A systematic literature review on network marketing: What do we know and where should we be heading?

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to synthesize the extant network marketing research and propose directions to advance this research domain. The key findings show that social cognitive theory and graph theory are the prominently used theories with the majority of research in this domain being conducted in the US. A qualitative method or a conceptual approach has been used mainly for network marketing research. The frequently reported antecedents, mediators, and consequences of network marketing include country-level, organizational, and individual attributes. Lexicometric analysis shows that the key themes of network marketing research are formats of network marketing and their characteristics, membership norms, and outcomes of network marketing. Theoretically, this systematic literature review (SLR) synthesizes the network marketing literature from multifarious perspectives and proposes a conceptual framework. Further, it contributes to advancing the network marketing domain by proposing future research directions in terms of theoretical underpinnings, characteristics, contexts, and methods. Our SLR also suggests pragmatic strategies to achieve effective outcomes for network marketing business.

1. Introduction

Network marketing is a contemporary marketing practice (CMP) that supports organizations to grow their business on both Business to Business (B2B) and Consumer to Consumer (C2C) platforms (Achrol & Kotler, 2022; Naudé & Sutton-Brady, 2019; Petersen & Schmid, 2021; Weng Wong & Nasir, 2019). It is a business model which involves direct selling through non-salaried distributors who can generate income from their own sales and those of the distributors they recruit for the company (Bosley, Greenman, & Snyder, 2019; Roman et al., 2021). In this business model, people or organizations initially buy products from a company as customers and register as network members, but later they will be involved in selling activities as distributors of the company's products (Bosley et al., 2019; Peterson & Albaum, 2007). Apart from selling activities, these distributors, alias network members, act as independent contractors who recruit several other distributors (network members)

under them (Dai, Teo, & Wang, 2017; Keep & Nat, 2014; Roman et al., 2021). Further, they perform human resource management functions as independent businessmen/businesswomen for the recruits (i.e., socialization activities, training, and motivation) (Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016; Keep & Nat, 2014). Each network member earns a commission on his/her own sales and the sales made by his/her recruits (Nat & Keep, 2002). In the B2B context, it occurs among organizations when the buying center participants commit resources and develop firm-level relationships to enhance their sales or market share (Brodie, Coviello, & Winklhofer, 2008).

Network marketing forms a multilevel pyramidal structure; therefore, it is also referred to as "multilevel marketing" or "pyramidal marketing". However, the term 'network marketing' is considered a more morally acceptable term than 'multi-level marketing (MLM)' or 'pyramidal marketing' (Herbig & Yelkurm, 1997; Peterson & Albaum, 2007). The terms 'MLM' and 'pyramidal marketing' appear to mean a

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pyramid scheme where an organization rewards and compensates its members for recruiting other individuals for the organization rather than for selling its products or services. Hence, the term "Network Marketing" is well-received in academic literature and business contexts. Some of the renowned and successful organizations that have adopted network marketing are Amway, Avon, Herbalife, Natura, Mary Kay, Oriflame, and QNet. Network marketing offers employment and earning opportunities to numerous people, and their primary or secondary source of income comes from network marketing while maintaining a good work-life balance (Prahalad & Hammond, 2002; Pratt & Rosa, 2003).

The number of network marketing members is rapidly growing with about 119.9 million people recruited globally in 2019 (Biswaas, 2022). Further, the turnover of network marketing businesses around the world grew by 2.3% during 2019–2020 (Gokul, 2022). Amway, the leading organization working in the network marketing model, earned global revenue of nine billion US dollars in 2021 (Tighe, 2022). Furthermore, the success of network marketing has attracted industrial marketers to adopt network marketing in their businesses (Geiger, Dost, Schönhoff, & Kleinaltenkamp, 2015). In B2B selling, the network marketing model is applied by offering bonus points, commissions, and discounts to the buying center participants whenever they add new buyers to the selling firm's market (Naudé & Sutton-Brady, 2019).

Despite the positive aspects of network marketing and its growth, there are controversies about its adoption (Albaum & Peterson, 2011; Bloch, 1996). Some business professionals and researchers criticize network marketing as a pyramid scheme in which compensation is earned on recruiting distributors in the organizational chain rather than primarily on the sale of products and services. New members (i.e., new distributors) are often added on payment of a minimal fee by propagating myths about future benefits (Albaum & Peterson, 2011). Sometimes, there is no return or payback provision to distributors for the items purchased for resale (Peterson & Albaum, 2007). In such cases, network marketing models pressurize network members economically and psychologically (Bloch, 1996). Therefore, society does not welcome network marketing, and in some countries, governments have officially banned some network marketing businesses (Albaum & Peterson, 2011; Farooqui, 2020; Vudali, 2021; Wet, 2020).

Due to such contrasting views on network marketing, this business model has attracted researchers' interest globally (Bosley et al., 2019; Dai et al., 2017; Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016; Weng Wong & Nasir, 2019). Further, it is important to note that recently there have been special issues on network marketing in reputed journals, such as *Industrial Marketing Management,* (e.g., '*The Blurring Boundaries between B2B actors and Consumers in the Supply Chains/Networks of Digitalizing Business Models*' in 2020). Most of the earlier studies in this domain were about understanding the conceptual aspects of network marketing (Albaum & Peterson, 2011; Bloch, 1996; Koehn, 2001; Peterson & Albaum, 2007). However, researchers later have become interested in understanding the phenomenon and prospects of network marketing in different contexts. For example, studies have focused on the prospects of adopting a network marketing model for the hotel and tourism industry (Li & Petrick, 2008; Weng Wong & Nasir, 2019). A few other studies have focused on the factors affecting the success of network marketing (Bosley & McKeage, 2015; Dai et al., 2017; Dai, Wang, & Teo, 2011; Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016; Groß & Vriens, 2019). Some studies focused on the important role of network marketing in diminishing economic inequalities (e.g., Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016; Ireland, 2008), while a few studies focused on the disclosure practices of network marketing firms (e.g., Bosley et al., 2019), and youth willingness to adopt network marketing as a career (e.g., Nga & Mun, 2011).

Thorelli (1986), Brodie, Coviello, Brookes, and Little (1997) and Sparks and Schenk (2001) are some of the prominent authors within the network marketing domain. The highly cited papers in this domain include the earliest conceptual papers that explain the networking concept and its strategic benefits (Thorelli, 1986) and advocate for the adoption of network marketing as a contemporary marketing practice over transactional marketing (Brodie et al., 1997). Sparks and Schenk's (2001) paper provided a breakthrough in empirical research in this domain, and, as a result, their paper is considered the seminal work in this domain. They investigated the nature of leadership required to develop cohesion among network members, motivate them to put in rigorous efforts and perform effectively, and create job satisfaction. Thus, this paper lays the foundation to investigate the role of organizational factors in the success of network marketing.

Although the literature on network marketing is growing, as discussed above, it is rambling and fragmented. This is indicated by the extent and diversity of theories, methods, and constructs used in the extant literature. Several theories have been used to understand the network marketing phenomenon, but the theoretical underpinnings of this domain appear to have disintegrated. Therefore, these diverse theoretical perspectives need to be synthesized to identify the gaps in the theoretical debate and to suggest alternative theories that can strengthen and advance the theoretical lens of this domain. Further, providing an abstract view of the methods used in network marketing research over time will guide future researchers to adopt advanced techniques and methods for attaining robust research outcomes. Moreover, the extant literature indicates that various contextual, cultural, organizational, and individual factors affect the adoption, success, and growth of network marketing. However, these factors have not been synthesized to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the antecedents, mediators, and outcomes of network marketing.

Considering the fragmented state of the literature in this domain, a systematic synthesis will be highly beneficial for academicians and practitioners from multifarious perspectives. However, a comprehensive review of the network marketing literature has not yet been carried out to synthesize the literature in this domain. A systematic literature review (SLR) is adopted to provide a systematic synthesis of the literature in this domain. SLR "adheres to a strict scientific design based on explicit, prespecified and reproducible methods" (Gopalakrishnan & Ganeshkumar, 2013, p.10). It also highlights the avenues for research in a specific domain by identifying the gaps in that literature (Corbet, Lucey, Urquhart, & Yarovaya, 2019). Thus, the present study aims to conduct an SLR of the network marketing literature with three major objectives. The first objective is to synthesize the extant network marketing literature to examine the evolution of research in this domain over time. This SLR synthesizes the network marketing literature from multifarious perspectives, i.e., in terms of publication years, publication outlets, citations, theories, contexts, methods, and constructs. The second objective is to propose a conceptual framework to understand the network marketing phenomenon based on the inferences generated from the synthesis of the literature. This framework elaborates on the antecedents, mediators, and outcomes of network marketing. The third objective is to propose an arena for future research in network marketing by highlighting gaps in the network marketing literature.

This SLR is an unprecedented endeavor to provide comprehensive insights into network marketing research. It appraises network marketing literature by reconciling it from multifarious perspectives and proposing future research directions. For example, the synthesis of theoretical underpinnings shows that social cognitive theory and graph theory are the prominently used theories. This finding uncovers the huge potential to advance the theoretical lens in this research arena. The findings also show that network marketing research is highly concentrated in the US which suggests the need to extend research in this domain to other countries and cultural backgrounds. The extensive use of qualitative methods and conceptual research suggests a need to apply other research methods to this research domain. Further, the findings demonstrate the widely researched themes in the network marketing literature. Moreover, the congregation of the widely studied variables in this domain unravels the antecedents, mediators, and outcomes of network marketing. It also provides robust encapsulation of country-level, organizational, and individual factors affecting outcomes of

network marketing. These findings are a ready reference for network marketing research; thus, the present SLR uniquely contributes to serving the interests of academia. Practically, the present study highlights important factors that should be considered by network marketing practitioners while formulating and executing strategies to attain greater outcomes for a network marketing organization.

The remainder of the paper has been organized as follows. The next section outlines the methodology adopted for this SLR followed, by findings and discussion. Then, future research directions are provided followed by academic and practical implications, limitations, and a conclusion.

2. Methodology

2.1. Approach adopted for the review

Various approaches are adopted for a literature review paper, i.e., a systematic review, a semi-systematic review, and an integrative review (Swain et al., 2023a; Vrontis & Christofi, 2021). Of these approaches, an SLR provides a comprehensive understanding of the literature on a topic which guides future researchers to make more impactful contributions to the domain. An SLR involves identifying, selecting, and synthesizing the literature on a domain in an unbiased, transparent, and rigorous manner (Vrontis & Christofi, 2021). An SLR also suggests future research directions to the domain's literature by identifying gaps in the literature based on the theories, constructs, methods, and contexts adopted in previous studies (Paul & Criado, 2020; Swain et al., 2023b). Therefore, an SLR is considered a superior method to synthesize the literature in a domain (Linnenluecke, Marrone, & Singh, 2020). Since an SLR is a widely used approach to review literature (Linnenluecke et al., 2020; Vrontis & Christofi, 2021), it appears to be the most suitable approach to achieving the objectives of the current review, i.e., to synthesize the network marketing literature intricately and propose future research avenues.

Since the hybrid nature of an SLR enables researchers to use multiple methods to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the literature (Paul & Criado, 2020), this review combines the structured literature review method with lexicometric analysis (explained later) to synthesize the literature in terms of theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods. Such a hybrid review method has been used in previous SLR papers (e.g., Adil et al., 2022; Akhmedova, Manresa, Rivera, & Bikfalvi, 2021; Lavissière, Sohier, & Lavissière, 2020; Macke & Genari, 2019; Mandják et al., 2019; Mohamed et al., 2022; Shankar et al., 2022). For example, Shankar et al. (2022) used a hybrid review approach where they combined structured review with lexicometric analysis to present a systematic review of online food delivery literature. They used the structured review approach to synthesize the literature in terms of widely used theories, contexts, constructs, and methods. Further, they used lexicometric analysis to identify major themes and interrelationships of these themes in the online food delivery literature. Accordingly and consistent with their approach, this SLR follows a hybrid review method to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the network marketing literature and suggests future research directions in this domain.

2.2. Topic selection

Paul and Criado (2020) suggested that before finalizing the topic for an SLR, it is imperative to investigate whether any recent SLR exists on the topic of interest. Accordingly, the authors critically reviewed the network marketing literature but did not find any recent SLR in this domain. Network marketing is gaining interest and significance academically and pragmatically. Academically, there is a recent surge in the number of studies focused on ethical and legal issues related to network marketing, the impact of network marketing on society, and how network marketing works (Bruckermann, 2021; Feng, Lu, Gong, & Sun, 2021; Groß & Vriens, 2019; Lofthouse & Storr, 2021; Yu, 2021).

Pragmatically, network marketing is gaining popularity among businesses and society (Yu, 2021). Thus, the growing relevance and significance of network marketing coupled with the absence of review studies in this domain call for an SLR to synthesize the literature on network marketing and identify future avenues of research in this domain.

2.3. Search strategy

After finalizing the topic and consistent with previous SLR papers (e. g., Jebarajakirthy et al., 2021; Lim, Yap, & Makkar, 2021), a robust search process was adopted. The appropriate keywords and databases were selected to search for relevant papers (Maseeh et al., 2021). The keywords and database selection are explained below.

