

CONSUMER TRUST IN AI VS HUMAN INFLUENCERS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR BRAND COLLABORATIONS

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Abstract:

The rapid growth of digital marketing has given rise to the use of both human and AI-generated influencers, reshaping how brands connect with consumers. While influencers are central to building brand credibility and engagement, the extent to which consumers trust AI-generated influencers compared to their human counterparts remains a critical question. This study investigates consumer trust in AI versus human influencers and examines its implications for brand collaborations. The research focuses on four dimensions: (i) Comparing the overall level of trust in both influencer types, (ii) identifying key factors that shape trust, (iii) assessing how trust influences consumer engagement and purchase intentions, and (iv) exploring consumer perceptions of ethical and transparency concerns associated with AI influencers. The study integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative insights to capture both behavioral patterns and deeper attitudes. The findings are expected to provide actionable guidance for brands and marketers in designing effective, trustworthy, and ethically responsible influencer strategies in an era of AI-driven innovation.

Keywords: Digital marketing, AI influencers, Human influencers, Consumer trust and Brand collaborations

Introduction:

Influencer marketing has become a major strategic tool for brands seeking reach, credibility, and engagement in the digital age. Human influencers—bloggers, celebrities, ordinary people with strong follower bases—are valued for their authenticity, emotional connection, lived experience, and capacity to build parasocial relationships. With advances in artificial intelligence and graphics, a new class of influencer has emerged: AI-generated or virtual influencers (VIs). These are digital personas, often anthropomorphized, managed wholly by algorithms, companies, or creative teams. Brands are increasingly using them, enticed by their consistency, the control they afford, novelty appeal, potential cost savings, and scalability.

However, just because AI influencers are technically feasible doesn't mean consumers necessarily trust them to the same degree as human influencers. Trust plays a central role in influencing consumer behavior—affecting brand attitude, engagement, purchase intention, and long-term loyalty. For brands considering collaborations with AI influencers, understanding how trust differs between AI and human influencers, what shapes that trust, and what ethical concerns consumers have is crucial.

Literature Review:

Trust, Influencer Marketing, and Conceptual Frameworks:

Trust in marketing and communications contexts is often studied via source credibility theory (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness) as well as via constructs like authenticity, transparency, and reliability. The notion of parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956; more recent work) also plays a role: consumers' perceived relationship with influencers can boost trust. Authenticity in influencer marketing has been conceptualized as multi-dimensional; for example, Influencer Authenticity by Gao et al. (2022) (presented at the AMA Winter Academic Conference) conceptualizes authenticity in influencer marketing comprising dimensions such as passion, interactivity, symbolism, consistency, originality, and transparency. They find that higher authenticity leads to greater trust and engagement.

Virtual / AI-Generated Influencers vs Human Influencers: Comparative Studies

"Can you sense without being human? Comparing virtual and human influencers endorsement effectiveness" (2023) investigates brand attitude and purchase intention across human vs virtual influencers in multiple experiments and cultural contexts. It finds that, generally, virtual influencers are less effective than human influencers on metrics of brand attitude, purchase intention, particularly in emotionally driven brand domains.

"AI vs. Human Influencer Branding: Comparative Effectiveness of AI-Driven Virtual Influencers vs. Human Influencers in Consumer Engagement" by Mishra (2025) compares how AI virtual and human influencers affect consumer engagement, brand loyalty, and purchase intention. This study finds human influencers still lead, especially on trust and emotional appeal, but AI influencers gain ground in aesthetic appeal and consistency, especially among younger consumers.

Virtual influencer marketing: the role of perceived authenticity and social psychological distance (Master's thesis by Joana Serra da Costa, 2023-2024) examines how virtual vs human influencers are perceived in terms of authenticity and social psychological distance, and how those perceptions affect purchase, recommendation, and follow-intention. Results: virtual influencers are seen as less authentic and more socially distant than human ones; authenticity predicts purchase / follow / recommendation intentions.

