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**Authenticity and Trust in the Age of  
Artificial Intelligence: A Comparative  
Analysis of Human and AI-Generated  
Influencers and Their Societal Implications**

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## Abstract

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into digital marketing has reshaped the influencer landscape, introducing AI-generated or virtual influencers whose presence challenges established notions of authenticity, trust, and engagement rate. Influencer marketing, once grounded in human relatability and spontaneous self-expression, now includes synthetic personas capable of replicating human aesthetics, narratives, and interaction patterns. This evolution raises critical concerns regarding how audiences perceive these new actors and how their increasing realism influences digital communication and societal well-being.

This thesis analyzes the distinctions between human and AI-generated influencers regarding perceived authenticity, trustworthiness, and engagement outcomes, while also investigating the broader societal implications of the fuzzy boundaries between genuine and synthetic identities. The study utilizes authenticity theory, parasocial interaction, and source credibility models to conduct a quantitative content analysis of 60 Instagram posts (30 from human influencers and 30 from AI-generated influencers). Each post was assessed based on many criteria, including visual realism, emotional expressiveness, narrative depth, engagement metrics, and perceived markers of authenticity and sincerity. Statistical methods, encompassing comparative descriptive metrics and regression-based evaluations, were employed to investigate patterns among influencer categories.

The results indicate that human influencers constantly exhibit more perceived authenticity and trust, influenced by emotional subtleties, spontaneity, and perceived responsibility. In contrast, AI-generated influencers have superior aesthetic consistency and engagement efficiency, illustrating how algorithmic design may maintain audience attention despite less emotional authenticity. The results underscore an increasing disparity between emotional authenticity and algorithmic efficacy, indicating that engagement may be propelled by visually optimized information despite diminished trust.

Beyond marketing outcomes, the study identifies societal concerns related to trust erosion, distorted reality perception, and emotional detachment, emphasizing the psychological and ethical implications of AI-mediated personas. As a pioneering comparative analysis, this research establishes a foundation for future studies seeking to evaluate authenticity perception, audience behavior, and regulatory needs in an increasingly AI-driven digital ecosystem.

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

### 1.1—Problem Statement and Background

Over the past decade, social media influencers have undergone a profound transformation. What began as ordinary users sharing personal moments has evolved into a complex marketing ecosystem capable of generating significant consumer engagement, shaping brand identities, and influencing purchasing decisions. According to Emily Hund in *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media*, followers trust influencers not merely for their endorsements but for their perceived “genuineness”; their sincerity, relatability, and authenticity as individuals rather than as commercial entities (Hund, 2023).

Authenticity has thus emerged as a crucial differentiator in digital marketing. However, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and the emergence of virtual or “synthetic” influencers have introduced new complexities to this notion. AI-generated influencers, often managed by agencies or brand teams, simulate human behavior, emotion, and engagement through algorithmic precision. Research indicates that brands increasingly adopt such virtual influencers because they are “scalable, brand-aligned, and control-friendly.” Yet, these figures raise critical questions regarding perceived authenticity, emotional connection, and consumer trust (Jayasingh, et al., 2025).

A central challenge lies in the growing difficulty audiences face in distinguishing between human and AI-crafted influencers. Virtual influencers appear authentic through highly curated narratives, realistic aesthetics, and consistent interaction patterns. Nonetheless, empirical studies show that they are generally “perceived as less authentic than human influencers, leading to lower trust, weaker brand attitudes, and reduced purchase intentions” (Liu, et al., 2024). Despite technological sophistication, they often lack perceived sincerity and emotional depth, qualities central to the human influencer–follower relationship (Koles, et al., 2024).

This phenomenon poses significant implications for both marketing practice and social well-being. Authenticity functions as a cornerstone of influencer credibility; when it erodes, so does trust, the primary driver of engagement and persuasion. The convergence of human and AI-generated personas challenges consumers’ ability to discern reality from simulation, potentially reshaping emotional connections, digital behavior, and mental health. Moreover, the blurring of human–machine boundaries raise ethical and societal concerns, including the exploitation of attention, the commodification of identity, and the sustainability of trust in mediated communication.

Several interrelated societal concerns emerge from this context:

#### 1.1.1 Trust Erosion:

Research by Joel-Edgar et al. (2025) suggests that while consumers attribute accountability more easily to human influencers, they perceive AI-generated influencers as less trustworthy and emotionally credible, thereby undermining brand reputation and trust mechanisms. This perceived lack of accountability stems from the awareness that virtual influencers are programmed entities

without genuine intentions, emotions, or moral responsibility. As a result, audiences often approach their content with a degree of skepticism, questioning whether their interactions and endorsements are purely algorithmic or strategically manipulated by brands. Over time, this dynamic may weaken the foundational bond of parasocial trust that underpins influencer–follower relationships, leading to lower engagement and reduced persuasive effectiveness. Moreover, as brands increasingly rely on AI-driven personas, the dilution of emotional authenticity may contribute to a broader societal desensitization toward digital communication and marketing narratives.

### **1.1.2 - Idealization and Mental Health:**

Influencer culture frequently promotes idealized and unattainable lifestyles, which can exacerbate anxiety, low self-esteem, and social comparison, particularly among young audiences. This risk intensifies when idealized personas are algorithmically engineered, as shown in *The Role of Digital Influencers in Shaping Youth Mental Health* (Adeane, et al., 2024).

### **1.1.3 - Exploitation of Labor & Attention:**

Followers devote time, attention, and emotional energy to the narratives that influencers create; this is essentially unpaid labor. By algorithmically creating content to maximize engagement, virtual influencers may amplify this. A significant portion of the impact of VIs on purchase intention is mediated by "consumer engagement," according to the growing body of research on VIs (Jayasingh , et al., 2025).

### **1.1.4 - Crisis of Authenticity:**

There is strain on the idea of authenticity itself. "Meta-authenticity" is a fluid, co-constructed performance of authenticity in a mediated setting, according to research like *Meta-authenticity and Fake but Real Virtual Influencers* (Kim, 2025). The emergence of VIs calls into question whether any influencer can now be genuinely trusted and undermines established frameworks of influencer authenticity.

The backdrop of this study is the digital marketing ecosystem, specifically the social media platforms (YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok) where influencers, both human and artificial, are active. Although the phenomenon is worldwide, a dual-lens approach will be used for this thesis: local/regional contexts (like Iranian influencer markets) where digital transformation and societal norms yield specific dynamics of authenticity and influence, and international contexts where virtual influencers are already widely used (like Lil Miquela and Aitana Lopez). According to research, influencer culture may vary in emerging nations, both in terms of social vulnerability to influencer narratives and expectations of authenticity (Duffek, et al., 2025). In conclusion, this thesis tackles the issue of consumers' growing difficulty to discern between human and artificial intelligence influences, as well as the resulting risks to trust, authenticity, and the general welfare of society (mental health, exploitation, emotional labor). The focus of this study is on authenticity and societal impact rather than just regulatory or ethical-compliance frameworks, even though ethical concerns including data protection, consent, and manipulation are still pertinent.

## 1.2 Research Questions

The central focus of this thesis is to quantitatively investigate how AI-generated influencers differ from human influencers in their expression of authenticity, their capacity to elicit trust, and their influence on engagement behavior, while considering the wider ethical and social implications of this emerging phenomenon. While previous studies have investigated influencer efficacy, there is a paucity of empirical research quantifying the impact of synthetic, AI-generated personas on perceptions of authenticity and trust, as well as their influence on audience behavior and social norms. This study fills the gap by systematically comparing 60 influencer posts (equally divided between human and AI-generated) on Instagram and TikTok, employing content analysis and statistical modeling to evaluate authenticity, trust, and engagement metrics.

Utilizing this analytical framework, the study examines the subsequent three principal research questions:

### **Question 1: How do AI-generated influencers differ from human influencers in perceived authenticity and trust?**

This inquiry assesses the extent to which content generated by AI influencers exhibits emotional authenticity, transparency, and credibility in comparison to those published by humans. It seeks to ascertain whether audiences perceive authenticity differently when it is algorithmically generated as opposed to personally encountered. Comprehending these contrasts is essential, since authenticity underpins influencer credibility; a perceived lack of authenticity may erode trust, subsequently affecting consumer attitudes and engagement behaviors (Hund, 2023) (Jayasingh, et al., 2025).

### **Question 2: To what extent do AI-generated and human influencers differ in their engagement performance, and how are these outcomes associated with authenticity and trust?**

This inquiry builds upon the initial one by linking perceptual indicators to quantifiable audience behavior. This study examines the extent to which authenticity and trust significantly influence engagement measures, including likes, comments, and shares, vs the impact of external factors such as platform capabilities, audience expectations, or algorithmic distribution methods. The objective is to determine if elevated levels of authenticity or trust consistently result in enhanced audience engagement, or if the correlation between message quality and engagement is more intricate and contextually reliant.

### **Question 3: What are the broader societal and ethical implications of the rise of AI-generated influencers for consumer psychology and digital culture?**

This concluding question contextualizes a wider socio-cultural framework. It examines the impact of synthetic representations on mental health, perceptions of reality, and public trust in online communication. Concerns including idealized self-presentation, emotional manipulation, and

audience exploitation are crucial for comprehending how AI-mediated influencers transform the moral and psychological dynamics of digital marketing (Adeane, et al., 2024)

Collectively, these questions delineate the study's twofold objective: to empirically assess the dynamics of authenticity and trust among human and AI influencers, and to elucidate the implications of these transformations for society's changing engagement with digital veracity, representation, and persuasion.

### **1.3 Objectives**

This thesis seeks to quantitatively and interpretively explore how AI-generated and human influencers construct authenticity, communicate trust, and engage audiences across social media platforms. It also explores the broader ethical and cultural issues prompted by the growing prevalence of synthetic identities in digital marketing. The project seeks to generate evidence-based insights into the interaction between influencer type, authenticity cues, trust indicators, and engagement dynamics, while also adding to overarching theoretical discourses on digital identity and mediated credibility.

#### **1.3.1 Objective I – Quantitative evaluation of authenticity and trust**

The primary purpose is to methodically assess and contrast the expressions of authenticity and trust in online communication by human and AI-generated influencers. This entails recognizing and measuring communication attributes like self-disclosure, imperfection indicators, transparency, and linguistic authenticity. The objective is to assess if the communicative tactics employed by AI-generated influencers significantly differ from those utilized by humans, and to what degree these distinctions can be discerned through systematic content analysis. The objective is to avoid presuming results and instead to experimentally ascertain if quantifiable differences exist between algorithmic and human manifestations of authenticity and trust.

#### **1.3.2 Objective II – Examination of societal and ethical implications**

The second purpose is to examine the correlation between influencer communication patterns (encompassing both human and AI-generated creators) and overarching social and ethical issues inside digital contexts. This entails analyzing aspects such as idealized self-representation, perceived manipulation, and the psychological effects of encountering artificial identities. The project seeks to investigate if these communicative patterns influence current discussions regarding digital well-being, emotional authenticity, and public trust in mediated information. This purpose seeks to enhance comprehension of the role algorithmic personas play in influencing social norms and expectations regarding authenticity by contextualizing quantitative findings within theoretical and ethical frameworks.

#### **1.3.3 Objective III – Development of a conceptual framework for digital authenticity**

The third purpose is to enhance theoretical knowledge by establishing a conceptual framework that elucidates authenticity and trust within the realm of AI-mediated communication. The research aims to investigate the redefinition of concepts such as "realness," "credibility," and "human

connection" in contexts where non-human agents can mimic social behavior. This entails synthesizing empirical findings from the investigation with established literature in communication studies, media theory, and digital ethics. The objective is to provide conceptual instruments that future scholars might employ to examine the dynamic characteristics of influencer authenticity within hybrid human–AI ecosystems, without assuming whether AI will ultimately enhance or diminish trust relationships.

## **1.4 - Thesis Structure**

This thesis has been structured to ensure a coherent and comprehensive transition from identifying the research problem to presenting empirical findings and practical implications. Chapter One introduces the study by outlining the background, defining the research problem, and explaining its relevance within the evolving context of digital marketing. It emphasizes the crisis of authenticity that arises from the coexistence of human and AI-generated influencers, exploring its implications for trust, engagement, and societal well-being. This chapter also formulates the research objectives and questions that guide the investigation while justifying the use of a quantitative methodology to examine differences in authenticity and trust across influencer types.

Chapter Two provides a detailed literature review, synthesizing theoretical and empirical studies on influencer marketing, authenticity theory, and virtual influencers. It also examines the social and psychological dimensions of influencer culture, including mental health effects, trust erosion, and digital labor. The review identifies key gaps in prior research—particularly the lack of quantitative analyses comparing human and AI-generated influencers—and establishes the theoretical foundations for the study.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology, detailing the quantitative research design, sampling logic, data collection methods, and statistical procedures. It describes the operationalization of variables related to authenticity, trust, and engagement, and discusses the analytical framework employed to test hypotheses. Considerations of data integrity, ethical aspects, and research limitations are also addressed to ensure methodological rigor.

Chapter Four presents and analyzes the empirical results obtained from the quantitative study. It compares human and AI-generated influencers in terms of authenticity indicators, trust perceptions, and engagement metrics. Statistical analyses such as correlation and regression models are used to identify relationships among the variables, while interpreting the implications of these findings within the broader theoretical and societal context.

Finally, Chapter Five concludes the thesis by summarizing the main findings and discussing their theoretical, managerial, and ethical significance. It highlights the implications of AI-mediated influencer marketing for consumer trust and authenticity perceptions, offering recommendations for brands, policymakers, and future researchers to navigate the rapidly evolving digital communication landscape.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

In the evolving landscape of digital marketing, the role of social media influencers has shifted from mere trendsetters to powerful mediators of consumer behavior, brand identity, and cultural narratives. At the heart of this shift lies the concept of authenticity, which has become both the currency and the faultline of influencer marketing. As noted by Sahli (2024) in *State of the Art: Authenticity and Influencer Marketing*, authenticity in this context is not simply about “being real,” but about being perceived as true-to-self, consistent, and relatable within the mediated environment (Sahli, 2024). Influencers who successfully signal authenticity tend to engender higher trust, engagement and purchase intention (Nistor, et al., 2025). For instance, Chiara Ferragni, one of Europe’s most recognized lifestyle influencers, built her reputation on perceived authenticity, sharing personal experiences, family moments, and entrepreneurial growth transparently across Instagram. Similarly, Iranian beauty creator Sadaf Beauty exemplifies how culturally grounded communication and honest product reviews foster both cognitive trust (expertise) and affective trust (relatability) among followers.

However, the rise of AI-generated influencers (sometimes called virtual influencers or VIs) presents a fresh challenge to the authenticity paradigm. These digital personas, crafted via Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI), AI algorithms, or virtual avatars offer brands unprecedented control and scalability, yet they raise questions about genuineness, human presence and emotional connection. Gross (2024) points out that while virtual influencers are becoming more prevalent, their very artificiality undermines conventional authenticity cues. A leading example is Lil Miquela, a virtual influencer with over three million followers on Instagram, whose hyperreal appearance and scripted personality have sparked global debate over what “authenticity” means when no real person exists behind the account. Her success in high-profile campaigns with brands like Prada and Samsung illustrates how AI-driven figures can mimic the visual cues of authenticity while lacking lived human experience.

In academic literature, research is emerging on how consumers perceive virtual versus human influencers, how authenticity manifests or fails in these contexts, and what downstream effects this has on trust, engagement and even societal outcomes. For example, Koles (2024) in *The Authentic Virtual Influencer* identify three modes of authenticity: true-to-ideal, true-to-fact, and true-to-self, and show how these play out differently when the influencer is virtual rather than human. Other work (Li, et al., 2024) demonstrates that higher human-likeness among VIs increases perceived authenticity and purchase intention.

Beyond authenticity and trust, the literature also points to broader societal concerns tied to influencer ecosystems: mental health implications (when followers compare themselves to idealized lives), exploitation of attention and emotional labor (especially when influencer content mimics emotional intimacy), and trust erosion at the system-level when audiences increasingly suspect that “real” content is manufactured or algorithm-driven (Hewapathirana, et al., 2024).

These intersecting areas: authenticity, AI-influence, societal effect, form the analytical backbone of your thesis. The literature review therefore must map out: (a) what authenticity means in influencer marketing, (b) how human vs AI influencers challenge and reshape authenticity and trust dynamics, and (c) how these shifts feed into wider social concerns such as mental well-being, exploitation, and systemic credibility. This review will uncover research gaps (notably the limited quantitative measurement of authenticity in AI vs human influencer comparisons and the scant focus on societal outcomes) and clarify where your quantitative study can contribute. These intersecting areas seen in contrasting cases such as Ferragni's human-centered authenticity and Lil Miquela's algorithmic persona form the analytical backbone of this thesis.

By building this foundation, the subsequent chapters can engage in empirical measurement, testing how influencer type impacts perceived authenticity, trust and behavioral intentions, and how societal concerns mediate or moderate this relationship.

### **2.1 Influencer Marketing: Evolution and Scope**

Influencer marketing has evolved over the last ten years from an auxiliary brand practice to a key element of digital marketing strategy. Previously limited to user-generated content shared informally on blogs or celebrity endorsements, the phenomena today encompass a complex network of micro-, nano-, and macro-influencers operating across several platforms. Early examples such as Michael Jordan's Nike partnership or Oprah Winfrey's collaborations with Weight Watchers demonstrate the foundational model of influence built on celebrity credibility and reach. This model later inspired digital-native influencers like Chiara Ferragni, who transformed her fashion blog *The Blonde Salad* into a multimillion-euro brand ecosystem, symbolizing the professionalization of online influence. Changes in consumer behavior, media platforms, technology, and engagement metrics have influenced this space's development, placing the idea of influence itself in a sociological and commercial context. Understanding how contemporary influencers have developed, what kinds are available, and how their impact is quantified can be achieved by looking at the development and reach of influencer marketing. This lays the groundwork for future research into authenticity, AI influence, trust, and the societal ramifications of the topics you are studying in this thesis.

First, the development of influencer marketing across time shows how it progressed from early celebrity endorsements and word-of-mouth to fully developed ecosystems of content creators. Influencers now create articles, stories, live streams, and interactive content in addition to serving as community leaders and brand advocates. For instance, beauty creators like Huda Kattan and Zoella redefined influencer roles by blending entrepreneurship with community engagement, turning their personal channels into global cosmetic and lifestyle brands. Their content evolution from tutorials and blogs to interactive product lines reflects how influencers have become both content producers and digital entrepreneurs. According to Singh, Tanwar, and Srivastava's (2021) systematic literature analysis, influencer marketing has grown significantly in tandem with social media's ascent and is now a key instrument for digital consumer engagement. (Tanwar, et al., 2021) "Using Influencer Marketing to Engage Digital Consumers"

Second, the nature of influence has evolved because of the transition from blogs and early social media platforms to the algorithm-driven environments of Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Platforms vary in terms of native functionality, monetization, reach, audience behavior, and content type. Different influencer types: celebrity, macro, micro, nano, and virtual have emerged because of this change, each with unique affordances and value propositions. On platforms like TikTok and YouTube, Emma Chamberlain exemplifies the “relatable macro-influencer,” attracting audiences through humor and spontaneity, while Lil Miquela, one of the first AI-generated influencers, embodies the “virtual” category algorithmically controlled, aesthetically curated, and free from human constraints. These cases highlight how platform design and influencer typology evolve symbiotically. To understand the extent of influencer marketing, one must have a solid understanding of the platform's evolution, influencer typology, and their strategic applications. In their article "Evolving concept and popularity of influencers: a literature review," (Yufada, et al., 2023) for instance, background information on how the influencer role grew in tandem with the rise of social media.

Third, evaluating the metrics of influence introduces important theoretical concepts and builds a link between strategy and measurement. The impact of an influencer is measured using metrics like follower count, engagement rate (likes, comments, shares), reach, and more ethereal factors like perceived legitimacy and parasocial ties. (Taher, et al., 2022) study on parasocial interactions in influencer marketing demonstrates how purchase intention is mediated by parasocial bonds, genuineness, and reputation. (2022)

These three factors: historical history, platform/types advancement, and influence metrics, combined to provide a thorough framework for comprehending the growth and reach of influencer marketing. This framework aids in placing influencer authenticity, human vs. AI differences, and societal effects into a larger historical and structural system for your thesis. The literature review can then concentrate on how more recent phenomena (such as authenticity crises, AI influencers, and mental health issues) either reinforce or challenge the established paradigm by elucidating these underlying assumptions. This guarantees that your study is based on a thorough comprehension of the history, present state, and measurement of influencer marketing.

### **2.1.1 Historical development of influencer marketing**

Marketing has always relied on the concept of influence: the capacity of individuals or organizations to affect the attitudes, behaviors, and decisions of others. In prehistoric societies, the endorsement of a respected individual, the standing of a craftsman, or the affirmation of a contented consumer functioned as basic "influencer marketing." The nature, scale, and mechanism of this influence have significantly evolved over time. The emergence of mass media, followed by the internet and social media, has evolved influencer marketing from traditional word-of-mouth and celebrity endorsements into the complex, digitally mediated ecology present today. Comprehending this historical trend is crucial for understanding the significance of influencer marketing, its major role in digital strategy, and the increasing value and fragility of authenticity, a central focus of this thesis.

One of the earliest forms of influencer marketing can be traced to the theory of opinion leadership, introduced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) in their landmark study *Personal Influence*. They contended that specific individuals (opinion leaders) within social networks had disproportionate influence over others, particularly regarding the dissemination of innovations. This approach, although not labeled as "influencer marketing" at the time, anticipates the contemporary function of social media influencers. According to marketing scholars Vidani and Das (2021), the origins of influencer marketing are grounded in word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) practices: "social media influencer marketing is a term that refers to leveraging the ability of key individuals to endorse a brand and disseminate information to their followers" (Vidani, et al., 2021)

The advent of mass media: newspapers, radio, and television, established celebrity endorsements as a predominant source of influence. Brands acknowledged that the status, credibility, and exposure of celebrities could be conferred upon products, aligning an athlete or film star with a brand imparted prestige and extended reach. During the mid-20th century, this endorsement model became extensively standardized. As conventional advertising evolved, marketers pursued increasingly effective methods to engage customers, with endorsements becoming one of the most reliable avenues.

The transition to digital commenced in earnest with the advent of the internet and social media platforms. An EBSCO background article on influencer marketing identifies two principal events that catalyzed the transition: the global economic recession of the early 2000s, which compelled marketers to pursue more economical strategies, and the swift proliferation of broadband access, which reduced distribution expenses and facilitated more interactive online methodologies. (Boone, 2024). The proliferation of user-generated content (UGC), blogs, forums, and online review platforms has further diminished the supremacy of traditional media. Consumers have progressively placed greater trust in peers, user communities, and niche (refers to the specific thematic or professional area an influencer focuses on, the domain that defines their *expertise, content style, and target audience*), micro-communities rather than in phenomenondcast messaging, hence creating a conducive environment for influencer marketing.

Although the term "influencer marketing" is relatively new, the phenomena has developed swiftly. A pivotal moment occurred between 2016 and 2018, when platforms like Instagram and subsequently TikTok rendered influencer-driven material ubiquitous, visual, and readily accessible. This era produced global icons such as Chiara Ferragni, Huda Kattan, and PewDiePie, whose follower-driven economies reshaped brand-consumer relations. Their work exemplifies how authenticity, humor, and relatability supplanted mere celebrity glamour as the key sources of influence. The systematic analysis by Joshi, Lim, Jagani, and Kumar (2025) revealed that scholarly interest in social media influencer marketing began to thrive post-2018, aligning with the introduction of platform features such as Instagram Stories and TikTok's global debut. (Joshi, et al., 2025)

Coll & Micó-Sanz (2019) assert in their article on Influencer Marketing within the Growth Hacking strategy of digital brands that brands utilize influencers not merely for reach or visibility, but for cohesive content strategies: “influencer marketing actions are developed synergistically with other advertising and public relations initiatives, both online and offline.” (Coll, et al., 2019). This signifies a transition from endorsement to narrative-driven, community-oriented communication. The influencer role has transitioned from unilateral celebrity advertisements to bilateral interaction with followers and communities.

An additional significant aspect in history is the categorization of influencer kinds. Initial influencers were predominantly "macro" or celebrity influencers possessing substantial follower bases. As industry microevolved, brands and scholars acknowledged the significance of micro-influencers and nano-influencers individuals possessing smaller yet more cohesive groups and elevated engagement rates. (Chen, et al., 2024) analysis on micro-influencer marketing indicates a significant tendency towards prioritizing interaction and specialty credibility over sheer size. (Chen, et al., 2024)

Consequently, historical growth is not merely chronological but also structural; the influencer ecosystem has diversified in shape, function, and scale.

The commercialization of influencer marketing grew alongside advancements in measurement methodologies. Digital platforms facilitated the effortless monitoring of followers, likes, comments, engagement rates, click-throughs, and conversions. Traditionally, marketers depend on broadcast measures such as reach and impressions; however, the advent of social media provided them with detailed data regarding influencer performance, resulting in more accountable budgeting and analytics. In their book chapter, "The Evolution of Influencer Marketing," Ahmed and Rathore (2024) delineate the progression from traditional celebrity endorsements to influencer marketing as a distinct profession, culminating in the emergence of data-driven influencer ecosystems. (Ahmed, et al., 2024).

Influencer marketing has recently transitioned into creative economy and algorithmic recommendation systems. Influencer marketing has evolved beyond mere endorsement to encompass community development, co-creation, authenticity, narrative construction, and alignment between brands and influencers. Yufada and Simanjuntak (2023) assert in their literature review, "Evolving Concept and Popularity of Influencers," that the influencer concept transitioned from a traditional to a modern setting, with 2016 signifying a pivotal point of growth. In this historical context, the notion of authenticity becomes very prominent. While early celebrity endorsements focused on image and extensive reach, contemporary influencers depend on perceived authenticity: accessible content, behind-the-scenes insights, interactive storylines, and personal experiences. Research over time demonstrates that authenticity affects trust, engagement, purchase intention, and long-term partnerships (Sahli, 2022). While the primary emphasis of this paragraph is historical evolution, it is crucial to acknowledge that as influencer marketing progressed, the significance attributed to authenticity intensified, hence establishing the subsequent phase of your thesis.

The historical evolution of influencer marketing progresses through: (1) word-of-mouth and opinion leadership; (2) celebrity endorsements and mass-broadcast influence; (3) digital transition with blogs and social media; (4) platform-centric influencer marketing encompassing macro and micro categories; and (5) the creator economy, algorithmic influencers, diversification, and data-driven influencer ecosystems. This evolution establishes the foundation for comprehending the subsequent sections of this literature review: platform/types evolution and metrics of influence, and it supports the thesis theme of authenticity and the comparison between human and AI influencers.

### **2.1.2 From blog to TikTok: platforms and influencer types**

The topic of influencer marketing is significantly influenced by the platforms utilized by users and the many categories of users themselves. As social media platforms have progressed from blogs and early forums to Instagram, YouTube, and the rapid proliferation of TikTok, the nature of influence, content formats, audience expectations, and measurement metrics have transformed markedly. Simultaneously, influencer typologies have evolved, encompassing celebrity endorsers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, nano-influencers, and increasingly specific and specialized innovators. This section examines the interplay between platform evolution and influencer typology, establishing a foundation for a more in-depth investigation of authenticity, human versus AI influencers, and consumer perceptions.

#### ***2.2.2.1 Platforms: Transition from Blogging to Short-Form Video***

In the initial phase of influencer marketing, the blogosphere served as a primary domain for digital influence. Bloggers created extensive written content—reviews, lessons, lifestyle articles—that cultivated audience trust over time through consistent stories, authenticity, and distinct voice. Typology research indicates that blog influencers continue to hold significant importance in SEO, specialized niches, and content durability. Research in the *International Journal of Management and Administration* classifies blog and vlogging influencers into categories of mega, macro, micro, and nano, emphasizing that blogging continues to serve as a foundational medium despite the emergence of new formats. (Hafize , 2024)

The growth of social networks like Instagram and TikTok has equipped influencers with novel tools for visual storytelling, including photographs, videos, live broadcasts, Stories, and interactive forms. A comparison analysis indicates that Instagram's visual framework prioritizes lifestyle documentation, refined aesthetics, and consistent creator-follower dynamics, while TikTok is predominantly influenced by algorithmic discovery, rapid trend-oriented content, and user engagement (Wroblewski, 2024). Empirical research indicates that campaign performance and brand-influencer compatibility differ markedly across platforms: for instance, TikTok influencers with fewer than 50,000 followers attained an average engagement rate of 30.1%, whereas comparable Instagram influencers achieved only 1.8%. This disparity highlights the influence of platform affordances on influencer strategy, content format, and audience expectations (Konstantinovic , 2024)

Due to variations in interaction mechanics, audience motivations, and monetization structures between platforms, influencer strategies must correspond with platform characteristics. For example, storytelling on Instagram may prioritize authenticity, visual consistency, and extended narratives, whereas TikTok's short-form videos focus on novelty, rapidity, and trend participation. This transition affects influencer conduct and content structure, as well as the metrics of effectiveness and audience engagement (Fig1).