2.3.1. Keywords selection

In the current SLR, Talwar, Talwar, Kaur, and Dhir's (2020) three-step approach was adopted to shortlist keywords more systematically and robustly. The first step in this approach was brainstorming, i.e., the authors discussed and brainstormed to enlist the terms that were synonymous with 'network marketing' and were used interchangeably with 'network marketing'. The second step was a review of the literature i.e., the search terms should be derived from previous papers in the specified research arena (Akhmedova et al., 2021). As such, publications in this domain available on Google Scholar were searched to find the terms that were frequently used in addition to the term 'network marketing'. Google Scholar was used as the search engine to identify the search terms because it indexes most, if not all, scholarly publications (including in-press articles) and is much quicker than other potential mechanisms that could be used for article search. It is also easily accessible and freely available. The third step was confirmation by subject experts (Mehta et al., 2022). Thus, an expert team of four professors, who were all well-versed in network marketing terminologies, were consulted to finalize the keyword list. The final keywords developed following this three-step process included "network marketing", "multilevel marketing", "pyramidal marketing", "pyramid scheme", and "pyramid marketing" in the keyword list. Overall, the process of shortlisting keywords for article search was consistent with the recent SLR papers published in reputed journals (e.g., Redine, Deshpande, Jebarajakirthy, & Surachartkumtonkun, 2022; Shankar et al., 2022).

After the three-step validation of the keywords, we used these keywords with a Boolean 'OR' operator to search for relevant published papers across the databases. As such, keywords used for article search with the search string were "(network market*) OR (multilevel market*) OR (multi level market*) OR (multi-level market*) OR (pyramid* market*) OR (pyramid* scheme)". Any papers with these keywords identified in the title, abstract, or keyword list were considered for this study, with due attention given to the inclusion and exclusion criteria explained later.

As indicated in '2.2. Topic Selection', no review papers exist in this domain. Therefore, in this review, the authors were interested in synthesizing the entire network marketing literature published to date. Thus, no restrictions were applied regarding the time period.

2.3.2. Database selection

The use of multiple databases for article search is highly recommended for SLR papers (Wanyama, McQuaid and Kittler, 2021). The recent SLR papers published in top-ranking journals have considered multiple databases (Gupta, Chauhan, Paul, & Jaiswal, 2020; Maseeh et al., 2022; Paul & Feliciano-Cestero, 2020; Srivastava, Singh, & Dhir, 2020). Hence, we identified multiple online databases, including EBSCO, Emerald, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, Sage, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, and Web of Science for the article search. These databases have been frequently used in recent SLR papers and are considered very reliable and comprehensive in terms of the availability of scholarly literature (Ashaduzzaman et al., 2022; Maseeh et al., 2021; Paul & Mas, 2019; Vrontis & Christofi, 2021; Wanyama et al., 2021).

2.4. Journal selection and inclusion/exclusion criteria

Next, we developed the inclusion /exclusion criteria to shortlist papers for the review. These criteria were developed in line with the guidelines of Dhaliwal, Singh, and Paul (2020) and Srivastava et al. (2020). Accordingly, only those manuscripts which were (a) scholarly work, (b) published in a peer-reviewed journal, and (c) in the domain of network marketing were shortlisted for the review.

We adhered to the recommendations of Paul and Criado (2020) to attain a quality SLR. Accordingly, we included papers in the review which were published in journals ranked A*, A, or B in the Australian Business Dean Council (ABDC) Journal Quality List or in journals that had an impact factor of one or above in the Journal Citation Report (JCR). This screening criterion has been adopted by SLRs published in top-rated journals (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022; Mandler, Sezen, Chen, & Özsomer, 2021; Shankar et al., 2022). It is important to note that the criteria adopted by the ABDC ranking system to evaluate journal quality are more robust than that used by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) in their Academic Journal Guide (AJG) (Zhang, 2021, p. 10). Compared to AJG rankings, ABDC rankings are more strongly grounded on several matrixes and indexes, such as "impact metrics", "influence metrics", and "source metrics". We have also considered the Clarivate Analytics (Web of Science) JCR impact factor (journals with impact factor one or more were considered) to screen good-quality papers for the current SLR. The JCR impact factor is considered a superior method to ABDC and AJG and it ensures a journal's quality due to its comprehensive, credible, and robust measurement approach adopted to evaluate journal quality (Zhang, 2021). It is comprehensive because ABDC and CABS' AJG ranking lists include only business/management journals whereas the JCR impact factor is used to evaluate journals in all fields of study. Further, Clarivate Analytics (Web of Science) adopts a transparent statistical approach to calculating JCR impact factor metrics
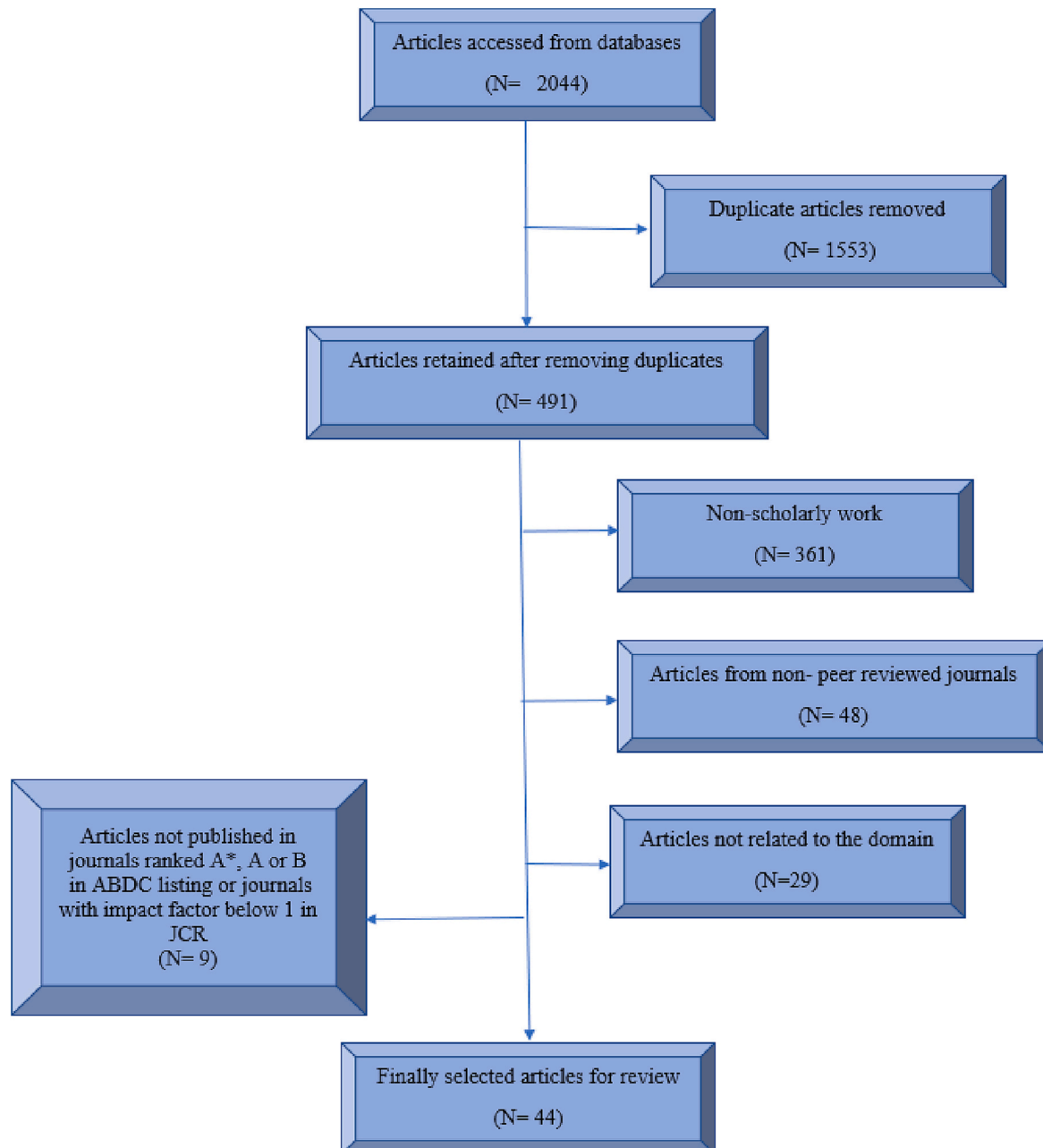

Fig. 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

compared to a subjective evaluation approach adopted by a panel of experts as in the case of ABDC and AJG. Additionally, ABDC and CABS' AJG rely on the JCR impact factor as one of the robust criteria for evaluating journal quality.

Initially, 2044 papers were identified from the selected databases using the specified keywords. Next, 1553 duplicate research papers that were downloaded more than once across the databases were omitted from the review. Thereafter, we employed the inclusion/exclusion criteria to shortlist articles for our SLR. Accordingly, 361 papers out of the 491 remaining papers were excluded because they were not scholarly work (e.g., articles published in business magazines). Another 48 papers were excluded from the review because they were published in non-peer-reviewed journals. Next, the relevance of the remaining 82 papers were closely examined. Subsequently, 29 articles were excluded because they were not in the domain of network marketing. Thereafter, we analyzed the remaining 53 articles regarding the quality criteria (see Paul & Criado, 2020) explained in the previous paragraph. Accordingly, nine articles were removed as they did not fulfill the quality criteria, i.e., they were not published in journals ranked A*, A, or B in the ABDC listing or journals with impact factor one or above in JCR.

Thus, the final dataset for the current SLR comprised 44 research papers published in 38 journals from 1973 to 2021, based on the data collected from 15 countries. To achieve the proposed objectives of this research, the full-text versions of these 44 research papers were reviewed. The steps adopted for the search process, and inclusion and exclusion criteria have been illustrated in Fig. 1.

Academically, 40 or more research papers represent a substantial body of work in a domain because that number of papers indicates that the domain has reached a mature state for conducting an impactful SLR (Paul, Lim, O'Cass, Hao, & Bresciani, 2021. p.4). Notably, several recent SLRs published in top-rated journals reviewed and synthesized a similar number of papers. For example, Du, Hu, & Vakil (2021) synthesized 35 papers on supply chain agility (published in the *International Journal of Consumer Studies*), Akhmedova et al. (2021) synthesized 40 papers on service quality in the sharing economy (published in the *International Journal of Consumer Studies*), and Siachou, Trichina, Papasolomou, & Sakka (2021) synthesized 39 papers on knowledge hiding (published in the *Journal of Business Research*). Consistent with this trend, the current SLR has been conducted on 44 shortlisted papers on *Network Marketing*.

2.5. Lexicometric analysis

Lexicometric analysis helps in carrying out an in-depth quantitative analysis of qualitative data (Abhayawansa, 2011). It enables researchers to perform statistical investigations to bring out clusters of concepts within a text (Reinert, 1990) and eliminates the probability of researcher bias by providing automated textual analysis through systematic coding of texts (Mandják et al., 2019). The shortlisted articles on network marketing were subject to lexicometric analysis to gain detailed insights. It is often performed by software, such as Iramuteq and Alceste.

Iramuteq software was used to perform lexicometric analysis for the present study. Each article was coded as a text with stated variables as per the recommendations of Mandják et al. (2019). The software was used to code the variables: 'country of research', 'year of publication', 'category of the journal of the publication', and 'research methods'. While performing lemmatization through Iramuteq software, words automatically lemmatized are termed 'form'. The software recognizes similar words, such as 'take', 'took', and 'taken' to combine into one word, i.e., 'take'. Such combined words appearing in the corpus only once are designated 'hapax', whereas the words appearing in the corpus twice or more are designated 'active forms' by Iramuteq software. A group of published articles imported into the Iramuteq software for performing lexicometric analysis represents a corpus. Forty-four research papers shortlisted for this SLR form the corpus for lexicometric analysis in the present study.

2.6. The review structure

Consistent with the standard practice adopted for a structured SLR (Jebarajakirthy et al., 2021; Mariani, Perez-Vega, & Wirtz, 2022; Paul & Criado, 2020; Secinaro, Calandra, Lanzalonga, & Ferraris, 2022; Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi, & Thrassou, 2021), we synthesized and organized the network marketing literature systematically and logically in various sections and subsections. First, we synthesized the network marketing literature in terms of years to understand the evolution of research in this domain. Then, we presented the publication outlets and key authors of this domain. After this, we analyzed the network marketing literature in terms of methodological and theoretical perspectives to understand researchers' methodological preferences and theoretical underpinnings in this domain. Further, the variables reported in network marketing research were synthesized to propose a comprehensive conceptual framework to understand the network marketing phenomenon. Moreover, lexicometric analysis was performed to identify the main themes of this research field. Finally, the future research directions were presented using the lucid and organized "Theory-Context-Characteristics-Methodology" (TCCM) framework for ease of understanding these directions.

