

Consumer Perceptions of AI Influencers

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Abstract: The paper reviews how consumers perceive the AI-powered influencers on social media. AI influencers represent a relatively new form of communication between brands and consumers. The topic has gained increasing attention because a growing number of brands started using human-like avatars in marketing communication while consumer opinion has not yet been fully determined. As a result, they raise new questions about authenticity and credibility in influencer marketing. This paper seeks to offer insight into consumer perceptions of AI influencers, particularly the role of authenticity, credibility, trust, humanness, and uniqueness. The study is based on a review and synthesis of existing academic literature. Previous studies show that human-like AI-generated influencers may increase the uncertainty about brand and have a strong influence on the formation of attitudes and engagement. At the same time, some studies suggest that novelty and uniqueness may increase consumer interest and engagement among younger and digitally active audiences.

Keywords: AI influencers, consumer perceptions, authenticity, trust, social media marketing

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and relevance of the topic

Social media has been part of brand communication for years, but in the last decade it has become a key tool for business growth and marketing communication. Brands no longer just post irregularly as they used to but increasingly integrate social media into their marketing strategies. Social media marketing has also moved away from the more frontal advertising style that was common in its earlier period. Brands

realised that they do not always need to spend blockbuster amounts of money on Facebook ads. This shift created room for a more personal and less formal kind of communication, which is where influencers entered the picture. Influencer marketing has become far more prominent in recent years, partly because marketing noise has become almost unbearable and younger audiences have become numb to traditional ads. In this crowded environment, everyday people started to share their opinions on products, and some of them gradually became influential voices on the web. Influencers now affect how consumers think and what they buy. As a result, companies invest more in collaborations with online influencers, and influencer marketing is no longer a niche practice but a widely adopted marketing approach [2].

In the last few years, with the growth of artificial intelligence, brands have started to realise that they can benefit from it and adapt it to content creation and digital communication. Human influencers have always had the potential to make a wrong move and make a brand regret working with them. This is one reason why brands have become more interested in virtual alternatives that offer greater control and fewer reputational risks. Developments in artificial intelligence and computer-generated content have transformed digital communication in a new way. In the beginning, inconsistent and often mediocre AI-generated images flooded social platforms, but brands adapted quickly and learned how to create computer-generated characters with human-like appearance and behaviour in a more consistent way. These characters are now able to interact with audiences and promote products similarly to human influencers. A number of AI influencers collaborate with global brands and attract millions of followers [2].

What makes AI influencers particularly attractive for brands is not only their novelty, but also their predictability. Unlike human influencers, AI influencers are not exposed to personal scandals or unpredictable behaviour. This makes them a more stable and manageable communication tool for brands. It also gives companies the possibility to build carefully designed and highly consistent identities around them [1], [5].

1.2 Research gap and research problem

At first glance, controllability and consistency could make AI influencers seem like a perfect solution for brands. However, the question remains whether artificial creations can build the same kind of connection and credibility as human influencers. Can a computer-generated, human-like influencer really influence the public in a way that cuts through the constant noise of digital media? Although AI influencers may bring real advantages for brands, they also raise doubts about authenticity and credibility [1], [5].

Several factors seem to shape how consumers perceive AI influencers. Among the most frequently discussed are authenticity, credibility, and trust. At the same time,

the human-like characteristics of these digital figures also appear to play an important role in consumer reactions [2]. Still, the overall picture is far from clear. Existing research does not provide a consistent understanding of these factors, and in many cases they are examined in isolation rather than as part of a broader framework [2], [5]. Because of this, it is still difficult to see how these dimensions work together in shaping consumer reactions.

1.3 Research questions

The aim is to examine how consumers perceive AI influencers in social media marketing. Special attention is given to dimensions such as authenticity, credibility, trust, humanness, and uniqueness [5]. To guide the discussion, the paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How are AI influencers perceived by consumers in social media environments?

RQ2: Which dimensions are most strongly associated with behavioural openness toward AI influencers?

RQ3: How do AI influencers compare with human influencers in terms of authenticity, trust, and credibility?

In addition to the literature review, the paper also includes a short exploratory primary study based on a non-representative online questionnaire.

2 Literature review over artificial intelligence

2.2 Defining AI influencers

To understand why AI influencers have gained such an important role in marketing communication, they first need to be defined. According to Ma and Li [7], AI influencers are computer-generated digital characters designed to operate as influencers in social media environments. Their role is similar to that of human influencers. They create content, engage with audience and promote brands, products, or services. However, they differ from human influencers in such a unique way that brands can shape them into carefully designed promotional tools. Brands are able to build an AI avatar from the ground up without inconvenient factors such as a problematic personal history [2].