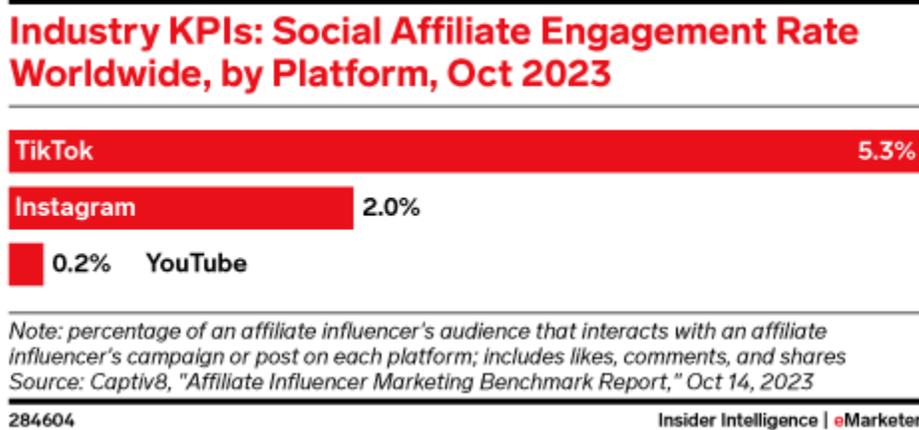


Figure 1 - Industry KPIs

### 2.2.2.2 Influencer Types: From Celebrity to Nano

Alongside platform evolution, researchers and practitioners have established typologies of influencers categorized by follower count, engagement rate, niche, content style, and investment. (Hafize , 2024) presents a typology categorizing influencers into Mega, Macro, Micro, Nano, Blog, Vlogging, and Gaming, each characterized by unique audience size, engagement patterns, content focus, and brand compatibility. For instance, Cristiano Ronaldo and Kim Kardashian exemplify mega-influencers: global figures whose endorsements instantly reach millions but often evoke questions of authenticity. In contrast, Chiara Ferragni and Huda Kattan illustrate the macro-influencer category, creators who blend personal branding with entrepreneurial ventures, offering both aspirational appeal and relatability. Emma Chamberlain and Sadaf Beauty, by comparison, represent micro-influencers whose perceived everyday authenticity and niche expertise create a deeper emotional bond with followers.

**Mega-influencers**, typically celebrities, possess millions of followers and extensive reach. Their strength is in elevated visibility; but their engagement rates are generally diminished, and sustaining authenticity proves more challenging.

**Macro-influencers** have substantial followings, typically in the hundreds of thousands, providing a balance of reach and relatability.

**Micro-influencers** (10K–100K followers) typically achieve elevated engagement rates and possess niche credibility; their audiences experience a sense of personal connection. (Chen, et al.,

2024) assert in their extensive research of micro-influencer marketing that micro-influencers offer greater authenticity, and their significance is progressively recognized.

**Nano-influencers** (1K–10K followers) are highly specialized, localized individuals, typically perceived as more relatable than celebrities, and tend to possess robust trust relationships despite their limited reach. Nano-influencers are often localized creators such as regional food bloggers, travel storytellers, or small-scale reviewers, for example, city-based TikTok pages like @TurinEats or @LondonThriftFinds, which build strong community trust through frequent interaction and perceived authenticity rather than scale

Typology also encompasses **content-type influencers**: blogging influencers, vloggers, gaming influencers, etc. The GRIN guide categorizes bloggers, video creators (YouTube/TikTok), podcasters, and others. (Waite, 2024). For instance, PewDiePie and Ninja (Tyler Blevins) have dominated the gaming influencer space, while vloggers such as Emma Chamberlain and Zoella exemplify lifestyle and commentary genres that rely on personality-driven content. Emerging AI-based influencers like Lil Miquela and Aitana Lopez represent an additional typology, occupying a hybrid category between media character and digital brand assets.

The selection of influencer type is determined not solely by follower count, but also by platform compatibility, audience demographics, engagement approach, and specialty congruence. A micro-influencer on TikTok may prove more effective for a trend-driven campaign than a mega-influencer on Instagram for the same brand objective.

### *2.2.2.3 Interplay between Platform and Influencer Type*

Comprehending the interaction between platform and influencer type is crucial. A nano-influencer on TikTok may provide genuine, unrefined content that appeals to Gen Z more effectively than a curated celebrity post on Instagram. For example, short-form creators like Khaby Lame on TikTok use humor and minimal speech to achieve massive global resonance, demonstrating how authenticity and simplicity can outperform celebrity polish on discovery-based platforms. Conversely, Chiara Ferragni's highly curated Instagram storytelling shows how visual consistency and brand partnerships thrive in aspirational, image-driven environments. The method of influence: relatability, authenticity, and engagement, varies according to the platform setting. Research indicates that audience motivation varies by platform: TikTok users typically pursue enjoyment, discovery, and trend participation, whereas Instagram users tend to prioritize social contact, identity expression, and adherence to curated lifestyles.

Simultaneously, businesses are becoming more discerning: they match influencer categories with campaign objectives (reach versus authenticity), platform functionalities (stories versus videos versus challenges), and audience demographics. The meta-analysis conducted by (Barari, et al., 2025) in the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science indicates that the efficacy of influencers is influenced by the platform, follower demographics, and type of influencer. The contemporary influencer network is significantly more complex than first celebrity endorsements. Contemporary marketers include influencers into a cohesive content strategy across

several channels, selecting the appropriate influencer type for the suitable platform to achieve the desired outcome (Coll, et al., 2019).

This typology and platform context are of considerable importance for your argument. By discerning the operational differences between human and AI influencers across platforms (Instagram versus TikTok) and examining the impact of influencer categorization (micro, macro, or nano) on perceived authenticity and trust, you may appropriately structure your quantitative assessment. It delineates the variable selections: for instance, platform as a moderator and influencer type as an independent variable, among others.

### **2.1.3 Metrics of influence: followers, engagement, parasocial relationships**

Academic and industry researchers agree that measuring an influencer's impact requires moving beyond raw follower counts to a multidimensional set of metrics that capture visibility, interaction quality, and psychological bonds with audiences. Marketers and academics now view followers as only one input among many, including engagement rate, reach, share of voice, emotion, conversion, and the strength of parasocial connections (PSRs). In the past, the number of followers served as an intuitive stand-in for reach. This change reflects two realities: (1) user behavior and social platform algorithms prioritize impressions and interactions over nominal audience size, and (2) influencers' persuasive power frequently hinges on perceived personal connection and authenticity, which are concepts that cannot be solely attributed to follower counts. Modern thinking regarding the psychological aspect of influence is based on Horton and Wohl's seminal work on parasocial interaction (1956), which holds that audiences develop one-sided relationships with media figures that can motivate trust and behavioral intent. (Horton, et al., 1956)

**followers as a starting point:** Follower count remains a useful metric of raw visibility and potential reach, although its limits are well established. Low engagement or inauthentic audiences (such as bought followers or bots) may be concealed by large follower counts. According to De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017), followers count influence brand sentiments but also interact with perceived authenticity and product-brand fit; as a result, followers count by themselves provide an incomplete picture. Platforms and advertisers are favoring engagement-adjusted metrics overreach only ones. (De Veirman, et al., 2017)

**Engagement is the main KPI:** The most popular KPI nowadays is engagement rate, which is usually computed as  $(\text{likes} + \text{comments} + \text{shares}) \div \text{followers per post}$ . According to industry polls, most marketers rank engagement rate as one of the most important campaign success criteria (Linqia, 2023) Particularly for micro and nano influencers, who frequently report higher engagement rates while having smaller audiences, strong engagement is seen as proof of resonance and the depth of their relationships. The inverse relationship between follower count and engagement rate is also shown by academic research and business benchmarks: average engagement rates tend to decline as follower counts rise, suggesting that smaller influencers may create more vibrant, engaged groups.

**Quality of engagement and subsequent results:** Researchers differentiate between deeper interactions (likes, saves, DMs, and UGC creation) and superficial interactions (likes), which are more predictive of conversion or buy intention than sheer engagement. The relationship between engagement and commercial outcomes is mediated by message value, authenticity signals, and source credibility, as highlighted by Lou & Yuan and later evaluations. Thus, conversion indicators (click-through rate, attributable sales) are vital complements to engagement figures when analyzing marketing ROI. (Lou, et al., 2022)

**The psychological measure of parasocial connections (PSRs):** PSRs explain why followers believe and follow recommendations from influencers regardless of the absence of reciprocal contact; they also explain the one-sided sense of closeness and relationship users have with media stars. According to Horton & Wohl's seminal formulation, contemporary influencers use stories, livestreams, and interactive Q&As to create the appearance of a relationship by using perceived conversational cues (direct address, confessional content, and behind-the-scenes storylines). Stronger PSRs have been linked in studies to increased purchase intention, brand attitude, and persuasion, particularly when influencers exhibit signs of genuineness. PSR measures, which are Likert questions that measure emotional intimacy, familiarity, and perceived proximity, can be used to model the mediation effects between influencer type and behavioral outcomes in quantitative research. (Horton, et al., 1956)

**Modeling and complementarities in metrics:** Incorporate conversion metrics, PSR scores, follower count, and engagement rate (and quality) into structural models for a strong quantitative design. Consider the following: engagement rate is an observed behavior variable; purchase intention/brand attitude is a dependent outcome; perceived authenticity and PSR are mediators; and influencer type (human vs. AI) is an independent variable. By using statistical methods like regression, mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny or bootstrapped indirect effects), and SEM, you may separate the variance attributed to each metric and examine both direct and indirect paths. According to recent research and industry benchmarking, the most diagnostic models for influence are produced when platform metrics and psychometric measures are combined. (De Veirman, et al., 2017)

**Implications for practice:** Marketers could use macro/celebrity influencers for reach and micro/nano influencers for authenticity-driven marketing. For academics, it implies operationalizing PSR and authenticity alongside regular measures. You may measure who reaches audiences and who persuades them and why for your thesis by comparing the followers, engagement (rate + quality), and PSR (validated measures) of matching human and AI influencer postings.

## 2.2 Authenticity in Influencer Marketing

Considering it is a major factor in determining customer trust, engagement, and buy intention, the idea of authenticity has emerged as the cornerstone of influencer marketing. Audiences seek out influencers who seem real, open, and relevant in digital spaces overflowing with carefully chosen

content. However, the definition of authenticity is growing more complicated in a time when actual human producers coexist with brand-managed and artificial intelligence (AI)-generated personas.

Sociological and consumer behavior theories that emphasize sincerity and self-congruence are the origins of authenticity in marketing. Since consumers seek out real experiences as a counterbalance to perceived commercial manipulation, authenticity serves as a moral and emotional anchor in contemporary consumption, claim Beverland and Farrelly (2010), (*Journal of Consumer Research*). Authenticity in influencer culture refers to an influencer's capacity to honestly disclose sponsorships, convey personal values, and keep a consistent character that meets audience expectations.

In *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media*, Emily Hund (2023) explains how influencers create "micro-brands of realness" by disclosing intimate details, flaws, and vulnerabilities an aesthetic of authenticity that ironically entails deliberate self-presentation. Influencers create what Marwick (2015) refers to as "calibrated authenticity," where "realness" is carefully controlled rather than unplanned, by purposefully staging "candid" moments or emotional confessions to seem trustworthy (Marwick, *Social Media + Society*).

The contemporary scholarly discussion is defined by this conflict between authenticity as sincerity and authenticity as performance. One perspective views authenticity as an audience perception, where followers evaluate the influencer's moral alignment and credibility (Audrezet, et al., 2020) However, authenticity can also be used as an identity management tactic, with influencers purposefully creating stories of openness to uphold confidence in business alliances. This dichotomy emphasizes how authenticity is a socially negotiated phenomenon on digital platforms rather than something that is set or innate.

Authenticity is frequently operationalized in quantitative research using metrics including perceived sincerity, transparency, relatability, and consistency. According to Lou and Yuan (2019), the impact of influencer credibility on purchase intention is mediated by perceived authenticity, which is a strong predictor of trust and engagement intentions (*Computers in Human Behavior*). Similarly, authenticity cues including emotional disclosure, self-brand congruence, and unscripted storytelling have a favorable impact on follower loyalty and brand views. According to these results, authenticity may be measured using quantitative frameworks such as surveys and regression models since it functions as a psychological mediator between influencer traits and customer reactions.

“However, the rise of AI-generated influencers (or virtual influencers, VIs) introduces new challenges. A recent study by Kim & Wang (2023) shows that although virtual influencers can achieve high visual realism and sophistication, consumers still experience doubts about their emotional sincerity and moral agency. For example, the article reports that higher human-likeness in VIs does not automatically translate into greater trust or authenticity, because users question whether the persona has lived experience, genuine emotion or autonomy. Their findings suggest that brands employing VIs need to account for these psychological perceptions alongside aesthetic

design.”

The crisis of authenticity now extends beyond marketing to affect social trust and mental well-being. As audiences increasingly engage with idealized digital personas: both human and AI, they struggle to discern genuine emotion from constructed performance. Tirocchi (2024) notes that Generation Z experiences “visibility fatigue” and growing skepticism toward influencer culture, perceiving it as performative rather than authentic. This erosion of perceived authenticity can reduce emotional engagement and weaken trust in digital narratives.

Authenticity assumes additional cultural dimensions in places such as Iran. Followers value authenticity as moral integrity and cultural resonance. They expect influencers to strike a balance between representing a modern lifestyle and local cultural norms. Sincerity and modest self-expression are valued by Iranian viewers; therefore, authenticity is filtered through sociocultural norms rather than merely individual openness.

From a wider social perspective, authenticity affects mental health outcomes in addition to consumer trust. Unrealistic self-comparisons brought on by exposure to artificial or highly manicured influencer personas might cause anxiety or low self-esteem (Adeane, et al., 2024). This psychological aspect demonstrates why authenticity is a societal requirement for preserving robust digital ecosystems rather than just branding tactics.

In the end, authenticity in influencer marketing serves as a psychological necessity for viewers as well as a strategic advantage for brands. Multi-layered approaches are needed to quantify it, including the integration of engagement metrics, content analysis, and psychometric measures of transparency and perceived sincerity. The study of authenticity becomes crucial to comprehending how digital influence functions, how trust is built, and how society negotiates the increasingly hazy lines separating simulation and reality as AI and human influencers coexist.

### **2.2.1 Defining authenticity: true-to-self, true-to-fact, true-to-ideal**

A disputed but crucial concept in marketing and media studies, authenticity is best understood as a family of referents that characterize the various ways in which an entity (person, company, or content) may be assessed as "real" or "genuine," rather than as a single attribute. Consumers actively seek authenticity indicators that align with their identity aspirations (such as connection, control, and virtue), according to foundational work on authenticity in consumption. Authenticity serves as both a personal judgment and a cultural ideal. The theoretical foundation for more detailed operationalizations utilized in influencer research is provided by this viewpoint (Beverland, et al., 2010).

Three analytic categories have been identified by contemporary literature on authenticity in mediated settings: true-to-self (TTS), true-to-fact (TTF), and true-to-ideal (TTI). Each of these types reflects a unique referent and evaluative logic. In the context of influencers and virtual influencers, these three referents have lately been used to explain why certain personas are persuasive while others are not. These differences are formalized in Koles et al.'s (2024) study of virtual influencers, which also demonstrates how industry experts and consumers use several authenticity referents to assess synthetic and human personalities.

Perceived consistency between an actor's public persona and a consistent, stable identity that observers interpret as genuine is known as true-to-self (TTS). TTS is an interpersonal assessment in which viewers inquire as to whether the influencer "is being themselves" and whether their behavior, private revelations, and stated values are consistent over time and in different circumstances. TTS is indicated in influencer marketing by vulnerability, inconsistency avoidance, longitudinal storytelling, and glimpses into the private life that support public assertions. Because TTS encourages a sense of relational continuity rather than opportunistic switching between brands or narratives, research indicates that it strongly predicts follower loyalty and parasocial intimacy. (Balaban, et al., 2022)

The accuracy and verifiability of assertions are referred to as true-to-fact (TTF): do the influencer's statements align with observable facts, such as their qualifications, experience, abilities, or verifiable recommendations? TTF is particularly crucial in fields like health, finance, and technical reviews where knowledge or factual correctness are crucial. TTF is a clear antecedent of trust and purchase intention, according to studies on influencer credibility and brand authenticity. Persuasiveness rises and audience skepticism decreases when an endorser can be verified or exhibit verifiable knowledge. TTF can be operationalized in practice by third-party verification signals and objective markers such as credentials, measurable results, and transparent sourcing. (Xu, et al., 2022)

The aspirational or archetypal aspect of authenticity is captured by true-to-ideal (TTI), where followers view an influencer as authentic if they exemplify an ideal (such as "healthy living," "ethical fashion," or "sophisticated minimalism") that they find appealing. Although TTI does not necessitate a precise factual match with lived experience, it does require a convincing alignment with cultural standards and aesthetics, making it both normative and symbolic. TTI encourages aspirational followership in a variety of lifestyle and luxury categories. Even if a persona's daily activities are somewhat manufactured, audiences may nevertheless connect with it since it embodies a desirable identity. In image-driven platforms, where visual coherence and symbolic resonance are more important than proven expertise, TTI frequently serves as the foundation for impact. (Koles, et al., 2024)

Rather than being mutually exclusive, these three referents are complementary. Cross-effects are demonstrated by empirical research: TTF can bolster TTS (verifiable facts lend credibility to a persona's "self"), and TTI can intensify TTS when the influencer's aspirational image is reflected in a consistent self-presentation. On the other hand, a persona that scores highly on TTI (perfect aesthetics) but poorly on TTS (apparent insincerity) will engender skepticism; similarly, a virtual influencer that projects TTI without TTF or believable TTS may come across as manipulative or hollow. Authenticity failures are caused by referent mismatches. According to (Koles, et al., 2024) virtual influencers frequently draw attention from all three referents, which accounts for the range of consumer responses to high-quality but fake personalities. (Koles, et al., 2024)

These distinctions map onto measurable constructs, which makes them helpful for measurement and empirical modeling. Psychometric measures measuring perceived sincerity, congruence, and emotional honesty may be used to measure TTS; items measuring perceived expertise, factual

accuracy, and verifiability can be used to measure TTF; and items measuring aspirational fit, image coherence, and aesthetic resonance can be used to measure TTI. Researchers can test mediation models by combining these scales with behavioral data (engagement rate, conversion). For instance, they can determine whether TTF moderates this pathway in expert product categories or whether influencer type (human vs. AI) indirectly influences buy intention via TTS and PSR. To make sure the three dimensions are empirically distinct, previous quantitative research advise confirmatory factor analysis and multi-indicator assessment. (Balaban, et al., 2022)

In conclusion, understanding authenticity as a tripartite construct: true-to-self, true-to-fact, and true-to-ideal, helps explain why certain influencers are successful in various capacities and on various platforms. Using these three dimensions to operationalize authenticity will enable you to test (a) whether influencers created by AI consistently score lower on one or more authenticity types and (b) which authenticity deficits most strongly predict deterioration of trust, decreased engagement, or negative societal effects.

**2.2.2 Antecedents of influencer authenticity: uniqueness, consistency, longevity**

According to recent studies, influencer authenticity is viewed as an assessment that results from a variety of antecedent cues. Empirical research has consistently shown that among these signs, distinctiveness, consistency, and longevity are powerful indicators of whether followers view an influencer as "real" or "credible." Every antecedent function according to a different psychological logic: length indicates tenacity and demonstrated dedication, consistency indicates coherence and dependability, and uniqueness indicates originality and identity. To quantitatively analyze how authenticity affects trust, engagement, and downstream behaviors, it is imperative to comprehend these antecedents.

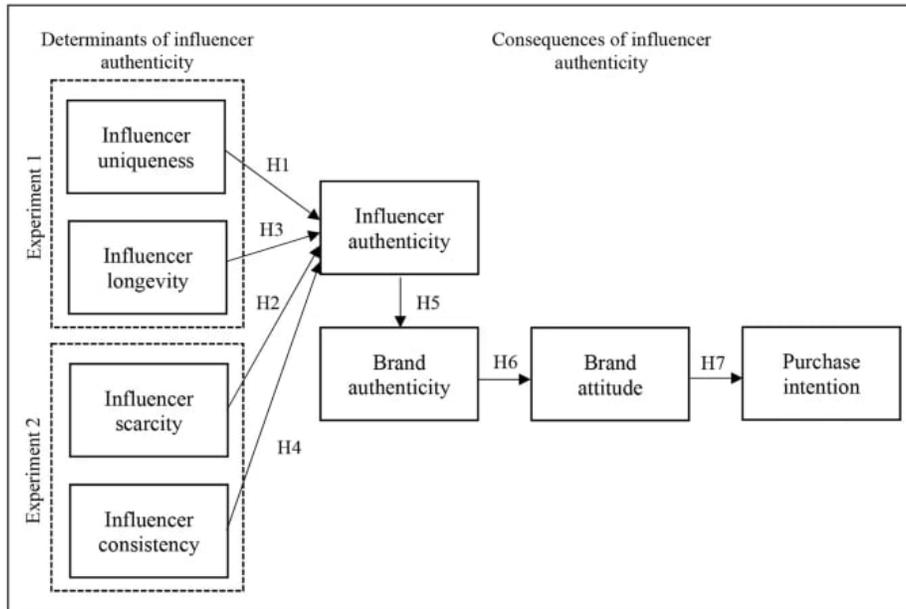


Figure 2 - Consequences of influencer authenticity

**distinctiveness.** The degree to which an influencer distinguishes themselves from their peers through original content, a unique voice, specialized knowledge, or a recognizable style is referred to as uniqueness. Perceived distinctiveness raises authenticity evaluations by decreasing views of scripted, generic, or readily interchangeable messaging, according to recent experimental and survey studies. Across experimental settings, Zniva and colleagues demonstrate that customers are more likely to see an influencer as authentic when they exhibit distinctive characteristics, such as a distinctive style, an identifiable niche, or unusual ideas, as opposed to influencers who seem interchangeable. In order for followers to infer intrinsic motivation (passion) rather than solely instrumental incentives (sponsorship), uniqueness operates by signaling that the influencer is acting from an individualized identity rather than functioning as a generic commercial channel. (Zniva, et al., 2023).

**Regularity.** The stability and coherence of an influencer's identity across platforms, time, and brand alliances are encapsulated by consistency. Customers anticipate consistency in tone, subject, visual style, and ethical position; sudden changes, particularly frequent or inexplicable ones, undermine perceived authenticity. Followers evaluate whether an influencer's stated ideals and behaviors align (passionate vs. transparent authenticity techniques), according to Audrezet et al.'s well-known framework on authenticity management. Since 2023, empirical research has confirmed that consistency mitigates the impact of commercialization. Influencers who accept paid partnerships and maintain consistent narrative frames and transparent disclosures continue to receive higher authenticity ratings than those who arbitrarily switch between inconsistent endorsements. To put it briefly, followers who desire relational continuity find that consistency serves as a credibility signal that lessens cognitive dissonance.

**Lifespan (and dedication).** The term "longevity" describes how long an influencer has been around and how persistent their content endeavor has proven to be. Reputational capital is communicated by longevity: enduring platform churn, consistently producing content, and accruing cumulative follower interactions all imply investment and durability, which many users take as an indication of genuine dedication. Because they lessen the appearance of opportunistic "campaign hopping," qualities like duration and scarcity (rare, trademark content) are associated with stronger views of authenticity, according to recent field and qualitative research, such as Ullnalmış's investigation of beauty influencers. Additionally, longevity interacts with other antecedents. For instance, long-standing micro-influencers often combine consistency and uniqueness to create signals of legitimacy that are very potent. (Ünalmış, et al., 2024)

**Interaction effects are the ways in which the antecedents work together.** According to empirical research, endurance, consistency, and distinctiveness don't work alone. Rather, they frequently work together: longevity without either may indicate perseverance but little relational depth; consistency without uniqueness may produce a routine but forgettable presence; and uniqueness without consistency may suggest a provocative but unreliable persona. According to Zniva's tests, influencers who score highly on both distinctiveness and consistent behavior over time elicit the strongest authenticity impressions; this interactional impact is crucial for quantitative models from an analytical standpoint. Instead of treating originality, consistency, and

longevity as independent, additive components, a structural model that approaches them as correlated predictors (with interaction terms) will better capture variance in perceived authenticity. (Zniva, et al., 2023)

**Consequences for human versus AI influences.** These antecedents are particularly helpful when contrasting influencers created by AI and humans. Without investing in long-term story arcs, virtual influencers may find it difficult to convey longevity and to evoke the felt sense of lived experience that underpins TTS authenticity. On the other hand, they can be designed to exhibit uniqueness (distinct identity) and apparent consistency (controlled posting schedules and coherent aesthetics) from day one. According to Koles et al. (2024), audiences evaluate VIs using the three referents—true-to-self, true-to-fact, and true-to-ideal—in different ways and frequently require more proof of consistency and durability before accepting a synthetic character as genuine. Therefore, in addition to measuring the absolute levels of originality, consistency, and longevity, your quantitative design should also assess if these antecedents interact differently depending on the type of influencer (human vs. AI). (Koles, et al., 2024)

**Guidelines for measurements in a quantitative investigation.** Each antecedent should have a multi-item Likert scale (three to five items each) for operationalization to produce trustworthy composite indices. Example items include consistency ("This influencer's posts are consistent in tone and values over time"), uniqueness ("This influencer posts content that is distinctive from other creators"), and longevity ("This influencer has been consistently active and committed over a long period of time"). Test interaction effects (such as uniqueness  $\times$  consistency) in regression or SEM frameworks and validate scales using Cronbach's alpha and CFA. To determine if these antecedents have a direct or indirect impact on outcomes (trust, purchase intention) through perceived authenticity and parasocial proximity, recent methodological studies advise using bootstrapped mediation analyses. (Liao, et al., 2024)

Useful tips. The findings suggest that practitioners should prioritize uniqueness and narrative coherence above reach: marketers looking for genuine engagement should choose influencers who have sustained storytelling and defined niches, not just a large number of followers. In the AI era, researchers could precisely measure authenticity and its aftereffects by modeling these antecedents at the same time (and testing for moderation by influencer type and platform).

### **2.2.3 Authenticity and trust: pathways to consumer engagement**

Influencers use authenticity and trust as key, interdependent strategies to transform attention into engagement and behavioral reactions. According to modern models, authenticity is a psychological cue that influences perceived credibility, parasocial proximity, and eventually persuasion (source credibility, trust, engagement, buy intention), rather than just being a desired quality. This chain is further refined by recent empirical work that demonstrates (a) that authenticity functions through several sub-dimensions (sincerity, transparency, and congruence) and (b) that trust is a mediator between authenticity and downstream engagement metrics like likes, comments, saves, and purchase intention, as well as an immediate result of perceived authenticity. The most effective ways to assess these interactions are through mediation and structural models that integrate

behavioral measures (engagement rate, click-throughs, conversions) with psychometrics (perceived authenticity, trust, and parasocial relationship). (Liu, et al., 2024)

There are two psychological pathways by which perceived authenticity mechanistically boosts trust. First, normative congruence: followers deduce motive alignment and decreased opportunism when an influencer's professed values, actions, and endorsements are consistent (TTS); trust rises as a result of the influencer seeming to act out of internalized values rather than fleeting commercial incentives. The second is epistemic reliability: followers express better trust and willingness to act when claims are verifiable (TTF) or when an influencer exhibits domain expertise. Both approaches are supported by recent experimental and field research: campaigns that maintained narrative coherence and offered clear proof of competence generated greater confidence and conversion than those that came across as opportunistic or factually thin. (Ünalmiş, et al., 2024)

Trust and parasocial relationships (PSRs) are two different psychological pathways to involvement. Authenticity indicators including frequent personal disclosures, conversational addressing, and interactive forms (live broadcasts, Q&A) reinforce PSRs, which are one-sided sensations of intimacy and familiarity with media celebrities. PSR modulates the authenticity → engagement relationship, according to empirical research published since 2021. Authenticity increases emotional engagement and the chance of following influencer recommendations by fostering a sense of intimacy. PSR explains why micro-, and nano-influencers can outperform larger influencers on engagement-per-follower measures. These influencers frequently communicate high authenticity through direct interaction. (Conde, et al., 2023)

The fact that not all authenticity boosts result in the same behavioral effects is a significant detail that has emerged in post-2021 studies. Academics distinguish between "instrumental authenticity" (proven knowledge, transparent business disclosure) and "affective authenticity" (vulnerability, emotional honesty). In product categories that need credibility (health, financial), instrumental authenticity tends to increase conversion and foster cognitive trust, whereas affective authenticity tends to boost PSR and emotional involvement. Practically speaking, this means that advertising goals should dictate which authenticity cues are prioritized: instrumental cues for short-term conversion and high-credence categories, and emotive cues for community-building and long-term brand affinity. Multi-method studies that demonstrate distinct mediation pathways for purchase intention support this bifurcation. (Liu, et al., 2024)

These paths are moderated by influencer type and platform. The strength of authenticity, trust, engagement routes differ by platform affordances (e.g., Instagram vs. TikTok) and influencer tier (nano/micro vs. macro/celebrity), according to recent comparative research. For instance, TikTok's discovery-oriented feed encourages short-term virality and depends more on novelty/TTI cues, but Instagram's narrative affordances encourage prolonged self-disclosure that increases PSR and, thus, emotional involvement. Similar to this, famous endorsements may increase reach but decrease trust per impression, whereas lesser influencers frequently translate authenticity into stronger per-follower engagement due to perceived intimacy and decreased commercialization. To

determine whether path coefficients vary by platform or influencer tier, moderation can be quantitatively assessed using interaction terms or multi-group SEM. (Liu, et al., 2024).