3. Findings and discussion

The details of the 44 articles shortlisted for SLR after applying inclusion/exclusion criteria are shown in Table 1. These articles were reviewed to accomplish the objectives of the SLR on network marketing literature. The details of the research papers, i.e., author(s) with the year of publication, title of the research paper, journal of publication, and the key findings, are presented in Table 1 chronologically.

The systematic synthesis of the network marketing literature and the development of a synthesized conceptual framework for network marketing are presented in the following subsections.

3.1. Evolution of network marketing research over the years

The evolution of academic research in a specific domain can be gauged through a periodical analysis of good quality publications in that domain (Jebarajakirthy et al., 2021). The year-wise analysis exhibits the evolution of the network marketing literature over the past 50 years. To understand the evolution of the research in the network marketing domain, the year-wise distribution of selected published articles is presented in Fig. 2.

The first article in this domain was published in 1973. Considering 1973 as the initial year of publication on network marketing, it is evident from Fig. 2 that the arena of network marketing garnered little research attention; with only four (9.09%) papers published till 1995. The research on network marketing increased from 1996 onwards. The majority of the research articles were published after 2000, i.e., 16 (36.36%) publications from 2001 to 2010 and 19 (43.18%) publications from 2011 to 2020. From 1996 onwards, one to two papers were published in most of the years with no papers published in some years (e.g., 1999, 2000, 2010, and 2012). The highest number of publications in a year was five recorded in 2001 and 2021, followed by three publications recorded in 2018 and 2019. The number of recent publications, i.e., 2018–2022, indicates that this domain is attracting steady interest among researchers. The probable reasons for this recent surge in network marketing research are the contrasting positive and negative aspects of network marketing, such as rapid growth in turnover and revenue generated by network marketing businesses (Gokul, 2022; Tighe, 2022), employment generation by network marketing businesses (Korman, 2022; Malhotra, 2018), and socio-legal criticism against this form of businesses (Vudali, 2021; Wet, 2020). Consequently, understanding the intricacies of the network marketing phenomenon from multifarious perspectives is gaining interest in the academic community.

Table 1
Articles included in this review.

Sr. No.	Citation	Title	Journal	Key findings
1	(DeJute, Myers, & Wedding, 1972)	Wheeler-Lea Versus Pyramidal Sales	American Business Law Journal	On the basis of case studies of various pyramidal marketing organizations, this paper distinguishes the characteristics of legal and illegal pyramid schemes and discusses the laws being framed to restrict the illegal practices of pyramidal sales.
2	(Gastwirth, 1977)	A Probability Model of a Pyramid Scheme	The American Statistician	Network members fail to earn if their sub-dealers fail to make new dealers due to inadequate efforts.
3	(Thorelli, 1986)	Networks: Between Markets and Hierarchies	Strategic Management Journal	Not only does network management consist of marketing but it also incorporates technology transfer, information exchange, accounting and finance as well as public and interpersonal relations for building internal effectiveness in serving other network members.
4	(Reingen & Kernan, 1986)	Analysis of Referral Networks in Marketing: Methods and Illustration	Journal of Marketing Research	The personal network and the strength of the relational ties in these networks play an important role in maintaining and improving the flow of referrals in network marketing.
5	(Bloch, 1996)	Multilevel Marketing: What's The Catch?	Journal of Consumer Marketing	Multilevel marketing has a negative image among the general public, but network members gain confidence and self-esteem by joining such organizations.
6	(Croft & Woodruffe, 1996)	Network Marketing: The Ultimate in International Distribution?	Journal of Marketing Management	Considering Amway's success in the Japanese market, it was found that network marketing has some strength over conventional marketing. With effective marketing strategies and the right environment, network marketing can be a quick and extremely lucrative strategy for companies to penetrate into apparently impenetrable markets.
7	(Brodie et al., 1997)	Towards A Paradigm Shift in Marketing? An Examination of Current Marketing Practices	Journal of Marketing Management	Firms are likely to practice interaction and network marketing together. Transactional marketing perspective is slowly being replaced by other forms of marketing including network marketing.
8	(Herbig & Yelkurm, 1997)	A Review of The Multilevel Marketing Phenomenon	Journal of Marketing Channels	This review discusses the legalities and illegalities of MLM. Although MLM is the future of worldwide marketing, it can turn into a pyramid scheme (illegal format) by recruiting as many distributors as possible and riding on the pyramid leading to its collapse.
9	(Coughlan & Grayson, 1998)	Network Marketing Organizations: Compensation Plans, Retail Network Growth, And Profitability	International Journal of Research in Marketing	In network marketing organizations, compensation and markup parameters, recruitment parameters and time parameters affect sales at individual and organizational level.
10	(Sparks & Schenk, 2001)	Explaining The Effects of Transformational Leadership: An Investigation of The Effects of Higher-Order Motives in Multilevel Marketing Organizations	Journal of Organizational Behavior	Transformational leadership (communication, training and exchange of information) leads to higher purpose motivation, unit cohesion and job satisfaction. Higher purpose motivation, efforts, and organizational citizenship behavior have been used as mediators between transformational leadership and network marketing outcomes.
11	(Koehn, 2001)	Ethical Issues Connected with Multilevel Marketing Schemes	Journal of Business Ethics	This paper discusses two unethical aspects of MLM i.e., fraudulent practices and focus on recruitment rather than a product-centred business.
12	(Kong, 2001)	Marketing of Belief: Intertextual Construction of Network Marketers' Identities	Discourse & Society	Network marketing organizations promote their organization, their members' efforts and earned benefits to enhance their image and gain advantages for their business operations.
13	(Msweli & Sargeant, 2001)	Modelling Distributor Retention in Network Marketing Organization	Marketing Intelligence & Planning	Organizational characteristics and distributors' attributes influence the retention of salesforce/ distributors in a network marketing organization.
14	(Gibb Dyer, 2001)	Network Marketing: An Effective Business Model for Family-Owned Businesses?	Family Business Review	Social relationships and obligations are significant factors affecting the success of a network marketing organization.
15	(Nat & Keep, 2002)	Marketing Fraud: An Approach for Differentiating Multilevel Marketing	Journal of Public Policy & Marketing	Lack of deeper analysis of rewards provided on the basis of the revenue generated may lead people to believe a pyramid scheme as a legitimate business format.
16	(Kong, 2002)	Managing The Ambiguous and Conflicting Identities of 'Upline' And 'Downline' In A Network Marketing firm	Discourse Studies	The interactions between network marketers (uplines-downlines) play an important role in the successful operations of network marketing organizations.
17	(Pratt & Rosa, 2003)	Transforming Work-Family Conflict into Commitment in Network Marketing Organizations	Academy of Management Journal	Network marketing offers employment and earning opportunities while maintaining a good work-life balance.
18	(Chang & Tseng, 2005)	Building Customer Capital Through Relationship Marketing Activities the Case of Taiwanese Multilevel Marketing Companies	Journal of Intellectual Capital	Core service performance and relationship marketing activities carried out by network marketing organizations (such as recognition of performance, membership interdependence and dissemination of knowledge) are the antecedents of customer capital which is a key outcome of network marketing.
19	(Hill et al., 2006)	Network-Based Marketing: Identifying Likely Adopters Via Consumer Networks	Statistical Science	Social relationships of network marketing members can be used to expand market share. Therefore, their relationship

Table 1 (*continued*)

Sr. No.	Citation	Title	Journal	Key findings
				building capacity and information can be used as a crucial basis of marketing strategies.
20	(Sparks & Schenk, 2006)	Socialization Communication, Organizational Citizenship Behaviors, And Sales in A Multilevel Marketing Organization	Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	Socialization communication positively affects members' organizational citizenship behavior, which produces direct and indirect effects on sales. Group cohesion mediates this relationship.
21	(Peterson & Albaum, 2007)	On The Ethicality of Internal Consumption in Multilevel Marketing	Journal of Personal Selling &Sales Management	Network marketing is perceived as more ethical than MLM. Internal consumption by network members should not be considered unethical.
22	(Li & Petrick, 2008)	Tourism Marketing in An Era of Paradigm Shift	Journal of Travel Research	It is hard to decide how the three concepts: the relationship approach, network approach or service dominant approach affect the tourism industry
23	(Brodie et al., 2008)	Contemporary Marketing Practices Research Program: A Review of The First Decade	Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing	Network marketing is one of the upcoming contemporary marketing practices (CMP). Research on CMP encompasses industry linkages, multi- theory and multimethod approaches, and international emphasis. CMP can be adopted by all types of firms and can coexist with transactional marketing practices.
24	(Domegan, 2008)	Social Marketing: Implications for Contemporary Marketing Practices Classification Scheme	Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing	The CMP resonate with network marketing. CMP research can be expanded by adding a third layer to the unit of analysis i.e., a community/society aspect and capturing the marketing exchanges in societal spaces.
25	(Palmer & Wilson, 2009)	An Exploratory Case Study Analysis of Contemporary Marketing Practices	Journal of Strategic Marketing	The synthesis of the literature on marketing practices reveals that there is a need for research on various marketing practices (transactional, database, interaction and network marketing) and draw linkages.
26	(Dai et al., 2011)	Chinese Immigrants in Network Marketing Business in Western Host Country Context.	International Business Review	Network marketers' motivation for pursuing network marketing business, self-efficacy (related to network marketing) and social competence are affected by a network marketing organization's social environment.
27	(Nga & Mun, 2011)	The Influence of MLM Companies and Agent Attributes on The Willingness to Undertake Multilevel Marketing as a Career Option Among Youth	Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing	An MLM company's characteristics and the family income level influence youth's willingness to pursue MLM as a career option.
28	(Henkel & Block, 2013)	Peer Influence in Network Markets: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis	Journal of Evolutionary Economics	Peer influence helps in adding new members to a network marketing business resulting in a larger user base. Further, a larger user base increases the goodwill of the firm and attracts new members.
29	(Keep & Nat, 2014)	Multilevel Marketing and Pyramid Schemes in The United States: An Historical Analysis	Journal of Historical Research in Marketing	The traditional direct selling approach is rapidly being replaced by the MLM model which provides a good business opportunity. Looking at historical perspectives of MLM in the US, this paper suggests imposing regulations to curb illegal pyramid schemes operating under the guise of MLM.
30	(Bosley & McKeage, 2015)	Multilevel Marketing Diffusion and The Risk of Pyramid Scheme Activity: The Case of Fortune Hi-Tech Marketing in Montana.	Journal of Public Policy and Marketing	Countries experiencing economic recession tend to adopt MLM. Interpersonal influence affects joining and participating in MLM.
31	(Menelec & Jones, 2015)	Networks And Marketing in Small Professional Service Businesses	Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship	The level of trust is higher in smaller network marketing organizations than in larger ones. Further, knowledge exchange in networks enhances the success of network marketing firms.
32	(Hatchaleelaha & Wongsurawat, 2016)	Multilevel Marketing and Entrepreneurship in Thailand: A Case Study	Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship	Individual characteristics, training and technology play an important role in improving network marketing outcomes.
33	(Dai et al., 2017)	Network Marketing Businesses and Chinese Ethnicity Immigrants in Australia	Journal of Small Business Management	Network marketers' self-efficacy, desire for the opportunity, motivation and network marketing organizations' social environment affect the actions of its members and outcomes.
34	(Bosley & Knorr, 2018)	Pyramids, Ponzis and Fraud Prevention: Lessons from a Case Study	Journal of Financial Crime	Country-level characteristics, such as affinity, culture, education and economic conditions affect the multi-level marketing.
35	(Franco, 2018)	Networking as a Marketing Tool in Small Companies: A Random and Informal Approach	Journal of Business Strategy	The implementation of networking, as an important marketing tool, needs to be structured through formal processes.
36	(Liu, 2018)	The Behavioral Economics of Multilevel Marketing	Hastings Business Law Journal	On the basis of examination of the legal, economic, and psychological aspects of MLMs, the authors suggest strategies to increase the membership and performance of network members.
37	(Bosley et al., 2019)	Voluntary Disclosure and Earnings Expectations in Multi-Level Marketing	Economic Inquiry	Income disclosure has no significant effect on members' interest in the MLM business opportunity. However, individual characteristics, such as culture and knowledge affect the intention to join an MLM business.
38	(Groß & Vriens, 2019)	The Role of the Distributor Network in the Persistence of Legal and Ethical Problems of Multi-level Marketing Companies	Journal of Business Ethics	The paper discusses the current legal and ethical problems of MLMs, evaluates the effect of current countermeasures, and suggests new measures to mitigate these problems.

