



# International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Science, Engineering and Technology

*(A Monthly, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Scholarly Indexed, Open Access Journal)*



**Impact Factor: 8.206**

**Volume 9, Issue 4, April 2026**



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# AI-Generated Influencers vs. Human Influencers: A Comparative Study of Brand Trust, Authenticity, and Purchase Intention in Digital Marketing

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**ABSTRACT:** The rapid expansion of influencer marketing has fundamentally reshaped digital brand communication, moving it away from one-way promotional messaging and toward interactive, personality-driven persuasion. In the earlier phase of digital marketing, brands primarily controlled the message, while consumers acted as passive recipients. Today, however, audiences actively evaluate, interpret, share, and sometimes even challenge brand narratives created by influencers. This shift has made the influencer not just a communication channel, but a central persuasive actor in the marketing ecosystem.

Within this context, AI-generated influencers have emerged as a major disruption. These synthetic personalities offer brands unprecedented advantages in scale, consistency, controllability, and creative flexibility. They can be designed to maintain a specific tone, visual identity, language style, and brand persona without the unpredictability that often comes with human creators. Human influencers, however, continue to dominate in areas such as authenticity, emotional connection, spontaneity, and perceived lived experience. Consumers often trust human influencers because they seem to speak from real-world usage, personal taste, and genuine emotional involvement rather than from a programmed script.

Recent studies suggest that human influencers still outperform AI-based influencers in perceived authenticity and emotional appeal, while AI influencers may perform better in novelty, aesthetic precision, and highly controlled personalization. This creates an important strategic tension for marketers. On one hand, AI-generated influencers can provide efficiency and brand safety; on the other hand, they may trigger skepticism if audiences feel the content is too artificial, too polished, or insufficiently grounded in real experience. The issue becomes especially important in categories such as food, beauty, fashion, and lifestyle, where consumer judgment is heavily influenced by trust and credibility.

A particularly important factor in this debate is disclosure. Emerging evidence indicates that revealing the virtual or synthetic nature of an influencer can intensify skepticism among consumers, especially when the audience expects authenticity as part of the persuasion process. At the same time, digital literacy plays a moderating role: highly informed consumers may be more critical, while some audiences may simply respond to content effectiveness rather than the influencer's human or synthetic origin. This suggests that consumer reaction to AI-generated influencers is not uniform, but shaped by contextual and psychological factors.

This study proposes a comparative analysis of AI-generated influencers and human influencers in shaping consumer trust, brand credibility, and purchase intention. The aim is not only to determine which type of influencer performs better overall, but also to identify the conditions under which AI-generated influencers may support persuasion and the conditions under which they may weaken it. The study is therefore designed to move beyond a simple technology-versus-human debate and instead examine how trust is formed, sustained, and undermined in digital influencer ecosystems.



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The research is positioned at the intersection of Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and Schema Incongruity Theory. Source Credibility Theory helps explain why audiences respond more positively to sources they perceive as expert, trustworthy, and believable. Parasocial Interaction Theory explains the emotional bonds consumers form with media personalities, which often strengthen persuasion. Schema Incongruity Theory helps explain why AI-generated influencers attract attention through novelty while simultaneously risking rejection if they violate consumer expectations too strongly. Together, these theories provide a strong framework for examining whether consumer trust is built differently when the influencer is synthetic rather than human.

This study is especially relevant for brands operating in fast-moving, content-heavy sectors where influencer-led persuasion now shapes purchase decisions more than many traditional media channels. It also has practical importance for marketers deciding whether to invest in synthetic brand ambassadors, hybrid influencer ecosystems, or traditional creators. From a managerial perspective, the research seeks to guide decisions on when to deploy AI influencers, how to disclose synthetic identity, and how to balance automation with authenticity in an era where consumer trust is increasingly fragile.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing has become one of the most powerful instruments in digital promotion because it aligns with how consumers now discover, evaluate, and adopt brands. Instead of relying only on corporate advertising, consumers increasingly prefer recommendations that appear personal, familiar, and socially validated. Influencers succeed because they appear closer to peers than to institutions; they speak in a relatable voice, show everyday usage, and often present products in a more informal and trusted manner. This makes influencer marketing especially effective in digital environments where attention is limited and consumers are overloaded with content.