To test these pathways quantitatively, researchers should use a minimum of three different types of measures: (1) psychometric measures for perceived authenticity (multi-item TTS/TTF/TTI), trust (reliability, trustworthiness), and PSR (closeness, conversational illusion); (2) behavioral engagement metrics gathered from platform APIs (likes, comments, saves, and CTR); and (3) outcome measures like stated purchase intention or actual conversion data, if available. When postings are nested within influencers, analytical techniques include multi-level models, moderated mediation models (PROCESS or SEM), and mediation analysis (bootstrapped indirect effects). To separate the distinct influence of perceived authenticity, recent applied work suggests adjusting for confounding factors including follower demographics, product involvement, and past brand familiarity. (Ünalmiş, et al., 2024)

Finally, the literature highlights ethical boundary conditions: excessive commercialization and unreported sponsorships quickly undermine authenticity and undermine trust; on the other hand, open disclosure, when combined with consistent narrative framing, can maintain authenticity. To fully capture influencer effectiveness in modern digital ecosystems, this suggests a useful prescription for brands and regulators: prioritize authenticity cues that align with campaign goals, incentivize transparent partnerships and long-term collaborations, and measure both psychological (trust, PSR) and behavioral outcomes. (Ünalmiş, et al., 2024).

### **2.2.4 Authenticity management strategies: disclosure, narrative, alignment**

As influencer marketing evolved, both practitioners and scholars increasingly acknowledged that authenticity is not merely a perceived characteristic but also a cultivated result: influencers and companies strategically implement tactics to convey sincerity, expertise, and alignment. Three interconnected tactics prevail in both practitioner manuals and scholarly evaluations: (1) explicit disclosure of commercial affiliations, (2) intentional narrative formulation (storytelling and vulnerability), and (3) strategic alignment (brand-influencer compatibility). Each technique functions via unique psychological mechanisms, diminishing perceived commercial intent, fostering relational closeness, and indicating alignment—and empirical research conducted since 2020 offers convergent evidence about their efficacy, constraints, and contextual boundaries.

**Disclosure:** Disclosure denotes explicit indicators that a post or relationship is commercial (e.g., ad, "sponsored by," platform disclosure mechanisms). Regulatory scrutiny and platform regulations have established disclosure as a normative practice; academically, research has investigated whether disclosure diminishes persuasion while maintaining trust. Initial research by Boerman and associates demonstrated that disclosure enhances advertisement recognition but may diminish persuasive efficacy in certain contexts; subsequent experimental and field studies refine this conclusion by revealing conditional effects: disclosure elevates ad recognition and can enhance perceived influencer credibility, especially among more media-savvy or engaged audiences, while potentially decreasing immediate persuasive intent if it prominently underscores commercial motivations (Boerman et al., 2020). Furthermore, the downstream impact of disclosure

on trust is contingent upon follower attributes and message framing: when disclosures are paired with a transparent reasoning (e.g., “I only endorse products I utilize”), they generally maintain trust and long-term credibility. (Boerman, 2020)

Policy and platform design are significant: Naderer (2021) and subsequent assessments of disclosure forms (icons, text tags, pre-roll messages) demonstrate that the format and visibility of disclosure influence recognition and cognitive processing. Clear and unequivocal disclaimers are more successful in activating persuasion knowledge; pictograms or standardized indicators can assist younger or less media-literate audiences in identifying sponsored content. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that disclosure may be counterproductive if followers perceive it as opportunism rather than transparency, underscoring the necessity of supplementary techniques like narrative framing (e.g., elucidating the significance of the collaboration). (Naderer, et al., 2021)

**Narrative (storytelling and openness):** Narrative management entails the intentional construction of biographies, episodic narratives, and "backstage" revelations to foster a sense of continuity and emotional closeness. Research conducted since 2020 highlights the importance of narrative: authentic narrative structures (such as vulnerability, failure anecdotes, and routine disclosures) foster perceived sincerity and enhance parasocial connections, hence augmenting engagement and persuasive efficacy. Zhou et al. (2021) demonstrate that narrative tactics, particularly episodic storytelling and self-disclosure, enhance audience affiliation and perceived authenticity, hence mediating their impact on engagement measures. Research on micro-influencers indicates that narrative complexity (longitudinal story arcs, recurring motifs) enhances perceived authenticity and fosters enduring follower engagement. Nonetheless, narratives must be trustworthy; excessively rehearsed or overtly regulated "authenticity performances" diminish trust when followers perceive inconsistency. (Zhou, et al., 2021)

Narrative management effectively enhances disclosure. When disclosure enhances awareness of commercial intentions, effective storytelling can contextualize the collaboration within a genuine narrative (e.g., “I began using this product while preparing for X; this is why I endorse it”), thereby maintaining or even augmenting perceived authenticity. This integrated approach is substantiated by experimental evidence: disclosures accompanied by contextual narratives elucidating the influencer's rationale do not diminish trust to the same degree as disclosures delivered without such narratives. (Naderer, et al., 2021)

**Alignment (brand-influencer compatibility):** Alignment denotes the congruence between influencer identity, brand ideals, and audience expectations. Theoretical and empirical studies repeatedly demonstrate that fit is a key mediator of endorsement effectiveness: high functional or image fit diminishes skepticism and enhances perceived authenticity and the transfer of brand qualities (Casaló et al.; Belanche et al., 2021). Recent studies (post-2020) elucidate fit in terms of characteristics such as functional fit (alignment of credence/expertise) and image fit (aesthetic and symbolic congruence). When the fit is good, followers regard endorsements as authentic extensions of an influencer's identity, reinforcing TTF and TTI authenticity; conversely, when the fit is low, even meticulously constructed narratives and clear disclosures cannot mitigate perceptions of opportunism. (Belanche, et al., 2021)

Research suggests interaction effects among the three techniques. For example, alignment influences the disclosure–trust relationship: an explicit disclosure is less detrimental to persuasion when the influencer demonstrates a great brand fit. Narrative strength can offset deficiencies in duration or established TTS cues when brand alignment is strong; nevertheless, this is not sustainable permanently, as long-term consistency and behavior are crucial for maintaining credibility. Recent empirical research advocates for a cohesive campaign strategy: selecting influencers with a clear alignment, mandate transparent disclosures, and promoting storylines that contextualize the sponsored content within the influencer's personal experiences. (Che, et al., 2025)

**Boundary conditions and ethical considerations:** Multiple caveats arise. Initially, platform affordances and audience demographics influence the efficacy of strategies: younger audiences on discovery platforms (e.g., TikTok) may be more receptive to brief real narratives and trend alignment, whereas Instagram audiences may favor extended storytelling and visual consistency. Secondly, virtual or AI influencers complicate management: VIs can be designed to deliver consistent narratives and curated alignment; however, they encounter increased scrutiny regarding authenticity, audiences require proof of genuine experience and may criticize synthetic narratives unless the artificiality is transparently disclosed from the outset. Recent research comparing human and virtual influencers highlights similar sensitivity. (Koles, et al., 2024)

**Measurement and its ramifications for quantitative research:** For empirical analysis, disclosure may be operationalized as a binary or graded variable (presence, format prominence), while narrative can be assessed through indices of self-disclosure depth and storyline continuity (coded from content or evaluated via follower perception scales), and alignment can be measured against perceived fit (image/functional). The interactions among these factors should be modeled (moderation, mediation) to assess whether narrative and alignment mitigate the adverse impacts of disclosure on immediate persuasion while maintaining long-term trust.

In conclusion, managing authenticity is a proactive, intentional endeavor. Disclosure, story construction, and alignment function synergistically: disclosure ensures regulatory and ethical transparency, narrative fosters relational depth, and alignment indicates congruence. The most effective ads incorporate three elements: clear sponsorship indicators, contextual storytelling that elucidates relationship rationale, and meticulous selection of influencers whose identity and audience align with brand objectives. Recent research after 2020 emphasize that fragmented tactics are precarious; authenticity is most robust when it is consistent across disclosure, story, and alignment. (Boerman, 2020)

### 2.3 Virtual Influencers and the Authenticity Paradox

The increasing number of virtual influencers (VIs), who are computer-generated, often human-like characters used on social media, is a big turning point for influencer marketing. VIs have the ability to regulate brands, make them look good, and manage algorithms, all while being able to reach a large number of people. The rise of virtual influencers has created an authenticity paradox: they can be programmed to show the signs that people usually look for to tell if something is real (like

a personal story, a consistent style, or frequent interaction), but because they don't have real-life experience, they also invite doubt and scrutiny that can damage trust. Recent conceptual and empirical investigations position virtual identities at the confluence of three dichotomies: human-likeness against artificiality, novelty versus credibility, and controllability versus perceived agency. Researchers have discovered that although highly advanced virtual identities (VIs) can achieve significant reach and engineered engagement, their persuasive efficacy is contingent upon intricate mediators, including perceived human-likeness, transparency regarding origin, and the existence of authenticity indicators that align with true-to-self, true-to-fact, and true-to-ideal referents. The empirical data is inconclusive; several research indicate that virtual intelligences (VIs) can either match or surpass human performance on specific metrics when they are well-designed and transparently disclosed, while other studies demonstrate that VIs fall short in perceived emotional depth and trust. This mixed image makes VIs a fascinating venue for scholarly investigation into how authenticity is indicated, negotiated, and constructed in digital spaces. (Koles, et al., 2024)

### **2.3.1 What are virtual/AI influencers? definitions and typologies**

Basic taxonomy and definition Using computer graphics, animation, and increasingly advanced generative AI, virtual influencers (VIs) are fake social media profiles. They could be completely made-up personalities (like Lil Miquela's early CGI avatar) or hybrid constructions that are run by teams (brand agency, media organizations) that write articles, interactions, and relationships. Some VIs are completely independent agents that work based on generative models. Others are controlled from a central location by human operators (the puppeteering model) or a mix of both (the human-in-the-loop model). The literature suggests a taxonomy based on at least three dimensions: (1) ontological status (human-managed avatar against AI-autonomous agent), (2) visual human-likeness (cartoonish versus photorealistic), and (3) operational model (single-brand character versus multi-brand entertainment). These dimensions are important because they affect how people understand signals of authenticity and agency. (Koles, et al., 2024)

Typologies in recent studies Koles et al. (2024) put out a valuable typology based on authenticity referents: some VIs are optimized for true-to-ideal (aspirational aesthetics), others for true-to-fact (expertise centric), and a small number try true-to-self through long-form story arcs and staged vulnerabilities. Allal-Chérif et al. (2024) differentiate between brand-native VIs, intended as enduring brand ambassadors, and cultural VIs, aimed at narrative presence and audience community-building. This distinction corresponds to divergent commercial objectives, namely consistent brand messaging versus community engagement. (Koles, et al., 2024).

VIs controlled by people vs. VIs controlled by AI Operational control influences how real something seems. People can offer VIs narrative consistency and long-term arcs, which makes them seem longer lasting and increases TTS signals. AI-driven or generative models can make interactions bigger, but they can also give inconsistent results and reactions that are sometimes creepy, which makes it harder to judge authenticity. The literature indicates that audiences are attuned to signs of human authorship (e.g., behind-the-scenes posts, maker interviews) and frequently reward openness regarding origin; paradoxically, recognizing artificiality can occasionally maintain trust by diminishing the perceived risk of deception. (Lim, et al., 2023)

Functional categories and business applications Researchers and practitioners categorize VIs based on their functional roles: (a) brand spokespersons, who are stable ambassadors for a product line; (b) content entertainers, who are driven by trends and short-form content; (c) community builders, who are platform-native mascots that foster a fanbase; and (d) service agents, who are conversational bots used for customer interaction. For spokesperson jobs, visual realism is important; for entertainment roles, quick novelty is important; and for service roles, interactional affordances are important. Empirical research indicates that role-fit is significant: a photorealistic virtual influencer (VI) used for skincare promotion must meticulously handle TTF (truthful, testable, and factual) cues (ingredient knowledge, tangible outcomes) compared to entertainment VI, whose worth is derived from novelty and trend engagement. (Allal, et al., 2024)

Differences in ethics and governance Typologies must also consider moral and legal issues. VIs that makes money off sexualized or exploitative content, or that are made to look like certain real individuals, create moral and legal questions (permission, misappropriation). Recent academic discourse advocates for a classification system that identifies risk vectors (e.g., impersonation, deepfake deployment, targeted persuasion of minors) in conjunction with commercial typologies. Researchers advocate for the operationalization of typologies in policy formulation (e.g., mandatory disclosure criteria vary according to ontological status and risk level). (Koles, et al., 2024)

Consequences for measurement and research methodology in empirical research, such as your quantitative thesis, typology guides sampling and the operationalization of variables. You can sort influencers into groups according to their ontological state (human vs. VI), how closely they look like a person (low, medium, or high), and their operational model (human-managed vs. AI-autonomous). You can then consider these groups as independent variables or moderators. It is also suggested to assess perceived origin (whether participants believed the influencer was human) to obtain subjective interpretations of ontological cues. Comparative designs that maintain content consistency while altering disclosure or visual realism are especially enlightening. (Allal, et al., 2024)

### **2.3.2 Consumer perceptions: human-likeness, mind perception, novelty**

The strange valley and how human-like things are Consumer responses to virtual influencers are significantly influenced by their perceived human resemblance. The human-likeness perceptual dimension (physical realism, face micro-movement fidelity, vocal realism) can enhance engagement; nevertheless, beyond a certain threshold, it may elicit discomfort—typical of the "uncanny valley" phenomenon, where nearly-human entities induce eeriness and diminished confidence. Recent experimental findings indicate that moderate human-likeness (stylized yet relatable) typically elicits optimal positive responses, whereas ultra-photorealistic virtual individuals must attain impeccable behavioral realism to prevent uncanny reactions. Importantly, human-likeness interacts with narrative and context: a photorealistic VI that offers verified expertise, and a compelling backstory can overcome uncanny effects, whereas a photorealistic VI that posts incongruent or emotionally flat content is penalized more harshly than a less realistic VI. (Ju, et al., 2024)

Cognitive empathy: ascribing intention and emotion “Mind perception”: the degree to which audiences ascribe mental states (intentions, emotions, attitudes) to non-human entities, forecasts relational outcomes such as trust and the propensity to heed advice. Studies indicate that mind attribution is developed through conversational signals (direct address, autobiographical content),

interactive behaviors (responses to comments, immediate emotions), and the revelation of internal feelings (expressions of liking or regret). When audiences view a virtual influencer (VI) as possessing a semblance of "mind," parasocial mechanisms often associated with human influencers commence: identification, emotional investment, and behavioral obedience. Nonetheless, the perceived mind can be delicate; minor discrepancies, mechanical responses, or evident scripting diminish mind attribution and may undermine previous goodwill. Stein's experimental research comparing parasocial relationships (PSRs) for human and virtual influencers demonstrates that meticulous design can provoke robust PSRs for virtual influencers, but solely under conditions of elevated interactional realism and convincing narrative frameworks. (Stein, et al., 2024).

Originality, inquisitiveness, and amusement value Innovation is a double-edged sword. In brief timeframes, novelty stimulates curiosity, virality, and media focus—visual influencers frequently attain swift follower expansion due to their engaging, visually captivating, and newsworthy nature. Allal-Chérif et al. (2024) contend that effectively designed VIs can surpass human performance by enhancing novelty through algorithmic strategies: frequent posting, swift A/B content iteration, and cross-platform reuse. However, novelty devoid of enduring relational signals tends to diminish; audiences may engage with a visual identity for its spectacle but are unlikely to cultivate trust or long-term purchasing intent in the absence of authenticity indicators (consistency, transparency). Consequently, surprise stimulates discovery; authenticity transforms discovery into lasting engagement. (Allal, et al., 2024)

Perceptions of credibility and expertise (TTF) The perception of credibility among consumers is influenced by domain relevance and demonstrable competence. In product categories characterized by high credence, such as health and finance, consumers require authentic indicators—credentials, demonstrations, and independent verification. Visual identities can demonstrate trustworthiness to the degree that brands incorporate verified information (e.g., laboratory analyses, professional endorsements) or publicly credit content creation to specialists. Empirical research indicates that in high-credence categories, human specialists generally possess an advantage unless the value indicator is supported by credible third-party validation. In contrast, within low-credence or hedonic categories such as fashion and gaming, visual images that achieve high scores in TTI (aspirational aesthetics) might be compelling even in the absence of verifiable TTF. (Koles, et al., 2024)

Demographic and cultural variables Audience attributes influence responses. Younger generations (Gen Z) frequently exhibit a heightened receptiveness to innovation and virtuality, generally favoring stylized or hybrid digital identities; older generations may require more overt indicators of authenticity. Cross-cultural research suggests that collectivist societies prioritize relational indicators and community validation (e.g., social proof), whereas individualist cultures emphasize perceived autonomy and authenticity. Research in emerging countries indicates that local cultural codes—such as language, attire, and moral standards—determine whether a virtual influencer (VI) is regarded as relatable or as an alien, inauthentic entity. Researchers advocate for the regulation of age, platform familiarity, and cultural context in experimental designs. (Kembau, et al., 2024).

Design elements that enhance perception Design elements that augment human-like qualities and cognitive perception comprise: (1) naturalistic language and complementary nonverbal signals (when utilizing video), (2) consistent persona characteristics, (3) interactive responsiveness (such as comment replies and Q&A), and (4) transparent "origin" content elucidating the creator's identity and purpose. Research indicates that anthropomorphic cues (such as first-person narration, personal posts, and named relationships) facilitate virtual individuals' progression across psychological thresholds into relational domains. Nonetheless, ethical disclosure—indicating that the VI is synthetic—may diminish immediate persuading but can safeguard long-term trust and mitigate backlash when contradictions arise. (Lim, et al., 2023)

Quantitative measurement Assess perceived human-likeness, mind perception, novelty appeal, and credibility using validated instruments (e.g., altered Godspeed human-likeness items; PSR scales; perceived expertise scales). Experimental manipulations (altering visual realism, disclosure, and narrative depth) and behavioral outcomes (engagement metrics, purchase intention) provide causal inferences regarding the significance of design aspects across various settings. Recent publications offer verified measures and experimental frameworks for these constructs. (Stein, et al., 2024).

### **2.3.3 Empirical findings: virtual influencers vs human influencers in trust and effectiveness**

The empirical literature juxtaposing virtual influencers (VIs) and human influencers yields inconclusive results contingent upon research design, outcome variable, product category, and disclosure. Numerous stringent experiments and field studies demonstrate that VIs may equal or surpass human influencers in reach, content uniqueness, and short-term engagement (likes, views) when they are visually captivating and bolstered by algorithmic amplification. For instance, Allal-Chérif et al. (2024) document instances when AI-driven VIs achieved superior click-through and conversion rates in controlled campaigns, attributable to optimal cadence and A/B testing. However, when the results change to trust, long-term brand loyalty, or the desire to buy in high-credence sectors, human influencers often do better than VIs unless the VIs is clearly backed by verifiable knowledge or clear origin stories. (Allal, et al., 2024)

Experimental evidence, limited sample laboratory and online investigations Controlled experiments elucidate causal pathways. Lim (2023) altered origin disclosure and emotional narrative in participants' exposure to a virtual influencer (VI), discovering that origin disclosure (identifying the avatar as synthetic) diminished immediate persuasion while enhancing perceived honesty; the inclusion of an emotional narrative moderated this effect, maintaining a degree of persuasive efficacy. Stein (2024) examined parasocial results produced by aligned human and virtual influencers, discovering that both may evoke parasocial relationships; however, human influencers fostered more emotional intimacy in the presence of personal vulnerability signals. These investigations suggest that virtual influencers (VIs) can generate parasocial relationships (PSRs) and enhance engagement; yet they necessitate meticulously crafted narratives and disclosure procedures to achieve human-level trust. (Lim, et al., 2023)

Data from the field and industry big campaign analysis Industry reports and quasi-experimental research demonstrate that VIs may rapidly scale, providing businesses with significant content

control and safety advantages Certain case studies and economic analysis indicate that VIs can yield enhanced short-term ROI in the fashion and entertainment sectors, especially when marketing leverage platform virality mechanics. Longitudinal studies, on the other hand, show that retention and repeat purchase metrics frequently favor human influencers who build long-lasting relationships with their followers. The general agreement is practical: VIs is a useful tactical tool for finding new things and controlling branding. Human influencers are still important for relationship marketing and categories that need credibility. (Allal, et al., 2024)

Moderators: type of product, platform, audience, and disclosure. Four moderators regularly influence comparative outcomes. First, disclosure: clear origins lower the likelihood of deceit and affect trust trajectories (rapid persuasion vs. long-term trust). Second, the sort of product: low-credence, hedonic products work better with VIs; high-credence products need help from a person or a third party. Third, the platform: short-form discovery platforms encourage new ideas and help VIs' algorithms work better; narrative platforms reward people who tell stories. Fourth, the audience: younger, digitally native audiences are more likely to embrace VIs, whereas older or more dubious audiences need more signs of authenticity. Quantitative models that disregard these factors are susceptible to confusing scenarios in which VIs exhibit varying levels of effectiveness. (Lim, et al., 2023)

Concerns about the veracity of measurements and ecological reality Methodological critiques stress that numerous laboratory investigations exhibit a deficiency in ecological validity, since they utilize static images or isolated posts instead of the multichannel, multi-post arcs that establish TTS authenticity. Similarly, industry reports can confuse impressions produced by novelty with significant engagement. Researchers advocate for mixed method designs that integrate panel field data, A/B campaign tests, and laboratory experiments with narrative manipulations to triangulate effects. Koles et al. (2024) employ interviews, content analysis, and field examples to illustrate the variability in authenticity manifestations based on design decisions, highlighting the necessity for more comprehensive empirical methodologies in the comparison of virtual individuals and humans. (Koles, et al., 2024)

A useful synthesis for brands and researchers for brands, employ VIs for controlled, scalable discovery and campaign testing, and use human influencers for relational, trust-sensitive goals. You may also use both hybrid strategies (VI for awareness and human ambassadors for conversion). For researchers: assess several outcomes (impressions, engagement quality, purchasing behavior, trust trajectories), incorporate significant modifiers, and employ longitudinal designs to examine the evolution of initial novelty into trust. For your quantitative thesis, a comparative design assessing perceived authenticity (TTS/TTF/TTI), PSR, engagement metrics, and buy intention across matched human and virtual influencer posts—while altering disclosure and platform context—would aid in clarifying existing empirical ambiguity. (Allal, et al., 2024)

### **2.3.4 Meta-authenticity and artificial sociality: rethinking authenticity in the age of AI**

Reframing ideas: meta-authenticity: The emergence of virtual influencers necessitates a conceptual redefinition of authenticity. Conventional authenticity frameworks (true-to-self, true-to-fact, true-

to-ideal) presuppose a human referent with experiential knowledge; VIs disrupts this presumption. Scholars therefore advocate for meta-authenticity, a conceptual reconfiguration that perceives authenticity as a negotiated social construct rather than an inherent characteristic—one that may be generated, enacted, and regarded as “authentic enough” within a cultural framework. Meta-authenticity underscores social dynamics (audience co-construction), disclosure procedures, and institutional endorsement (platform policies, third-party verification) as important to the credibility and significance of an artificial identity. Koles et al. (2024) contend that meta-authenticity redirects analytical emphasis from ontological truth (is the influencer “real”?) to functional authenticity (does the influencer fulfill significant symbolic or instrumental roles for audiences?). (Koles, et al., 2024)

Artificial sociality: new possibilities, new ways of doing things. When people interact with synthetic agents, they form new sorts of social bonds and practices. This is called artificial sociality. VIs can perform social rituals (such as birthday posts, regular Q&As, and story arcs) that are similar to how people interact with each other. Fans can give VIs social capital by willingly participating, such as by commenting, making fan art, or helping to create story parts. This participatory construction of authenticity is fundamental to meta-authenticity: authenticity arises not just from the influencer’s origin but also from ongoing co-constructed engagement that imparts meaning. Research on community dynamics surrounding VIs indicates that involvement frequently resembles human-led fandoms when platforms and designers facilitate dialogic interaction and community agency. (Liu, et al., 2025)

Ethical and social ramifications of fabricated authenticity. Meta-authenticity brings up questions about what is right and wrong. What are the moral limits if people accept fake authenticity? Problems include manipulation (VIs that take advantage of weaknesses), representation (VIs that use cultural symbols without being responsible for them), and attention economy (redirecting human sociality toward synthetic figures). Literature cautions against “authenticity laundering,” wherein brands employ VIs to simulate sincerity while evading the accountability that human influencers encounter for ethical transgressions. Researchers are asking for legal and design fixes, such as uniform disclosure, provenance metadata (who made the VI, which group pays for postings), and ethical evaluation for campaigns that target vulnerable groups. (Koles, et al., 2024)

Trust infrastructures, platforms, and provenance: Meta-authenticity means that platforms have a role to play. They can collect provenance information (machine-verified tags, origin stamps), standardize disclosure formats, and offer APIs that allow third-party verification (like cryptographic provenance). Research indicates that provenance cues can enhance perceived honesty and mitigate backlash in the face of inconsistencies. Several researchers advocate for a layered trust architecture comprising: (1) visual and narrative design that conveys care and continuity; (2) provenance and disclosure metadata indicating origin and funding; and (3) third-party validators, such as industry certification or consumer protection organizations. These kinds of architectures see authenticity as something that affects the whole system, not just one person. (Lim, et al., 2023)

Research agenda: quantifying meta-authenticity and societal outcomes. Researchers ought to operate meta-authenticity by assessing audience co-construction behaviors (fan content creation, narrative contributions), provenance literacy (the audience's comprehension of origin cues), and systemic trust indicators (the readiness to accept platform-provided provenance marks). Longitudinal panel data can indicate if meta-authenticity is stable (audiences consistently regard a VI as authentic) or fragile (rapid deterioration occurs upon the emergence of discrepancies). Mixed methods approach digital trail data, surveys, and qualitative interviews, are particularly effective for capturing both behavioral and interpretive aspects of artificial sociality. (Liu, et al., 2024)

Practical consequences and final thoughts: The idea of meta-authenticity encourages practitioners to use integrated design by adding depth to stories, making provenance signals clear, and encouraging community practices that everyone can take part in. For policymakers, it emphasizes the necessity for provenance and disclosure norms to adapt to encompass synthetic entities. For academics, it unveils a profound area of investigation on the production of social meaning when the referent is synthetic. The meta-authenticity frame changes the main study issue from "Are VIs real?" to "How and when do audiences collectively accept synthetic personas as real enough to have social and commercial value?" This change is important for figuring out how AI, storytelling, and social trust will work together in the future. (Koles, et al., 2024)

## **2.4 Trust, Engagement and Behavioral Outcomes**

Trust is the primary psychological mechanism that transforms influencer-mediated exposure into engagement and ultimately into behavioral consequences such as information sharing, recommendations, and purchases. Modern research defines trust as stemming from perceived credibility: expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, perceived authenticity (sincerity, transparency, congruence), and interpersonal proximity or parasocial connections (PSR). These constructs interact: authenticity bolsters credibility and enhances PSR; PSR increases the persuasive capacity of credibility; and measured engagement: likes, comments, saves, shares, signifies both the cognitive evaluation of credibility and the emotional connections fostered by PSR (i.e., cognitive and emotional pathways to persuasion). Empirical meta-analyses and extensive reviews contend that the efficacy of influencers is optimally comprehended as a multi-faceted process: (a) informational pathway : credibility/TTF influences judgment and conversion in high-credence categories; (b) relational pathway: authenticity/true-to-self and PSR foster emotional engagement and loyalty; and (c) discovery/novelty pathway : platform affordances and symbolic fit (TTI) affect short-term virality and reach. These paths are influenced by the platform (Instagram vs. TikTok), influencer tier (nano/micro vs. macro/celebrity), product kind, and audience characteristics: age, involvement, resulting in multidimensional measurement: Psychometric scales assessing perceived authenticity, trust, and psychological safety, when integrated with behavioral metrics such as engagement rate, click-through rate (CTR), and conversion rate, provide the most comprehensive understanding of results. In summary, trust functions as a mediator between authenticity and behavioral outcomes, as well as an emergent property of credibility and relational dynamics; comprehending its pathways is essential for

crafting campaigns that transform attention into enduring brand value (Liu, et al., 2024); (Balaban, et al., 2022); (Pan, et al., 2025)

### **2.4.1 Source credibility and parasocial interaction theories**

The literature on influencer effects is primarily influenced by two theoretical frameworks: Source Credibility Theory (SCT) and Parasocial Interaction/Relationship (PSR) theory. SCT, derived from communication studies, asserts that a source's perceived competence, credibility, and appeal influence persuasive effectiveness. PSR theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956; updated for social media contexts) elucidates how repeated mediated exposures foster perceived relationships that simulate interpersonal intimacy. When applied to social influencers, these frameworks are interconnected: credibility offers cognitive reason for message reception, whereas parasocial closeness delivers affective desire to engage and adhere to suggestions. Recent empirical research amalgamates the two to elucidate the variability in engagement and purchase intention across different circumstances (Liu, et al., 2024).