The category is not uniform. According to Davlembayeva et al. [2], virtual influencers can be grouped into several categories, such as non-human like, human-

like and brand mascots. Furthermore, it can be distinguished by their roles in brand communication: entertainment-driven virtual figures, commercially managed influencers, or brand mascots.



Figure 1.

Examples of virtual influencers. From left to right: Nobody Sausage (@nobodysausage), Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela), and Lu of Magalu (@magazineluiza). Source: Davlembayeva et al. [2].

For instance, @nobodysausage represents a more entertainment-oriented non-human-like virtual influencer without promoting a specific brand, @lilmiquela are commercially managed human-like virtual influencers with brand collaborations, while @magazineluiza function as brand mascots created to represent specific brands [2].

This distinction is important because different types of virtual influencers may trigger different reactions from audiences, especially when their level of human likeness changes. This helps explain why brands increasingly turn to AI influencers [2], [7].

2.3 Why brands use AI influencers

Brands choose AI influencers not just for the hype, they have exact strategic reasons. The main reasons that the paper identifies are controllability, consistency, reliability, always-on availability and long-term sustainability. The AI variant of influencers easier to manage, they do not age, they do not need rest, they are not able to make mistakes. For this reason, brands do not see them as alternative of human influencers, but rather a carefully planned and controlled marketing communication tool, that can be used for exact strategic purposes [5], [6].

The other main reason why brands use AI influencers is the precise digital identity they can create. Koles et al. [6] states that not only the present what can be controlled, but also the past. Brands can create the origin story of their AI influencers. They can make the most fitting avatar for their brand. This is so important in fields like fashion, where aesthetics, image and symbolism are crucial. Not only they promote, but also convey the brand's narrative, visual identity and values in such a unique, never seen way that a human influencer would not be able to do [6].

Volles et al. [9] argue that AI influencers value is not only in their ability to be controlled, but also in their uniqueness. Virtual influencers may be seen as less trustworthy, yet their uniqueness can still work in their favor and lead to positive consumer responses. This is especially important if the consumer can relate to the AI influencer. As the paper discusses in the previous section, the AI influencers is not a uniform category. Yan et al. [10], states that artificial avatars may trigger different emotional attachments and consumer motivations. This means that brands need to choose the right narrative persona depending on the communication context. Some cases the realistic, human-like virtual persona is the most fitting, in other cases a more stylized, cartoon-like avatar may be more entertaining [9], [10].

The appeal of digital characters for brands is further strengthened by the fact that their authenticity and credibility does not necessarily work on the same basis as human influencers. Koles et al. [6] argue that credibility can take different forms, AI avatars do not need to be copied from real people, for instance by relating to an ideal, an objective reality, or an individual's internal sense of self-consistency. Put it simply, this means the created character do not need to be realistic but satisfy the consumer's expectations and here lies the key. It may be more effective for brands to recognize that consumers do not need another highly standardized influencer figure, rather an avatar that consumers can identify with and who carries symbolic meaning to them [6].

Overall, the appeal of AI influencers from a brand perspective can be explained by greater control, more consistent identity building, and more flexible communication opportunities. At the same time, it is important to note that these advantages do not automatically guarantee success. For this reason, the next section will examine the main dimensions that shape consumer perceptions of AI influencers.

2.4 Consumer perceptions of AI influencers

From a brand perspective, AI influencer technology is attractive because agencies can manage several aspects of the influencer marketing process. But on the other hand consumer perceptions of AI influencers are shaped by a variety of factors. Although the idea that brands gain full control is an advantage for them, it may negatively affect consumer perceptions. The literature most often highlights authenticity, credibility, trust, humanness, and uniqueness among them [6].

According to Koles et al. [6] authenticity is one of the most important factor. Consumers may easily question how real or genuine they are. The authors explain that virtual influencers can be perceived as authentic in different ways, including true-to-ideal, true-to-fact, and true-to-self. In simple terms, this means that a virtual influencer may appear authentic by matching an expected ideal, by seeming believable or by remaining true to their character.

Credibility is another important dimension in how consumers perceive AI influencers. Perceived credibility and trustworthiness are key conditions of their effectiveness. However, credibility may be weakened when consumers perceive AI influencers as overly controlled by brands. In line with this, Franke et al. [3] suggest that virtual influencers may be viewed as innovative and effective, but at the same time as uncanny or even deceiving. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that their credibility collapses completely, as factors such as uniqueness and strong storytelling may partly offset these concerns [2], [3], [9].