Table 1 (*continued*)

| Sr. No.	Citation	Title	Journal	Key findings
39	(Weng Wong & Nasir, 2019	Adopting A Network Marketing Model as a Distribution Channel for Hotels in The Maldives: An Exploratory Study	International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration	The adoption of network marketing among hoteliers is low due to a lack of resources and a lack of knowledge of how it can be implemented in the hotel industry. However, most of them have a positive attitude and intention towards adopting it as one of their hotel's distribution channels.
40	(Lofthouse & Storr, 2021)	Institutions, The Social Capital Structure, And Multilevel Marketing Companies	Journal of Institutional Economics	Successful MLMs require a social capital structure and supportive cultural background where members can access and mobilize both strong and weak social ties.
41	(Yu, 2021)	Research on the Evaluation Algorithm of Social Capital Influence of Enterprise Network Marketing	Security and Communication Networks	The social capital of a firm after adopting network marketing is higher than before its adoption.
42	(Roman et al., 2021)	Essence of the Compensation Plan in the Process of Motivation in Multi-Level Marketing (MLM). A Case Study	Sustainability	Various personal, organizational and country-level factors affect the intention to join a MLM firm and motivation to cooperate as a MLM member. Further, incentives are important to determine distributors' satisfaction, motivation and performance.
43	(Feng et al., 2021)	A Case Study of the Pyramid Scheme in China Based on Communication Network	Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and its Applications	A pyramid scheme communication network is a sparse network and follows a core peripheral structure.
44	(Bruckermann, 2021)	Network Marketing and State Legitimacy in China: Regulating Trust from Physical Workplaces to Virtual Spaces	Economic Anthropology	Network marketing through virtual spaces transforms women's life in China but the regulations related to online operations need to be regularly adapted to avail the opportunities.
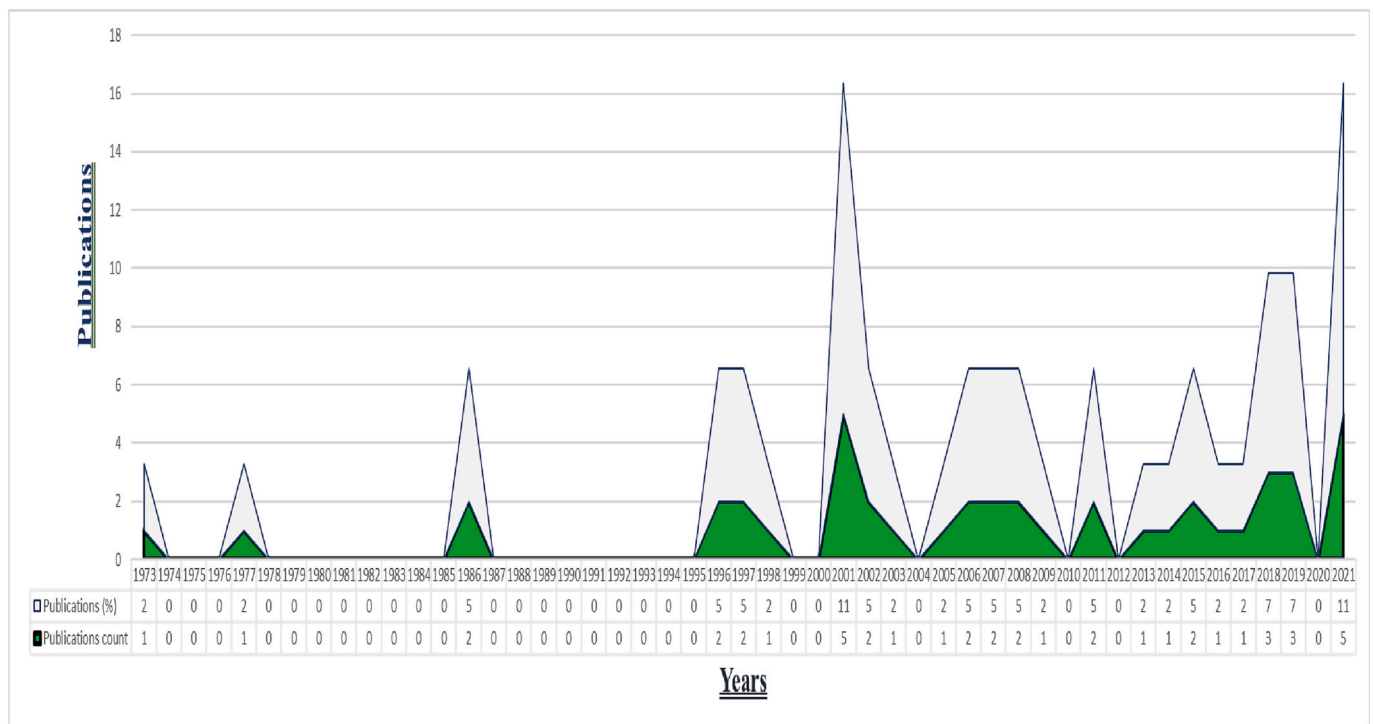
Fig. 2. Year-wise publications on network marketing.

3.2. Publication outlets

This section focuses on the journal-wise distribution of network marketing literature. Table 2 shows that the research articles on 'network marketing' have been published in 38 academic journals of international repute. Interestingly, none of these journals have published more than two research papers in this domain. However, it is important to note that the journals publishing network marketing research are from diverse research arenas, such as marketing, statistics, applied economics, finance, business management, tourism, and commercial and contract law. This indicates this domain has attracted the interest of researchers from various fields and has multifarious research perspectives. Further, as articulated in the 'Methodology' section, more

than 40 papers have been published in this domain suggesting that this domain has progressed enough to warrant a systematic review to synthesize its literature.

3.3. Authorship

In line with the structure proposed by previous SLR studies (Paul & Feliciano-Cestero, 2020), next, the authors identified the top 10 most cited studies in the network marketing domain, which are presented in Table 3. Thorelli's (1986) article was the most cited research article, with 4479 total citations and 124.4 per year citations. Hill, Provost, and Volinsky's (2006) paper is the second most cited study, with 786 total citations and 52.4 annual citations, followed by Brodie et al.'s (1997)

Table 2
Journals and number of publications.

	Journal	#	Articles	JCR impact factor	ABDC ranking
1	Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing	2	Brodie et al. (2008); Domegan (2008)	3.462	A
2	Journal of Business Ethics	2	Koehn (2001); Groß and Vriens (2019)	6.430	A
3	Journal of Marketing Management	2	Croft and Woodruffe (1996); Brodie et al. (1997)	3.048	A
4	Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	2	Sparks and Schenk (2006); Peterson and Albaum (2007)	–	A
5	Journal of Public Policy & Marketing	2	Nat and Keep (2002); Bosley and McKeage (2015)	4.500	A
6	Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship	2	Menelec and Jones (2015); Hatchaleelaha and Wongsurawat (2016)	**–**	B
7	Academy of Management Journal	1	Pratt and Rosa (2003)	10.194	A*
8	American Business Law Journal	1	DeJute et al. (1972)	1.533	A
9	Discourse & Society	1	Kong (2001)	1.850	A
10	Discourse Studies	1	Kong (2002)	1.917	A
11	Economic Inquiry	1	Bosley et al. (2019)	1.538	A
12	Family Business Review	1	Dyer (2001)	9.848	A
13	Hastings Business Law Journal	1	Liu (2018)	–	B
14	International Business Review	1	Dai et al. (2011)	5.915	A
15	International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration	1	Weng Wong and Nasir (2019)	–	B
16	International Journal of Research in Marketing	1	Coughlan and Grayson (1998)	4.513	A*
17	Journal of Business Strategy	1	Franco (2018)	–	B
18	Journal of Consumer Marketing	1	Bloch (1996)	–	A
19	Journal of Evolutionary Economics	1	Henkel and Block (2013)	2.343	A
20	Journal of Financial Crime	1	Bosley and Knorr (2018)	–	B
21	Journal of Historical Research in Marketing	1	Keep and Nat (2014)	–	B
22	Journal of Institutional Economics	1	Lofthouse and Storr (2021)	2.050	B
23	Journal of Intellectual Capital	1	Chang and Tseng (2005)	7.198	B
24	Journal of Marketing Channels	1	Herbig and Yelkurm (1997)	–	B
25	Journal of Marketing Research	1	Reingen and Kernan (1986)	5.000	A*
26	Journal of Organizational Behavior	1	Sparks and Schenk (2001)	8.174	A*
27	Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing	1	Nga and Mun (2011)	4.018	B
28	Journal of Small Business Management	1	Dai et al. (2017)	3.119	A
29	Journal of Strategic Marketing	1	Palmer and Wilson (2009)	–	A
30	Journal of Travel Research	1	Li and Petrick (2008)	10.982	A*
31	Marketing Intelligence & Planning	1	Msweli and Sargeant (2001)	3.491	A
32	Statistical Science	1	Hill et al. (2006)	2.901	A

Table 2 (*continued*)

	Journal	#	Articles	JCR impact factor	ABDC ranking
33	Strategic Management Journal	1	Thorelli (1986)	8.641	A*
34	The American Statistician	1	Gastwirth (1977)	8.710	B
35	Security and Communication Networks	1	Yu (2021)	1.791	–
36	Sustainability	1	Roman et al. (2021)	3.251	–
37	Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and its Applications	1	Feng et al. (2021)	3.263	–
38	Economic Anthropology	1	Bruckermann (2021)	3.439	–

No. of publications.

Table 3
Ten most cited studies.

Rank	Study	Journal	Citations[1]	Average citations per year[2]
1	Thorelli (1986)	*Strategic Management Journal*	4479	124.4
2	Hill et al. (2006)	*Statistical Science*	786	52.4
3	Brodie et al. (1997)	*Journal of Marketing Management*	631	26.29
4	Reingen and Kernan (1986)	*Journal of Marketing Research*	580	16.11
5	Sparks and Schenk (2001)	*Journal of Organizational Behavior*	425	21.25
6	Pratt and Rosa (2003)	*Academy of Management Journal*	209	11.6
7	Nat and Keep (2002)	*Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*	199	10.4
8	Coughlan and Grayson (1998)	*International Journal of Research in Marketing*	162	7.07
9	Li and Petrick (2008)	*Journal of Travel Research*	275	19.6
10	Koehn (2001)	*Journal of Business Ethics*	144	7.2

[1] Based on Google Scholar (07/01/2022).
[2] Total number of citations divided by number of years after article publication.

study, with 631 total citations and 26.29 per year citations. Overall, these studies can be considered the three most influential studies in terms of citations.

3.4. Methodological perspectives

3.4.1. Research settings

The authors further synthesized the research on network marketing in terms of the country where the study was carried out. Country-wise analysis helps in understanding the geographical distribution of the research domain over time (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022; Mandler et al., 2021; Shankar et al., 2022). As network marketing is a global phenomenon, it is interesting to examine how the research on network marketing has spread around the world. The country-wise synthesis also enables researchers to understand the gaps in the contextual distribution of research in a domain, i.e., in which region or country research lacks in that domain, thereby suggesting researchers to expand research to those contexts or countries.

Both empirical and conceptual papers were considered for this synthesis. The empirical papers were synthesized on the basis of the country from where the data were collected, whereas the conceptual papers were

synthesized on the basis of the country of affiliation for the first author. Fig. 3 lists the source countries of the selected 44 papers, which depict that research on network marketing has been carried out across 15 countries. The highest number of studies in this domain were conducted in the US (22 studies, i.e., 50%), followed by China (four studies, i.e., 9.09%), New Zealand (three studies, i.e., 6.82%), the United Kingdom (three studies, i.e., 6.82%), and Australia (two studies, i.e., 4.55%). Only one study was carried out in each of the remaining 10 countries. These findings indicate that network marketing research is popular and concentrated in the US where 50% of the research publications in this domain were generated. This might be because the US leads the direct selling market worldwide (Tighe, 2022), and 16 out of the top 25 network marketing organizations are US-based (Saleem, 2022).

3.4.2. Research design and data collection

The method-wise synthesis of the research on network marketing is presented in Table 4. The current SLR observed that the majority of the studies have adopted either qualitative methods (17 studies, i.e., 38.64%) or conceptual approach (13 studies, i.e., 29.55%). Within the qualitative methods, interviews (nine studies, i.e., 22.46%), document analysis (seven studies, i.e., 15.91%), and observation (one study, i.e., 2.27%) were used. In document analysis, researchers tended to evaluate reports published by companies or other agencies, and records from a third party. It was also observed that five studies (11.36%) used the survey method, while eight studies (18.18%) used a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods (mixed methods). Further, an experimental design was adopted for a single study (2.27%) (Bosley et al., 2019). Interestingly, not a single review paper was found in this domain justifying the need for an SLR on network marketing. Though methodological diversity exists in this domain, a large proportion of studies are conceptual or qualitative (30 studies, i.e., 68.18%). This indicates continuous conceptual advancement and exploration of emerging ideas in this domain.

In terms of the data collection method, Table 4 demonstrates that regardless of the methods used, most of the studies (21 out of 23 studies, 91.30%) in this domain adopted the offline mode for primary data

Table 4
Research methods used in network marketing.