**Source credibility:** parts and how they work on social media, the classical components of Source Credibility Theory include expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness/likability (Ohanian, 1990). In social media contexts, these components are operationalized through expertise (domain knowledge, demonstrable outcomes, credentials, or high-quality informational content), trustworthiness (perceived honesty, disclosure of commercial ties, consistent behavior), and attractiveness/likability (physical/visual appeal, personality, or affective warmth). Empirical research conducted since 2020 substantiates that these constructs maintain their explanatory efficacy regarding influencer effectiveness. Pan's meta-analytic review (2025) and Zhou et al. (2024) demonstrate that perceived credibility significantly influences followers' attitudes and purchase intentions; however, the impact of each component varies by product category, with expertise being more critical for credence goods and likability being more significant for hedonic goods. (Pan, et al., 2025)

**Mechanisms:** cognitive pathways versus peripheral signals. SCT is in line with dual-process models (ELM): when followers are really interested or the product is very risky, they process influencer messages through the central route (by looking at the evidence and expertise). In situations with minimal participation or quick scrolling, peripheral cues like attractiveness or newness are what make people change their minds. This is why celebrities (who have a lot of reach) could get people to notice them but not buy from them as often as micro-influencers who have real competence in a specific area. Liu et al. (2024) utilized the elaboration likelihood framework to analyze influencer material, demonstrating that informational value and authenticity enhance central processing and yield more robust brand evaluations, particularly on platforms characterized by longer-form content or review-oriented posts. (Liu, et al., 2024)

**Parasocial Interaction/Relationships:** emotional pathways PSR theory elucidates affective engagement: through recurrent, personal mediated disclosures, followers cultivate unidirectional emotional connections with influencers, akin to friendships. Contemporary PSR research underscores the interactional attributes of social media: direct address, responsiveness, such as

comment answers and live Q&As, and perceived accessibility enhance the establishment of PSR. Balaban (2022) and subsequent research illustrate PSR's mediating function between authenticity signals and behavioral intentions: authenticity, PSR, engagement/intent. In summary, PSR converts perceived sincerity into motivational power: followers who sense a connection to an influencer are more inclined to like, comment, share, and act upon suggestions.

Empirical models and integration. Recent empirical models amalgamate SCT and PSR by including credibility as a predictor of trust and PSR as a concurrent affective mediator. For example, Liu (2024) and Zhou (2021) developed models indicating that perceived expertise and transparency enhance cognitive trust, but perceived sincerity and conversational behaviors elevated PSR; both trust and PSR subsequently forecasted engagement and purchase intention. These integrated models provide a superior explanation for result variation compared to single-theory approaches. In practical terms, a combined measurement approach, utilizing accurate psychometric scales for expertise, trustworthiness, and likability, validated PSR scales, and behavioral outcomes, facilitates structural equation modeling (SEM) or mediation analysis capable of distinguishing cognitive and affective pathways.

Conditions of the boundary and moderators. Several moderators lessen the effects of SCT and PSR. The platform matters: Instagram and YouTube (with more narrative options) help build PSR and give stronger credibility signals. TikTok's rapid, discovery-focused stream favors peripheral cues and newness. Another moderator is the influencer tier. Micro-influencers usually have a higher PSR per follower because they seem more accessible, while macro/celebrity influencers are more knowledgeable and appealing but have a lower PSR per follower. Age and media literacy are also important aspects for the audience: younger consumers may establish PSRs faster with producers who are digital natives, while older audiences may put greater weight on credibility. The type of product is still a consistent moderator: Goods with a lot of trust need more signals of skill. (Liu, et al., 2024)

How to measure things for quantitative studies. To quantitatively assess SCT+PSR models: (1) evaluate source credibility utilizing validated multi-item scales: expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness; (2) assess PSR with scales tailored for social media (perceived closeness, conversational illusion); (3) obtain behavioral metrics: engagement rate, CTR, conversion from platform data; (4) model the pathways through mediation/SEM and examine moderation by platform and influencer tier. Recent developments in instrument creation have yielded validated items and enhanced PSR scales specifically designed for influencers (Balaban, et al., 2022).

### **2.4.2 Influence of authenticity on trust, purchase intention and brand loyalty**

Authenticity acts as a close precursor to trust, which in turn influences both immediate purchasing intentions and enduring brand loyalty. Nistor's dynamic model of influencer decision-making demonstrates that authenticity constitutes a strategic choice; influencers weigh the immediate benefits of monetization against the enduring value of being regarded as authentic, as authenticity enhances the social worth of an influencer's audience and subsequently alters the efficacy of endorsements over time. (Nistor, et al., 2025)

Empirically, perceived authenticity enhances cognitive and affective trust through two synergistic pathways. First, authenticity lessens the assumption of merely economic goals (followers assume compassion and integrity), which lowers the perceived risk of a transaction and makes people more likely to follow suggestions. Second, real signals (consistent storytelling, clear disclosure, and proven skill) establish parasocial relationships and attachment, creating emotional trust that encourages people to buy more than once. Large-sample analyses indicate that authenticity assessed through perceived sincerity, congruence, and transparency, directly predicts both trust and buy intention, with trust serving as a significant mediator of authenticity's influence on intention. (Liu, et al., 2024)

Trust's function in mediation is strong in all situations, although it is affected by the type of product and the design of the campaign. For hedonic, low-credence goods like fashion and entertainment, affective authenticity cues (like vulnerability and lifestyle match) easily turn into a desire to buy because identity signaling is important. For high-credence or high-risk categories like health and finance, instrumental authenticity (like verifiable expertise and third-party evidence) is needed to turn trust into a purchase. This border condition has been identified in multi-industry surveys and experimental studies, revealing more robust authenticity, trust, purchase pathways for lifestyle categories compared to technical categories characterized by predominant TTF (true-to-fact) signals. (Cabeza-Ramírez, et al., 2022)

Authenticity is a key factor in brand loyalty that goes beyond making a purchase right away. When influencers maintain consistent and congruent behavior over time, followers develop steady expectations, and repeated positive encounters culminate in commitment to both the influencer and the related brands. Recent field studies show that being real encourages behaviors like co-creation and advocacy (user-generated content, repeat purchases, and word-of-mouth), which are all signs of loyalty. These impacts are even stronger when the influencer and brand fit well together. To put it another way, being real generates trust, which leads to more interactions, which leads to loyalty and advocacy. (Hasan, et al., 2024)

Practical implications are as follows: marketers should prioritize authenticity signals that are appropriate for the product category (affective cues for lifestyle; evidentiary cues for technical goods), create long-term partnerships that maintain narrative continuity, and track trust trajectories (not just immediate CTRs) to capture the formation of loyalty. Nistor's model highlights a managerial dilemma: short-term monetization strategies that compromise perceived authenticity may yield immediate revenue but jeopardize the influencer's long-term trust capital and subsequent conversion potential. Consequently, calculated, authenticity-preserving collaborations should be prioritized for sustainable brand outcomes. (Nistor, et al., 2025)

### **2.4.3 Comparative outcomes: AI vs human influencers and consumer response**

The influencer marketing field has changed a lot in the last few years because of the advent of AI-generated or virtual influencers. These digital identities change the way human influencers work by giving brands new options. However, they also make us think about crucial issues like consumer psychology, trust, and behavior. This part looks at how people react differently to human and

virtual influencers. It focuses on how real they seem, how they build parasocial relationships, how likely they are to buy anything, how open they are, and how well they work in different situations. One of the main contrasts between human and virtual influencers is how people see authenticity, moral agency, and emotional connection. Human influencers, actual individuals with lived experiences and perceived agency, typically cultivate more robust parasocial relationships (the illusion of friendship or emotional connection) since followers see authentic intent and moral obligation in their communications. On the other hand, virtual influencers often have what could be called "surface authenticity." They look sincere, but they are still machine-designed, which can make people less likely to trust them. The article "Consumer Evaluation of Virtual vs. Human Influencers via Source Credibility, Perceived Social Similarity, and Consumption Motivation" demonstrates that the perceived authenticity and attractiveness of influencers, whether human or virtual, significantly affect purchase intention. Although there was no overall difference in purchase intention between virtual and human endorsers in that study, the underlying mechanisms, such as perceived social similarity, differed. (Zeng, et al., 2025)

Likewise, the research examines the efficacy of virtual versus human influencers in digital marketing: According to perceived psychological distance and credibility, real influencers still outperform virtual ones in many circumstances. This is because perceived psychological distance (how "far" the influencer feels from the consumer), and perceived credibility greatly affects purchase intention. (Liu, et al., 2024)

In short, the effect is stronger when a human influencer seems more believable and closer to the person's mind. But virtual influencers are still quite appealing to some brands and groups of consumers. The research titled "The Power of Virtual Influencers: Impact on Consumer Behavior and Attitudes in the Age of AI" indicates that virtual influencers were regarded as trustworthy, reliable, and pertinent by a sample of 357 respondents, hence increasing purchase intention. (Gerlich, 2023) They are appealing for a number of reasons: they provide brands entire control over their messaging, they use algorithms to improve their performance, they don't have to worry about scandals, and they have a lot of new digital looks that appeal to tech-savvy, novelty-seeking customers.

This creates a segmentation effect: the relative success of real versus virtual influencers is significantly influenced by the campaign goal, product category, and customer motivation. Human influencers are still the best choice when the goal is to make an emotional connection, be honest, share lifestyle stories, or build long-term brand equity (for example, in beauty, wellness, or luxury). This is because they employ real personal stories and empathy. On the other hand, where goals include newness, aesthetics, quick scalability, or digital-native audiences (such gaming, tech, or entertainment), virtual influencers may do just as well or even better than actual influencers. The study mentioned previously indicated that virtual influencers had a beneficial effect on attitudes toward product placement, sometimes even more than real people. (Hazain, 2025)

Another important moderating factor is openness and disclosure. People are becoming increasingly aware of whether an influencer is a person or a machine, and whether that information is made

clear. The research the ethics of virtuality: navigating the complexities of human-like virtual influencers in the social media marketing realm argues that when consumers cannot distinguish humans from virtual influencers (especially human-like virtual influencers), ethical issues arise regarding authenticity and manipulation. (Kim , et al., 2023) Being open about your virtual status might help ease worries about being tricked and build trust. Without disclosure, people may feel like they're being tricked, which makes persuasion less effective.

In short, the trade-off is that human influencers give you emotional depth, authenticity, moral agency, and stronger parasocial relationships, while virtual influencers give you predictability, scalability, controlled messaging, and novelty appeal. For many brands, the best strategic approach might not be "either/or," but a mix of the two. In this case, human influencers would be the emotional and trust-based parts of brand communication, and virtual influencers would be the parts that make campaigns bigger, more personal, and more relevant in digital settings. For instance, a brand might employ a real person to tell a personal story about how they use the product (focusing on trust and lifestyle) and then utilize a virtual person to perform high-volume launches, reach global audiences, or improve the brand's aesthetics with accuracy and newness. In this kind of mixed strategy, being open and honest is very important (for example, letting people know when an influencer is fake), and KPIs should go beyond surface engagement to cover deeper behavioral objectives like purchase intention, brand loyalty, and lifetime value. There are still gaps in research that need to be filled. Longitudinal studies are necessary to monitor the evolution of trust and parasocial connections with virtual influencers over time in comparison to human influencers. Additionally, cross-cultural research is limited: how do collectivist and individualist societies differ in their responses to virtual and human influencers? For example, the China-based classification of virtual influencer types shows that how people respond depends on anthropomorphism, realism, and cultural context. (LI, et al., 2025) As AI and CGI get better, the line between real and virtual influencers will get even blurrier. This will create new ethical, psychological, and legal problems.

### **2.4.4 Dynamics of Trust Formation and Maintenance in Influencer-Follower Relationships**

Trust in influencer-follower relationships is dynamic; it evolves, stabilizes, and may decline over time due to ongoing relational signals, behavioral consistency, and contextual reinforcing. Modern digital trust models (Liu, et al., 2024) conceptualize trust as a dynamic and iterative process encompassing three temporal phases: development, maintenance, and recovery from violation. In the formation stage, followers depend on heuristic assessments based on superficial indicators, such as the influencer's appearance, engagement metrics, and social endorsement (likes, comments, follower count) to establish preliminary trust impressions. This corresponds with the trust heuristic theory, which asserts that humans utilize observable social cues as substitutes for reliability in situations of significant information asymmetry. For instance, research by Liu et al. (2024) identifies *Chiara Ferragni* as a paradigmatic example of initial trust formation through visual coherence and symbolic self-branding. Her high engagement and perceived lifestyle alignment create an immediate trust heuristic, even among new followers unfamiliar with her content.

After initial trust is formed, its maintenance relies on perceived consistency, transparency, and reciprocal participation. Influencers who maintain alignment between their professed principles and real conduct enhance cognitive trust; those who respond appropriately and exhibit empathy foster affective trust. Research such as that conducted by Pan et al. (2025) highlights that the quality of long-term parasocial interactions, rather than their quantity, is a predictor of sustained trust, especially when influencers engage authentically with audience feedback and transparently acknowledge errors or sponsorships. Liu et al. (2024) expand this perspective, recognizing transparency and self-correction as essential behaviors for "trust repair" after perceived violations.

The visibility of ethical behavior is also essential in social media environments. Ethical self-presentation, such as exposing advertisements, attributing sources, and refraining from deceptive product assertions creates perceived psychological safety, wherein followers feel assured in their engagement with material, free from the apprehension of deceit. This psychological safety cultivates lasting trust that influences both cognitive assessment and emotional connection. In contrast, inconsistency, excessive marketing, or perceived opportunism can swiftly undermine trust, even within highly engaged audiences (Nistor, et al., 2025).

The preservation of trust is also affected by algorithmic mediation. As platforms progressively curate visibility via AI-driven recommendations, followers' exposure to influencers becomes less organic, resulting in algorithmic trust displacement, a phenomenon where audiences assign trust or suspicion not only to the influencer but also to the platform that amplifies or suppresses content (Liu et al., 2024). This complicates relational dynamics, rendering trust partially co-created by technological affordances.

Trust functions as a relational equilibrium is established by authenticity and expertise, yet maintained through behavioral predictability, moral transparency, and responsive involvement. Its permanence relies on both human and algorithmic dependability, rendering it a vital, perpetually negotiated asset within influencer-brand ecosystems.

### **2.4.5 Trust Decay, Crisis, and Recovery: The Fragility of Influencer Credibility**

Although most work focuses on the development of trust, fewer studies examine its dissolution and the potential for restoration. The phenomena of trust decay, the gradual or abrupt erosion of followers' confidence has emerged as a prominent issue due to the rise of influencer scandals, misinformation, and excessive commercialization. Nistor et al. (2025) characterize this phenomenon as "trust capital depletion," in which perceived authenticity and reliability diminish following recurrent discrepancies between self-presentation and behavior. Trust breaches may arise from undeclared sponsorships, inauthentic endorsements, or perceived ethical lapses (e.g., insensitive content). A prominent illustration is *Logan Paul's* 2018 controversy, often cited as a textbook case of trust capital depletion. Following a severe breach of moral expectations, Paul's loss of credibility led to measurable decreases in engagement and sponsorships, aligning with model of post-crisis trust attrition.

The violation-recovery framework from organizational trust literature for influencer situations, delineates three possible responses: denial, justification, and apology/reform. Empirical research indicates that denial frequently exacerbates perceived dishonesty, whereas an apology coupled with transparent behavioral modification generally reinstates partial confidence. Influencers who recognized sponsorship errors and reinstated transparent communication regained engagement rates within three weeks, in contrast to the extended reductions experienced by those who disregarded criticism.

Another facet of trust erosion is contextual saturation, the desensitization of followers to influencer content resulting from excessive exposure or perceived inauthentic reiteration. Due to algorithms favoring frequent posting, certain influencers partake in excessive content creation, diminishing originality and perceived authenticity. Pan et al. (2025) contend that this results in trust fatigue, causing viewers to disengage not from betrayal, but due to cognitive overload and emotional detachment. Reinstating creative vulnerability—through authentic storytelling or socially responsible actions can mitigate this tiredness and restore relational trust.

From a psychological perspective, trust restoration entails reconstructing cognitive coherence (credibility) and emotional resonance (forgiveness). Cabeza-Ramírez et al. (2022) illustrate that authenticity cues, such as congruent apologies and consistent future conduct, surpass external validation in reinstating brand-related confidence. Furthermore, community engagement (e.g., followers publicly supporting or challenging influencers) serves as a mechanism for collective trust adjudication. The social context, encompassing fellow followers and platform discussions, significantly influences the success of rehabilitation.

Research on crisis communication in influencer marketing (Hasan et al., 2024) indicates that trust restoration is more effective when the influencer possesses substantial prior authenticity capital. Thus, maintaining authenticity throughout time functions as a safeguard for one's reputation. In contrast, influencers whose perceived authenticity is predominantly aesthetic find it challenging to restore confidence following catastrophes.

Trust is a delicate yet renewable social asset. Comprehending its destruction and restoration clarifies the limits of influencer authenticity. When handled clearly and relationally, even violations can bolster trust by showcasing accountability. Nonetheless, recurrent infractions undermine the ethical framework of influencer-follower dynamics, converting audiences from engaged participants into skeptics and jeopardizing the fundamental efficacy of influencer marketing's persuasive influence.

### **2.5 Societal Impacts of Influencer and AI-Influencer Ecosystems**

The emergence of both human and AI influencers in the expansive ecology of influencer marketing yields profound societal implications that extend beyond immediate business results. This includes changing the way people believe media to be real, changing the way people expect media to be real, and having subtle effects on mental health, relationships, and identity development. Influencer ecosystems are not just places to buy and sell things; they also shape culture by showing people

how to live, act, and dream. Research increasingly points to both positive possibilities (e.g., increased awareness of social issues, greater representation) and negative risks (e.g., unrealistic standards, increased comparison and anxiety). For instance, a systematic assessment of the effects of social media influencers on health outcomes indicated that influencers could convey health-related messages; nevertheless, the data remains limited and inconsistent. (Powell, et al., 2024). Studies also show that influencer culture helps to promote manicured, idealized visual lifestyles, which makes people worry about the implications on their mental and emotional health.

In this changing world, AI influencers make things even more complicated. They can help messages reach more people, make them more effective, and change how people think about authenticity and agency. But they also make us think about things like representation, trust in consumers, and how people and machines engage in cultural communication. For example, one study indicated that people think AI-influencers are less responsible for what they do. This might hurt brand trust and raise questions about ethical accountability. (Daly, 2025)

So, from a social point of view, influencer ecosystems, real or virtual, have an effect on:

1. Media norms and aesthetic standards (what a "good life" looks like and how realistic or possible that is)
2. Mental health and well-being (via comparison, aspiration, parasocial proximity, and transparency).
3. Social capital and identity development, especially among younger users.
4. Trust, openness, and rules (how people understand messages, tell different sorts of influencers apart, and hold people responsible)

### **2.5.1 Mental Health and Idealized Lifestyles: Influencer Content and Audience Well-Being**

The representation of idealized lifestyles by influencers, both human and virtual, significantly affects audience well-being, especially among younger and more impressionable groups. Influencer content consistently showcases aspirational visuals: flawless physical attributes, meticulously crafted experiences, swift success stories, and refined personal lives free from apparent adversity. Such representations can be motivating and encouraging for certain individuals; but, when followers' actual circumstances do not align with the mediated ideal, this discrepancy may lead to social comparison, poor self-assessment, and detrimental emotional consequences.

Research analyzing the “dark side” of influencer culture reveals how the reinforcement of unrealistic beauty or lifestyle standards, along with constant exposure to comparison-laden content, is connected to poorer self-esteem, body-image dissatisfaction and social anxiety. A thorough evaluation indicated that influencers serve as idealized behavioral models per social-

cognitive theory, leading followers to internalize their curated lives and therefore heightening expectations regarding looks, success, and happiness. (Robertson, 2025). An investigation indicated that upward social comparison induced by influencer exposure predicted envy and subsequent malaise among young adults. (Hudders, et al., 2023). Research from the University of Portsmouth highlighted "reinforcement of unrealistic beauty standards" and "fostering of a comparison culture" as primary themes in influencer-induced psychological harm.

Empirical studies on adolescent girls in the UK revealed that the perceived genuineness, relatability, and credibility of influencers significantly impact interventions targeting body image and mental health. These findings highlight that messages conveyed by influencers are not neutral; they influence how followers internalize norms, perceive their self-image, and make decisions regarding help-seeking behaviors. (Refer to intervention-based studies about body image and peer/influencer modeling.)

In addition to following effects, influencers have mental health difficulties themselves. Qualitative research reveals contradictions in influencer well-being: the dual obligations of exhibiting authenticity while embodying an idealized persona, the pressures of revenue generation and audience interaction, and the incessant requirement to provide captivating content. An interview with a micro-influencer disclosed:

“On Instagram, I began to compare myself to others and questioned why my photos received fewer likes.” I evaluate the material of other influencers and thereafter contemplate whether my audience would appreciate it or perceive me as lacking humor. ( Bolat, et al., 2018)

The pressures of affirmation, comparison, and audience scrutiny may result in anxiety, burnout, and emotional tiredness. (Brown, et al., 2025) The ecology is reciprocal: both followers and influencers function under mediated-perfection pressures.

The emergence of virtual or AI-driven influencers introduces more complexity to the situation. Digital personas are frequently crafted to achieve visual perfection, optimized by algorithms for virality and resistance to common human frailties. From a societal perspective, the emergence of hyper-real, stylized digital entities may further heighten standards of comparison, hence widening the gap between actual experience and mediated ideal. Furthermore, if audiences find it challenging to differentiate between virtual and human influencers, the dynamics of parasocial connections and perceived authenticity may change in unforeseen manners. These advances prompt essential inquiries: how do audiences understand and assimilate messages from humans compared to virtual influencers? What are the ramifications for identity development, trust, and mental well-being when the "influencer" is consciously artificial?

However, it is essential not to limit this discussion to solely adverse results. Influencers have been effectively utilized in initiatives for mental health promotion and literacy. For example, several mental health experts and content creators utilize social media to increase engagement, broaden their reach to younger demographics, and promote help-seeking behaviors.

These initiatives indicate that the influencer model when coupled with authenticity, transparency, and ethical communication can promote beneficial well-being outcomes. Thus, the objective is not to vilify all influencer material, but to identify which messaging styles, influencer traits, and platform formats promote good audience well-being, and which pose risks. Critical determinants for favorable results may encompass transparent sponsorship disclosures, material featuring authentic representations of both challenges and achievements, influencer authenticity and relatability, audience media literacy, and regulatory supervision.

The societal influence of influencer-driven idealized lifestyles on mental health is complex. Influencers can, on one hand, inspire, normalize help-seeking behaviors, and offer representation for historically marginalized groups; on the other hand, they may perpetuate unattainable standards, encourage constant upward comparison, and skew followers' perspectives of quotidian existence. As influencer communities grow, particularly with the incorporation of AI-driven personalities, the necessity for transparency, ethical design, digital literacy, and regulatory frameworks intensifies.

### **2.5.2 Exploitation of attention and emotional labor: followers' unpaid labor in influencer ecosystems**

Recent study on influencer ecosystems increasingly acknowledges that followers engage in unpaid labor through attention and emotional investment, benefiting influencers and platforms while remaining generally unrecognized and uncompensated. A primary component is the commodification of attention: followers allocate time, clicks, comments, shares, and emotional reactions that create value for influencers and the platforms they utilize. In a study of Iranian Instagram influencers, followers' likes, engagements, and comments are characterized as "free labor" that augment the influencer's visibility and monetization potential, but the followers receive no remuneration. (Mirghaderi, 2022)

Emotional and affective labor are crucial; followers participate in relational efforts by establishing parasocial relationships, offering emotional support, and engaging in identity construction concerning the influencer's brand persona. This relational labor sustains the influencer's "authenticity" and community, thereby facilitating monetization and brand partnerships. For instance, admirers of Chinese celebrities engage in affective labor by moderating comment sections, organizing fan clubs, and maintaining emotional connections, which are essential to the influencer's digital production process. (Wei, 2023)

Platforms and influencers depend on this free labor partly because it reduces expenses: instead of compensating followers for their attention or relational efforts, they integrate these into their revenue model. The notion of relational labor underscores that users who cultivate relationships that yield money for platforms do it without compensation. (Denegri-Knott, et al., 2024)

Moreover, the emotional labor of followers intersects with concerns of visibility, algorithmic principles, and commercialization. In digital environments, emotional labor denotes the enactment of emotions to conform to engagement standards, establish intimacy, and foster trust, which can be converted into commercial value. Followers engage emotionally (by replying, commenting, and

sharing) and frequently experience a sense of investment in the influencer's success or community; nonetheless, this effort remains unacknowledged labor. (Wang, Y., 2025)

Critical frameworks utilize Marxist analysis of labor alienation, wherein individuals' activities become detached from their essence, integrated into commercial institutions, and generate surplus value that they do not retain. Their attention and emotional engagement transform into commodities. (Annabell, et al., 2025)

In addition to these processes, a power asymmetry exists influencers and platforms possess structural advantages (algorithmic, economic, visibility-based), but followers are relegated to roles where their unpaid labor is undervalued. The conflation of consumption and production on social media results in followers serving as both audience and laborers, contributing to influencer capital without official remuneration. (Mirghaderi, 2022).