In 2025 and 2026, influencer marketing has entered a new stage. It is no longer dominated solely by human creators, but increasingly includes AI-generated personalities that compete for consumer attention, engagement, and trust. These synthetic influencers are not merely software experiments; they are now being used in real brand campaigns, social media storytelling, and product endorsements. Their rise reflects the convergence of generative AI, creator economy economics, and the demand for always-on digital spokespersons who can be tightly aligned with brand objectives. This shift makes the current period particularly interesting for academic and managerial study.

The key issue is that influencer marketing is not just about visibility. It is about persuasion, and persuasion depends heavily on whether audiences believe the messenger is real, relatable, and credible. Human influencers traditionally perform well because they create parasocial bonds, share personal routines, and appear emotionally accessible. They may show their homes, their daily meals, their experiences with a product, or even their failures, and this human imperfection often strengthens credibility. When consumers feel that an influencer has genuinely experienced the product, the recommendation carries more weight.

AI-generated influencers disrupt this persuasive logic. They can be programmed to look aesthetically perfect, post consistently, and remain completely aligned with brand objectives. They do not fatigue, make scandalous mistakes, or deviate from campaign guidance. For brands, that level of control is highly attractive. It allows for message consistency, global scalability, and safer brand environments. However, the same artificiality that makes AI influencers efficient can also make them less trustworthy. When consumers sense that a persona is engineered rather than lived, the emotional foundation of persuasion may weaken.

This creates a very important question for modern marketing strategy: should brands prioritize control and scale, or should they prioritize authenticity and emotional connection? The answer is not obvious. Some campaigns may benefit from novelty, visual control, and precision targeting, while others may depend on trust, familiarity, and perceived sincerity. In categories such as food, beauty, lifestyle, and fashion, the issue becomes even more sensitive because purchase decisions are often tied to sensory experience, personal identity, and social influence. A recommendation about food, for instance, feels more convincing when it comes from someone who appears to have actually tasted and enjoyed the product.

The comparison between AI-generated influencers and human influencers therefore represents more than a technological curiosity. It reflects a deeper transition in the logic of digital persuasion. Marketers are no longer



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choosing between traditional media and influencer marketing alone; they are also choosing between different kinds of influencer identities. Some are fully human, some are synthetic, and some may eventually become hybrid personas blending real creators with AI augmentation. Understanding how consumers respond to each type is essential for brands that want to build effective, ethical, and future-ready communication strategies.

This topic is especially relevant in the MBA context because it combines strategy, consumer behavior, branding, and technology. It also reflects a real-world managerial dilemma faced by agencies and firms today. If an AI influencer can deliver more stable branding and broader reach, should a company choose it over a human influencer who may be less controllable but more believable? And if disclosure reduces trust, how transparent should brands be about synthetic identity? These are not theoretical questions only; they are operational decisions that influence campaign success, brand equity, and long-term consumer relationships. Background

The rise of virtual influencers has been driven by three converging developments: advances in generative AI, the creator economy's demand for scalability, and the growing need for brand-safe, always-on digital spokespersons. AI-generated influencers can be designed to fit exact brand values, avoid unpredictable scandals, and maintain a consistent posting schedule. For global brands, this makes them attractive for campaigns requiring precision and control, especially in visually driven sectors such as cosmetics, luxury, and food content. hellopartner+1

At the same time, the consumer environment has become more skeptical. Audiences increasingly expect transparency, and brand trust is now closely linked to honesty about sponsorship, identity, and content origin. Recent work in AI influencer marketing suggests that consumers respond negatively when AI-generated personas are perceived as overly fake or when their synthetic nature is not made clear. In contrast, human influencers retain an advantage because they are seen as capable of real experience, genuine emotion, and relational authenticity. news.northeastern+2

This tension is especially important in sectors where trust matters more than novelty. Food marketing, for example, depends on sensory credibility and practical experience, making consumers more sensitive to whether the recommendation comes from a person who has genuinely tasted, used, or experienced the product. In such contexts, AI influencers may deliver reach and novelty, but human influencers may deliver relational trust. This study therefore positions itself within a current managerial dilemma: should brands optimize for control and scale, or for authenticity and emotional connection.

