan & Brooks, 2019). This, in turn, is influenced by the level of congruence between the influencer and the brand (van Esch et al., 2018; de Jans, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2019).

Finally, studies focusing on social media discourse on how influencers can position themselves to leverage brand positioning were noted by Voorveld (2019), as a study trend within the field of social media and social networks. The popularization of these networks has a direct effect on the influence of these individuals on consumers (Halvorsen, 2019). The effects of remittance marketing (free gifts) on word of mouth have been found, even if only short-lasting (Chae et al., 2017).

5.6. New research proposals

After bringing the contributions and advances found in the relationship between branding and digital influencers, this subtopic focuses on the gaps and suggestions for further research found in the studies in the sample, with the aim of promoting new research agendas that can be of assistance to those wishing to study this topic in future. The agendas permeate cultural, demographic, contextual, and niche market factors.

Most of the articles reviewed were developed in the United States, such as those by Petrescu et al. (2018), Kumar and Mirchandani (2012), and Jin, Mugaddam, and Ryu (2019); in Asia, such the articles by Li, Lai and Lin (2017), Ki and Kim (2019) and Arora et al. (2019); and in Europe, such as those by Torres, Augusto and Matos (2019), Devigili et al. (2018) and Gannon and Prothero (2016). All the articles were developed based on local culture. It is not known whether all valid

hypotheses and models developed are applicable to different cultures.

Although the cultures of the United States, Europe, and Asia are very different, and the results found are similar, it cannot be inferred that all the models will apply to all cultures. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers replicate the articles reviewed here in their own countries.

The main articles that present culture as a gap is that of van Esch *et al.* (2018), which only focuses on consumers in the United States; Chae *et al.* (2017), a study only conducted with South Korean consumers; and that of Esteban-Santos *et al.* (2018), which only studies the Spanish context.

Proposition 1: Differences between branding strategies used by digital influencers in emerging and developed countries

The articles, for the most part, validated their research on a predominantly female audience in their 20s and 30s, e.g. the articles by Makkar and Yap (2017), Trivedi and Sama (2019), and Devigili *et al.* (2018). Some articles also conducted their studies with young people and children, e.g., Folkvord *et al.* (2019). However, the audience of the study does not represent the whole population, as it does not focus on men, or the elderly. Thus there is a clear demographic limitation.

The study themes, *branding* and *digital influencers*, are considered very current, so it makes sense that the primary focus of the study will be people who are immersed in the digital market and influencers. However, for the expansion of the study, it is also essential to examine how these themes relate to people not as involved in these markets. Therefore a suggestion for future research would be to explore other demographics as regards gender and age.

The main articles that present demographics as a limitation are those of Thomas and Johnson (2019), which only addresses the impact of celebrity gender but does not consider other demographics such as celebrity age, gender, and age of the respondent; Devigili *et al.* (2018), which only studies the age range of Millennials; and van Esch *et al.* (2018), which does not consider demographic issues such as gender and age.

Proposition 2: Perceptions of senior citizens about a brand endorsement by digital influencers The studies were limited to investigating only one platform in their research.

The most studied platform was Instagram, as evidenced in the article by Jin, Mugaddam, and Ryu (2019), but some studies also addressed YouTube, e.g., the article by Folkvord *et al.* (2019), Facebook, e.g., Canhoto *et al.* (2015), and Twitter, e.g., Araujo, Neijens, and Vliegenthart (2016). However, these platforms were not analyzed in the same study.

The relationship of digital influencers as a public varies significantly according to the platform, and the branding strategies used by influencers to promote or endorse a brand should always be congruent with the communication channel used by them. Therefore, a suggestion for future research is to replicate these studies on other social media platforms.

The main articles in this gap are Petrescu *et al.* (2018), who use reviewers from Amazon, and Jin, Mugaddam, and Ryu (2019), whose work was only applied to Instagram, but the paper itself suggests replicating it to other growing platforms, such as Pinterest; and Li, Lai, and Lin (2017), who analyze only the impact of posts on the Instagram feed, without including other tools of Instagram, such as IPTV and stories, or posts on other platforms.