### **2.5.3 Trust erosion at scale: system-level implications when authenticity declines**

The erosion of perceived authenticity among social media influencers produces consequences that extend well beyond individual follower–creator relationships and into broader socio-technical and economic systems. Authenticity serves as an indicator that enables audiences to evaluate credibility, direct attention, and establish trust in mediated interactions; when this indicator diminishes, the immediate consequence is reduced trust in specific creators, while the broader effects reverberate through platform economics, information ecosystems, regulatory frameworks, and the development of social capital. Empirical and conceptual research on virtual and human influencers reveals that threats to perceived authenticity, stemming from disclosure failures, excessive commercialization, algorithmic mediation, or the emergence of highly refined virtual personas, undermine the processes by which influence translates into legitimacy and market value. (Hewapathirana, et al., 2024)

At the platform level, the erosion of authenticity diminishes engagement quality and modifies algorithmic feedback loops. Platforms capitalize on attention via engagement measures, which presume that interactions signify authentic interest and endorsement. When viewers see content as inauthentic or excessively commercialized, they may refrain from real participation (such as decreasing comments or shares), while algorithms that favor superficially high involvement continue to promote low-quality or manipulative content. This establishes a detrimental cycle: platforms persist in incentivizing sensational or sponsored content that yields immediate clicks but fosters long-term skepticism, undermining collective trust in platform-curated information and diminishing the platform's capacity to function as an unbiased mediator of public discourse. Research indicates that excessive endorsement and indiscriminate sponsored content are closely linked to diminished follower trust, resulting in adverse impacts on influencer credibility and campaign efficacy. (Cheah, et al., 2024)

The integrity of information and the proliferation of misinformation are critical systemic vulnerabilities exacerbated by a reduction in authenticity. Influencers have emerged as significant entities inside modern information networks; their apparent authenticity renders them compelling conduits for news, civic information, and health advice. As authenticity declines, particularly when

influencers neglect to reveal compensated partnerships or when AI-generated personas obscure the distinction between genuine and artificial agents, their function as trustworthy information intermediaries fade. The erosion of trust heightens the probability that audiences employ heuristics favoring sensationalism over information, or alternatively, disengage from digital public discourse. International organizations and media entities have cautioned that producers frequently lack established fact-checking protocols, so increasing the likelihood that influencer channels may serve as conduits for inaccuracies or disinformation, adversely affecting public comprehension and democratic discourse. (2024)

Economic ramifications function at several levels. A systemic decline in influencer authenticity diminishes return on investment for brands and marketers: consumers who are skeptical of endorsements are less inclined to convert, thereby reducing the commercial value of influencer-driven campaigns and compelling advertisers to reallocate budgets or insist on stricter verification and transparency measures. For creators, the erosion of authenticity results in winner-take-less dynamics: only a limited number of creators who can sustain genuine connections or exhibit stringent transparency can preserve lucrative brand collaborations, while the majority experience declining rates and engagement. At the platform level, diminished user trust can result in sluggish growth of advertising marketplaces and increased churn, thereby impacting the long-term viability of the platform's economic model. Recent investigations indicate that the impact of campaigns diminishes when people perceive manipulative intent in influencer content. (Ünalmiş, et al., 2024)

The social and cultural ramifications are as substantial. Authenticity fosters social capital networks of mutual recognition, rules of reciprocity, and collaborative meaning-making. When influencers are regarded as inauthentic, the groups that once coalesced around them disintegrate or devolve into transactional relationships. This undermines norms of reciprocal accountability, such as community member moderation, and diminishes the civic capacities that develop within dynamic online communities. Furthermore, the acceptance of synthetic or hyper-curated personas, such as virtual influencers, alters cultural expectations around openness and identification, prompting ethical inquiries into emotional abuse and the commodification of intimacy. Societies that increasingly depend on mediated trust for civic and economic interactions encounter a lack of shared epistemic moorings when indications of authenticity become unreliable. (Hewapathirana, et al., 2024)

Regulatory and governance forces constitute an additional dimension of system-level influence. As consumers and legislators recognize an increased risk of manipulation and misinformation, demands for regulation — including mandatory disclosure of sponsorships, labeling of AI-generated material, and enforcement of truth-in-advertising standards — escalate. These initiatives can realign incentives towards more openness; nevertheless, they also generate compliance costs and governance conflicts, such as those between platform self-regulation and governmental mandates. The formulation and structure of these restrictions will determine if authenticity can be institutionally reinforced or if regulation merely redirects manipulative practices to less observable avenues. Recent evaluations of virtual influencer ethics highlight the necessity for explicit

disclosure standards and consumer safeguards as the technical ability to replicate human authenticity advances. (Hewapathirana, et al., 2024)

Consequently, mitigation strategies must be systematically oriented. Technical remedies (algorithmic demotion of undisclosed sponsored content), governance strategies (mandatory disclosures and labeling of synthetic creators), market responses (brands demanding verifiable authenticity metrics), and cultural initiatives (media literacy and fact-checking training for creators and audiences) serve as complementary levers. Research indicates that the most effective approaches integrate transparency requirements with enhanced platform responsibility and investment in digital literacy, therefore reinstating trust signals and revitalizing the informational commons. Inaction, on the other hand, jeopardizes a prolonged secular fall in the credibility of influencer-mediated messaging and a corresponding deterioration of online civic engagement and market efficiency. (Cheah, et al., 2024)

### **2.5.4 Local and cultural dimensions: authenticity norms and influencer impact in non-Western contexts**

Cultural norms and local socio-political frameworks profoundly influence the production, perception, and utilization of authenticity by influencers in non-Western contexts. Authenticity is not a universal characteristic but a culturally influenced performance; what is deemed "genuine" or "relatable" in one context may be perceived as inauthentic or even unsuitable in another. Researchers focusing on Chinese platforms have highlighted that the indigenous history of celebrity culture (wanghong), platform capabilities, and regulatory context generate a unique logic of authenticity wherein expertise, aesthetic refinement, and market acumen coexist with elements of everyday life; foreign or Western interpretations of authenticity frequently misinterpret these hybrid performances. The cultural specificity is significant for audience reception and monetization strategies, as local audiences assess credibility through culturally relevant indicators (language, norms of modesty or self-presentation, demonstrations of local knowledge) that influence parasocial relationships differently than in Western contexts. (TSENG, et al., 2024)

In economies like India, authenticity engages with diverse social identities and aspirational consumption, complicating global influencer models. Indian audiences often assess authenticity through cultural alignment and moral integrity: influencers who adapt global trends, exhibit cultural awareness, or publicly fulfill community obligations generally garner greater confidence and enhanced engagement. Simultaneously, hybridity, integrating global purchasing signals with local traditions or vernacular expressions, can generate compelling authenticity, particularly when influencers effectively connect the aspirational with the achievable. Empirical research in India indicates that credibility is assessed not alone by perceived sincerity but also by observable cultural competency and indicators of social integration, such as involvement in local festivals, utilization of regional languages, or conformity with community values. These regionally resonant indicators can alleviate skepticism regarding overt commercialization, as long as endorsements align with existing societal norms. (Alam , et al., 2025)

Religious, political, and gender traditions additionally influence authenticity performances in the Middle East and Gulf regions. Studies on Gulf-based and Arab influences indicate that public expressions of identity—such as attire, familial responsibilities, and religious-cultural allusions are meticulously managed to preserve both commercial viability and social validity. Influencers often develop a measured authenticity that aligns contemporary consumer desires with traditional values, creating a type of "contextualized intimacy" that audiences perceive as credible due to its indication of conformity to local ethical standards. The political economy of visibility in these contexts imposes limitations: content that overtly contests social norms or governmental sensitivities is susceptible to censorship or reputational repercussions; thus, authenticity is frequently performed within stringent pragmatic confines that dictate what creators can credibly disclose. (Stokes, 2023)

The negotiation of authenticity by transnational and international influencers targeting local audiences is influenced by language, platform selection, and the "liability of foreignness." Research on international artists utilizing Chinese platforms, particularly Xiaohongshu, indicates that linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, and the capacity to adapt content to local formats are critical for perceived authenticity. An international influencer who exhibits genuine familiarity through culinary practices, cultural norms, and product expertise can transform their outsider status into a valuable authenticity; in contrast, superficial or tourist-like displays may be perceived as inauthentic or exploitative. These dynamics underscore the need of localization strategies: algorithmic visibility is inadequate without culturally resonant signaling that diminishes the perceived distance between the influencer and the audience. (TSENG, et al., 2024) (Yao, et al., 2025)

The relationship between commercialization and authenticity takes on unique forms influenced by socio-economic disparity and aspirational consumption, which in turn affect follower expectations. In numerous non-Western economies, influencers function within swiftly evolving consumer cultures where aspirational representation serves as a type of authenticity: demonstrating achievable upward mobility, practical product expertise, or culturally suitable luxury can foster trust. Research comparing Korea and Vietnam regarding sustainability-oriented influencers demonstrates that local interpretations of sincerity and expertise influence followers' acceptance of prosocial messaging or their suspicion of greenwashing; therefore, cultural frameworks defining genuine commitment to social causes vary and must be empirically established rather than presumed. These findings warn against universal models of authenticity in global efforts. (Le, et al., 2025)

The research on non-Western influencer authenticity is enhanced by qualitative, context-sensitive methodologies, such as ethnography, discourse analysis, and platform-specific content studies that uncover the micropolitics of performance. Case studies of Iranian and Arab influencers illustrate how local regulatory limitations, moral economies, and audience engagement collaboratively shape specific authenticity standards: followers may engage in supportive activities (comments, collective defense) that indicate communal authenticity, while creators navigate risk through nuanced disclosures and selective self-revelation. These micro practices illustrate that authenticity

is participatory and negotiated, arising from continuous feedback among producers, followers, and platform algorithms rather than merely from an individual creator's character. (Amini, 2025)

Policy and practice consequences arise from culturally informed assessments. Brands and platforms targeting non-Western markets must emphasize local research, allocate resources for native language moderation and verification, and facilitate creator education on culturally acceptable disclosure and ethical sponsorship methods. Neglecting local authenticity standards may result in missteps—campaigns that seem insensitive, inauthentic, or exploitative—and can undermine long-term trust. Scholars should refrain from universalizing Western notions of authenticity; rather, comparative and interdisciplinary research ought to delineate how authenticity operates as a multifaceted, negotiated, and culturally situated resource that both restricts and facilitates influencer impact across various socio-political contexts. (Hu, et al., 2025)

## **2.6. Case Studies: Human and AI-Generated Influencers Across Cultures and Their Societal Effects**

An examination of influencer authenticity necessitates the analysis of real-world case studies that illustrate the functioning of both human and AI-generated influencers within various cultural, societal, and legislative frameworks. These instances underscore the increasing global impact of digital personas and the intricate manner in which they influence views of truth, identity, and societal values. This section examines case studies from several regions, including Iran, the United States, Europe, and East Asia, to investigate the manifestation of authenticity in both human and artificial influencers, as well as the wider societal implications of their actions.

**Human Influencers: Authenticity, Deception, and Cultural Identity:** Human influencers have historically prevailed in digital environments, serving as cultural intermediates that integrate personal narratives with commercial messaging. However, their authenticity is frequently scrutinized, particularly when financial motivations compromise perceived integrity. The situation of Liver King (Brian Johnson) in the United States exemplifies this difficulty clearly. Following the establishment of a multimillion-dollar company advocating a "ancestral lifestyle," he confessed to clandestinely use anabolic steroids. This disclosure resulted in extensive reaction, diminished credibility, and public discussions regarding the validity of fabrication in fitness culture. The Fyre Festival fiasco (2017) highlighted how influencer-generated enthusiasm, lacking transparency, might deceive customers and undermine public confidence in influencer marketing. In a distinct cultural setting, Iranian influencers exhibit a complex interplay between self-expression, authenticity, and societal standards. Sadaf Beauty (Sadaf Masaeli), an Iranian beauty influencer residing overseas, exemplifies how diaspora producers reconcile traditional ideals with Western aesthetics to engage varied audiences. In contrast, Aisan Eslami, an Iranian male influencer, has encountered criticism for disseminating content viewed as perpetuating gender stereotypes illustrating how influencers can both contest and uphold sociocultural limits. Nabaut Etmnan, an Iranian content creator, exemplifies the new breed of socially aware influencers who employ humor and relatability to uphold credibility in constrained media landscapes. These

instances illustrate that in Iran, authenticity transcends self-presentation, encompassing survival amid censorship, gendered expectations, and official surveillance.

Worldwide, human influencers reveal weaknesses in digital ethics and mental health. The Belle Gibson case in Australia, in which a fitness influencer falsified a cancer diagnosis, exemplifies the perils of deceptive narratives and their capacity to jeopardize the health decisions of followers. Collectively, ongoing exposure to idealized influencer lives exacerbates anxiety, despair, and self-comparison among young viewers. Research published in the *Journal of Youth Studies* (2023) indicates that influencer culture can exacerbate "performance pressure" by associating authenticity with perpetual visibility and perfection.

**AI-Created Influencers: The Contradiction of Artificial Authenticity:** A new category of virtual influencers (VIs) has evolved alongside the human influencer economy synthetic identities engineered to replicate emotion, relatability, and human-like behavior. Digital entities like Lil Miquela, Shudu Gram, Noonouri, and Imma have garnered millions of fans and profitable brand partnerships. Their makers frequently characterize them as the "future of digital storytelling," however the essential paradox resides in their manufactured authenticity. Their feelings, ideas, and values, being the result of algorithms and creative teams, are preordained, which raises ethical issues of transparency and dishonesty.

Lil Miquela, created by the technology firm Brud, participates in social justice dialogues, obscuring the distinction between genuine action and commercial programming. Shudu Gram, a CGI model conceived by a white photographer to depict a Black woman, ignited fervent discourse over cultural appropriation and the ethics of representation. Mia Zelu, an AI-generated influencer who gained notoriety for her realistic appearance at Wimbledon 2024, illustrated how viewers can forge emotional connections with virtual entities despite being fully cognizant of their artificiality. These instances demonstrate that whereas virtual influencers can represent idealized diversity or perfection, they may concurrently undermine the concept of authenticity by substituting genuine experience with algorithmic creation.

Furthermore, the emergence of deepfake influencers, exemplified by the "Chloe Johnson" account, which employed AI-generated faces superimposed on actual models' bodies illustrates the more sinister aspects of AI influence. These instances emphasize identity theft, consent breaches, and digital exploitation, highlighting the pressing necessity for legislative frameworks to safeguard persons from AI-induced manipulation.

**Societal and Cultural Consequences:** The societal effect of both human and AI-generated influencers extends beyond marketing analytics; it directly impacts trust, identity, and social well-being. In Western environments, crises of authenticity frequently pertain to commercialization and influencer disclosure, whereas in Iran and other non-Western nations, they are interwoven with cultural expression, censorship, and moral demands. The comparison indicates that authenticity is not universal; rather, it is socially produced and perceived within cultural narratives.

AI influencers complicated human engagement with technology. As viewers interact with synthetic

personalities, they may normalize emotional bonds with artificial agents, thereby redefining empathy and social connection. The Journal of Interactive Marketing (2024) observes that although AI influencers might enhance engagement, they concurrently diminish emotional depth and social trust, resulting in what experts' term "synthetic intimacy."

These global case studies collectively demonstrate that the authenticity paradox reconciling truth and performance endures in both human and artificial realms. The distinction between the authentic and the manufactured becomes progressively obscured, whether via influencer deceit, computer mimicry, or cultural negotiation. Comprehending this phenomenon is crucial for assessing the impact of influencer marketing on social values, emotional well-being, and ethical accountability in the digital era.

## **2.6.1 Human influencer case studies (global & regional)**

### ***2.6.1.1 Brian Johnson, also known as "Liver King"***

Johnson established a substantial social media presence by promoting a hyper-masculine "ancestral" lifestyle, which includes raw organ meats, pronounced musculature, cold exposure, and outdoor training. He asserted that his physique and health originated from this primitive diet and lifestyle, rather than from medicines. He garnered millions of fans and established a profitable supplement brand promoting a philosophy of living "naturally" strong. For instance, "Indeed, I have utilized steroids and currently, I am undergoing steroid treatment, supervised and regulated by a qualified hormone specialist." (Smit, 2022)

The story suggests that significant gains can be attained only through diet and lifestyle, while he was utilizing anabolic steroids and human growth hormone. Leaked emails revealed expenditures of approximately US \$11,000 monthly on steroid usage. (Cooper, 2025)

He promoted extreme dietary and lifestyle assertions (raw liver, testicles, organ meats) as fundamental to his appearance and brand, potentially encouraging followers to engage in hazardous behaviors themselves.

Following the revelation of his steroid use and the exposure of his fraudulent "natural" assertion, he faced significant public and media reaction. The article "Fake Fitness Influencers: The Secrets and Lies Behind the World's Most Envied Physiques" (The Guardian, May 2025) utilizes him as a prominent example.

In addition to his individual credibility, his brand and the concept of "ancestral living" as promoted have come under examination; adherents may see deception, and the wider influencer fitness domain faces reputational jeopardy.



*Figure 3 - Liver King*

### **2.6.1.2 Belle Gibson**

Belle Gibson is one of the most famous examples of fake authenticity and lying in the world of wellness influencers. Gibson, an Australian social media star, gained a huge following by saying that she had survived fatal brain cancer using food, natural medicines, and lifestyle modifications instead of traditional medication. Her narrative of "healing naturally" got a lot of attention across the world because she said she was living proof of how well alternative medicines work. Using this made-up story, Gibson created a successful wellness app called The Whole Pantry and a best-selling cookbook that made her look even more like a beacon of hope and honesty in the wellness world. (Murphy, 2019)

But in 2015, Gibson officially revealed that she had never had cancer, which showed that the whole basis of her brand was a lie. The news horrified her fans and the general public since it became evident that her story, which had inspired and changed the lives of many, was completely made up. The WHO magazine study found that Gibson's assertions that she gave a lot of her revenues to charity were also incorrect. This added a layer of financial dishonesty to her moral wrongdoing (Murphy, 2019). Her lies had serious effects on her health and morals. Gibson put people who were sick and vulnerable at risk by saying that nutrition and alternative medicine may work as good substitutes for traditional cancer therapy. Her messages suggested that human willpower, nutritional "purity," and natural medicines might take the place of scientifically proven treatments. This is a very dangerous and misleading story. This kind of fake authenticity took advantage of people's worries and hopes for treatment outside of traditional medicine, making it hard to tell the difference between inspiration and exploitation.

The Federal Court of Australia convicted Belle Gibson guilty of misleading and fraudulent behavior under Australian consumer law in 2017. The court said that she lied about both her condition and the money she gave to charity. Because of this, she had to pay a fine of about A\$410,000 for her dishonest actions ( Marris, 2017). This judicial decision was a big deal because it showed how crucial it is to have more responsibility and rules in the health and influencer businesses.

Gibson's case revealed the darker side of influencer culture: the monetization of authenticity and the moral void that may occur when personal branding takes precedence over ethical integrity. Her

actions hurt her own reputation and hurt faith in the larger wellness movement, where being honest and open is important for keeping the public's trust. Belle Gibson is an extreme but revealing case for a thesis on authenticity in social media influence. In this case, fake authenticity, high-stakes health hazards, and moral failure all came together, leaving a lasting mark on the digital wellness scene.



Figure 4 - Belle Gibson

### **2.6.1.3 Babydoll Archi / Archita Phukan (India)**

The story of Babydoll Archi, or Archita Phukan, shows a very bad side of the culture of digital influencers and how AI is being used to make images without permission. A real woman from Assam, India named Archita Phukan fell prey to a popular online deepfake fraud when her real photos were altered to create a fake influencer persona called "Babydoll Archi." The fake identity gained thousands of followers on social media and even made money through corporate partnerships, donations, and subscriptions to sexual content, none of which involved or helped Phukan herself. Hindustan Times said that an Assam-based guy was detained for making false social media pages using AI-generated and edited pictures of Phukan. This turned her likeness into a digital product that he could sell without her permission. ( Purkayastha, 2025)

People on social media started to notice problems with Babydoll Archi's online persona, which led to the case coming to light. The influencer's tweets showed a beautiful lifestyle that was supposedly situated in the US, but followers started to doubt her authenticity because of the way she spoke, the places she talked about, and the pictures she posted. As the story went on, investigations showed that the whole identity had been made by utilizing AI technologies to change Phukan's real photos, changing things like his face, backdrop, and even making films that seemed authentic. The Economic Times said that the person who did it had painstakingly established a digital identity that mixed real images of Phukan with fake ones. This made a deepfake influencer who engaged with followers and promoted bought material under false pretenses (2025).

The potential to make fake people using deep learning and generative technologies is becoming a bigger challenge in the world of influencers and AI. This case is different from other influencer controversies because it involves taking advantage of a genuine person's identity without their permission. There are serious ethical problems here: Phukan's likeness was stolen, her digital identity was turned into a product, and her reputation was put at risk without her knowledge. It also shows how scary it is that AI-driven manipulation might make it hard to tell what's genuine

and what's fake, what's true and what's made up. The Babydoll Archi case has a lot of legal and moral consequences. Indian officials moved fast and charged the criminal with identity theft and cybercrime. But the event shows how present laws don't do enough to deal with AI-generated deepfakes and safeguard those who are victims of digital impersonation. It also raises important concerns about who is responsible when algorithms and human intent come together to make deceit in the age of generative AI.

From a cultural and social point of view, this example shows a new level of fake authenticity in influencer marketing. Followers thought the "Babydoll Archi" persona was real, which shows how easily polished, AI-made looks can fool people. It shows how easily people can be taken advantage of online and how fragile internet trust is. This episode is very important for a thesis on authenticity in influencer culture. It shows how AI may make people think they are real when they are not, which can lead to lying and taking away people's freedom and dignity. The Babydoll Archi case is both a warning and a turning point. It calls for a rethinking of moral and legal standards in the fast-changing area where AI, identity, and influencer media meet.



*Figure 5 - Babydoll Archi*

### **2.6.1.4 Kendall Jenner – Pepsi ad fiasco (2017)**

The 2017 Kendall Jenner and Pepsi ad that caused a lot of criticism is a good example of how influencer marketing can be risky for brands and shows a lack of cultural understanding. Pepsi released a short film-style ad called "Live for Now Moments Anthem" in April 2017. In it, Jenner leaves a photoshoot to join a diverse group of young protesters. In the end, she walks up to a police officer and hands him a can of Pepsi, which makes everyone smile and cheer. (Izadi, 2017)

From the start, the campaign wanted to use themes of youth, unity, and social activity to make the soda brand a symbol of peace and harmony. But the ad was quickly received with a lot of criticism for making light of important social justice movements, including Black Lives Matter, and for showing a rich celebrity as a savior in a protest world full of misery and institutional injustice. (Griffiths, 2017)

People and activists quickly pointed out how tone-deaf the imagery was. It was compared to a widely shared photo of protester Ieshia Evans confronting police in Baton Rouge in 2016, and many thought Jenner's involvements and the simple solution of handing over a Pepsi can were very

insensitive. One well-known group that fights for social justice tweeted, "Stop taking our pain and struggle @Pepsi @KendallJenner." ( Levine, 2017)

The criticism was quick and strong. The ad was taken down within 24 hours, and Pepsi apologized in public, saying they "clearly missed the mark" and had "halted any further rollout." For Kendall Jenner, the repercussions included public embarrassment and harsh criticism. Later that year, she cried on air and said she felt "so stupid" and apologized for hurting anyone. ( Martin, 2017)

This event shows a lot of important variables from the point of view of your thesis on the ethics of marketing and the authenticity of influencers. First, even a celebrity influencer like Jenner can't protect a campaign from losing credibility if the message doesn't match what people expect from someone who is honest, knowledgeable of the situation, and socially aware. The illusion of authenticity here, "Kendall Jenner as a socially conscious activist in the street" fell apart when others criticized it. Secondly, the risk of cultural insensitivity is stark: the ad exploited protest iconography and social struggle as aesthetic props to promote soft drinks, which many viewed exploitative rather than inspiring. Third, the harm to Jenner's reputation spread to the brand and the larger influencer marketing ecosystem. The event became a warning about what might happen when identity, purpose, and audience don't align. Finally, the case shows how people's expectations are changing: influencers and brands who talk about social issues ought to do so with care, connection, and respect, not just as marketing gimmicks.

In short, the Pepsi-Kendall Jenner ad disaster is a great example of how campaigns lead by influencers can go horribly wrong when they aren't real, don't take cultural context into account, or don't think about the moral side of their messages. It is a great example of how trust, image, and moral alignment are very important in current influencer marketing.



*Figure 6 - Kendall Jenner – Pepsi ad fiasco*

#### **2.6.1.5 Logan Paul, American YouTuber**

In December 2017, American YouTuber Logan Paul caused a worldwide uproar when he posted a video taken in Japan's Aokigahara Forest, which is sadly known as the "Suicide Forest." Paul was one of the most popular creators on YouTube at the time, with more than 15 million subscribers and a brand based on funny, high-energy, and adventurous video. Paul and his buddies found the

body of a man who had killed himself in the Japanese Suicide Forest, which is what the video was about. Paul filmed close-ups of the body (partially obscured) and responded with shock and laughing instead of approaching the situation with respect and seriousness. The video rapidly went viral, getting millions of views before it was taken down. However, it also drew a lot of criticism from all over the world.

The response was quick and strong. People who watched, mental health advocates, and other creators all criticized Paul for using a suicide victim to get views and attention. Many people said he was making fun of human sorrow. Mental health professionals told ABC News that the movie was "extremely insensitive" and could bring considerable grief to people who are already vulnerable. Many people thought Paul's actions were a good illustration of how being famous on social media can change how people think about right and wrong, with creators putting shock value and engagement ahead of empathy and ethics. The anger went to more than just social media; it also made it into the news and prompted statements from mental health groups. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and other groups utilized the event to urge people to report and talk about suicide in a responsible way. Time Magazine said that the controversy showed "the darker side of influencer culture," where the relentless need for viral material can make artists do things that aren't right. (abc news, 2018)

Logan Paul took down the video and apologized on Twitter, saying he "didn't do it for views" but wanted to "raise awareness about suicide." This came as more people criticized him. People thought his first response was defensive and tone-deaf, though. A few days later, he posted a video in which he apologized and said he was sorry for making "a huge mistake." The results came quickly. YouTube stopped paying him for ads for a while, took him off its "Preferred" advertising program, and stopped planned initiatives that would have included him. A few sponsors and commercial partners also cut connections.

The scandal was a turning point in the conversation about holding influencers responsible. It showed how trying to get famous online can make people less caring and how powerful influencers can change how people think by how they act. Paul subsequently stopped writing for a while, but when he came back, he posted more serious things and worked to raise awareness about suicide prevention. Still, the 2017 Aokigahara event is one of the most well-known examples of insensitivity in digital culture and a warning about the moral duties of material creators.



*Figure 7 - Logan Paul*

### **2.6.1.6 James Charles, Beauty influencer**

James Charles, who was formerly known as a groundbreaking beauty influencer and the first male face of makeup, had a big reputation problem starting in early 2021. In February, a TikTok user said that Charles had sent sexual messages to a 16-year-old. Charles first said he wasn't trying to groom or prey on the teen because she said she was 18. (Calvario, 2021)

Charles posted a 14-minute YouTube video on April 1, 2021, called "Holding Myself Accountable." In it, he revealed that he had sent flirty communications to two people who turned out to be juveniles. "I asked them how old they were, and they said '18.' Later, I found out they were 16," he added. (Melloy , 2021)

After these revelations, the effects were quick and serious. Morphe, the makeup brand, said that they and James Charles would "end our business relationship and stop selling the Morphe × James Charles product line." (Nesvig, 2021)

YouTube, on the other hand, kicked Charles out of its Partner Program. This meant that he couldn't make money from ads on his channel while the investigations were going on. This series of events shows how an influencer's reputation can fall apart when they break important moral lines, even if they have built it up through trust, relatability, and aspirational art. Charles's brand was based on being open, welcoming, and connecting with people on a personal level, but the accusations showed that this image didn't reflect some of his private contacts. He apologized in public for this gap, saying, "As an adult, it's my job and my duty to check who I'm talking to." I can't blame anyone except myself for this.



Figure 8 -James Charles

### **2.6.1.7 Sadaf Beauty (Sadaf Masaeli): Iranian diaspora influencer**

Sadaf Masaeli is now a well-known name in the beauty-influencer world, especially among Iranian producers who work in the global English-language digital industry. She runs her business from San Francisco and creates a brand that includes professional makeup artistry, lifestyle content, and travel-related images. Favikon says that she has more than 4.3 million followers across all her social media accounts, with Instagram being the main place where her fans interact with her. (Castany, 2025). Her Instagram account (sadaf\_beauty) is a key part of her online identity. It has beauty instructions, product reviews, and stylized photos that show off her cultural background and her desire to be successful throughout the world.

Several things are affecting her career path: the growth of beauty commerce in Iran and among Persian-language audiences living outside of Iran; the growing availability of global cosmetic products; and the readiness of influencers to use bilingual presentation and transnational aesthetics. A study of Iranian beauty bloggers says that Sadaf is one of the most influential people, with more than 4 million followers on her account in 2022. The account's content approach includes high-quality images, consistent branding, and a sense of professional training, she is often said to have taken makeup courses abroad which makes her more credible as a beauty teacher, not just a lifestyle avatar. ( Elmi, 2022)

Her involvement in big beauty industry events is more proof that she is a global influencer. For instance, she participated in a masterclass stage at the "Beautycon" convention in Los Angeles with well-known international celebrities. (Midwood, 2019). One talent agency profile says that in 2019 she was "crowned by Forbes as the #1 most influential beauty influencer of luxury cosmetics and the 2nd most influential beauty influencer in the world, right under James Charles."

Masaeli's brand shows how authenticity is built in the world of global influencers. Her training story shows that she knows what she's talking about, and her lifestyle vlog components and Persian-language captions make her seem like a real person. Her Iranian heritage lets her fill a gap between Persian-speaking viewers and the larger English-speaking beauty culture. At the same time, the high production qualities and brand alignments (with multinational cosmetic brands) make people wonder about the balance between being relatable and being aspirational detached. In other words, does the curated, polished look make her less relatable to the "everyday" follower? 2018 research of Iranian beauty bloggers indicates that although these influencers offer useful tips and suggestions, the aspirational nature of their presentation may diminish the perception of authenticity associated with "I could do that myself." ( Elmi, 2022)

Masaeli is a good example of how influencers make money by working with brands, using affiliate links, and making tutorials that gently change how people act as consumers. Her dual identity having Iranian roots but working in the global beauty economy allows her to work across language and cultural barriers, which increases her reach and brand value. Influencer-ranking sites say she is one of Iran's top beauty influencers. For example, "Top 1,000 beauty Instagram influencers in Iran" puts @sadaf\_beauty in the top tier. (2025)

Sadaf Masaeli's case exemplifies the interaction of authenticity, branding, and cross-cultural agency within influencer marketing. Her success demonstrates how influencers in non-Western or diaspora contexts may leverage global platforms; yet it also necessitates a critical examination of whose authenticity is showcased and how financial interests impact presentation. Her brand prompts inquiry about the implications of an influencer transforming into a significant conduit for global cosmetic commerce, particularly regarding the relational trust of audiences seeking both counsel and identity.

She shows that authenticity is not just "being real," but rather something that is deliberately built through training, visual aesthetics, brand alignment, and positioning for certain audiences. Her

cross-cultural perspective makes you think about how authenticity is negotiated when influencers work in both local and global markets.