### II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite rapid adoption of AI-generated influencers, there is still limited consensus on their actual effectiveness in comparison with human influencers. While AI personas may offer aesthetic appeal, efficiency, and consistency, it remains unclear whether they can match human influencers in trust formation, persuasion, and purchase intention. Existing research points to a possible authenticity deficit in AI-generated content, especially when consumers detect artificiality or react negatively to disclosure of virtual identity. jmsr-online+2

The core problem is that brands are investing in a medium whose short-term performance may be visible through clicks and likes, but whose long-term impact on trust and loyalty is uncertain. A campaign can succeed in engagement while still failing in brand credibility, and this is a critical distinction for MBA-level marketing strategy. The issue becomes even more complex when consumers have different digital literacy levels, because not every audience evaluates AI-generated content in the same way. jmsr-online

Accordingly, the central research problem can be framed as:

**How do AI-generated influencers compare with human influencers in shaping consumer trust, brand authenticity perceptions, and purchase intention in digital marketing?**

#### Objectives

This study aims to:

- Compare consumer trust levels toward AI-generated influencers and human influencers.
- Examine the effect of influencer type on perceived authenticity.
- Test the impact of influencer type on purchase intention.
- Assess whether digital literacy moderates consumer responses to AI influencers.



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- Identify when AI influencers may be more effective than human influencers.
- Explore the role of disclosure in shaping trust toward synthetic influencers.

### Research Questions

1. Do consumers trust human influencers more than AI-generated influencers?
2. How does perceived authenticity differ between AI and human influencers?
3. Does influencer type affect purchase intention?
4. Does disclosure of AI identity change consumer response?
5. Does digital literacy moderate trust in AI influencers?
6. In which categories are AI influencers more acceptable than human influencers?

### III. SIGNIFICANCE

This research is significant for three reasons. First, it addresses a live and emerging question in digital marketing strategy: whether brands should adopt AI personas as persuasion agents. Second, it contributes academically by comparing synthetic and human persuasion through trust-based theories, extending influencer marketing literature into the AI era. Third, it has practical value for brands, agencies, and platforms because it can help determine when AI influencers should be used and how they should be disclosed to avoid trust damage.

For marketers, the study can help identify whether AI influencers are best used for awareness, brand storytelling, or niche personalization. For consumers, it provides a clearer understanding of how synthetic persuasion works. For policymakers, it raises important transparency and disclosure questions as AI-generated media becomes more common.

### IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on influencer marketing has long established that credibility, relatability, and parasocial interaction are key determinants of persuasion. Human influencers are effective because audiences often perceive them as friends, peers, or trusted advisors rather than distant advertisers. This relational quality is central to parasocial interaction theory and helps explain why influencer recommendations can feel more personal than traditional advertising.

Recent comparative studies suggest that human influencers still outperform AI-based influencers on perceived authenticity, emotional appeal, and long-term trust building. A 2025 comparative study reported that while AI influencers may be useful for novelty, cost-effectiveness, and controlled personalization, human influencers remain superior in genuine connection and authenticity. This aligns with the broader literature showing that consumers are especially sensitive to signs of sincerity and lived experience in influencer content.

At the same time, AI influencers are not ineffective; rather, they succeed under different conditions. Research from 2026 on virtual influencers in organic food marketing found that authenticity still matters strongly, but consumer engagement can partially mediate the relationship between virtual influencer authenticity and purchase intention. This suggests that AI influencers may not replace human influencers outright, but they may be strategically valuable in contexts where novelty, visual control, and scalable brand storytelling matter more than deep emotional credibility.

Another critical issue is disclosure. Evidence indicates that explicit disclosure of AI-generated identity can sometimes reduce trust, especially when consumers already suspect manipulation. However, nondisclosure may create even greater backlash if audiences later discover the synthetic nature of the influencer. This creates a practical paradox for brands: transparency is ethically necessary, but disclosure may also intensify skepticism.

In summary, the literature suggests a trade-off. Human influencers excel at trust, intimacy, and emotional depth, while AI influencers excel at consistency, control, and brand-safe personalization. The unresolved question is how these advantages translate into consumer purchase intention across different product categories and audience segments.