Research methods	#	Sample type	
		Network participants	Generic respondents
Survey based (05)			
Online	2	Coughlan and Grayson (1998), Henkel and Block (2013)	
Offline	3	Dai et al. (2011)	Yu (2021), Nga and Mun (2011)
Experimental*Offline*	(01)		Bosley et al. (2019)
Mixed *(Offline)*	(08)	Brodie et al. (1997), Sparks and Schenk (2001), Chang and Tseng (2005), Sparks and Schenk (2006), Dai et al. (2017)	Hill et al. (2006), Peterson and Albaum (2007), Brodie et al. (2008)
Qualitative (17)			
Interview*(Offline)*	9	Bloch (1996), Kong (2002), Pratt and Rosa (2003), Menelec and Jones (2015), Hatchaleelaha and Wongsurawat (2016), Roman et al. (2021)	Palmer and Wilson (2009), Franco (2018), Weng Wong and Nasir (2019)
Document analysis	7	DeJute et al. (1972), Croft and Woodruffe (1996), Dyer (2001), Koehn (2001), Kong (2001), Groß and Vriens (2019), Feng et al. (2021)	
Observation	1	Bruckermann (2021)	
Conceptual	(13)	Gastwirth (1977), Reingen and Kernan (1986), Thorelli (1986), Herbig and Yelkurm (1997), Msweli and Sargeant (2001), Nat and Keep (2002), Li and Petrick (2008), Domegan (2008), Keep and Nat (2014), Bosley and McKeage (2015), Bosley and Knorr (2018), Liu (2018), Lofthouse and Storr (2021).	

represents number of publications.

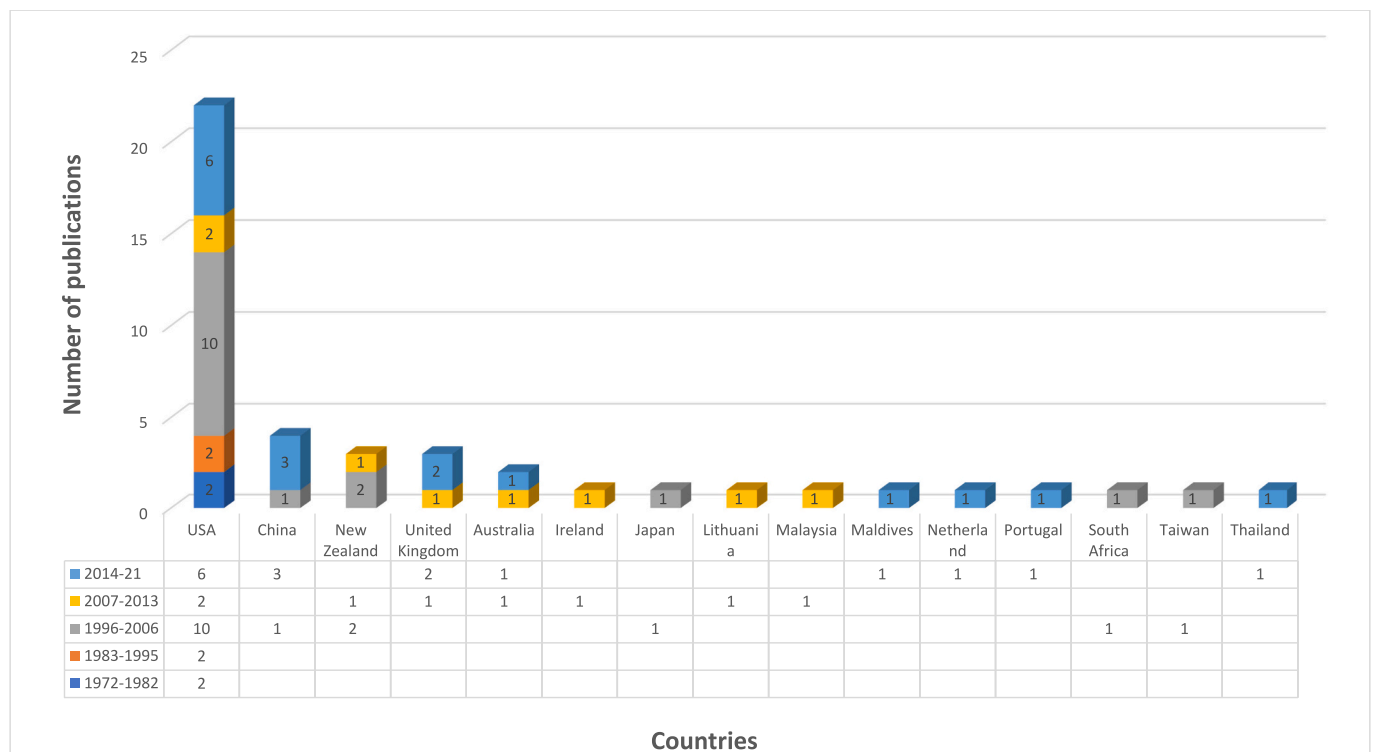|	USA	China	New Zealand	United Kingdom	Australia	Ireland	Japan	Lithuania	Malaysia	Maldives	Netherland	Portugal	South Africa	Taiwan	Thailand
2014-21	6	3		2	1					1	1	1			1
2007-2013	2		1	1	1	1		1	1						
1996-2006	10	1	2				1						1	1	
1983-1995	2														
1972-1982	2														

Fig. 3. Country-wise publications over the years.

collection, either surveys, interviews, or experiments. Only two survey-based studies (8.7%) (Coughlan & Grayson, 1998; Henkel & Block, 2013) used the online mode to collect primary data.

In terms of the type of respondents considered for data collection in this domain, it was observed that both members of network marketing organizations and generic respondents were used in almost all the methods. Fourteen studies (31.82%) collected responses from members of network marketing organizations while nine studies (20.46%) collected data from generic respondents. Generic respondents included students, experts, and employees (managers, administrative staff, and sales executives) of other types of organizations, which did not adopt the network marketing business model.

3.5. Theoretical perspective

3.5.1. Theories used in network marketing research

This section synthesizes the theories applied to network marketing research. Fig. 4 presents these theories, which shows that over the years, 12 theories were used in studies in this domain. Interestingly, it was observed that only a small portion of studies (11 out of the 44 studies, i. e., 25%) adopted a theoretical background. It was also noted that none of these theories had been extensively used. Social cognitive theory and graph theory were used in three studies each (16% each). Social exchange theory, network theory, and social capital theory were used in two studies each (11% each) while other theories (i.e., seven out of 12 theories) were used in a single study each (5% each). Overall, this theoretical synthesis suggests a lack of concentrated reliance on a specific set of theories in the network marketing domain. Further, a lack of theoretical background for studies in this domain indicates room to apply more theoretical perspectives to network marketing research. The theories used in this domain are explained below:

3.5.1.1. Social cognitive theory.
This theory posits that human behavior is the result of an interaction between the environment, personal factors, and behavior (Bandura, 1999). Social cognitive theory has been applied to three studies in the network marketing domain (Dai et al., 2011; Dai et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2006). Dai et al. (2011) applied this theory to explain how the social environment (i.e., training) of a network marketing organization may influence a network member's personal factors (i.e., self-efficacy, social competence, and motivation). These personal factors may then result in entrepreneurial actions related to a network

marketing business.

3.5.1.2. Graph theory.
Graph theory is a mathematical technique pioneered by Euler in 1976, which is widely applied to studies on social networks to understand the hierarchical relationships based on interconnected tautologies (Barnes & Harary, 1983). It has been applied to three studies in network marketing research (Feng et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2006; Reingen & Kernan, 1986). Reingen and Kernan (1986) applied this theory to analyze the strength and phenomena of referral and social networks in marketing. The strength of such social networks in industrial marketing is boosted by the specific norms adopted by the network members (Dessaigne & Pardo, 2020; Naudé & Sutton-Brady, 2019). Hill et al. (2006) applied this theory to mathematically understand the significance of network neighbors in network-based marketing where customers were considered interconnected nodes.

3.5.1.3. Social exchange theory.
This theory was promulgated by Homans (1958) to understand the phenomena of social exchange relationships in economic undertakings. This theory states that people exchange tangibles and intangibles to meet each other's expectations (Harvey, Smith, Goulding, & Illodo, 2020; Möller, 2013). Social exchange theory has been applied to two studies in the network marketing domain (Brodie et al., 2008; Nga & Mun, 2011). Researchers have applied this theory to distinguish network marketing from traditional transaction marketing (Brodie et al., 2008; Nga & Mun, 2011). According to this theory, the success of network marketing is attributable to building and maintaining social relationships along with transactional exchanges.

3.5.1.4. Network theory.
Network theory elucidates the working mechanism of a network structure (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011), and is considered the heart and soul of network marketing. Thorelli (1986) used this theory to explain the organization of network marketing firms. The interconnected firms/members behave like nodes in a network structure to perform various functions systematically and smoothly. The members' interaction with the internal and external environment (i.e., adapting to environmental changes) generates beneficial outcomes for members and the organization. Feng et al. (2021) applied this theory to explain the structural characteristics and endogenous processes of communication in social networks that are embedded in network organizations.
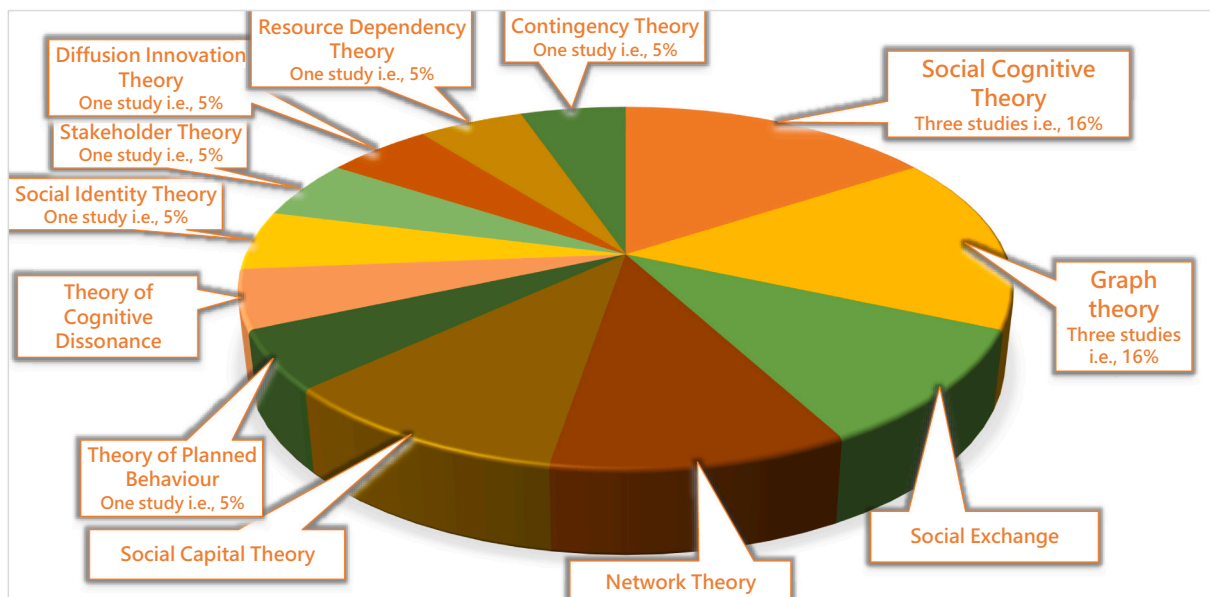

Fig. 4. Theories used in Network Marketing Research.

3.5.1.5. Social capital theory. This theory propagates the concept of 'homophily', i.e., people who interact more with each other, are likely to behave alike (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Hill et al. (2006) applied this theory to demonstrate that customers who interact more with each other become like-minded and purchase the same or similar products. In the network marketing context, proximity among network members leads to greater product/service adoption and increased sales. Thus, socially active and interactive network members are more likely to generate profits in network-based marketing.

3.5.1.6. Theory of planned behavior (TPB). This theory is one of the most widely applied theories for understanding and predicting human behavior (Ajzen, 2020). TPB suggests that behavior is strongly determined by the intention to perform it, which is the function of attitude towards behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Dai et al. (2017) have used this theory to argue that the desire for opportunity (attitude), social influence (subjective norms), and self-efficacy (perceived behavioral control) drive the entrepreneurial actions of network marketers (behavior).

3.5.1.7. Theory of cognitive dissonance. This theory postulates that humans seek to attain a balance among their cognitions, such as belief, attitude, and behavior (Festinger, 1957). In the network marketing context, network members are intrinsically motivated to maintain a consonance among their organization-specific beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. Chang and Tseng (2005) used the underpinnings of this theory to articulate the effect of customer behavior on value equity (belief) in multilevel marketing companies. This means that a customer's intention to add new customers (customer capital) to the network will result in enhanced value attribution to the company's products/services (value equity).

3.5.1.8. Social identity theory. Social identity theory postulates that people ascribe their self-identity to membership in an organization or a group (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). When people develop the feeling of group citizenship due to social interactions with the group, they start behaving like other group members (Jebarajakirthy & Thaichon, 2016). Sparks and Schenk (2006) applied this theoretical underpinning to assess a positive relationship between the citizenship behavior of members in network marketing and their group cohesion.