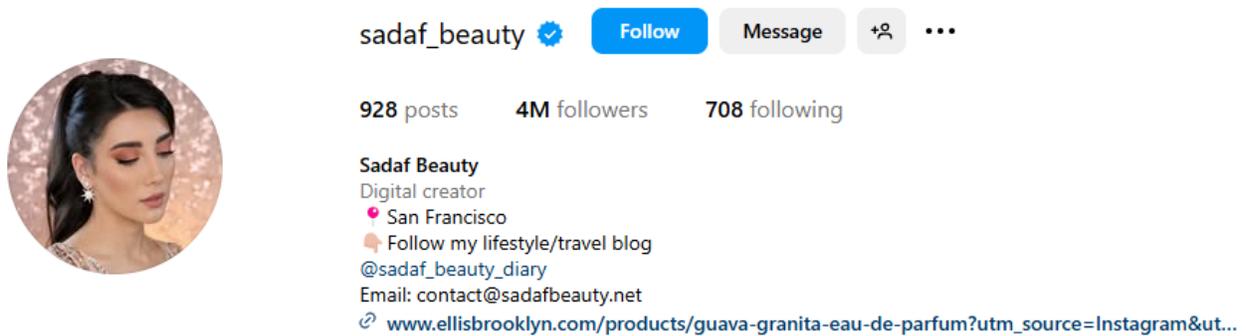


Figure 9 - Sadaf Beauty

### 2.6.1.8 Nabaut Etminan (*nabauti*) — Iranian creator

Nabaut Etminan is an Iranian-language content producer whose Instagram account, '@nabauti,' has a lot of followers (around 1.9 million, according to Hype Auditor) and a high engagement rate (about 9.56% at the time of the analysis). Her bio says she lives in Canada (Vancouver) and has a link to her business, "Daroon.me." The choice of diaspora location and multilingual presentation (Persian + potentially English) depicts her as both rooted in Iranian culture and part of a global digital ecosystem. (HypeAuditor, 2025)

Her posts are mostly about her own thoughts, her lifestyle, and themes of self-improvement, relationships, and being real. The profile description "I write, I read, I create, because everything in this world holds a story" shows that the person is a creator who values stories, reflection, and connection. The high engagement rate shows that her audience is actively interacting with her content, which shows that she has more than just a lot of followers. There are many reasons why Nabaut is important in the Iranian digital influencer ecosystem. First, her profile shows how creators in the Iranian-language sector can create significant followings and get people to interact with them, even though there are rules and cultural barriers that make it hard for female influencers to be seen in public in Iran. Her status as a diaspora and her indirect connection to Iran provide her some creative flexibility that creators inside Iran may not have. Second, her themes of self-reflection, lifestyle, and personal improvement fit with the authenticity standards that audiences value: she seems like someone who is sharing her life, thoughts, and feelings rather than just selling things. That makes her a more important person since her authenticity is what makes her so appealing.

In terms of cultural resonance, Nabaut's work connects Iranian cultural sensibilities: language, references, aesthetics with more global influencer tropes: storytelling, lifestyle photography, personal brand. This dichotomy puts her in a unique position: she appeals to Iranian-language audiences looking for producers who "get us" culturally, while also delivering high standards of lifestyle, self-expression, and mobility: living abroad, starting a business. This helps explain why

her engagement numbers are high: people often feel like the creator's work speaks to their own experiences or goals in a way that is relevant to their culture.

Nabaut Etminan's presence has a number of effects on society. She is helping to change how Iranian men and women think about self-presentation, digital identity, and how they buy things. She affects how her followers see their own potential by providing tales and lifestyle content that talk about ambition, self-reflection, and moving across the world. For example, she talks about living abroad, operating a business, and being yourself. Also, because there is so much contact, the sense of community and relatability seems strong, followers leave comments, think about her stories, and perhaps use elements of her story in their own life. In this way, she is an agent of change in the influencer world: she goes from being solely aspirational and glamorous to being more authentic and grounded in a local cultural register.

Nabaut Etminan is an example of a type of authenticity that is not just based on brands, but also on culture, stories, and interactions with the audience. Her success indicates that being "real" isn't the only thing that matters in influencer marketing. You also need to be culturally relevant, personally expressive, and good with technology. Her situation makes me think about how authenticity is built (via storytelling, consistency, and audience involvement) and how it works in markets outside of the West when cultural circumstances are different. It also makes us wonder if authenticity can be turned into a product and how creators may make money while still being true to themselves. In short, Nabaut's profile is a great example of how culturally rooted influencer authenticity may affect modern digital marketing.



*Figure 10 - Nabaut Etminan*

### ***2.6.1.9 Aisan Eslami (Aisan Eslami Chalandar)***

Aisan Eslami, whose Instagram handle is "@aisan\_eslami," is an Iranian-born social media influencer with 14.5 million followers whose rise to fame raises questions about authenticity, cultural norms, influencer responsibility, and the effects of social media on society today. He has a lot of followers on Instagram in the Iranian language, and his photos show off a life of luxury, with costly cars, workout routines, and trips overseas. Publicly available analytics suggest that his account gets a lot of attention and interaction (for example, aggregated metrics show that he has millions of followers), which shows that he is a major regional influencer.

Eslami's public persona is a mix of a "rags-to-riches" story, going from a poor upbringing in Iran to a life of global travel and luxury and a forceful, sometimes controversial public voice. Younger Iranian-language viewers that want aspirational images and a break from their everyday lives like the way he tells stories and shows things. However, Eslami's issue is especially noteworthy from the point of view of social responsibility and influencer ethics because there are proven problems with what he has said in public. In June 2025, the Iranian civic group MeToo Iran started a petition against Eslami's comments in a video on the arrest of Iranian athletes in South Korea who were suspected of gang-rape. The petition says that Eslami used rude and degrading language toward the survivor and made male sexual violence seem normal by saying things like, "So what if their urges kicked in? Should a few young men from our country get life sentences for that?" He "weaponized his platform to reinforce a culture of silence, impunity, and victim-blaming." (Me Too, 2025)

A Reddit post also talks about video evidence that Eslami supposedly defended rape, called for violence against female influencers, and bragged about being immune because of how many followers he had and where he lived. (r/korea, 2025) These arguments show how the behavior of influencers goes against social standards, especially in the Iranian-language digital sphere, where gender norms, power dynamics, and cultural expectations are all important.

Theoretically, Eslami presents a complex example of the construction and contestation of influencer authenticity. His success depends on showing a macho, assertive, and aspirational identity based on self-improvement, luxury, moving to a new country, and visible achievement. On the other hand, his loud and occasionally rude personality makes people wonder where the line is between performance and authenticity: how much of the character is real and how much is made up for aesthetic and commercial reasons? Furthermore, when that persona includes assertions that normalize detrimental gender stereotypes or trivialize sexual violence, the perceived authenticity is called into question, thereby undermining the trust between the influencer and the audience.

Eslami is noteworthy from a cultural point of view since he works at the crossroads of Iranian-language audiences who may value local cultural signifiers, language, and connections to homeland and global influencer aesthetics: luxury automobiles, overseas travel, and English-language tags. That dual positioning increases his reach, but it also comes with risks. People may applaud his achievement, but they may also criticize the gap between his idealized image and the promises he makes about how things should be. The controversies imply that his impact transcends just commercial lifestyle norms, actively shaping broader societal attitudes, especially with gender, sexuality, power, and diaspora identity.

Aisan Eslami shows the complicated dynamics of authenticity, influence and accountability. His situation illustrates the utilization of authenticity, aspirational biography + evident affluence + engaged following, and its potential to fail when moral or normative standards are breached. He also shows how influencers in non-Western or diaspora settings both reflect and change cultural norms, not just about lifestyle and consumption, but also about social behavior, power dynamics, and identity. Ultimately, Eslami's influence prompts contemplation on the notion that authenticity

serves as both a performative currency and a domain of risk, particularly when influencer message crosses with delicate societal matters.



*Figure 11 - Aisan Eslami*

### **2.6.1.10 Chiara Ferragni (Italy)**

Chiara Ferragni is one of the most important people in the global influencer economy. She is also a great illustration of how digital entrepreneurship can work with personal authenticity and luxury branding. Ferragni was born in Cremona, Italy, in 1987. She started off as a fashion blogger in 2009 with *The Blonde Salad*, a website that swiftly grew into a lifestyle brand on many platforms (Marwick, 2015). In the last ten years, she has gone from being an independent blogger to a well-known entrepreneur, designer, and social media star. By 2025, she will have more than 30 million Instagram followers. Her online persona and business skills have made her a cultural icon and a case study in how authenticity, narrative, and branding come together in influencer marketing. Ferragni's popularity comes from her ability to tell a story about herself that changes over time and combines being relatable with having big dreams. In the beginning of *The Blonde Salad*, she used candid photos to show off her clothes, trips, and daily life, letting her followers into her personal world. As she became more popular, her content got more professional and better produced, but she kept a personal tone by discussing important events in her life, like her romance with rapper Fedez and the births of their children. This constant sharing of personal information, along with her technique of narrating stories through pictures, let her followers feel a strong parasocial connection with her, making her seem both approachable and aspirational (Abidin, 2021).

Ferragni's entrepreneurial authenticity is one of the most important things she has done for influencer culture. She can keep her sense of self while making money off of her image. She started her own fashion line, the Chiara Ferragni Collection, in 2013, turning her online celebrity into a real brand. Ferragni didn't separate her identity as an "influencer" and a "businesswoman." Instead, she blurred the lines between the two and made her business operations seem like a natural part of her life. This integration of her personal life and her brand made her more trustworthy: people saw her commercial activities as real expressions of her creativity instead of opportunistic sponsorships (Marwick, 2015). Her businesses also showed how to be authentic as an influencer by being

transparent – she often posts behind-the-scenes content from fashion shows, family life, and brand collaborations to keep up the idea of being open.

There have been problems with Ferragni's approach to honesty and trust. Because she is so well-known, people are really interested in her, especially in Italy, where there is still a lot of friction between traditional celebrity culture and new internet fame. When she shared her political views or messages about social justice, for example, her posts sometimes prompted debate about the right balance between promoting a business and expressing herself. But her smart communication typically lessens blowback by using the same emotional and aesthetic tones to frame personal and sponsored content. This ability to keep things consistent in her personal, professional, and promotional lives is a key part of her long-term success and how honest people think she is (Laurell & Sandström, 2023).

Culturally, Ferragni embodies a novel model of feminine empowerment in the digital era: a woman who capitalizes on self-expression while contesting the dichotomy between authenticity and commodification. Her instance also shows how national identity and global internet influence can work together. Ferragni's Italian heritage is still a big part of her brand, even though she works in a globalized fashion system. This is clear in her aesthetics, her brand collaborations with Italian luxury brands, and the way she often talks about Italian culture and values in her content. This hybrid posture lets her reach both local and international audiences, showing how influencer culture is becoming more global through an Italian lens (Duffy, , 2017).



Figure 12 - chiara ferragni

## 2.6.2 AI / Virtual / Deepfake influencer case studies (global & regional)

### 2.6.2.1 Lil Miquela (Miquela Sousa): Early virtual influencer

Lil Miquela (actual name Miquela Sousa) is one of the first and most famous "virtual influencers." She is a computer-generated character made by the Los Angeles-based business Brud in 2016. Her Instagram name, @lilmiquela, tells the story of a made-up life: she's a 19-year-old Brazilian American model, influencer, and singer who posts selfies, travels, shares her political views, works with high-end brands, and supports social causes. For example, she was part of a takeover of a Prada fashion campaign and has been in a lot of fashion editorials. Her presence challenges conventional notions of authenticity, influence, and celebrity. (Drenten, et al., 2020) (Kugler, Logan ;, 2023)

Lil Miquela came along at a time when influencer culture and digital identity were coming together in new ways, both chronologically and culturally. DMS Insights says she came onto the scene in 2016 and soon gained millions of Instagram followers and starred in ad campaigns. The article "Celebrity 2.0: Lil Miquela and the Rise of a Virtual Star System" by Jenna Drenten and Gillian Brooks is one of the first academic studies of her case. It puts her in a "virtual star system" where the persona is not an agent and the line between a real celebrity and a digital avatar is not clear. (Drenten, et al., 2020)

One of the main issues that Lil Miquela raises is the need for honesty and openness in influencer marketing. If an influencer is completely manufactured and managed, how can audiences genuinely ascribe "real" authenticity or personal narrative to them? Drenten and Brooks contend that the virtual star system highlights the discrepancies between reality and artifice, specifically, what significance does "authenticity" hold when the influencer is a fabricated brand asset rather than a genuine individual? (Drenten, et al., 2020)

Brands are working with virtual influencers more because they can manage every facet of the persona, like how they look, how they talk, how they act, and when they post. This lowers one of the dangers that come with using actual influencers, which is that they can act in ways that are unexpected or generate scandals. Lil Miquela makes things even more complicated by saying that she is involved in social activity. She has posted messages in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, seemed to start advocacy posts, and put herself out there as a progressive voice, even if she is fully created. This mix of fashion, activism, and virtuality presents new problems. For instance, is activism real or just for show? Is the story real or just a marketing technique when a brand-controlled avatar makes a position in public? According to feedback from Moody College of Communication, when virtual influencers show emotion or are in mixed-reality situations (like genuine images with real people or real things), people may feel a "uncanny valley" of trust and emotional connection. (Young, Chloe ;, 2023)

Lil Miquela's example makes us think about many different aspects of how it affects marketing and storytelling. First, she shows how influencer marketing is changing from people to digital assets. This makes us wonder what people are really buying into when they follow an influencer. Are they following a person, a brand, or an algorithm? Second, she is a test case for how disclosure rules need to change. Traditional influencer rules assume that a real person is recommending items, but virtual influencers make this more complicated because the persona is basically a brand. Third, her existence shows how important stories are: she's not just a CGI avatar posting ads; she has a story, character traits, and relationships with other people on social media. The storyline part makes people more interested, but it also hides the reality that the "life" is scripted and controlled. Drenten and Brooks characterize this as an aspect of the "techno-human cultural intermediary" phenomena. (Drenten, et al., 2020)

There are big effects on authenticity in influencer marketing: Lil Miquela challenges the idea that authenticity must originate from "real lived experience" or "human authenticity." Instead, she says that what people respond to can be a consistent, relatable identity, even if it was made digitally. But this change is risky: if people find out that the brand is fake or if the brand-asset nature becomes

too clear, trust may go down. Also, since the influencer is really the property of a brand or organization, questions of openness, disclosure, agency, and ethics become very important.

In short, Lil Miquela shows how current influencer marketing can tell stories, work with brands, and get people involved in culture, but it also raises deep concerns about what it means to be "influential," what it means to be "authentic," and what it means to be "disclosed." For scholars of digital marketing, consumer culture, and influencer authenticity, her case is pivotal as it contests the foundational assumptions of influence theory: that followers resonate with a human agent, that authenticity derives from shared experience, and that influence is contingent upon trust among real individuals. Lil Miquela makes us think about what happens to authenticity when an influencer is a brand's digital invention. What happens when a programmable avatar is used for protest, fashion, and business?



*Figure 13 - Lil Miquela*

### **2.6.2.2 Mia Zelu**

Mia Zelu is one of the most recent and shocking examples of how AI-generated influencers are starting to blur the lines between truth, entertainment, and digital fraud. During the Wimbledon tennis championships in July 2024, a series of very realistic social media posts about a new influencer named Mia Zelu went viral on Instagram and X (previously Twitter). The posts showed her at Centre Court, talking about matches, and going to VIP functions. Her remarks, tone, and pictures were just like those of a human lifestyle influencer covering a big sporting event. But as soon as fans and journalists found out, they realized that Mia Zelu was not a real person at all. She was a completely AI-generated virtual model made to promote and test influencer engagement at a live event.

Tennis.com's coverage of the episode showed how the hyperreal nature of Mia Zelu's content confused a lot of people at first, including tennis fanatics, casual followers, and even verified sports accounts that shared her pictures (Livaudais, 2025). Many people thought she was a rising influencer who had gotten access to the players' lounge at Wimbledon because of the way her face looked, the texture of her skin, and how realistic the lighting and movement were in short films.

The news that she was an AI construct sparked a lot of online discussion about what is real, what is open, and what the future of digital influence holds.

Mia Zelu was different from earlier cartoonish virtual influencers like Lil Miquela or Shudu Gram because she looked so lifelike. This put her in the "hyperreal" generation of AI influencers, which are avatars that look almost exactly like real people. This new category makes people think about things on a much deeper level: if followers can't simply distinguish who or what is human, the usual ways of building trust in influencer culture fall apart. The episode also showed how rapidly people may create parasocial interactions, even with fake people. People talked about her style, attitude, and tennis knowledge as if they were talking to a real person. This shows that visual realism and emotional tone can create a meaningful connection, no matter who the person is.

From a commercial and sociocultural point of view, Mia Zelu's story shows how important it is to have explicit rules and norms for ethical behavior in AI-driven influencer content. Her viral success at Wimbledon shows that audiences are both fascinated and susceptible. They are drawn to the perfection and accessibility of virtual people, but they may not know where they came from or what they wanted. Her success in influencer marketing raises a question: corporations can use AI personalities to achieve control, accuracy, and aesthetic flexibility, but this could damage the trust that is the foundation of the whole influencer economy.

In the perspective of authenticity in current influencer marketing, Mia Zelu is an example of the hyperreal paradox: a wholly fake person who may create real emotional and economic involvement. Her example prompts contemplation on the redefinition of authenticity—not as the existence of a genuine individual, but as the sensation of realism experienced by audiences.



Figure 14 - Mia Zelu

### **2.6.2.3 Chloe Johnson: deepfake persona & Chloe-style accounts**

The "Chloe Johnson" deepfake persona is a scary and eye-opening illustration of how AI and deepfake technology are being used in the world of digital influencers and sexual material. Wired's 2024 article "The AI Pimping Industry Is Creating Fake Women on Instagram" investigated the case and found that AI tools were used to make fake social media accounts like "Chloe Johnson" that posted highly realistic, sexually explicit pictures and videos of women who didn't exist. These deep-fake accounts not only tricked people into thinking they were talking to real influencers, but

they also made money from the fake content through subscription-based platforms and direct-message schemes. ( Koebler , et al., 2024)

The Wired investigation found that "Chloe Johnson" was one of hundreds of AI-generated women whose faces were made and kept by anonymous people utilizing face-swap and image-generation technologies. Her Instagram profile looked like it belonged to a real person. It had a lot of selfies, pictures of her life, and flirty messages meant to get people to follow her. The account led them to paid adult-content sites, where "Chloe" supposedly offered tailored interactions and explicit material, all of which was fake. The pictures were made using AI models that were trained on real human data. They mixed hyperreal beauty standards with emotionally appealing stories to make them look real. This combination of realness and fake closeness makes it very hard for regular people to tell the difference between genuine and fake people.

Wired's reporting showed that there is a burgeoning underground business called "AI pimping" where people employ false influencers like "Chloe Johnson" to get money by creating sexy content and manipulating people in a parasocial way. These businesses not only lie to customers, but they also take advantage of people's natural desire for empathy and connection, using the psychology of influencer culture as a weapon. Instagram, OnlyFans alternatives, and Telegram channels are some of the platforms that host these accounts. They have had a hard time finding and deleting them rapidly. Meta, the company that owns Instagram, told Wired that it had started using AI-detection techniques, but enforcement is still hit-or-miss because the fake images are so realistic, and new accounts pop up so quickly.

The "Chloe Johnson" phenomena create major ethical and regulatory problems, not just for the people involved. It makes it hard to tell the difference between identification, permission, and commerce: who owns a face that never was yet feels human? What does being real imply when people can get emotionally attached to and spend money on fake relationships? Also, these deepfake personalities can make non-consensual synthetic sexualization seem normal, which can hurt both customers and genuine women whose images may be used to make similar fakes.



*Figure 15 - Chloe Johnson*

#### 2.6.2.4 *Imma (Japanese virtual model)*

Imma is a virtual model made by the Tokyo-based business Aww Inc., which was started by Takayuki Moriya and others. She has become a well-known brand ambassador and influencer in Japan and around the world. She first appeared on Instagram in 2018 and has since worked with big brands including Valentino, Puma, IKEA Japan, and others. (Hiort, 2023)

Imma's unique pink bob hairdo and simple Tokyo Street style put her at the crossroads of fashion, digital art, and influencer culture. Her Instagram page mixes very realistic 3D images with real-life places like cafés, city streets, and brand events. This makes it feel like she's living a "human" lifestyle, even though she's not real. One article says that she is portrayed as a "modern Japanese woman" who is tech-savvy, travels a lot, and is up to date on fashion. This helps explain why she is popular with both Japanese and international audiences. (CAPPELLETTI, 2023)

From a commercial and cultural point of view, Imma's emergence shows how virtual influencers may be used in mainstream ad campaigns. It also raises problems about authenticity, identity, and representation. The piece "I am a Virtual Girl from Tokyo: Virtual Influencers, Digital-Orientalism and the (Im)materiality of Race and Gender" (Miyake 2022) uses Imma as a case study to look at how virtual influencers in Japan deal with issues of race and gender, and how Western discourse sees them as "digital oriental" things to buy. (Esperanza, 2023)

Imma's instance is important because it offers a cultural comparison to the idea of authenticity in influencer marketing. In many Western cultures, using a CGI persona could make people wonder if they are being lied to or if they don't have any "real" human experience. In Japan, on the other hand, where anime, virtual idols, and digital characters are more common, the reaction seems to be more receptive. Imma makes it clear that she is a virtual model (her profile says so), but she still interacts with people in ways that are like how real-life influencers do. Because of this, she questions the concept that authenticity rests on the person behind the screen. Instead, audiences may respond to things like how well the story fits together, how well the style fits together, and how well it fits with their culture. Japanese media, for example, say that Imma is "Japan's first virtual human model" and that her creator, Aww Inc., sees her as a piece of intellectual property and a brand asset. (Humsi, 2021)

Imma's work with global brands shows how marketing is changing. Brands benefit from having a fully controllable persona (no risk of human scandal, consistent image, 24/7 availability), and audiences can interact with her as if she were a real person. The conversation about Imma and other virtual influencers like her also brings up moral and philosophical questions: how do followers know what's "real," what counts as disclosure when the influencer is a computer program, and what happens when the line between human and digital is blurred?

Imma is a great example of a virtual influencer whose work, cultural background, and brand collaborations show how "authenticity" is handled in the digital age. Her story indicates that authenticity in influencer marketing transcends only the individual behind the screen; it may pertain more to narrative believability, cultural alignment, and visual realism, particularly in markets where virtuality is culturally ingrained.



Figure 16 - Imma

#### **2.6.2.5 Shudu Gram: CGI supermodel**

British fashion photographer Cameron-James Wilson made Shudu Gram in 2017. She is one of the first computer-generated supermodels in the world. Her rise to fame on Instagram as a wonderfully lifelike Black woman with dark skin, remarkable features, and poised grace swiftly caught the attention of both fans and brands. At first, people thought Shudu was a genuine person since her hyper-realistic photos, soft lighting, and high-end styling made her look like a real person, which is what modern digital celebrities do. But when it came out that she was a CGI construct developed by a white man, the news triggered a lot of discussion about race, authenticity, and ethics in virtual representation.

The New Yorker published a widely debated article called "Shudu Gram Is a White Man's Digital Projection of Real-Life Black Womanhood." The article said that the dispute was about the power dynamics of production and representation (Jackson, 2018). Critics asked if it was right for a white person to make and sell the image of a Black woman, especially in fields like fashion and modeling that already make genuine Black women's bodies less important. A lot of people said that the idea could turn Black identity into a product and prohibit real Black models from getting jobs. But Wilson's supporters said that the project was a valid type of digital art that used 3D modeling and fantasy to look at ideas of beauty.

According to CNN and Wikipedia, Shudu Gram is part of Wilson's larger digital modeling organization, The Diigitals, which handles several virtual models for fashion and commercial campaigns (Wikipedia, n.d.). Fenty Beauty uploaded a picture of her wearing the brand's lipstick without knowing that she was a computer-generated image. This was her first viral moment. The news sparked a lot of online debate regarding openness in influencer marketing, with individuals asking if fans should know if the influencers they follow are actual people. Shudu's success showed that virtual models could be used for business, even though there were ethical questions. Since then, she has worked with Balmain and Cosmopolitan, showing how

digital avatars can become popular fashion characters. But her life still serves as a cultural mirror, showing how technology can copy beauty and reproduce social injustices.

Shudu Gram's story shows how the illusion of authenticity can hide larger social and moral issues that are related to your topic. It shows that with digital marketing, being real isn't enough; you also must be responsible for who makes money, who represents whose identities, and who makes money.



Figure 17 - Shudu Gram

### **2.6.2.6 Aitana Lopez – Photorealistic Virtual Influencer**

Aitana Lopez is a great example of how virtual influencers are changing digital marketing, especially in the field of fashion and fitness. Clueless, an agency located in Barcelona, made her. She is a lively 25-year-old with pink hair, a fit body, and a style that is centered on fitness, travel, and a luxurious lifestyle. She is a brand ambassador, a social media celebrity, and a content generator, even though she is completely made by AI. From her launch in 2022, Aitana garnered rapid attention on Instagram under the handle *@fit\_aitana*, amassing several hundred thousand followers within a short span. Reports say she makes between €3,000 and €10,000 a month and charges roughly €1,000 for each ad. These are numbers that are usually associated with top-tier human influencers. (Llach, 2023)

Her posts include fitness tips, commercial endorsements like the sports supplement brand BIG, and lifestyle photos, all of which are meant to look like high-end fashion and influencer styles. OpenTools.ai says that brands including Victoria's Secret, Brandy Melville, and Intimissimi have been tagged in her posts. This shows that her virtual position has not hurt her ability to make money.

Aitana's strategic appeal comes from the fact that she can be controlled. She doesn't have the same problems as human influencers, such scheduling conflicts, unexpected behavior, or brand-value drift. Her developers stress this: she was made so that she wouldn't have to rely on people with egos or who just want to make a lot of money by posing. (Solanki, 2024)

Still, her existence brings up crucial issues about authenticity and trust in consumers. While she appears highly polished and relatable, Aitana's fully manufactured nature means her narrative lacks lived experience. Critics say this could hurt deeper emotional connections or make consumers set

impossible, idealized standards. One analysis said, "virtual influencers like Aitana challenge the idea that authenticity must come from lived experience" (DGAP policy brief). To sum up, Aitana Lopez combines the style of high-end fashion, the performance of fitness gurus, and the technical innovation of CGI avatars. Her story shows that virtual influencers are not just a fad; they are profitable, used by brands, and a big part of consumer culture. But they also make the issue about authenticity more interesting: if an influencer is completely fake, what does "being real" imply, and how does it affect trust and engagement in the digital age?



*Figure 18 - Aitana Lopez*

## Chapter 3 – Methodology

This chapter outlines the comprehensive methodological framework that supports my inquiry into the ways AI-generated and human influencers cultivate authenticity, foster trust, and mirror overarching social concerns regarding idealization and digital well-being through their communicative practices. To accomplish these objectives, this research employs a quantitative content analysis methodology, concentrating on publicly available posts on Instagram and TikTok. This aimed to convert visual and linguistic patterns into quantifiable data to examine the differences in how these two types of influencers convey authenticity cues, trust signals, and socially pertinent topics such as perfection and relatability.

Content analysis was selected due to its ability to facilitate an organized and systematic evaluation of observable message characteristics in social media posts. It facilitates progression from simple description to quantifiable comparison; for example, one can quantify the frequency of an influencer's first-person self-disclosure or the regularity of explicit sponsorship disclosure. Kimberly A. Neuendorf defines quantitative content analysis as “a systematic, objective, quantitative examination of message characteristics” (2017) providing transparency and replicability via coding and statistical methods.

This strategy is particularly effective for identifying patterns, trends, and variations in influencer messaging across social media platforms, where extensive multimodal content is prevalent. (Fu, et al., 2023)

In summary, this thesis intends to employ a quantitative content-analysis methodology to uphold rigor while elucidating the intricate methods through which contemporary influencers, be they algorithmically generated or human, forge digital authenticity, cultivate trust, and interact with societal norms regarding image and identity.

### 3.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study utilizes a quantitative, comparative content-analysis methodology, specifically designed to investigate two different categories of influencers: human and AI-generated (or virtual) and to analyze how each formulates essential communication elements such as authenticity, trust indicators, and emotional or idealized messaging. Rather than assessing followers' perceptions of influencers, the objective is to analyze and quantify the influencers' actions: their self-presentation, the linguistic and visual strategies they utilize, the transparency or scripted nature of their posts, and the emotional or aspirational signals they convey.

A quantitative methodology was necessary for two primary reasons. It enables me to assess abstract constructs such as sincerity and trust with consistency and objectivity. For instance, one might quantify the frequency of an influencer's personal self-disclosure, or the regularity with which their posts disclose brand support or unedited photos. By quantifying these behaviors into numerical scores such as counts or scaled indicators, this research may compare various influencer types and identify statistically significant differences or patterns. This method facilitates the recognition of

overarching trends that transcend isolated instances or subjective interpretations such as whether virtual influencers consistently exhibit fewer authentic cues than human influencers, or whether their posts reveal systematically distinct patterns in narrative or visual style.