Uniqueness is also frequently mentioned as a factor that can positively shape consumer responses to AI influencers [9]. Uniqueness is one of the most appealing aspects of the influencer that brands can make whatever they need for their new campaign [1], [2]. Uniqueness came from the fact that the technology is mostly new. This newness makes the avatars interesting for consumers, and this can make an impact on their lack of trust. However, novelty alone is not enough to compensate for the lack of trust and identification [9].

Humanness can be seen as a factor that can positively shape consumer responses to AI influencers if they are perceived as human-like [7], [10]. If consumers perceive AI influencers human-like, they are more likely to see not just a tool for marketing purposes. This can increase anthropomorphism, which can lead to parasocial interactions [7]. Although brands need to be aware if a virtual influencer appears too human-like without seeming fully real, it may also trigger an uncanny reaction and create discomfort instead of connection [3], [4].



Figure 2.
Examples of uncanny valley, the 2019 film adaptation of Cats
Source: [11]

Trust is a fundamental key factor. Unlike credibility, which is more closely linked to believability, trust refers to whether consumers are willing to rely on the influencer and its recommendations. This is important in the case of AI influencers, since these avatars are highly controlled by brands. For this reason, the level of transparency and disclosure surrounding their identity may strongly affect trust [5], [8]. As Khalfallah and Keller [5] suggest, trust also plays a mediating role between

authenticity, disclosure, and engagement, which means that weak trust may reduce positive consumer responses even when other characteristics appear favorable.

Taken together, these dimensions show that consumer perceptions of AI influencers are not shaped by a single factor, but by a complex balance of attraction and skepticism. While some characteristics, such as uniqueness, human-likeness, or narrative coherence, may support positive reactions, concerns related to authenticity, credibility, and trust continue to limit broader consumer acceptance.

3 Materials and Methods

This section presents the research design, the sample and data collection process, the questionnaire and measurement, and the analytical approach used in the exploratory study.

3.1 Research design

The paper uses exploratory primary data collected through an online questionnaire. The goal of the questionnaire was to examine how consumers perceive AI influencers in social media marketing. The survey was based on the dimensions identified in the literature, including general attitude, authenticity, credibility, trust, humanness, uniqueness, comparison with human influencers, and behavioural openness, while also collecting basic background data on prior exposure, age, gender, and social media use. The empirical part of the study followed an exploratory descriptive and correlational approach rather than a dimension-reduction approach.

3.2 Sample and data collection

The data were collected through an anonymous online questionnaire. The target group consisted of social media users, as the study focused on perceptions of AI influencers in social media environments. The final sample consisted of 50 respondents. The sample was non-representative and should therefore be interpreted as an exploratory convenience sample.

3.3 Questionnaire and measurement

The questionnaire consisted of 18 items. The first question measured whether the respondent had previously seen an AI-generated influencer on social media. The main perception-related statements were measured on a five-point Likert scale,

where 1 meant strongly disagree and 5 meant strongly agree. Items 2-4 examined general attitude toward AI influencers, while 5-9 represented literature-based indicators of authenticity, credibility, trust, humanness, and uniqueness. Items 10–12 and 15 focused on comparing AI and human influencers, whereas items 13–14 measured behavioral openness toward AI influencers. The final questions collected demographic and background information, including age group, gender, and frequency of social media use.

Since the majority of the dimensions examined were represented by single questionnaire items, the analysis was conducted primarily at the item level rather than treating them as latent, multi-item constructs. Items 13 and 14 were combined into an indicator of behavioral openness, as they capture closely related behavioral intentions and demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$).

3.4 Data analysis

Because of the exploratory nature of the study and the small non-representative sample, the analysis focused primarily on descriptive statistics and bivariate associations. Individual questionnaire items were described using means and standard deviations. The General Attitude composite used in the initial analysis was not retained because its internal consistency was low (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.48$). Instead, the related items were analysed separately.

Spearman's rank correlation was used to examine how the main perception-related indicators authenticity, credibility, trust, humanness, and uniqueness, are associated with behavioural openness toward AI influencers. This method was chosen because the variables were measured on five-point Likert scale and it aimed to examine the strength and direction of associations rather than causal effects. As the study is exploratory, factor and cluster analyses were not applied.

4 Results

The following section of the paper presents the descriptive results of the exploratory questionnaire, followed by the associations between the main perception-related indicators and behavioural openness toward AI influencers.

4.1 Sample characteristics

The final sample consisted of 50 respondents. Most respondents were already familiar with AI influencers, with 80% ($n=40$) having heard of them before. The sample was young, 50% ($n=25$) was between the ages of 18 and 24. The majority

of respondents were female. Overall, the sample was highly active on social media, 88% (n=44) of respondents used social media several times a day. This is relevant because the study focuses on social media-based consumer perceptions.