3.5.1.9. Stakeholder theory. Freeman (1984) is considered the 'father of stakeholder theory'. This theory postulates that business managers should think about the interests of all stakeholders, maintain cordial relationships with the stakeholders and maximize the stakeholders' well-being (Freeman, 1984; Voyer, Kastanakis, & Rhode, 2017). Thorelli (1986) used this theory to understand the buyer-seller relationships among firms involved in network marketing operations. As such, in the network marketing context, the firms should be organized as a community of interest groups, and the well-being of these groups should be protected for the long-term sustenance of network marketing firms.

3.5.1.10. Diffusion of innovation theory. The diffusion of innovation theory was initially given by Rogers, Singhal, and Quinlan (2014) to explain the phenomenon and momentum of product adoption or idea circulation across a social system. Bass (1969) extended this theory to assess the diffusion of products by dividing adopters of an innovative product over a period. Hill et al. (2006) advocated that this theory can be applied to the network marketing domain to model product diffusion through word-of-mouth at the societal level. They used this theory to understand the diffusion of network-based marketing via network members.

3.5.1.11. Resource dependence theory. This theory postulates that organizations form coalitions to gain power through resource sharing (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Brodie et al. (2008) used this theory to explain the growth of marketing practices that were popular in the 1990s, such as services marketing, network marketing, interactive marketing, electronic marketing, and the role of resource sharing among network marketing members in strengthening their market position. Resource sharing is inherent in network marketing where members harness their efforts and resources for the success and growth of individuals and organizations.

3.5.1.12. Contingency theory. Contingency theory states that there is no single best strategy for performing any management function because the effectiveness of a strategy depends on internal and external environmental factors (Fiedler, 1964). Therefore, there may be multiple logical responses to any opportunity or challenge. Accordingly, Brodie et al. (2008) suggested that organizations should adapt to change, be flexible in perspective and practice, and explore multiple possibilities to be successful. Thus, a network marketing firm should be ready to tackle the dynamic environment and associated contingencies for their sustenance.

4. Frequently discussed variables

The second objective of this SLR is to develop a conceptual framework integrating the antecedents, mediators, and outcomes (see Table 5) reported in the network marketing literature. Therefore, all the variables used in the extant network marketing literature have been synthesized. Authors were not guided by any selective/scrutiny criteria, their own discretion, or any theoretical underpinnings to choose these variables. These variables were divided into antecedents, mediators, and outcomes and then were sub-grouped, which is further explained in the following sections. The synthesized variables were integrated to provide a concise view of the network marketing phenomenon, starting from factors triggering intention to join a network marketing organization and perform as a network member to outcomes of network marketing with the mediating role of organizational factors and members' attributes in these relationships.

The antecedents can be classified into three sets of factors: country-level attributes, organizational-level attributes, and individual attributes that predominantly influence the outcomes of network marketing. These outcomes can be further classified into individual and organizational outcomes. Individual outcomes reported in the network marketing literature are job satisfaction (Sparks & Schenk, 2006), entrepreneurial activities undertaken by network members (Dai et al., 2011), and their financial achievements (Dai et al., 2017). Three important organizational outcomes are reported in the network marketing literature. First, network marketing organizations build goodwill and create interest among youth in network marketing as a promising career (Bosley & Knorr, 2018; Nga & Mun, 2011), second, they improve their performance in terms of sales (Sparks & Schenk, 2001, 2006) or user base (Henkel & Block, 2013), and third, they gain their customer capital (Chang & Tseng, 2005; Sparks & Schenk, 2001).

Further, organizational and network members' attributes mediate the antecedents and outcomes of network marketing. Organizational attributes, such as cohesiveness (Sparks & Schenk, 2006) and customer equity (Chang & Tseng, 2005) have been used as mediators in some studies. Network members' attributes, such as self-efficacy (Dai et al., 2011), higher purpose (Sparks & Schenk, 2001), effort (Sparks & Schenk, 2001), motivation (Dai et al., 2011), and organizational citizenship behavior (Sparks & Schenk, 2006), have been used as mediators in some studies.

4.1. Antecedent variables

This section elucidates the antecedent variables used in the network marketing literature.

Table 5
Variables studied in network marketing literature.

Study	Independent variables														Mediators								Outcomes					
	Country level attributes				Organization level attributes						Individual level attributes				Organizational attributes		Network members' attributes						Organizational			Individual		
	AFF	EC	EDU	CUL	UB	TR	SOC	COM	TL	RM	FI	PI	PER	DFO	COH	CE	SE	SC	HP	EFF	MOT	OCB	INM	PRF	CC	JS	FA	EA
Sparks and Schenk (2001)						✓	✓	✓	✓						✓				✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		
Chang and Tseng (2005)										✓						✓									✓			
Sparks and Schenk (2006)						✓	✓	✓							✓							✓		✓				
Dai et al.(2011)						✓					✓			✓				✓			✓							✓
Nga and Mun (2011)													✓										✓					
Henkel and Block (2013)	✓				✓			✓				✓												✓				
Bosley and Knorr (2018)	✓	✓	✓	✓																				✓				
Dai et al. (2017)														✓			✓			✓							✓	
Bosley et al. (2019)							✓																✓					

Independent variables: Country level attributes; AFF: Affinity, EC: Economic conditions, EDU: Education rate, CUL: Culture, Organization level attributes; UB: User base, TR: Training, SOC: Socialization activities, COM: Communication, TL: Transformational leadership, RM: Relationship marketing activities, Individual attributes; FI: Family income, PI: Peer influence, PER: Perceptions of network marketing organization and its members, DFO: Desire for opportunity/autonomy.
Mediators: Organizatioanal attributes; COH: Cohesiveness, CE: Customer equity, Network members attributes; SE: Self-efficacy, SC: Social competence, HP: Higher purpose, EFF: Efforts, MOT: Motivation, OCB: Organization citizenship behavior,
Dependent/outcome variables: Organizational outcomes: INMO: Interest in network marketing organization, PRF: Performance, CC: Customer capital, Network member outcomes; JS: Job satisfaction, FA: Financial achievement, EA: Network organization's entrepreneurial activities.

4.1.1. Country-level variables

Network membership varies across geographical regions based on country characteristics, such as affinity, culture, country-level education rate, and economic conditions (Bosley & Knorr, 2018; Naudé & Sutton-Brady, 2019). Participants in network marketing often exploit existing social networks to add new members (Henkel & Block, 2013; Petersen & Schmid, 2021). A greater sense of affinity (a sense of favoritism based on common characteristics) drives people to join network marketing because the inbuilt trust supports the congenial environment and growth in a network (Bosley & Knorr, 2018). Culture further enhances affinity. Two contradictory cultural traits that motivate an individual to join network marketing firms are (1) individualistic pursuit for achievement, status, and wealth; or (2) collectivism (Bosley & Knorr, 2018; Dheer, Lenartowicz, Peterson, & Petrescu, 2014).

Apart from affinity and culture, the education rate and economic conditions of a country also affect participation in network marketing (Bosley & Knorr, 2018). Education increases confidence in decision-making. Usually, educated people are risk-averse. However, if educated people do not find well-paid jobs due to the adverse economic conditions in a country, they may be inclined to join network marketing firms for financial return (Bosley & Knorr, 2018). Similarly, if the education rate is low and economic contractions prevail in a country, the probability of individuals joining network marketing firms may increase (Bosley & Knorr, 2018). Therefore, country-level education rates and economic conditions affect individuals' interest in network marketing firms and their membership prospects.

4.1.2. Organizational level attributes

Organizational level factors are important in attracting new members and developing team spirit among existing network members for effective network marketing operations. Relationship marketing activities, such as loyalty programs and organizing events, promote network members' connectivity and enhance customer delight and equity. Consequently, such relationship marketing activities help attract potential customers to join network marketing organizations as members/distributors (Chang & Tseng, 2005). A larger user base also builds brand goodwill and motivation among potential members to join the network marketing organization (Henkel & Block, 2013).

Training, socialization activities, communication, and information exchange promote cohesion, organizational citizenship behavior, and distributorship planning among network members (Möller, 2013; Petersen & Schmid, 2021; Sparks & Schenk, 2001, 2006). Training develops network members' skills which enhance their self-efficacy and motivation to perform better (Dai et al., 2011). Further, regular communication and transparency in information exchange within an organization help effectively plan the network marketing activities and evoke group cohesion (Sparks & Schenk, 2006). Additionally, transformational leadership behaviors (i.e., articulating a vision and providing individualized support) help the network members set a higher purpose and effectively perform network marketing activities (Henkel & Block, 2013; Sparks & Schenk, 2001).

4.1.3. Individual-level attributes

Individuals' characteristics often affect their choices and behavior. Vulnerable individuals, who are socially ignored and have little income to invest, are interested in joining a network marketing organization as it usually involves little investment but promising returns (Dai et al., 2011). Studies have also focused on the impact of psychographic attributes, such as peer influence, perceptions, and desire, on individuals' intention to join a network marketing organization and their performance outcome. The positive experiences of a peer group, who are already members of a network marketing organization, often motivate an individual to join a network marketing organization (Henkel & Block, 2013). Positive perceptions of network marketing organizations and their members also motivate an individual to join a network marketing organization (Nga & Mun, 2011). This motivation is further intensified if an individual has a desire for autonomy and achievement (Dai et al., 2011). Individuals with a greater desire for an opportunity often take risks, set higher purposes, and exert greater network marketing efforts to achieve greater success in life (Dai et al., 2017).

4.2. Mediators

The literature advocates that some organizational-level attributes and network members' psychological attributes and efforts mediate the relationship between the previously articulated set of antecedents and

outcomes of network marketing. These mediators are discussed below.

4.2.1. Organizational attributes

Various organizational-level antecedents lead to positive changes in the organization, such as cohesiveness and customer equity, which further improve network marketing outcomes. *Organizational cohesiveness* is the degree of attraction experienced by group members towards each other, which motivates them to continue in the group (Sparks & Schenk, 2006). Socialization activities, transformational leadership, and effective communication in network marketing organizations lead to cohesiveness (Sparks & Schenk, 2001), which promotes cooperation among network members leading to job satisfaction and better performance (Sparks & Schenk, 2006). Another organizational-level mediating variable is *customer equity* which is the summation of the discounted lifetime value of all the customers of a network marketing organization (Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml, 2004). Organizational-level antecedents (discussed in Section 4.1.2) help strengthen customer equity (Chang & Tseng, 2005). High customer equity helps develop customer capital, i.e., retaining existing members and attracting new members/customers because of the value that customers confer on the organization (Chang & Tseng, 2005). Thus, the network marketing organization is able to attain a larger customer base, greater sales, and higher profits due to customer equity.

4.2.2. Network members' attributes

The antecedents discussed in the previous section harness individual members' capabilities to improve their perceptions and efforts (self-efficacy, social competence, higher purpose, motivation, and organizational citizenship behavior). These positive changes further enhance their potential to secure network marketing outcomes effectively. Thus, network members' perceptions and efforts mediate the relationship between network marketing antecedents and outcomes.

According to the theory of planned behavior and social exchange theory, self-efficacy (degree of perceived behavioral control) affects the actions undertaken (Ajzen, 2020). Organizational antecedents, such as training, effective communication, and socialization activities, help develop self-efficacy, social competence, and organizational citizenship, which improve network members' job satisfaction and performance (Dai et al., 2017, 2011; Sparks & Schenk, 2006). Transformational leadership triggers a greater motivation among the network members, encourages them to set a higher purpose, and put more effort into performing network marketing effectively and earning a higher financial return (Dai et al., 2011; Sparks & Schenk, 2001). These individual-level mediators ultimately result in achieving the objectives of network marketing.

4.3. Outcomes

The outcome/dependent variables in the network marketing context can be broadly categorized as organizational and network member outcomes. The frequently studied organizational outcomes include three aspects. First, the studies have focused on the goodwill of a network marketing organization to generate interest among the public (Nga & Mun, 2011). Second, network marketing organizations' performance has been studied in terms of sales generated or the total number of network members/users in the network (Bosley & Knorr, 2018; Henkel & Block, 2013; Sparks & Schenk, 2001, 2006). Third, studies have focused on 'customer capital' in terms of the average number of members added by each member during their membership (Sparks & Schenk, 2001) and their loyalty (Chang & Tseng, 2005). The network members' outcomes include job satisfaction (Sparks & Schenk, 2001), financial achievements (Dai et al., 2017), and the involvement of network members in the organization's entrepreneurial activities (Dai et al., 2011). The majority of studies have focused on organizational outcomes rather than network members' outcomes.

4.4. Development of an integrated conceptual framework

A conceptual framework developed by integrating the variables studied in the network marketing literature is presented in Fig. 5. The framework depicts that country-level attributes (affinity, economic conditions, education rate, and culture), organizational attributes (user base, training, socialization, communication, transformational leadership, and relationship marketing activities), and individual attributes (family income, peer influence, perceptions, and desire for opportunity) influence network marketing outcomes. These outcomes include both organizational (goodwill, performance, and customer capital) and network members' (job satisfaction, financial achievements, and the involvement in an organization's entrepreneurial activities) outcomes. Some specific organizational attributes (cohesiveness and customer equity) and network members' attributes (self-efficacy, social competence, higher purpose, efforts, motivation, organizational citizenship behavior) mediate the relationship between antecedents and outcomes of network marketing.