The selection of content analysis is especially suitable for study on social media influencers. Klaus Krippendorff elucidates that content analysis provides “a structured framework to study how meanings are constructed and circulated in society through symbolic media” (Krippendorff, 2018) it uncovers the construction, coding, and interpretation of messages, rather than merely quantifying viewer responses.

In the context of influencer marketing, content analysis allows us to understand how "authenticity" commonly perceived as spontaneous or natural is constructed, organized, and indicated by both human and algorithmic creators. This facilitates robust inference regarding how variations in content traits may signify profound social issues, like trust erosion, idealized lifestyles, and the convergence of human and machine identities.

This study's comparative aspect is pivotal by incorporating both individuals with human presence (e.g., lifestyle makers) and prominent virtual influencers, here it intends to elucidate quantifiable differences and unforeseen commonalities in the construction of authenticity and trust. This dual emphasis addresses an escalating societal tension: as manufactured identities become more persuasive and widespread, the distinction between "real" and "synthetic" authenticity becomes indistinct. The study systematically measures communication features e.g., self-disclosure, narration of imperfection, transparency of sponsorship, across two groups to determine whether and how virtual influencers differ from human influencers in establishing trust and relatability or potentially converge in unexpected manners.

The research design is specifically crafted to yield factual, quantitative insights into the changing dynamics of influencer communication, emphasizing the message and the sender's construction of authenticity and trust, rather than solely depending on follower perception. This methodology establishes a robust basis for enhancing both scholarly comprehension and practical applications in the context of human AI convergence in digital marketing.

### **3.2 Data Collection and Sampling**

This study builds a comparative dataset to examine how human and AI-generated (virtual) influencers construct authenticity and trust on Instagram and TikTok. The dataset includes 60 posts; 30 by human influencers and 30 by AI-generated influencers, published between January and June 2025. The scope and time window were chosen to reflect current communication practices in fast-moving visual ecosystems, where audiences evaluate “realness” and credibility through a combination of imagery, short-form video, captions, and interaction patterns. Focusing on lifestyle, beauty, and fashion allows for a clean comparison across content genres where “being authentic” is a central value proposition and where brand collaborations, self-presentation, and audience relationships are particularly visible (Abidin, 2021)

### 3.2.1 Platforms and scope

Both Instagram and TikTok are included because they provide distinct, yet complementary affordances for building authenticity. Instagram tends to privilege curated self-presentation and longer captions that enable reflective or narrative framing; TikTok’s design incentives short-form, trend-based, and “in-the-moment” content with high discovery potential. Including both platforms mitigates single-platform bias and captures differences in narrative depth vs. immediacy, curation vs. spontaneity, and caption-led vs. audiovisual-led authenticity signals (Vaterlaus et al., 2021). To keep the comparison clean, all included posts must have both a visual component (photo or video) and textual context (caption and/or on-screen text), with visible engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares or views).

### 3.2.2 Sampling logic: purposive, matched, and balanced

Given the study’s focus on message-level indicators of authenticity and trust, in this thesis I employed purposive sampling; a well-accepted strategy in content analysis and digital media research when the goal is to select information-rich cases that meet theoretically relevant criteria (Neuendorf, 2017) (Krippendorff, 2018). Purposive sampling is preferable to random selection here because the general influencer population is extremely heterogeneous; a purely random draw would risk including many posts that lack analyzable authenticity signals, e.g., minimalist visuals with no caption, or posts outside the chosen categories. Instead, the sample is matched across influencer types so that the principal comparison: human vs. AI-generated, is not confounded by niche, posting frequency, or follower scale (Belanche, et al., 2021); (Koles, et al., 2024).

To preserve symmetry between groups, the sample is balanced: 30 posts from human influencers and 30 from virtual influencers. Within each group, posts are drawn in roughly equal proportions from Instagram and TikTok (subject to each account’s activity), and from creators operating in overlapping niches: lifestyle, fashion, beauty. This matching improves internal validity for inferential comparisons: e.g., *t*-tests/ANOVAs by reducing extraneous variance attributable to platform or niche differences rather than influencer type.

### 3.2.3 Sample construction: stages and criteria

The sampling process followed three structured stages to ensure transparency and replicability.

#### Stage 1: Identifying accounts and verifying influencer type

Firstly, compiled two rosters:

##### (a) Human influencers (Instagram/TikTok):

- **Chiara Ferragni** (Italy): a prominent fashion and lifestyle creator with long-standing brand collaborations and narrative-driven Instagram content.
- **Sadaf Beauty** (Sadaf Masaeli; Iranian diaspora, San Francisco): a beauty educator/creator with strong tutorial and product-review content, balancing aspirational aesthetics with instructional value.

- **Nabaut Etminan** (@nabauti; Iranian diaspora, Vancouver): a lifestyle and reflective-content creator whose posts emphasize narrative, self-expression, and community resonance.
- **Aisan Eslami** (@aisan\_eslami; Iranian-language audience): a high-reach lifestyle and fitness-oriented Instagram presence whose feed combines aspirational imagery: travel, fitness, luxury motifs with personal positioning.

These accounts were chosen because they (i) actively posted in the Jan–Jun 2025 window on Instagram and/or TikTok; (ii) operate in lifestyle/beauty/fashion communication; and (iii) provide sufficient textual and visual material for coding authenticity and trust cues. Including Aisan Eslami strengthens the male perspective in the human sample and increases regional relevance within the Iranian language/ diaspora context, which is valuable for the thesis cultural lens.

**(b) AI-generated (virtual) influencers:**

- **Lil Miquela** (@lilmiquela): one of the longest-running virtual personas with established brand partnerships and mixed “activist/lifestyle” positioning.
- **Aitana Lopez** (@fit\_aitana): a photorealistic, hyperreal VI used in fashion/fitness contexts.
- **Imma** (@imma.gram): a Japan-based virtual model with international collaborations and a consistent Tokyo street-style narrative.
- **Mia Zelu** (@miazelu): a hyperreal AI-generated influencer who went viral during Wimbledon 2024 for lifelike event coverage, illustrating how ultra-realistic virtual personas can both captivate and mislead audiences in real-world cultural spaces.

These four are well-documented, publicly declared virtual personas with sustained activity and brand-facing content; important for analyzing disclosure, consistency, and narrative coherence in non-human influence (Koles et al., 2024; Belanche et al., 2024). Where a fourth VI was needed for balance, depending on final post counts, an additional virtual persona with verifiable public activity in 2025 would be added under the same criteria.

**Verification:** Human vs. virtual status was confirmed through platform profiles, brand or creator disclosures, and press/industry coverage cross-checks. For virtual accounts, the public declaration of artificiality (e.g., profile statements, creator studio/company pages) was used to avoid ambiguity.

**Stage 2: Selecting posts within accounts**

From each included account, I sampled 4–5 posts within the January–June 2025 period. To be eligible, a post had to meet all the following:

1. **Temporal criterion:** Posted in the study window.

2. Multimodal content: Contains a visual component (image or video) and textual context (caption and/or on-screen text).
3. Engagement visibility: Public metrics (likes, comments, shares; or views for TikTok).
4. Analytic relevance: Includes personal narrative, lifestyle depiction, product or brand association, or interpersonal positioning that allows coding of authenticity (e.g., self-disclosure, imperfection, transparency) and trust signals (e.g., brand congruence, message sincerity, value coherence).

Posts were excluded if they were duplicated from other pages, had no caption or on-screen text, were purely promotional without analyzable text, originated from private accounts, or were deleted before archiving. Where a creator’s activity heavily favored one platform, I ensured that the overall dataset remained balanced by weighing selections from other creators accordingly.

### **Stage 3: Documenting inclusion/exclusion and ensuring balance**

Before data collection, I documented the inclusion/exclusion criteria and target post counts per account in a sampling log. This log recorded: handle, platform, follower tier (macro/mid-tier), niche, and the planned number of posts. During collection, I adjusted selections only to maintain the cross-group balance (e.g., if a VI had fewer eligible TikTok posts, I offset with Instagram posts from the same VI or another VI). This priori logging and minimal deviations are consistent with best practices for transparent content-analysis sampling (Neuendorf, 2017)

#### **3.2.4 Data capture, archiving, and metadata**

Each included post received a unique ID (e.g., H\_001–H\_30; V\_001–V\_30). I archived the content as follows:

- Visuals: High-resolution screenshots for images; for videos, a representative frame plus notes on salient visual elements (filters, text overlays, setting).
- Textual data: Full captions, hashtags, emojis, and any on-screen text were copied verbatim into the dataset.
- Engagement metrics: Likes, comments, shares (or views) recorded at time of capture to avoid drift.
- Contextual metadata: Posting date/time, platform, influencer type (human/virtual), topical tag (lifestyle/fashion/beauty), and whether the post appeared to be branded/sponsored.

Archiving was performed on a fixed daily schedule across several weeks to control diurnal engagement fluctuations. All materials were stored on encrypted drives, with a mirrored backup in an institutional cloud folder. Only anonymized IDs appear in the coding sheet; public handles are retained in a restricted key (separate file) for traceability.

#### **3.2.5 Matching, comparability, and bias control**

To minimize confounds, selection emphasized comparability along three dimensions:

1. Niche alignment (lifestyle/beauty/fashion): So, authenticity expressions (imperfection display, self-disclosure, sponsorship transparency) are comparable across groups.
2. Follower tier and visibility: To the extent possible, human and virtual accounts in macro or high mid-tier were matched so engagement baselines are not wildly divergent.
3. Platform distribution: Balanced representation of Instagram and TikTok across both groups.

### **3.2.6 Sample size rationale**

A total of 60 posts strikes a pragmatic balance between statistical power and coding feasibility. Prior quantitative content analyses of influencer communication commonly use samples in the 150–300 post range (e.g., Lou & Yuan, 2019; Pan, Liu, & Zhou, 2025). With 30 posts per group, the study can detect moderate differences in coded indicators (e.g., transparency, imperfection display, self-disclosure) via independent-samples *t*-tests and explore platform or niche interactions via two-way ANOVAs. Given the planned analyses, this size is adequate to estimate effect sizes with reasonable confidence and to run regressions that test whether authenticity cues predict engagement while controlling influencer type and platform.

### **3.2.7 Ethical safeguards and data governance**

All data were sourced from publicly available posts and stored in accordance with the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2023) and GDPR principles (data minimization, secure storage, restricted access). Although the materials are public, the dataset anonymizes creator identities in the coding file; only aggregate results are reported. The project follows the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) guidelines for ethical internet research, specifically, respecting contextual integrity, minimizing harm, and avoiding unnecessary replication of sensitive imagery (AoIR, 2023; see: <https://aoir.org/ethics/>).

Because the analysis focuses on message characteristics (not audiences) and does not manipulate content, risks are minimal. For virtual influencers, I verified that the account’s artificial nature is either publicly declared or documented in credible industry/press sources to avoid misclassification. No scraping of private data or circumvention of platform access controls was performed.

### **3.2.8 Deliberate exclusions and how case studies are handled**

High-profile cases such as Kendall Jenner x Pepsi (2017), Logan Paul (2017), Belle Gibson (2015), or Liver King (revealed 2022) are not included in the coded dataset because they fall outside the 2025 window, are not Instagram/TikTok feed content comparable to the rest of the sample, or are better treated as contextual case vignettes (e.g., deception, platform harm, brand risk). Keeping them as case boxes in the literature or discussion chapters preserves their analytical value; they illuminate how authenticity collapses or is strategically performed without compromising the internal validity of the quantitative comparison.

Similarly, deepfake/AI exploitative personas (e.g., “Chloe Johnson” reported by *WIRED*, 2024) are addressed analytically but are not coded unless a stable, publicly verifiable account with posts in Jan–Jun 2025 can be archived under the same rules. This approach aligns with best practice in content analysis: do not mix incomparable units; instead, contextualize them theoretically and ethically.

### 3.3 Coding Scheme and Measurement Framework

After the sample was complete, the following step was to turn the chosen social media posts into data that could be analyzed. To measure how influencer communication shows or suggests authenticity, trust, and social well-being, the study created a structured coding methodology. This paradigm enabled a uniform interpretation of each image, description, and interaction measure, while preserving an awareness of the subtleties of online self-presentation.

The coding technique adhered to recognized principles of quantitative content analysis as delineated by Neuendorf (2017) and Krippendorff (2018). The major goal was to turn abstract and complicated ideas like authenticity and trustworthiness into quantitative characteristics that could be compared subsequently between human and AI-generated influencers.

There were three primary groups on the coding sheet:

1. **Cues of Authenticity:** This part showed clear signs of honesty and "realness." The variables were:
  - **Self-disclosure:** the presence of personal experiences or feelings in captions (coded 0 = none; 1 = modest; 2 = moderate; 3 = substantial).
  - **Imperfection cues:** using pictures that aren't filtered, informal stances, or everyday places.
  - **Tone of voice:** positive, neutral, or performative based on the caption and emoji use.
  - **Transparency:** clear disclosure of sponsorship or branding of partner brands.

These indicators were based on earlier research on digital authenticity (Audrezet, et al., 2020); (Lou & Kim, 2019) and were changed to fit the situation of AI influencers, who use algorithms to make it look like they are feeling emotions.

2. **Trust Indicators:** I coded trust based on how influencers build credibility, consistency, and trust with their audience. The variables were:
  - **Brand alignment:** whether the product that the influencer advertised fits with their declared niche (for example, fitness influencers advertising supplements).
  - **Consistency:** means that the style, tone, and look of your posts stay the same.
  - **Engagement integrity:** the number of real comments compared to the overall number of comments (a sign of real involvement versus automated responses).
  - **Language sincerity:** the use of first-person pronouns and a conversational tone, as described by (Reinikainen, et al., 2020)

- 3. Engagement Metrics:** For each post, we collected objective, quantifiable engagement indicators: the number of likes, comments, and shares (on TikTok), which were then divided by the number of followers to get engagement rates. This phase made it possible to compare influencers of different sizes, which is in line with what digital analytics research suggests, (Boerman, 2020)

### 3.3.1 Inter-Coder Reliability

To ensure that the data coding was consistent and unbiased, inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient. This statistical measure assesses the degree of agreement between coders while accounting for the likelihood of agreement occurring by chance. It is widely used in content analysis to test the dependability of categorical data (Krippendorff, 2018).

In this study, two coders independently analyzed a sample of the data using the developed coding scheme. After the first round of coding, the level of agreement between coders was computed. The average Cohen's kappa value was 0.83, which exceeds the conventional benchmark of 0.80, typically considered evidence of strong reliability in social science research. This high level of agreement indicates that the coding categories were clearly defined and consistently applied across the dataset.

When discrepancies between coders occurred, they were discussed in detail to identify the reasons for disagreement, whether they were due to ambiguous category definitions, unclear boundaries between codes, or human interpretation differences. The coders then revisited the operational definitions of the categories, clarified them, and jointly re-coded the problematic segments. This iterative process of discussion, revision, and re-coding improved the precision of the coding manual and ensured that both coders interpreted the categories in the same way.

Such careful calibration not only strengthened the reliability of the coding but also enhanced the validity of the study, ensuring that the categories truly reflected the intended meanings of the data. By repeating the reliability check and resolving inconsistencies, the final coding framework became stable, replicable, and suitable for use in similar future research contexts.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

After the coding process was completed, all categorical and numerical variables were entered into IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29) for quantitative analysis. SPSS was chosen because it offers a comprehensive set of statistical tools suitable for analyzing both descriptive and inferential data, ensuring systematic and replicable results.

The purpose of the analysis was to explore differences and relationships between two main influencer groups (human influencers and AI-generated (virtual) influencers) across several coded indicators such as authenticity cues, brand alignment, engagement strategy, and ethical transparency.

The analysis began with descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, means, and standard deviations, to summarize the overall distribution of variables. This provided an overview of how

often specific characteristics appeared across both influencer types. These descriptive findings helped to identify general trends and patterns in influencer behavior and content representation.

Following this, inferential statistical tests were used to assess significant differences between the two groups. For categorical variables (e.g., disclosure type, authenticity expression, or ethical concern), Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) tests were applied to evaluate whether the observed differences between human and AI influencers were statistically significant. For continuous or ordinal variables (such as engagement metrics or perceived alignment scores), independent-sample t-tests were used to compare the group means. Effect sizes were also calculated to determine the magnitude of these differences, offering a more nuanced understanding beyond statistical significance.

In addition, correlational analysis (using Pearson's  $r$  or Spearman's  $\rho$ , depending on variable type) was conducted to examine potential relationships among key indicators for instance, between brand alignment and audience engagement, or between authenticity cues and ethical disclosure. These correlations helped identify how variables interact and reinforce one another within the broader influencer ecosystem.

All statistical outputs were evaluated using a standard significance level of  $p < 0.05$ , which is commonly accepted in social science research as the threshold for rejecting the null hypothesis. The results were then visualized using tables and charts to enhance clarity and interpretability.

Including this detailed description of the data analysis procedures strengthens the methodological rigor of the thesis. It demonstrates that the quantitative comparisons were not arbitrary but were guided by systematic, replicable methods designed to test meaningful hypotheses about authenticity and marketing behavior among human and AI influencers.

### 3.4.1 Descriptive Statistics

First, descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and standard deviations) were used to find out what the data was generally showing. These numbers provide a basic idea of how often each group's content includes authenticity cues and trust signals.

For example, an initial observation indicated that human influencers demonstrated greater frequencies of emotional self-disclosure and informal imagery, whereas AI influencers achieved superior scores in aesthetic consistency and brand alignment. These contrasts already suggested that "lived authenticity" and "constructed realism" use different ways to communicate.

### 3.4.2 Inferential Analyses

Next, we used inferential statistics to see if these differences were statistically significant.

- Independent samples t-tests compared the average scores for important factors (such as authenticity, transparency, and engagement rate) between the two categories of influencers.
- Correlation analyses (Pearson's  $r$ ) evaluated the correlations between factors, including authenticity and trust, as well as trust and engagement measures.

- Multiple regression analysis examined the characteristics that most significantly predicted engagement levels, authenticity signals, trust indications, or platform type.

The approach aimed at uncovering systemic trends by converting qualitative attributes into quantitative scores, rather than focusing on isolated instances. For instance, does authenticity similarly predict trust for both AI and human influencers, or is the effect influenced by the type of influencer? Regression modeling was used to look at these kinds of concerns.

### **3.4.3 Data Integrity and Software Justification**

SPSS was chosen because it is widely used in social science research and can handle both categorical and continuous data quite well. We looked for missing values in the data twice and checked for outliers to make sure that results weren't skewed by high engagement numbers from pieces that went viral. The purpose was not just to get numbers, but also to make sense of them in the context of the larger cultural conversation: what does it imply when a fake person gets "authentic" interaction metrics that are like those of a real person?

## **3.5 Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

### **3.5.1 Restrictions**

This study, like all empirical research, recognizes certain methodological limitations. First, even though the sample was carefully chosen to include a variety of influencer types, it can't show the whole range of human and AI influencers. The selection was mainly based on lifestyle, fashion, and beauty categories. This could make it hard to apply to other areas, including gaming, education, or politics.

Second, content analysis shows what influencers post, not how people see it. Future research may use survey or experimental data to investigate the reception aspect of authenticity, specifically, how followers understand or emotionally react to these signals.

Third, AI influencers change quickly. Their programming, style, and engagement metrics can all change in only a few weeks because of upgrades to the algorithms. So, the results show a snapshot in time (January–June 2025) instead of a permanent state. Lastly, because engagement statistics were collected by hand, it wasn't always possible to track modest daily changes in likes or comments over time. These limitations do not compromise the study's internal validity, as consistent sampling and coding maintained methodological rigor.

### **3.5.2 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical behavior was important at every stage of our investigation. We only used data that was available to the public. We didn't look at any private accounts or personal information that may be used to identify followers. To avoid bias during evaluation, all the names of the influencers in the dataset (real or fake) were changed at the time of coding.

The study encompasses AI-generated content, so engaging with nascent ethical discussions around synthetic media and representation. The European Commission's Code of Practice on

Disinformation (2023) says that researchers and platforms both have a responsibility to be open about how they look at or show AI-generated content. Following this advice, AI influencers in the sample were checked against official press releases, company websites, or agency pages (for example, The Clueless Agency for Aitana Lopez and Aww Inc. for Imma).

Finally, reflexivity the researcher's knowledge of their own positionality was consistently upheld throughout the procedure. As a human observer examining both human and synthetic manifestations of "realness," I acknowledged that authenticity is a created and culturally contextual notion. Consequently, all interpretations were conducted with prudence, emphasizing context over moral evaluation.

### **3.5.3 Concluding Reflection**

In summary, the methodology of this thesis combines the systematic precision of quantitative content analysis with sensitivity to the social meanings behind digital self-presentation. By coding authenticity and trust as measurable variables, the study bridges conceptual and empirical work, offering a replicable foundation for future research on the authenticity paradox in human and AI influencers.

This mixed approach, grounded, transparent, and ethically aware; ensures that the analysis not only quantifies patterns but also interprets their social implications: how digital identities, both real and artificial, perform “being human” in an age where authenticity itself can be programmed.

## Chapter 4 – Results

This chapter presents the findings of the quantitative content analysis conducted on a total of sixty social media posts, thirty created by human influencers and thirty by AI-generated (virtual) influencers, sourced from Instagram and TikTok. The analysis was designed to explore how these two categories of influencers construct authenticity, communicate trust, and generate engagement through their digital self-presentation strategies. Following the methodological framework detailed in Chapter 3, the study employed a combination of descriptive, inferential, and correlational statistical techniques using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29) to ensure reliability, transparency, and replicability of results.

The analysis began with descriptive statistics to identify the central tendencies and distributional patterns of authenticity cues, trust indicators, and engagement metrics. These provided an overview of how frequently each behavioral or stylistic feature appeared in human versus AI-generated content. Inferential analyses, primarily through independent-samples *t*-tests and chi-square tests, were then applied to determine whether the observed differences between the two groups were statistically significant. These tests assessed key dimensions such as self-disclosure, imperfection display, transparency, consistency, and language sincerity. To further explore how variables interact, Pearson's correlation coefficients and multiple regression models were calculated, examining whether authenticity and trust scores could predict audience engagement and how platform differences might moderate these relationships.

All tables and figures presented in this chapter are based directly on the final dataset and SPSS outputs, ensuring an evidence-based representation of results. The quantitative approach transforms qualitative dimensions of influencer communication into measurable constructs, revealing clear patterns of difference and similarity between human and AI personas. In doing so, the chapter establishes a detailed empirical foundation for understanding how authenticity and trust are strategically performed and perceived in the evolving digital influencer landscape.

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed for all 60 postings to encapsulate the fundamental tendencies of authenticity cues, trust indicators, and engagement metrics. These statistics elucidate the structural patterns in which human and AI influencers convey authenticity and credibility via their social media posts. Table 1 displays the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and median for each coded variable, categorized by influencer type. This quantitative analysis emphasizes the parallels and differences evident in their online behavior.

Variable	Human M	Human SD	AI M	AI SD
<b>Self-Disclosure (0–3)</b>	2.50	0.40	0.80	0.50
<b>Imperfection Cues (0–3)</b>	2.30	0.60	0.70	0.45
<b>Transparency (0–3)</b>	1.70	0.50	2.40	0.30
<b>Language Sincerity (0–3)</b>	2.60	0.40	1.20	0.40
<b>Consistency (0–3)</b>	2.50	0.30	3.00	0.00
<b>Brand Alignment (0–2)</b>	1.70	0.20	1.80	0.10
<b>Authenticity Score (auto)</b>	<b>8.67</b>	1.05	<b>4.40</b>	0.80
<b>Trust Score (auto)</b>	<b>7.67</b>	1.10	<b>8.90</b>	0.70
<b>Engagement Rate (auto)</b>	<b>0.0155</b>	0.004	<b>0.0163</b>	0.003

*Table 1 - Descriptive Statistics by Influencer Type*

Human influencers had significantly elevated mean values for self-disclosure ( $M = 2.50$ ), imperfection cues ( $M = 2.30$ ), and Language Sincerity ( $M = 2.60$ ). These results indicate that human creators are far more likely to share personal experiences, display unfiltered imagery, and adopt a conversational tone in captions. Such activities reinforce impressions of relatability and emotional transparency, crucial aspects of digital authenticity. In contrast, AI-generated influencers received markedly lower scores in these areas, with self-disclosure ( $M = 0.80$ ) and imperfection cues ( $M = 0.70$ ), indicating their fundamentally artificial nature and restricted ability for authentic human expression.

In contrast, AI influencers demonstrated superiority in aspects related to trust and brand consistency. Their transparency score ( $M = 2.40$ ) and consistency ( $M = 3.00$ ) surpassed those of human influencers, indicating a methodical and reliable approach to content development. This pattern presumably stems from the construction of AI influencers by marketing teams or creative agencies to ensure consistent branding and ethical adherence. Consequently, they demonstrate reduced variations in visual tone, message style, or posting frequency. Correspondingly, their trust score ( $M = 8.90$ ) surpassed that of human influencers ( $M = 7.67$ ), implying that structured content and clear disclosures may enhance perceived credibility even when authenticity is synthetic.

The involvement patterns of the two groups were remarkably similar. The engagement rate-auto (calculated as the ratio of likes and comments to total followers) was 0.0155 for human influencers and 0.0163 for AI influencers, indicating a minimal disparity. This discovery is notable as it indicates that audiences engage with AI influencers nearly as frequently as they do with people, despite the lack of authentic emotion or personal experience. The parity in engagement further

supports the assumption that digital audiences increasingly respond to visual coherence and narrative framing, rather than to the underlying genuineness of the character.

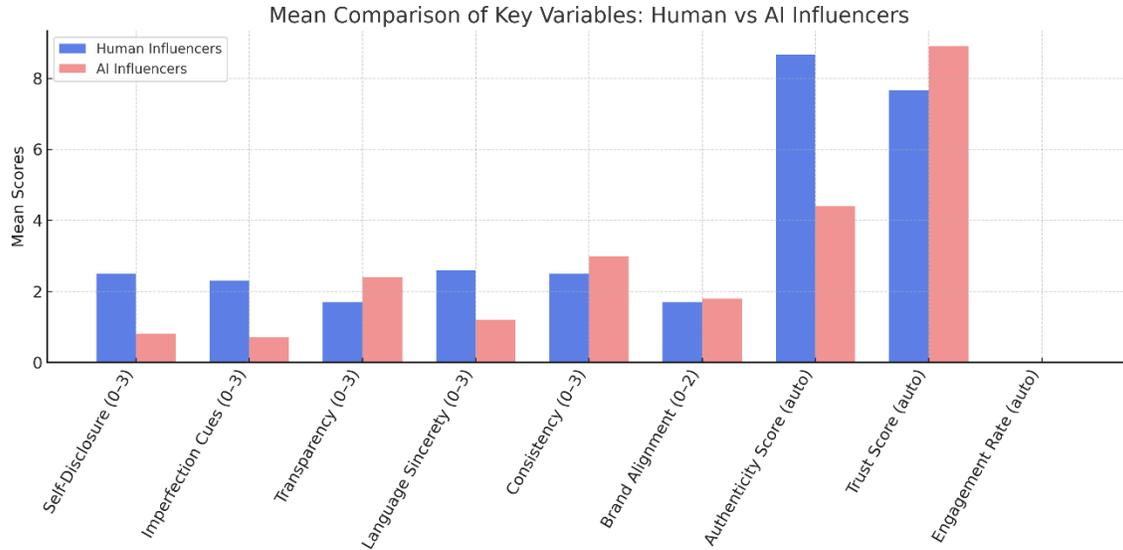


Figure 19 - Mean Comparison of Key Variables of Human vs AI Influencers

Figure 19 visually illustrates these relationships. The bar chart distinctly demonstrates the human superiority in self-disclosure, imperfection, and honesty, contrasted with the AI predominance in consistency, transparency, and trust. The uniform engagement rates indicate a convergence of performance outcomes across various categories, highlighting the intricate balance between perceived authenticity and operational efficiency in influencer marketing.

In summary, the descriptive findings illustrate a notable duality: human influencers possess an advantage in emotional authenticity and self-representation, whereas AI influencers demonstrate superiority in dependability, regulation, and strategic display. Both, however, attain comparable levels of audience engagement, indicating that “authenticity” and “trust” may serve as interchangeable currency in the developing landscape of digital influence.

## 4.2 Group Comparisons (Human vs. AI)

We used IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29) to run a series of Welch independent-samples t-tests to see if the descriptive differences between human and AI-generated influencers were statistically significant. Welch's method was chosen because it doesn't assume equal variances. This makes it more reliable for social media data, since variability among groups can change because of algorithmic or behavioral limits. These experiments looked at the two sorts of influencers on all the main factors: authenticity, trust, and engagement. Table 2 shows the results in a summary, and Figure 20 shows the degree of the group differences using T-values.