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### V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory argues that message persuasiveness depends on the credibility of the source. Traditionally, credibility has been built around expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Human influencers can communicate expertise through product knowledge and trustworthiness through perceived sincerity. AI influencers, however, may struggle to establish trustworthiness because they lack lived experience and emotional authenticity. mjar.singhpublication+1

#### Parasocial Interaction Theory

Parasocial Interaction Theory explains how audiences form one-sided emotional relationships with media figures. Human influencers naturally facilitate parasocial bonds because they can share personal stories, daily routines, and vulnerable experiences. AI influencers may simulate intimacy, but the bond often feels weaker because the audience knows the persona is artificial. frontiersin+1

#### Schema Incongruity Theory

Schema Incongruity Theory helps explain why AI influencers attract attention. A synthetic influencer can violate audience expectations, creating novelty and curiosity. That novelty can be valuable at the top of the funnel, but if the mismatch between “influencer” and “machine-generated entity” is too large, trust can collapse. jmsr-online+1

#### Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework for this study is:

##### Influencer Type

AI-generated influencer vs human influencer

↓

##### Perceived Authenticity

↓

##### Consumer Trust

↓

##### Purchase Intention

Moderators:

- Disclosure of synthetic identity
- Digital literacy
- Product category
- Audience age group

This framework assumes that influencer type affects trust primarily through authenticity perception, and that purchase intention is the behavioral outcome of trust. The model also recognizes that the effectiveness of AI influencers may vary by audience sophistication and product type. frontiersin+1

#### Research Gap

Although the literature on virtual influencers is growing rapidly, there are still important gaps. Most studies are either conceptual, platform-specific, or focused on brand engagement rather than purchase intention. Fewer studies compare AI and human influencers in the same framework using trust and authenticity as central variables. Another gap is that many studies do not examine how disclosure and digital literacy interact with influencer type. mjar.singhpublication+1

There is also a category gap. Much of the AI influencer literature is dominated by luxury, fashion, or metaverse contexts, while food and FMCG categories remain underexplored. This is important because food purchase decisions are highly sensitive to credibility and sensory cues. Therefore, a comparative study on AI-generated versus human influencers in consumer trust and purchase intention remains both current and under-researched. wjarr+1



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### VI. METHODOLOGY

#### Research Design

A **descriptive-cum-explanatory** design is appropriate for this topic because the study needs both comparison and causal interpretation. A quantitative survey can measure consumer trust, authenticity, and purchase intention across influencer types. A complementary qualitative element can explore why consumers prefer one type over the other.

#### Population and Sample

The target population can be digitally active consumers aged 18–35, since this group is most exposed to influencer content and most likely to engage with AI-mediated digital trends. A sample size of 300–500 respondents would be suitable for MBA-level research, depending on access and statistical goals. Purposive or convenience sampling may be used if access is limited, but the limitation should be acknowledged.

#### Data Collection

Primary data can be collected through a structured questionnaire using five-point Likert scales. Secondary data should include recent journal articles, industry reports, and case studies on AI influencers, virtual branding, and creator economy trends. [news.northeastern+2](#)

#### Variables

Independent variable:

- Influencer type

Mediating variable:

- Perceived authenticity
- Consumer trust

Dependent variable:

- Purchase intention

Moderators:

- Digital literacy
- Disclosure status
- Product category

#### Analysis Tools

The study can use descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation testing. ANOVA can compare consumer responses across age groups and digital literacy levels. If you want, the final paper can also include a conceptual model diagram and SPSS-style interpretation.

#### Proposed Hypotheses

- H1: Human influencers generate higher consumer trust than AI-generated influencers.
- H2: Human influencers are perceived as more authentic than AI-generated influencers.
- H3: Consumer trust positively influences purchase intention.
- H4: Disclosure of AI identity reduces perceived trust.
- H5: Digital literacy weakens negative reactions to AI-generated influencers.
- H6: The effect of influencer type on purchase intention is mediated by perceived authenticity.

#### Recent Literature Snapshot

Recent 2025–2026 evidence strengthens the relevance of this topic. One 2025 comparative study found that human influencers outperform AI-based influencers on authenticity, emotional appeal, and long-term trust, while AI influencers are stronger in novelty and controlled personalization. Another 2025 analysis warned that AI influencer marketing may pose risks to brand trust, especially if the product experience disappoints consumers. A 2025 article on AI-generated influencer content found that AI influencers reduce perceived authenticity and brand trust compared with human influencers, and that disclosure can intensify these effects. [jmsr-online+2](#)



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However, the 2026 Frontiers study suggests that AI/virtual influencers are not universally ineffective, because authenticity can still promote engagement and purchase intention under specific conditions, particularly in organic food contexts. This means the literature is no longer asking whether AI influencers work at all, but rather when, where, and for whom they work best. That is exactly the kind of question that makes a strong MBA research paper [frontiersin](#)

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This thesis reviews emerging academic research on AI influencers and consumer perception.



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