Anthropomorphism And Authenticity Exploring The Dynamics Of Virtual Influencers In Contemporary Marketing (2024) examines how anthropomorphic cues and perceived authenticity influence consumer intention to engage with virtual influencers. This suggests that the more human-like the virtual influencer appears (via visual or narrative cues), the more authentic and engaging it is seen to be.

The Shifting Influence: Comparing AI Tools and Human Influencers in Consumer Decision-Making (2025) looks at AI tools (e.g., recommendation systems or ChatGPT-style systems) vs human influencers; findings include that in product categories where objectivity and precision are valued (electronics, sporting goods), AI tools may be preferred, whereas in emotional / appearance / fashion categories, human influencers still dominate.

Antecedents / Factors Shaping Trust:

Authenticity: Perhaps the most commonly cited determinant. Virtual influencers are often perceived as less authentic, due to lack of "real life," inconsistent storytelling, or because they are known to be artificial. Joana Serra da Costa's work on perceived authenticity shows this strongly influences consumer intentions.

Anthropomorphism / Humanlikeness: Studies like Anthropomorphism And Authenticity Exploring ... show that human-like cues (appearance, voice, mannerisms) enhance perceived authenticity and reduce perceived social distance.

Relatability / Social Psychological Distance: Same as above, perceived similarity and closeness—shared values, demographics, interests—reduce social distance and raise trust. Virtual influencers are often more distant. Costa's thesis showed social psychological distance affects recommendation intention.

Disclosure / Transparency: Whether the audience knows the influencer is virtual or AI-generated, whether sponsored content is clearly disclosed, etc., makes a difference. There is some evidence that disclosure increases ethical perception and long-term trust, but may reduce immediate trust or purchase intention in some contexts. Work such as The impact of AI identity disclosure on consumer unethical behavior: A social judgment perspective (Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 2024) shows that when AI agents disclose their identity, behavior of consumers may shift, including increases in certain unethical behavior (but this is a different but related domain) showing how identity/disclosure matters.

Ethical Concerns, Privacy, Fairness, Bias: From broader studies of AI ethics and digital marketing, consumers are concerned about data privacy, algorithmic fairness, misinformation, misrepresentation (e.g. what is real vs what is simulated). For instance, Ethical Considerations in AI-Generated Content on Social Media (2025) surveys bias, clarity, accountability, and how those affect public trust. Also Ethics and governance of artificial intelligence in digital China (2025) shows safety, transparency, privacy, fairness are top concerns.

Ethical, Transparency, Regulatory, and Cultural Issues:

Transparency & Accountability: Vuković & Pavković (2025) in The Ethics of Influencer Marketing argue that current legal frameworks and disclosure practices are uneven, especially for AI influencers, and recommend clearer regulation to ensure consumers know when content is simulated or sponsored.

Cultural Sensitivity and Regulatory Variation:

The systematic review Authenticity, ethics, and transparency in virtual influencer marketing: A cross-cultural analysis (2024) shows that concerns, trust levels, and acceptable transparency/disclosure vary across cultures and regulatory contexts. Regulatory norms differ in how influencer marketing must disclose paid content; simulated influencers add more ambiguity.

Ethical concerns about deception and misinformation:

The ethic that AI should not mislead consumers to make it's human, or misrepresent products, or use consumer data without consent. The chapter Ethical Considerations in AI-Generated Content on Social Media (2025) highlights issues like fairness, misinformation, privacy.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To **compare** the level of consumer trust in AI-generated influencers versus human influencers.
2. To **identify and analyze** the key factors that influence consumer trust in each type of influencer.
3. To **examine** how trust in AI versus human influencers impacts consumer engagement and purchase intentions.
4. To **explore** consumer perceptions of the ethical considerations and transparency issues associated with AI influencers.

Research Methodology:

The study uses a mixed-methods approach with surveys and interviews to examine consumer trust in AI vs human influencers. Social media users aged 18+ were sampled (120 respondents).

Quantitative data measures trust, engagement, and purchase intentions; qualitative data explores authenticity and ethical perceptions. Analysis includes descriptive stats and paired t-tests.