5. Results of lexicometric analysis

A lexicometric analysis was performed on a corpus (text imported into the software) of 44 articles included in the present study. The corpus included 283,186 occurrences of words with an average of 6436.05 occurrences per text (approx. 6436 words). Further, the corpus comprised 6105 hapaxes (words that appear once) and 15,093 forms (words that occur more than once). Finally, a total of 11,760 active forms were used in the analysis. Table 6 shows the overview of the statistics of the lexicometric analysis.

5.1. Similarity analysis

We performed a lexicometric analysis using Iramuteq software which divides the corpus (i.e., papers included in this review) into groups known as "segments". These segments are further divided into clusters on the basis of word distribution. This process is known as similarity analysis. The intersection of the concepts across the text based on word proximity and its reappearance in segments is depicted in the form of a map. The linkages between the concepts (irrespective of their appearance in different lexical fields) are represented by the proximity between the words appearing in a segment.

Similarity analysis was run with the word "*network*". The output (Fig. 6) projects that four segments are interrelated with the main concept of "*network*". The first segment represents the "*market*", which comprises words related to the network marketing organization and their characteristics, such as firm, business, hotel, organization, managers, practice, knowledge, commitment, trust, technology, and development. The second segment represents the concept "*social*", which comprises words related to facilitating factors, such as capital, environment, institution, and facilitate. The third segment represents the concept of "*distributor*", which comprises words related to marketing activities and its outcomes, such as product, sell, promote, purchase, price, income, earnings, and consumption. The fourth segment represents the concept of "*company*", which comprises various formats of network marketing organizations and their features, such as multi-level marketing, pyramid, retail, agent, company, reward, risk, and pay commission.

Overall, the similarity analysis shows the key themes or focused areas of the network marketing literature. Specifically, it indicates that the network marketing literature is interconnected with a variety of concepts, such as organization and the characteristics of network marketing firms, facilitating factors, marketing activities, and formats of network marketing organizations.
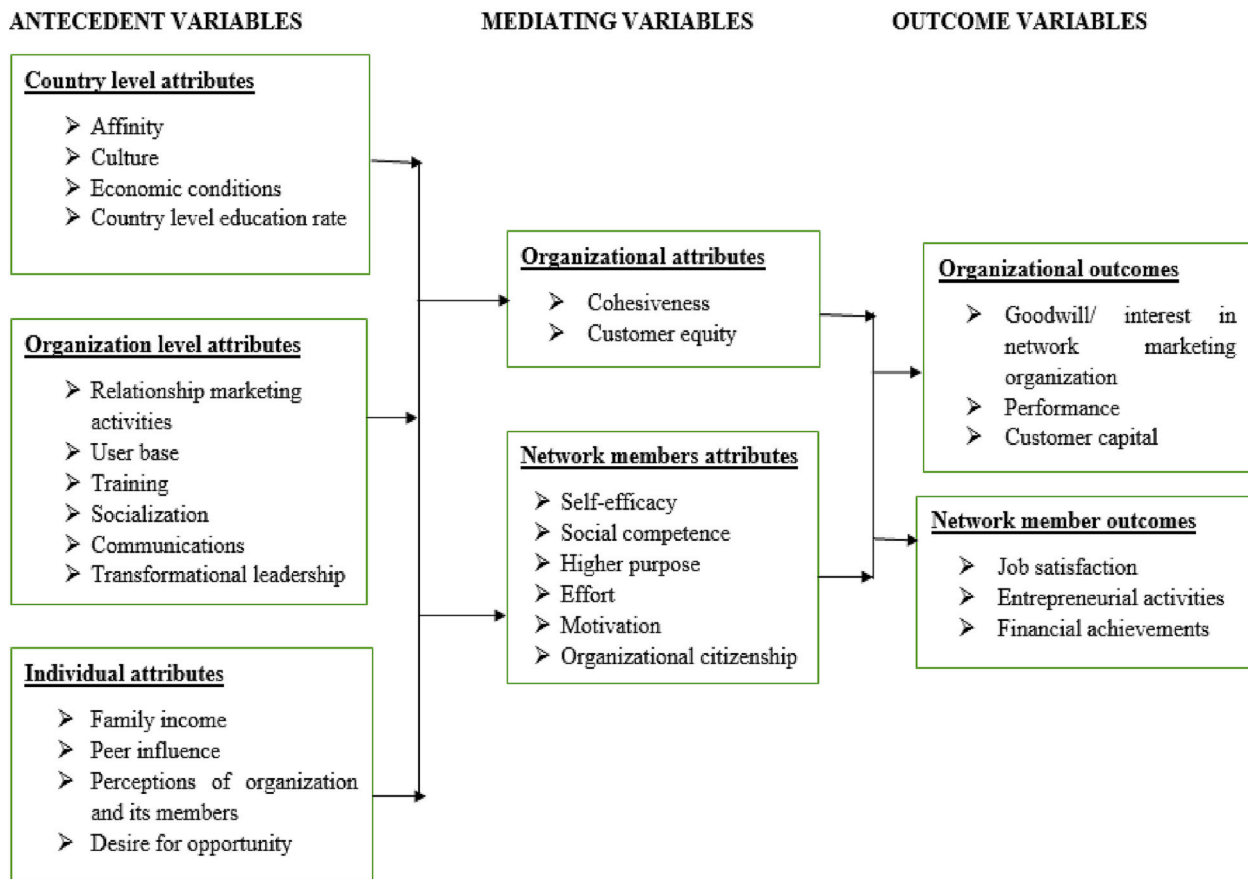
PROPOSED MODEL FOR NETWORK MARKETING

Fig. 5. Proposed conceptual framework for network marketing.

Table 6
Overview statistics of lexicometric analysis.

Texts	44
Text segments	7862
Occurrences	283,186
Average occurrences per text	6436.05
Forms	15,093
Hapaxes	6105 (2.16% of occurrences, 40.50% of forms)
Active forms for analysis	11,760

5.2. Factorial correspondence analysis

As discussed in the previous section, similarity analysis shows the organization of the main concepts. Despite this, Hoffman and Franke (1986) recommended performing a factorial correspondence analysis which helps identify the main groups of relationships in the corpus. It shows two outcomes: (i) a dendrogram showing hierarchical word clustering, and (ii) a two-dimensional graphical visualization of word clusters.

The dendrogram (Fig. 7) reveals three classes of words in our corpus. These classes were named in two stages by three scholars from the marketing domain. Firstly, each scholar conferred a term (name) to each class and then discussed it until a consensus was reached on naming these classes. They named class 1 '*formats of network marketing and their characteristics*', which comprised words related to network marketing business formats and companies, as well as their rewards, returns, and characteristics, such as MLM, pyramid, Amway, company, retail, distributor, sale, commission, reward, scheme, and FTC. Class 2 was named '*membership norms*', which comprised words related to

membership and their norms, such as referral, member, socialization, identity, neighbors, organizational behavior, cohesion, citizenship, and commitment. Class 3 was named '*outcomes and approaches of network marketing*', which comprised words related to drivers of growth of network marketing firms, such as market, contemporary marketing practice (CMP), customer, exchange, relationship, relational, transaction, and transactional approach.

Factorial correspondence analysis also categorizes the above-mentioned word classes statistically along two axes based on their co-occurrences within segments. The results (Fig. 8) suggest three classes of words on two axes. The graphical visualization illustrates a three-bladed propeller structure. The first blade (top-left) is predominantly focused on "*membership norms*", the second blade (bottom-left) represents "*outcomes and approaches of network marketing*", and the third blade (middle) represents "*formats of network marketing and their characteristics*". This triad of categorization of network marketing literature indicates that research in this domain focuses mainly on three aspects. First, it discusses the modes of adding and retaining network members and norms for successful network membership. Second, it discusses the drivers of the growth of network marketing organizations. Third, it revolves around the various formats of network marketing organizations and their rewards, returns, and characteristics.

6. Future research directions

The SLR helps in identifying the knowledge gaps in a research domain and proposing directions for future research (Adil et al., 2022). The present study follows the TCCM framework used by Jebarajakirthy et al. (2021) to propose future research directions. This framework helps
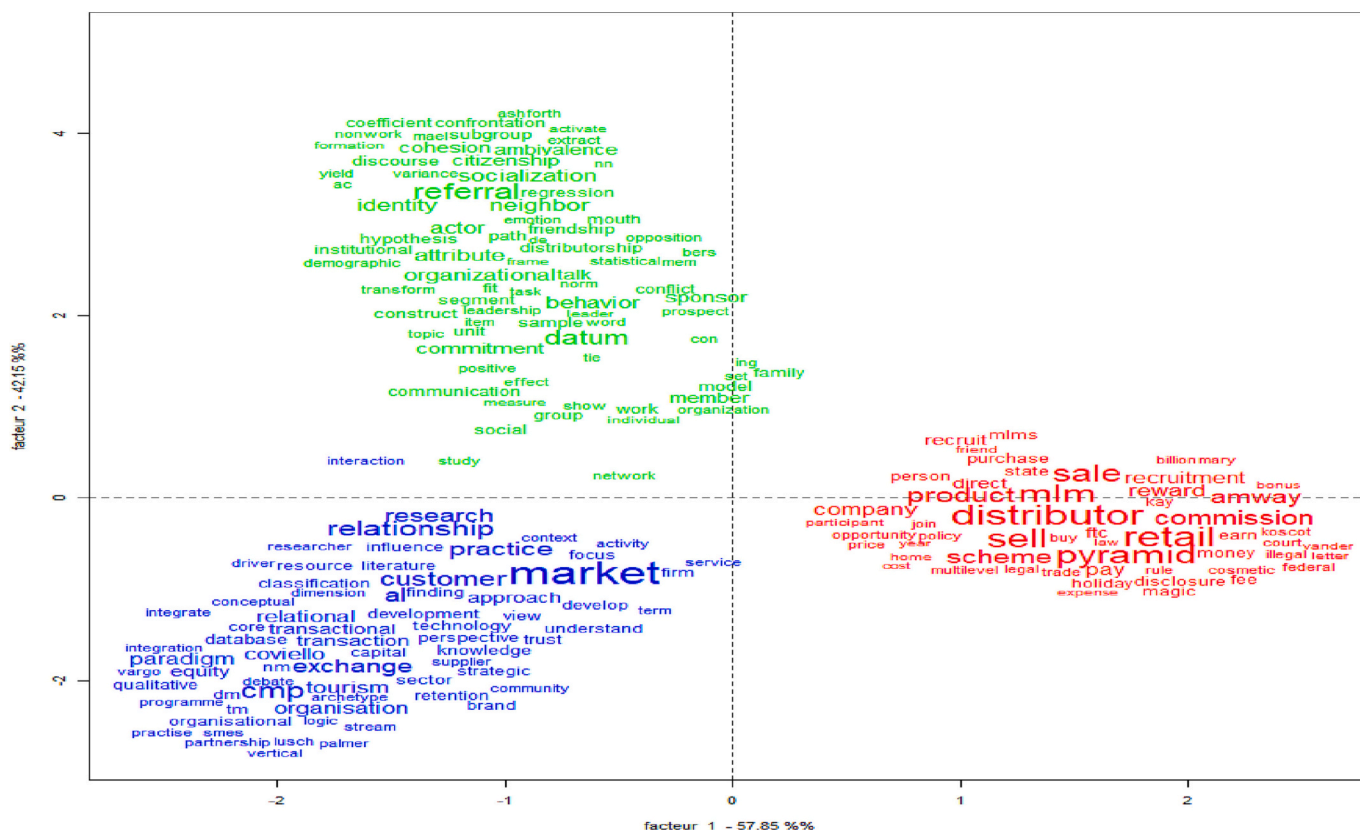
Fig. 6. Similarity analysis.

Fig. 7. Dendrogram.

Fig. 8. Factorial correspondence analysis.

to identify gaps in a research arena across four dimensions: theory development, context, characteristics, and methods. The future research directions for network marketing using the TCCM framework are discussed in the following subsections. Table 7 presents a summary of the research gaps and future research directions stemming from these gaps in accordance with the TCCM framework.

6.1. Theory development

The present SLR revealed that network marketing literature to date is largely developed based on the theoretical underpinnings of social cognitive theory, graph theory, social exchange theory, network theory, and social capital theory (Fig. 4). This indicates that several promising theoretical frameworks that can be applied for future research have been overlooked.

Attribution theory is one such theoretical approach. This theory elucidates the factors determining an individual's behavior. There are mainly two kinds of attributions: dispositional attribution (internal factors) and situational attribution (external factors) (Heider, 1958). The internal factors affecting an individual's intention to join and perform well in a network marketing organization are the desire for an opportunity, entrepreneurial skills, and intellectual level. External factors may relate to the network marketing organization, network members, and business environment, for example, the size of the network marketing organization, facilitating conditions, network members' social competence, and legal and economic environment. Thus, it would be interesting to evaluate and compare the impact of internal and external attributions on the propensity to join and perform as a network member in a network marketing organization.