Variable	Category	N	%
1. Have you ever seen a virtual or AI-generated influencer on social media?	Yes	40	80
1. Have you ever seen a virtual or AI-generated influencer on social media?	Not sure	10	20
16. Age group	18–24	25	50
16. Age group	25–34	20	40
16. Age group	45–54	4	8
16. Age group	55 or above	1	2
17. Gender	Female	34	68
17. Gender	Male	16	32
18. How often do you use social media?	Several times a day	44	88
18. How often do you use social media?	Once a day	4	8
18. How often do you use social media?	Less than once a week	2	4

Table 1.
Sample composition
Source: Author's own elaboration

4.2 Main findings

The main findings suggest a rather cautious attitude toward AI influencers. The general attitude toward AI-generated influencers was relatively low, moreover, the behavioural openness was even lower. This means that people were not open to engaging with AI influencers or buy their products. In contrast, human influencers were seen as preferable.

Item	Indicator	Mean	SD
Q2	Interest in AI influencers	2,50	1,27
Q3	Natural part of digital environment	1,88	1,12
Q4	Openness to AI influencers in brand communication	1,92	1,12
Q5	AI influencers perceived as less authentic	3,78	1,67
Q6	Credibility	1,54	1,01
Q7	Trust	1,52	0,86
Q8	Humanness	2,26	1,19

Q9	Uniqueness / attention	2,32	1,27
Q10	Human influencers perceived as more real	4,20	1,50
Q11	Greater brand control over AI influencers	4,20	1,14
Q12	Human influencers perceived as more persuasive	3,78	1,17
Q13	Willingness to follow an AI influencer	1,82	1,12
Q14	Purchase openness	1,98	1,17
Q15	Preference for engaging with human influencers	4,34	1,06

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics of the main questionnaire items
Source: Author's own elaboration

The descriptive results indicate generally cautious evaluations of AI influencers. Respondents showed relatively low credibility ($M = 1.54$) and trust ($M = 1.52$), while willingness to follow ($M = 1.82$) and purchase products promoted by AI influencers ($M = 1.98$) were also low. In contrast, human influencers were strongly preferred for engagement ($M = 4.34$) and were perceived as more real ($M = 4.20$) and more persuasive ($M = 3.78$). Respondents also strongly agreed that brands have greater control over AI influencers ($M = 4.20$).

4.3 Association with behavioural openness

Spearman's rank correlation was used to examine the relationship between the main perception-related indicators and behavioural openness toward AI influencers. Trust showed the strongest positive association with behavioural openness ($\rho = 0.681$, $p < 0.001$), followed by credibility ($\rho = 0.580$, $p < 0.001$) and authenticity ($\rho = 0.426$, $p = 0.002$). Humanness ($\rho = 0.242$, $p = 0.091$) and uniqueness ($\rho = 0.277$, $p = 0.052$) showed weaker relationships and were not statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. These findings suggest that trust and credibility are particularly relevant to behavioural openness toward AI influencers.

Indicator	Spearman's ρ	p-value	N	Significant ($p < .05$)
Authenticity (Q5)	0.426	0.0020	50	Yes
Credibility (Q6)	0.580	< 0.001	50	Yes
Trust (Q7)	0.681	< 0.001	50	Yes
Humanness (Q8)	0.242	0.0911	50	No
Uniqueness/ novelty (Q9)	0.277	0.0519	50	No

Table 3.
Spearman rank correlations with behavioural openness toward AI influencers
Source: Author's own elaboration

Conclusions

For brands, AI influencers may be attractive because they can be used for a more personal and less template-based kind of communication. Moreover, they have full control over the influencer, not just the content but the story, appearance and behaviour too. They also provide consistency, flexibility, and novelty. However, these advantages do not automatically lead to positive consumer perceptions. Authenticity, credibility, and trust remain central barriers.

The exploratory questionnaire supports these statements. Regarding RQ1, respondents showed low general attitudes toward AI influencers, and behavioural openness was even lower. Regarding RQ2, trust showed the strongest positive association with behavioural openness, followed by credibility and authenticity. At the same time, regarding RQ3, respondents still tended to prefer human influencers in several cases. These results show that AI influencers may attract attention, but this does not necessarily turn into trust, identification, or engagement.

To sum up, brands should not rely only on novelty of AI-generated influencers. The effective use of AI influencers requires a clear role, coherent storytelling, consistent personality, and strong fit with the target audience. It is also important to maintain transparency and not mislead the audience. At the same time, study has limitations. The sample was small and non-representative, so the results should be interpreted as exploratory. Future research should focus on a larger sample, compare different types of AI influencers, or test how transparency, humanness, and brand control may affect consumer reactions.

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