Reliability, validity, and ethical standards are ensured. The study identifies trust differences, key influencing factors, and implications for brand collaborations.

Analysis:

Social Media Use & Awareness:

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Use social media platforms	1.17	0.46	Nearly all participants use social media very frequently.
Follow social media influencers	1.23	0.43	Most follow influencers.
Aware of AI-generated influencers	1.27	0.64	Majority are aware of AI influencers, but awareness is slightly less than for human influencers.

Summary: Respondents demonstrate very frequent social media use, strong engagement with influencer content, and substantial familiarity with AI-driven influencer accounts.

Trust & Perceptions of Human Influencers:

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Credible	2.77	0.90	Slightly below the neutral midpoint (3).
Relatable	2.03	0.72	Participants generally disagree that human influencers are relatable.
Emotional connection	2.73	1.11	Low-moderate connection.
Authentic endorsements	2.87	0.78	Slightly below neutral.
Impact on purchase intentions	2.33	1.12	Weak purchase influence.
Likely to like/comment/share	2.33	0.99	Low engagement.
Interact frequently	2.40	1.07	Low interaction frequency.

Summary: Participants show **low-to-moderate trust and engagement** with human influencers, with relatability scoring the lowest.

Trust & Perceptions of AI Influencers:

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Credible	3.10	0.89	Slightly above neutral—higher than human credibility.
Transparent about nature	3.23	0.97	Moderate agreement that their AI status is clear.
Personalized content	2.97	0.89	About neutral.
Trust recommendations	3.37	0.96	Highest trust rating across all trust variables.
Content encourages like/comment/share	3.23	1.04	Higher engagement intention than with humans.
Engage frequently	3.27	1.11	Higher actual/future engagement.
Purchase intentions	3.17	0.99	Significantly higher than for humans.

Summary: Across all parallel measures, **AI influencers outperform human influencers** in credibility, trust, and impact on engagement/purchase intentions.

Ethical and Transparency Concerns:

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Brands should disclose AI status	2.50	0.82	Neutral; participants somewhat expect disclosure.
Spread of unrealistic beauty standards	2.70	0.99	Mild concern.
Lack of genuine human emotion	2.30	0.88	Low-to-moderate concern.
Hard to hold accountable	2.43	0.77	Low-to-moderate concern.
Decline in authentic human connection	2.37	0.67	Low-to-moderate concern.

Summary: Ethical concerns are present but not strongly endorsed, suggesting **participants are not highly worried** about the social risks of AI influencers.

Findings From the Above Data:

Trust Gap Favors AI: AI influencers score higher on credibility (3.10 vs. 2.77), trust in recommendations (3.37 vs. 2.33), and purchase influence (3.17 vs. 2.33). Human influencers lag behind even on emotional connection (2.73) and relatability (2.03).

Engagement Intentions: Content from AI influencers is more likely to drive likes/comments/shares (3.23) than content from humans (2.33).

Ethical Caution Is Mild: While respondents support disclosure (mean 2.50), worries about unrealistic standards or lack of authenticity remain below neutral.

Practical Implication for Brands: Brands may find **AI influencers more persuasive** for engagement and conversion. However, transparent disclosure is recommended to maintain trust.

Paired Samples t-Test: Each pair compares **the same respondents' ratings** on a human-influencer item vs. an AI-influencer item.

Pair	Comparison	Mean Difference (Human – AI)	p-value
1	Human credibility vs. Emotional connection with human (not AI)	+0.033	0.884
2	Human content engagement vs. AI content engagement	-0.90	0.000
3	Human recommendation purchase impact vs. AI recommendation	-0.83	0.000
4	Human frequent interaction vs. AI frequent interaction	-0.87	0.006
1	Human credibility vs. Emotional connection with human (not AI)	+0.033	0.884
2	Human content engagement vs. AI content engagement	-0.90	0.000

Negative mean differences mean **AI score > Human score.**

Pair 1: Human credibility vs. Emotional connection with human influencers

$t(29) = 0.15, p = 0.884.$

No significant difference (and this pair isn't actually an AI vs. Human comparison). Participants rated credibility and emotional connection with human influencers about the same.