Transactive memory theory is another theoretical approach that can be applied to network marketing research. This theory explains how people in groups and organizations learn from each other's knowledge base and use it in their respective roles, resulting in effective individual

and organizational performance (Hollingshead, Gupta, Yoon, & Brandon, 2012; Petersen & Schmid, 2021). This phenomenon explains why some teams perform better than others. In network marketing, members work with each other to generate income for individual members and network organization(s). The factors, such as organizational citizenship, transformational leadership, training, socialization, and communications help in sharing and enhancing each other's knowledge which assists in increasing the performance of both individual network members and the overall organization. Hence, there is scope to apply the tenets of transactive memory theory in the context of network marketing.

Women's empowerment and rapid changes in occupation structure have led to gender diversity in the corporate world. Social role theory emphasizes sex-differentiated behavior in an organization (Eagly & Wood, 2016). Women generally exhibit more empathy, concern, and care for others than men (Ridgeway & Diekema, 1992). Therefore, it will be interesting to investigate the gender differences in network members' performance, intention to join a network marketing organization, and potential to perform different roles in a network marketing organization.

With the advent of Web 3.0, rapid technological advances, and escalating popularity of digital platforms, people are utilizing digital networks to expand their business networks (Harvey et al., 2020; Jebarajakirthy, Weaven, Arli, & Maseeh, 2023). The potential of digital marketing in business networks and its impact on relationship management in such networks attract industrial marketers' interest in applying the digital form of network marketing practices to B2B businesses (Naudé & Sutton-Brady, 2019). Thus, another pertinent theory that can be applied to the network marketing domain is the actor-network theory proposed by Latour (2007). This theory is different from other earlier established social network theories because it posits that any action is an interaction of actors, i.e., social and technical elements, human and non-human elements in the network (Kolli & Khajeheian, 2020). Therefore, this theory implies that not only the human resources and their characteristics (individual characteristics, proximity

Table 7
Research gaps and related future research directions.

#		Research gap	Future research direction
Theory development	1	Several promising theoretical frameworks have been overlooked	Attribution theory, transactive memory theory, social role theory, and actor-network theory can be applied to understand the impact of external and internal environments, knowledge sharing, gender roles, and physical and situational variables on the success of network marketing, especially in B2B businesses.
Context	2	Lack of generalizability due to poor focus on network marketing research in developing countries (except China)	Research in developing countries and cross-cultural settings
	3	Absence of focused research in terms of product type and nature of business	Focused research on network marketing for different categories of products (i.e., goods and services) and in B2B contexts.
Characteristics	4	Lack of research on realigning network marketing strategies to adapt to the new normal, post COVID-19	Exploring how network member dynamics, marketing practices, and customers'/ potential members' expectations have changed in the COVID-19 and post- COVID-19 era to develop better business strategies.
	5	Lack of research on the role of network marketing in empowering weaker segments of society	Investigating how network marketing practices can contribute to various forms of empowerment (e.g., financial and social empowerment) of weaker sections of society (e.g., the bottom of the pyramid, women, and socially deprived people).
	6	Lack of understanding of reasons for network members' turnover and inoperative behavior	Exploring factors that deter or demotivate network members' performance and influence their decision to quit a network marketing organization
	7	Lack of understanding regarding the effectiveness of monetary v/s non-monetary motivation in deriving network marketing efforts	Investigating whether monetary, non-monetary, or mixed incentives are more effective in attaining greater outcomes from members at the different hierarchical levels of network marketing organizations (entry level, middle level, and senior level).
Methods	8	A dearth of survey-based, experimental, and longitudinal research	Conducting survey-based, experimental, and longitudinal research in this domain to strengthen the literature

Framework.

of members, social status, influencing capabilities), but the physical resources (financial resources), the technical resources (mode of communication, mode of transactions) and the situational variables (community structure, goodwill of the network organization, user base, country-level attributes) are important for sustenance and growth of a network marketing organization.

6.2. Context

The country-wise synthesis of network marketing literature (Fig. 3) discloses that half (50%) of network marketing research was conducted in the USA. Some research in this domain has been conducted in China (9.09%), New Zealand (6.82%), the United Kingdom (6.82%), and Australia (4.55%). The research in these five countries accounts for 77.27% of the total network marketing studies conducted worldwide to date. It is surprising to observe that there is a poor focus on network marketing research in other countries, especially in developing countries (except China). Thus, there is a dearth of generalizability of the results, and so enormous scope exists for research in this domain in other countries, especially developing countries. Further, network marketing studies can be conducted in cross-cultural settings and the findings can be compared between people with varied cultural backgrounds. It is also important to note that the empirical research in this domain is in a general context, for example, the intention to join a network marketing organization (Nga & Mun, 2011). Future research can be conducted in the context of different categories of products (such as network marketing organizations involved in fast-moving consumer goods and consumer durables) and services (e.g., network marketing organizations involved in financial, personal care, and tourism). Further, there is vast scope to explore the potential of network marketing in the B2B context (Naudé & Sutton-Brady, 2019).

6.3. Characteristics

Some characteristic-specific directions for future research on network marketing are discussed below.

6.3.1. Network marketing strategies for the new normal

COVID-19 has affected almost all countries worldwide. It has changed the consumption pattern globally due to the imposed precautionary restrictions, such as social distancing and intermittent lockdowns. Companies are now forced to adapt their marketing practices to reach consumers in the new normal (Carracedo, Puertas, & Marti, 2021). Therefore, it would be very interesting to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on network marketing organizations. For example, future research on network marketing could investigate how network member dynamics, network marketing practices, and the expectations of customers/potential members have changed in the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 eras. This will help realign network marketing strategies to adapt to this globally changed scenario.

6.3.2. Role of network marketing in empowering weaker segments of society

Usually, joining a network marketing organization involves minimum upfront investments (Nga & Mun, 2011). Therefore, network marketing can play an important role in empowering the weaker sections of society (e.g., the bottom of the pyramid, women, and people who are socially deprived) by giving them employment opportunities to earn their living and networking opportunities to connect with society. For example, bottom-of-pyramid marketing has a huge profit potential for network marketing organizations (Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016). Exploiting this huge market using a network marketing model will empower people below the poverty line and enable them to earn sustenance and connect with society. Similarly, some network marketing companies, such as Yanbal, employ only women making them economically independent (Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016). Therefore, it is recommended that future studies on network marketing investigate how network marketing practices can contribute to various forms of empowerment (e.g., financial and social empowerment) of weaker sections of society.

6.3.3. Why do network members become inoperative?

In the extant network marketing literature, many studies demonstrate the factors affecting network members' motivation to join a

network marketing organization as well as factors driving their performance (Bosley & Knorr, 2018; Chang & Tseng, 2005; Dai et al., 2011; Dai et al., 2017; Nga & Mun, 2011; Sparks & Schenk, 2001). However, the factors affecting network member job turnover are understudied. Its poor public image leads to low job satisfaction and high job turnover among network members (Wotruba, 1990). Several other personal, organizational, and environmental factors may deter or demotivate network members' performance and influence their decision to quit a network marketing organization. It is pertinent to investigate such factors to retain network members and address member turnover.

6.3.4. Monetary v/s non-monetary motivation in network marketing

Incentives play an important role in driving network members' performance (Dai et al., 2011; Dai et al., 2017). Network marketing organizations provide both monetary and non-monetary incentives. Monetary incentives include bonuses and commissions, while some prominent non-monetary incentives are achiever's club membership, free trips, and awards in annual conventions (Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016; Hatchaleelaha & Wongsurawat, 2016; Keep & Nat, 2014). However, our review showed that network marketing literature did not demonstrate which motivational factors, i.e., monetary or non-monetary incentives, are more effective in deriving network marketing efforts at the different managerial levels of a network marketing organization. Thus, future studies can investigate whether monetary, non-monetary or mixed incentives are more effective in attaining greater outcomes from members at the different hierarchical levels of network marketing organizations (entry, middle, and senior levels).

6.4. Methods

The method-wise synthesis of network marketing literature presented in Table 4 demonstrates a methodological diversity in network marketing literature. However, this synthesis reveals that out of the 44 studies shortlisted for this review, most of the studies had adopted either qualitative (17 studies) or conceptual (13 studies) methods. A small number of studies used other methods, i.e., mixed method (eight studies), survey-based method (five studies), and experimental method (one study). This indicates room for more survey-based and experimental research on network marketing in the future. For example, network members can be surveyed to identify the changes in customer responses, sales, and financial returns due to COVID-19. Further, experimental research can be designed where various incentive plans (i. e., monetary, non-monetary and mixed) can be manipulated to understand the differences among these incentive plans in motivating the network members at different hierarchical levels.

Moreover, it is observed that most of the studies on network marketing have adopted a cross-sectional research design. Therefore, longitudinal studies can be conducted in the future to obtain more valid results over time. For example, the effectiveness of various skill enhancement and motivational measures, such as training, communication, and transformational leadership, can be measured by conducting longitudinal studies. Network organizations can organize training and development programs periodically, for example, on a monthly basis for two years and the network members' performance can be examined quarterly for those two years. Such a longitudinal study will help determine whether the training program has been effective in enhancing network members' performance over time.

7. Academic and practical implications

This research offers multiple academic implications. First, this SLR synthesized the network marketing literature to examine and analyze the evolution of network marketing research over time. The network marketing literature is presented in terms of publication years, publication outlets, citations, contexts, methods, and constructs. Although the network marketing domain has been researched for over five

decades, the literature remains fragmented. This study provides state-of-art network marketing literature.

Second, this study has examined the theoretical frameworks used by researchers to underpin network marketing research. It is observed that despite five decades of research on this domain, only a small number of studies have used a theory, indicating a lack of theoretical focus for studies in this domain. Hence, this study has suggested some alternative theories, such as attribution theory, transactive memory theory, social role theory, and actor-network theory, for future research to strengthen the theoretical foundations of network marketing research in the future.

Third, this study proposes a conceptual framework of network marketing, which illustrates the antecedents, mediators, and consequences considered by past studies in this domain. This review synthesizes, illustrates, and categorizes the antecedents, mediators, and consequences. For example, the antecedents are classified into three categories: country-level attributes, organization-level attributes, and individual attributes. This framework broadly illustrates how network marketing works, i.e., what factors drive people to join and perform well in a network marketing organization, what factors mediate the effects of the drivers on network marketing outcomes and the consequences of network marketing.

Finally, this SLR identified some unexplored areas in the network marketing domain using the TCCM approach and suggested insightful recommendations for future research in this domain. These proposed research directions will contribute to advancing and enriching the body of knowledge in the network marketing domain from different perspectives, including theory, context, characteristics, and methods.

In addition to the abovementioned academic implications, this study provides critical insights to all those who may be interested in the growth and success of network marketing. First, this review synthesized all the antecedents and mediators driving greater outcomes for a network marketing organization and its members. These antecedents and mediators have been presented in the form of a conceptual framework. The antecedents have been categorized into country level, organization level and individual attributes. Further, the organizational and network member-related mediators discussed in the proposed conceptual model are pertinent in linking the antecedents with the desirable network marketing outcomes. Hence, to achieve greater success in network marketing operations, network marketing leaders and practitioners should formulate strategies considering these antecedents and mediators.

The country-level antecedents indicate the features (i.e., affinity, culture, economic conditions, and education level) responsible for the positive inclination of citizens/human resources towards network marketing organizations and the congenial growth of such organizations. The network marketing players (managers and members) should consider these attributes while expanding their network marketing organization internationally. The organization-level attributes highlight the significance of the internal environment in promoting and supporting the network members' activities. Network leaders should develop strategies for improving these organization-level attributes, such as training, communications, and socialization.

The proposed framework shows that members' (individual) characteristics drive network marketing outcomes. Further, the lexicometric analysis conducted for this study has shown that network membership norms, such as socialization, identity, cohesion, citizenship, and commitment, are crucial in driving greater outcomes for a network marketing organization. Hence, it is advisable that the network marketing organizations inculcate and promote these membership norms among their existing and potential network members. They are recommended to incorporate these aspects into training manuals and training programs designed for their network members.

8. Limitations and conclusion

This SLR has a few limitations that should be acknowledged. First,

this study followed predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to select scholarly research works on network marketing. Accordingly, the analysis, findings, and discussion are limited to the articles selected in line with the predefined criteria. Second, this study considered research work published exclusively in English. Therefore, the studies published in other languages but relevant to this domain might have been missed. These limitations may narrow the generalizability of the findings of this SLR.

To conclude, the purpose of this SLR was to synthesize academic research on network marketing and suggest directions for future research in this domain. Accordingly, the extant literature on this domain was first synthesized and analyzed in terms of publication years, publication outlets, citations, contexts, methodologies, and theoretical underpinnings. Subsequently, a conceptual framework was proposed integrating the antecedents, mediators, and outcomes of network marketing. Further, the structured literature review method was combined with lexicometric analysis that demonstrated some major themes of network marketing research. In pursuance of the final objective of this SLR, some insightful directions were proposed to advance network marketing research in terms of theoretical underpinnings, characteristics, contexts, and methods. Overall, this study is a silver line in network marketing literature.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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