Proposition 3: The use of cross-platform strategies to validate brand endorsement by digital influencers

Another limitation that applies to the vast majority of the articles analyzed was market segment or product category. Most of the studies focused on the fashion segment, e.g. those by Jin, Mugaddam, and Ryu (2019), Thomas and Johnson (2019), and Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack and Zahid (2018). However, the entertainment and technology segments were also studied, e.g. in the articles: by Torres, Augusto, and Matos (2019) and Trivedi and Sama (2019), respectively.

The digital influencers market originated in the fashion and beauty segments, but nowadays, some influencers address various topics, from finance to entrepreneurship and technology. Given that a company's branding strategy depends a lot on the segment in which it is inserted, it is very important to expand the studies to include more market segments. The main articles representing this category are Gannon and Prothero (2016), which is limited to the field of beauty bloggers; Jin, Mugaddam, and Ryu (2019), which only analyzes luxury brands advertised on Instagram; and Devigili *et al.* (2018), which is limited to the fashion industry. As such, one can see the gap in identifying the impacts of the models created in markets other than the fashion and entertainment market, the focus of most of the works found. An example is a financial market, such as cryptocurrency, which increased by 1,266% in the year 2021 in Brazil (Estadão, 2022).

Proposition 4: Investigate the use of digital influencers to endorse a brand in the financial market

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper analyzes articles indexed in the *Web of Science* database that combine the themes of branding and digital influencers. A total of 200 articles analyzed through a bibliometric analysis, with the support of the software program *CiteSpace*, and 31 articles were submitted to a systematic review.

The theoretical contributions include: (i) the role of systematic evidence for the global development of the chosen theme; (ii) the establishment of research trends obtained by combining bibliometric and systematic analysis; (iii) providing an overview of the cumulative scientific development on the study theme; and (iv) identifying gaps.

Empirically, it is also possible to highlight some contributions: (i) the systematic review provides tools to assist decision-making within the theme of branding and digital influencers by managers; (ii) the presentation of the central thematic groups along with research fronts that will help scholars navigate the topics related to the use of digital influencers in branding practice in conducting future research;

It can be seen that study of the themes of branding and digital influencers, combined, is relatively recent, with the first publication dating back to 2006, and a peak in publications in last two years the research period (2018/2019), which concentrate more than double the total publications on branding and digital influencers. The most central fields of study were related to consumption and consumer behavior, as confirmed in the systematic review, with many papers seeking to understand how digital influencers can influence consumer behavior and their purchase decision-making. The main countries producing research in this field were the USA and England, which demonstrates a focus in the regionalization of studies on North America and Europe. The systematic review also confirmed a significant influence of oriental countries.

With the systematic review, based on the in-depth reading of the articles, it was seen that little has been studied about how influencers can assist in the branding strategies of brands. Many articles address consumer behavior, drivers, and influencers, but the digital influencer itself is not much explored. In the systematic review, the articles were subdivided into five macro-categories: consumer behavior, influencer choice, brand endorsement, sponsored posts, and social media. The categories with the most articles were brand endorsement and influencer choice.

From the systematic review, some findings stand out: (i) the main characteristics that audiences value when following a recommendation from an influencer are credibility, trust, and identification; (ii) the influencer's fit with the endorsed brand, the influencer's values, and whether he or she is, in fact, a consumer of the brand; (iii) sponsored posts, which showed little significance in the studies; (iv) social networks in expansion and developing, which requires both brands and influencers to seek to reinvent themselves and look for new ways to produce content and approach their audiences.

Of the research gaps pointed out after reading the analyzed papers, five research proposals were suggested. These include: verifying the applicability of the studies in countries with developing economies, testing the studies on various platforms for a broader demographic population, and in more segments such as the financial market.

The main limitation of this work is the fact that it considers only one database. For the bibliometric review, the use of SCOPUS would be possible, and for the systematic review, SCOPUS, Scielo, EBSCO, and Spell could have been used, which would also include studies conducted in Brazil. Thus, it is suggested, for future research, that other databases be used, exploring articles in other languages, to better understand how the theme is addressed in Brazilian literature, for example.

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