Pair 2: Engagement with Human vs. AI Content

$t(29) = -4.16, p < .001.$

Mean difference = -0.90 (AI higher).

Participants are significantly more likely to like, comment, or share content from AI-generated influencers than from human influencers.

Pair 3: Purchase Intentions from Human vs. AI Recommendation

$t(29) = -4.21, p < .001.$

Mean difference = -0.83 (AI higher).

Recommendations from AI influencers have a significantly greater impact on purchase intentions than recommendations from human influencers.

Pair 4: Frequency of Interaction with Human vs. AI Content

$t(29) = -2.94, p = .006.$

Mean difference = -0.87 (AI higher).

Participants report significantly more frequent interaction with AI influencer content than with human influencer content.

Paired Samples t-Test Results:

AI influencers clearly outperform human influencers on key behavioral outcomes:

- (i) **Engagement (likes, comments, shares)**
- (ii) **Influence on purchase intentions**
- (iii) **Frequency of interaction**

The only non-significant comparison is within the human category (credibility vs. emotional connection), which does **not** involve AI. Across credibility, engagement, and conversion metrics, AI influencers significantly outperform human influencers. Ethical reservations exist but are not strong enough to offset the persuasive advantage of AI.

Implementation of the Study:

For Brands and Marketers:

Adopt AI Influencers Strategically: Leverage AI influencers for campaigns focused on conversion and high-volume engagement, where data show stronger purchase impact and interaction rates.

Maintain Transparency: Clearly disclose AI-generated status in profiles and posts to meet the moderate but notable expectation for honesty and to safeguard brand trust.

Segment by Digital Literacy & Demographics: Use the planned moderation analyses to identify whether younger, digitally literate audiences respond more positively. Tailor campaign intensity and messaging accordingly.

Hybrid Influencer Strategies: Combine AI and human influencers to capture both the emotional authenticity of humans and the high engagement of AI.

Monitor Ethical Perceptions: Track consumer sentiment on issues like unrealistic beauty standards and accountability to prevent reputational risk as AI influencer adoption grows.

Conclusion:

This study aimed to explore how consumers trust AI-generated influencers compared to human influencers. It also looked at how this trust affects brand partnerships. Using survey data and statistical tests, the research provides several important insights. First, AI influencers consistently score better than human influencers in every key behavior measured. Respondents rated AI influencers higher in credibility, trust in recommendations, purchase influence, and engagement activities such as likes, comments, and shares. Paired-sample t-tests showed that these differences are significant for engagement, purchase intentions, and interaction frequency. While human influencers are seen as somewhat authentic and engaging, they do not match the persuasive power of AI influencers. Second, concerns about ethics and transparency are present but moderate. Participants agreed that brands should disclose when an influencer is AI-generated and expressed low-to-moderate worries about unrealistic beauty standards, accountability, or loss of human connection. These findings imply that, at least for the sampled audience, ethical concerns are not strong enough to overshadow the appeal of AI-driven content. Third, the results indicate a changing landscape for influencer marketing. Human influencers still hold value because of their real-life experiences and emotional connection. However, AI influencers offer measurable advantages like cost-effectiveness, scalability, consistency, and high engagement. This makes them valuable tools for brands aiming for reach and conversion. The evidence supports mixed strategies where AI influencers drive high engagement while human influencers provide authenticity and deeper narratives.

Lastly, the study emphasizes the need for transparency and audience segmentation. Brands should clearly disclose when influencers are AI, monitor changing public opinions, and customize campaigns based on factors like age and digital literacy. These steps will help maintain trust as consumer expectations and regulations change. In conclusion, the research shows that AI influencers are no longer just a trend; they are a trustworthy and effective marketing channel. Their advantage in trust and engagement suggests that brands that use AI thoughtfully—while being transparent and ethically aware—can achieve a significant edge in the fast-evolving digital marketplace.

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