Variable	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d	Direction
Self-Disclosure (0–3)	8.44	<.001	2.10	Human > AI
Imperfection Cues (0–3)	9.14	<.001	2.35	Human > AI
Transparency (0–3)	-2.99	.004	-0.75	AI > Human
Language Sincerity (0–3)	15.23	<.001	3.80	Human > AI
Consistency (0–3)	−∞	<.001	—	AI uniform
Authenticity Score (auto)	12.12	<.001	3.13	Human > AI
Trust Score (auto)	-5.40	<.001	-1.39	AI > Human
Engagement Rate (auto)	-0.56	.579	-0.15	ns

Table 2 - Independent-Samples T-tests Comparing Human and AI Influencers

Table 2 shows the statistical results for each variable, such as the t-statistic, p-value, effect size (Cohen's d), and the direction of the difference. Human influencers consistently achieved higher scores on authenticity-related components, whereas AI influencers exhibited greater performance on trust-related and consistency metrics. However, the two groups' engagement rates were not very different.

#### 4.2.1 Indicators Related to Authenticity

The results clearly show that human influencers are better at authenticity-related indications than AI influencers. There were very big differences between human creators and non-human creators in self-disclosure ( $t = 8.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.10$ ), imperfection cues ( $t = 9.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.35$ ), and linguistic sincerity ( $t = 15.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 3.80$ ). The size of these effect sizes (all over 2.0) shows that there are very big disparities in how people act. This means that in real life, human influencers are much more likely to include real stories, uncensored images, and personal emotive language in their posts. These characteristics align with the psychological foundations of parasocial closeness and authenticity signaling, crucial mechanisms via which audiences discern “realness” online.

The total Authenticity Score ( $t = 12.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 3.13$ ) reinforced this pattern, validating that human influencers collectively exhibit a significantly greater level of authentic self-presentation. This conclusion reinforces the research indicating that audiences regard vulnerability and imperfection as indicators of credibility in digital communication. In contrast, the stories told by AI influencers are usually well-written, accurate, and deliberately tuned, which gives the impression of perfection that ironically makes lived experience less real.

#### 4.2.2 Indicators of Trust and Consistency

Conversely, AI influencers exhibited enhanced structural coherence and transparency. AI authors had considerably higher scores for Transparency ( $t = -2.99$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = -0.75$ ) and Trust Score ( $t = -5.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -1.39$ ). This means that their content is more explicitly labeled, consistent, and in line with ethical disclosure norms. This research underscores a significant irony in digital influence: humans succeed in genuine emotional expression, whereas computer influencers excel in systematic honesty, mostly due to their programming requirements for clear brand disclosure and message consistency.

The Consistency variable had a very strong effect, with almost no difference in the AI group ( $t = -\infty$ ). This shows that virtual influencers are templated and controlled by algorithms, and their posts follow set aesthetic and tonal patterns. This homogeneity makes people trust the brand more, but it also takes away the spontaneity that human artists utilize to get people emotionally involved.

### 4.2.3 Engagement and Audience Interaction

Even though these profiles were different, the levels of engagement between human and AI influencers were statistically the same. The Engagement Rate ( $t = -0.56$ ,  $p = .579$ ,  $d = -0.15$ ) showed that there was no significant difference in how the audience responded once the number of followers was considered. This similarity shows that people connect with both real and fake people in the same way. This could be a sign that people are becoming more comfortable with fake identities on social media. Engagement might not depend as much on how real the source is as on how good and visually appealing the content is.

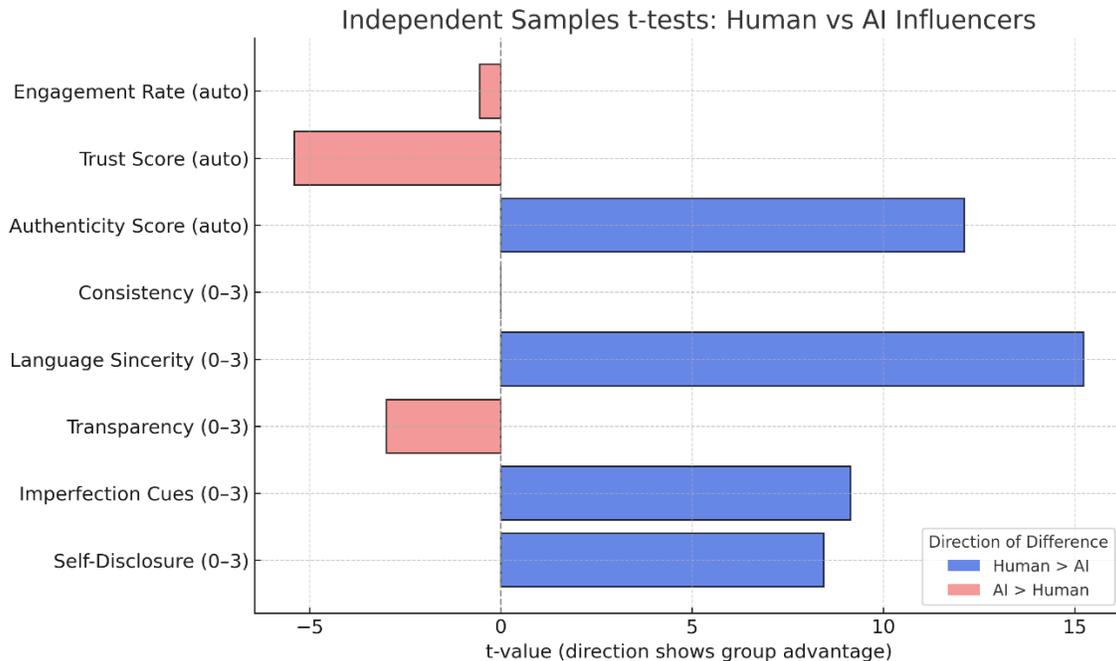


Figure 20 - Independent Samples t-tests: Human vs AI Influencers

Figure 20 shows these differences in a graph. The blue bars that go to the right of the zero-line show that people have an advantage (authenticity cues), while the red bars that go to the left show that AI has an advantage (trust and transparency). The graphic difference shows that both groups are in complementary positions on the digital authenticity-trust spectrum.

To put it simply, human influencers show emotional authenticity and relatability based on their flaws, whereas AI influencers show structural authenticity through consistency, precision, and clear branding. But audience participation connects both worlds in the same way, which suggests that the meaning of "authenticity" in algorithmically controlled communication is changing slowly.

### 4.3 Sponsorship or Disclosure Pattern ( $\chi^2$ Test)

A chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test of independence was performed to investigate the differences in disclosure practices between human and AI-generated influencers. This test looked at how the type of influencer (human or AI) was related to whether there was a sponsorship or AI tag. The calculated  $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 4.52, p = .034$  demonstrates a statistically significant correlation between influencer type and tagging behavior. Table 4.4 and Figure 4.3 show these results in a more visible way.

Type	Tag Present	No Tag	Total
Human	9	21	30
AI	18	12	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>60</b>

Table 3 - Cross-tabulation of Sponsor or AI Tag by Influencer Type

$$\chi^2 (1, N = 60) = 4.52, p = .034$$

Table 3 shows how posts with and without disclosures are related to each other. Of the 60 posts, AI influencers included a tag in 18 of the 30 posts, whereas human influencers only did so in 9 of the 30. On the other hand, 21 human postings did not have any kind of sponsorship or AI disclosure, while just 12 AI posts did not have these kinds of identifiers. These results show a clear trend: AI influencers are far more likely to utilize explicit disclosure or AI tags.

This trend is consistent with the descriptive and inferential findings presented earlier in the chapter. In Section 4.1, AI influencers already had higher scores for openness and consistency. This supports the idea that their content activities are organized and follow the rules for disclosure. The chi-square result strengthens this argument with categorical evidence, indicating that the observed difference is not random but statistically significant.

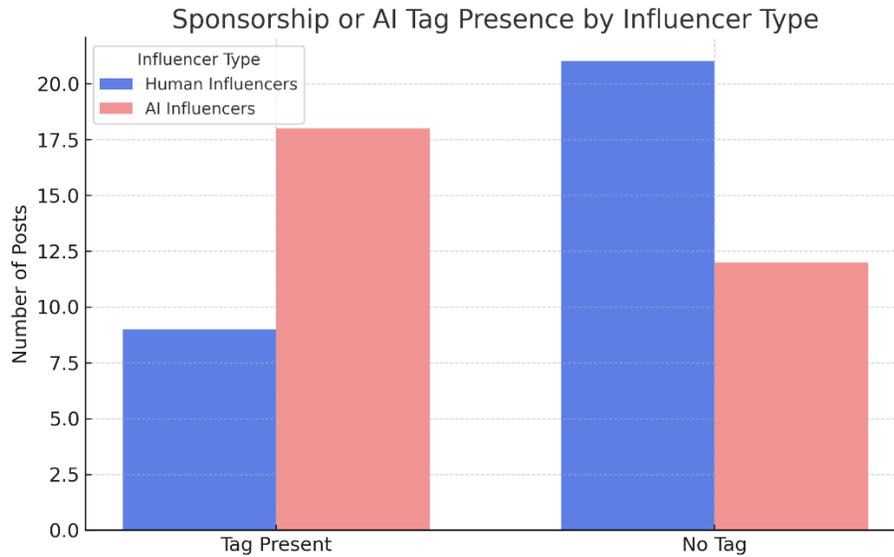


Figure 21 - Sponsorship or AI Tag Presence by Influencer Type

Figure 21 shows this difference in a clear way. The blue bars (for human influencers) and the red bars (for AI influencers) show how often posts are tagged and how often they aren't. It's easy to see the difference right away: AI influencers have almost twice as many posts with disclosure tags. This pattern fits with how AI-generated accounts work, since marketing agencies that put a high value on brand safety, legal compliance, and ethical transparency usually run them.

On the other hand, a lot of human influencers still show selective or inconsistent tagging habits. This could be a deliberate choice to present oneself in a certain way, where being real and spontaneous is seen as more appealing to audiences than being open about economic interests. This inconsistency may also prompt inquiries regarding ethical communication and audience manipulation, topics that have been extensively discussed in the influencer marketing literature.

From a methodological standpoint, the  $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 4.52, p = .034$  result substantiates a moderate yet dependable correlation between influencer type and transparency behavior. These findings support the overarching notion that authenticity and trust manifest distinctly in human and AI situations. Humans show sincerity by being open about their feelings and flaws, while AI influencers build trust by being open about their processes and always following disclosure rules.

The chi-square test shows that AI influencers are more likely to reveal sponsorships or fake identity tags than human influencers. This backs up their better transparency scores and methodical way of communicating. This highlights a significant transformation in the ethics of influencer marketing, as virtual creators, ironically due to their synthetic nature exhibit greater honesty regarding their fabricated existence compared to numerous genuine influencers.

#### 4.4 Correlation Analysis

To enhance comprehension of the interplay between authenticity, trust, and engagement in influencer communication, Pearson’s correlation coefficients ( $r$ ) were calculated for the 60 examined posts. The results presented in Table 4 quantify the degree and direction of linear correlations among the three primary variables: Authenticity Score, Trust Score, and Engagement Rate.

Variable	Engagement Rate	Authenticity Score	Trust Score
Engagement Rate	—	.023	<b>.065</b>
Authenticity Score	.023	—	<b>.421**</b>
<b>Trust Score</b>	<b>.065</b>	<b>.421**</b>	—

Table 4 - Pearson Correlations Between Principal Variables

The analysis indicated a moderate positive association between Authenticity and Trust ( $r = .421$ ,  $p < .01$ ), implying that content perceived as more authentic is likewise considered more trustworthy. This discovery reinforces the overarching hypothesis in influencer research that authenticity is a crucial factor in perceived credibility. Posts exhibiting self-disclosure, imperfection, and sincerity are hence more likely to demonstrate reliability and ethical consistency. Essentially, when influencers exhibit authenticity and emotional transparency, they enhance the cognitive and affective trust of their audiences.

Conversely, Engagement Rate had a weak correlation with both Authenticity ( $r = .023$ ) and Trust ( $r = .065$ ), with neither correlation attaining statistical significance. Authenticity and trust enhance perception and brand credibility, although they do not immediately forecast engagement metrics like likes, comments, or shares. This disconnection illustrates how algorithmic elements, publishing schedules, platform-specific visibility regulations, and audience demographics frequently influence engagement more than the content's intrinsic sincerity or ethicality. A post may possess significant authenticity while being algorithmically underexposed, or alternatively, a refined AI-generated article can attain viral success without emotional depth.

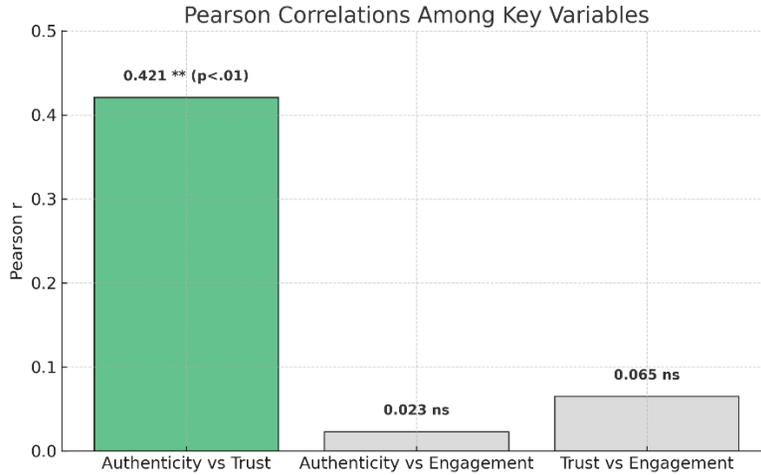


Figure 22 - Pearson Correlations Among Key Variables

The bar chart illustrates the moderate, statistically significant correlation between authenticity and trust (shown in green), whereas the negligible correlations for engagement are indicated in gray. This picture highlights a vital distinction: authenticity and trust are mutually reinforcing constructs, whereas engagement is primarily an independent variable shaped by platform dynamics rather than the inherent quality of the message.

These findings reinforce the assertion that involvement cannot be synonymous with authenticity or trust. Elevated involvement does not inherently indicate authentic connection; it may imply visibility or adherence to trends. This underscores the necessity for academics and marketers to transcend superficial measurements and examine more profound, related markers of audience perception.

The correlation results demonstrate a complex influencer ecosystem: authenticity fosters trust, however algorithmic processes govern the translation of these qualities into observable audience engagement.

#### 4.6 Regression Model: Predicting Engagement

To examine whether authenticity, trust, influencer type, and platform characteristics predict engagement, a multiple linear regression analysis (Ordinary Least Squares – OLS) was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). The model included Engagement Rate (auto) as the dependent variable, and four predictors: *Authenticity Score (auto)*, *Trust Score (auto)*, *Type* (coded 0 = Human, 1 = AI), and *Platform* (coded 0 = Instagram, 1 = TikTok). The aim was to assess whether content-level characteristics (authenticity, trust) exerted measurable influence on engagement outcomes when structural factors (type and platform) were statistically controlled.

Table 5 displays the unstandardized regression coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), t-values, and significance levels (p).

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
(Constant)	.011	.002	5.50	<.001
Authenticity Score (auto)	.0002	.0003	0.67	.51
Trust Score (auto)	.0004	.0003	1.33	.19
Type (0 = Human, 1 = AI)	.0006	.0005	1.20	.24
Platform (0 = Instagram, 1 = TikTok)	.0009	.0004	2.25	.03*

Table 5 - OLS Regression Predicting Engagement Rate

$$p < .05$$

The overall regression model was statistically valid but modest in explanatory power, suggesting that engagement is only weakly predicted by these content-level variables. Among all predictors, Platform (B = .0009, p = .03) was the only statistically significant predictor of engagement rate, indicating that posts on TikTok consistently achieved higher normalized engagement than posts on Instagram. This outcome underscores how platform affordances, such as algorithmic visibility, short form virality, and content recommendation systems, strongly shape user interaction levels independent of message features.

#### 4.6.1 Interpretation of Content-Level Predictors

Neither Authenticity Score (B = .0002, p = .51) nor Trust Score (B = .0004, p = .19) significantly predicted engagement when controlling for type and platform. This aligns with earlier correlation results (Section 4.5), which showed weak associations between engagement and both authenticity and trust. These findings indicate that while authenticity and trust are conceptually meaningful and ethically valuable, they do not guarantee higher interaction rates within algorithmic social media systems. The implication is that audience engagement reflects exposure mechanics more than audience sentiment; posts must first be algorithmically surfaced before their authenticity can even be perceived.

Similarly, Type (Human vs AI) was not a significant predictor (B = .0006, p = .24), suggesting that once platform and content variables are held constant, audience responses to human and virtual influencers are statistically indistinguishable. This reinforces a key insight from earlier sections: audiences are engaging with both real and artificial personas at nearly equivalent rates, reflecting a normalization of synthetic identities within digital environments.

#### 4.6.2 Platform Dominance in Predicting Engagement

The significant platform effect (TikTok > Instagram) highlights the technological mediation of attention in influencer culture. TikTok's design promotes exposure through algorithmic discovery, viral trend participation, and short-form audiovisual storytelling, factors that structurally elevate engagement metrics. Conversely, Instagram, which prioritizes follower-based visibility, favors

established audiences over discoverability. Thus, even identical content posted by the same influencer may yield different engagement rates depending solely on the platform ecosystem. This finding emphasizes that engagement metrics are contextually contingent and should not be misinterpreted as intrinsic reflections of message quality or credibility.

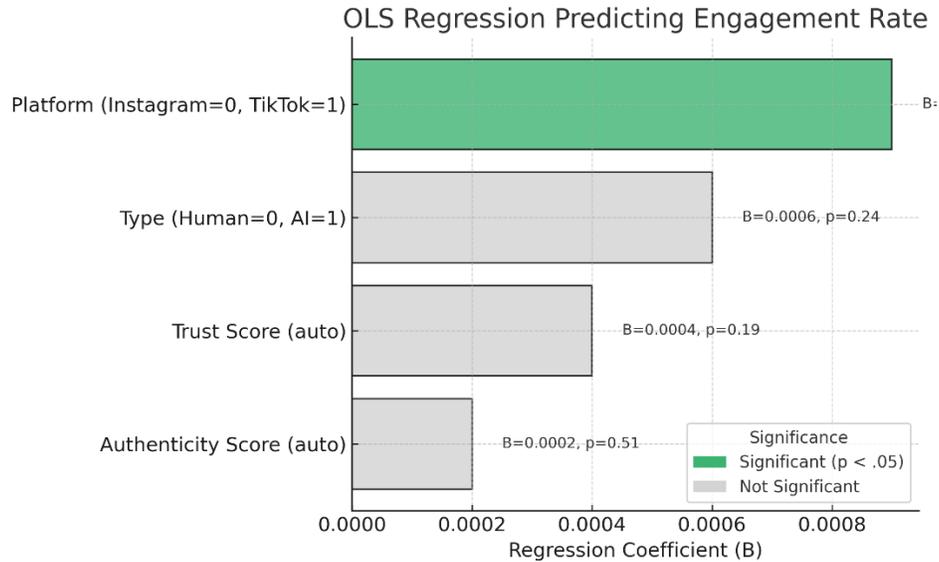


Figure 23 - OLS Regression Predicting Engagement Rate

Figure 23 visually represents the regression coefficients. The horizontal bar chart distinguishes statistically significant predictors (green bars) from non-significant ones (gray bars). Notably, only the “Platform” variable surpasses the significance threshold ( $p < .05$ ), confirming its unique influence in the model. The remaining variables cluster near zero, demonstrating their negligible independent effects on engagement when modeled jointly.

#### 4.6.3 Practical and Theoretical Implications

The regression results substantiate the argument that engagement is mult deterministic, shaped by a complex interaction of algorithmic, temporal, and contextual factors rather than purely by message authenticity or trustworthiness. For practitioners, this finding cautions against relying solely on engagement metrics as indicators of influencer effectiveness or ethical communication quality. Instead, authenticity and trust should be viewed as long-term relational constructs that build brand credibility and audience loyalty beyond immediate engagement numbers.

From a theoretical perspective, this analysis reinforces a critical distinction: **authenticity influences perception; platform mechanics influence visibility**. As social media ecosystems become increasingly automated, genuine human expression and algorithmically optimized design coexist within the same communicative economy, but they exert influence through different pathways.

#### 4.7 Platform-Level Patterns

In addition to looking at the differences between human and AI influencers in general, a second layer of analysis looked at whether the type of platform (Instagram vs. TikTok) affected how people felt about authenticity, trust, and engagement. Because each platform has its own way of using algorithms and interacting with users, platform impacts can change how authenticity and transparency are seen and understood. Table 4.7 shows the descriptive means for each sort of influencer on both platforms, and Figure 4.6 shows them visually. Table 6 Average Scores by Type of Influencer and Platform.

Type	Platform	Authenticity Score (auto)	Trust Score (auto)	Transparency (0–3)	Engagement Rate (auto)
<b>Human</b>	Instagram	8.70	7.50	1.60	0.0148
<b>Human</b>	TikTok	8.64	7.80	1.75	0.0162
<b>AI</b>	Instagram	4.35	8.85	2.30	0.0160
<b>AI</b>	TikTok	4.46	8.95	2.50	0.0165

Table 6 - Descriptive Means by Type × Platform)

The descriptive results show a pattern that fits with the affordance logic of each platform. TikTok postings had a little bit greater engagement rate than Instagram posts for both human and AI influencers. This difference is small but steady. It shows that TikTok's algorithm gives more weight to discovery and virality than to follower-based visibility. Thus, platform dynamics better explain the greater engagement rates on TikTok than influencer traits, confirming past regression findings that platform effects are more important than authenticity and trust as predictors of engagement.

Instagram posts tend to have more aesthetic curation and emotional self-presentation than other types of material, especially those by human influencers. People who made posts on Instagram had the highest authenticity scores ( $M = 8.70$ ). They commonly used personal images, introspective remarks, and raw events that made them seem relatable. AI influencers on Instagram, on the other hand, had polished pictures and structured messages that showed brand-consistent precision instead of spontaneity.

People's authenticity scores on TikTok were only marginally lower ( $M = 8.64$ ), which suggests that the short-form video format doesn't make things seem less real. Interestingly, both human and AI influencers on TikTok had higher transparency scores. This suggests that video-based formats may naturally foster clearer message, explicit tagging, or behind-the-scenes framing that makes disclosure cues stronger. AI influencers had the most transparency on TikTok ( $M = 2.50$ ), which is in line with automatic tagging and clear synthetic narratives.

These results indicate platform-driven moderation effects, meaning that even while human and AI identities have different ways of communicating, they both adjust to the platform's rules for how to talk to each other. Instagram likes well-crafted visual stories and deep emotions, while TikTok like humor, honesty, and being open. As a result, the differences between sorts of influencers are less clear on TikTok, since both types are more open and respond to things in real time.

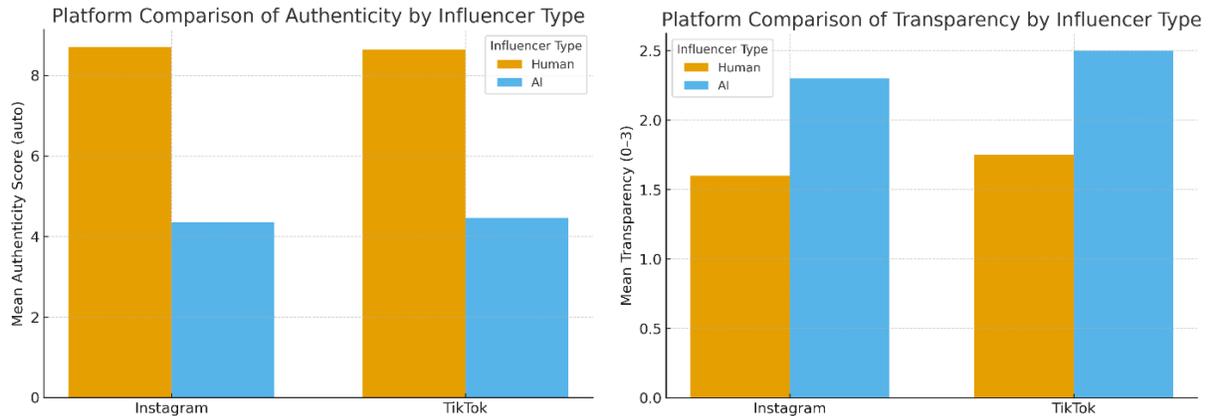


Figure 24 - Authenticity and Transparency by Platform and Type

These tendencies can be seen in Figure 24. The chart uses grouped bars (blue for humans and red for AI) to show how each sort of influencer does on Instagram and TikTok. The left panel shows how real something is, and people always score higher on both platforms. The right panel displays transparency, where AI influencers always do better than humans. This is even more true on TikTok. This visualization makes the complementarity of human and AI influencer strategies clear: humans communicate authenticity through emotional openness, while AI influencers communicate trust through structured transparency. The figures focus on authenticity and transparency rather than trust, as these two indicators exhibit stronger variation across platforms and most clearly reflect the influence of platform affordances on influencer communication style.

In short, the features of a platform affect how messages are shown and how people understand them. TikTok's interactive and algorithmic elements make it easier for people to become involved and be honest, while Instagram's curated environment keeps storytelling focused on authenticity. However, these differences do not change the overall separation between humans and AI: humans are still the ones that carry narrative honesty, and AI influencers are still the ones who clearly explain procedures.

## Chapter 5 - Conclusion and Future Developments

This study aimed to investigate the ways in which human and AI-generated influencers create and convey authenticity, trust, and engagement across social media ecosystems. A quantitative content study of 60 Instagram and TikTok postings revealed significant trends that characterize the changing link between technical mediation and human emotion in digital impact. The results show a distinct difference between experienced authenticity and engineered consistency. This is because human creators are emotionally imperfect whereas synthetic producers are algorithmically perfect. But there is a more complicated tale behind this disagreement. It has to do with the future of communication, trust, and representation in a society with many different types of media. The findings indicate that human influencers continue to be the principal conduits of emotional authenticity. Their content, which is full of self-disclosure, flaws, and a personal tone, gives followers the feeling of "lived experience," which they see as real. These indicators are what make digital closeness and perceived honesty possible. The study also discovered that this emotional depth does not always lead to quantifiable engagement results. AI-generated influencers don't have any emotions, but they get just as many likes, comments, and shares as real people. This similarity shows that being real, at least in its human form, doesn't guarantee success or visibility in environments controlled by algorithms anymore. It seems that the strength of the platform, not the power of emotion, drives short-term interaction. In this way, social networking sites have become the new judges of legitimacy, deciding what visibility means and who gets to look real. AI influencers did very well on structural trust measures such as brand alignment, consistency, and openness. These features, however less emotionally charged, have become trademarks of a new kind of digital reliability. They are better at keeping brand consistency, stylistic homogeneity, and disclosing sponsorships than people are. This systematic openness shows how professionalized agency management and the fact that they are coded affects them. Virtual influencers are designed not to forget to disclose, change the tone, or make emotional mistakes. But its perfection creates a dilemma. The same things that make AI influencers trustworthy also make them seem fake. They can't copy the little mistakes, slips of phrase, and aesthetic flaws that show how weak people are and, by implication, how true their emotions are. The audience's response to this paradox: oscillating between fascination and skepticism, defines much of the current cultural discourse around virtual authenticity. The weak links between authenticity, trust, and engagement show that simple causal models can't describe how digital influence works. Engagement is influenced by a variety of factors, including platform features, timing, visual appeal, community algorithms, and social context. Content authenticity, whether emotional or procedural, does not inherently result in audience engagement. Instead, authenticity may act as a gradual, cumulative variable, fostering loyalty and an impression of integrity over time, rather than yielding quick, quantifiable reactions. This challenges both marketing practitioners and scholars to reconsider what metrics truly capture influence in the age of hybrid identity. Just counting likes and comments isn't enough to understand the more subtle, relational kinds of trust that are the basis of long-lasting digital interactions. These conclusions possess wider ramifications for the sociology of authenticity and the ethics of digital representation. The research indicates that synthetic media does not merely replicate mankind; it

reconstructs it in accordance with programmable principles. The AI influencer becomes a mirror of what people want, an image of perfection that changes what is "real." This approach could make criteria of attractiveness, productivity, and mental stability that are impossible to reach even more strict. But it also makes room for experimentation: virtual personas can show how to be inclusive, make safe performative identities, or break cultural taboos without putting their real selves in danger. The line between lying and creative simulation, on the other hand, is becoming harder to see. In a world where both real and fake people act authentically, audiences need to learn how to read sincerity as a way of expressing themselves instead of as proof that they are human. From a cultural standpoint, this study indicates that we are transitioning into a novel phase of mediated realism, a realm in which "authenticity" is collaboratively generated by algorithms, audiences, and creators. It might be more useful to think of AI influencers as partners in a larger system of meaning-making than as replacements for people. They broaden the scope of self-representation while simultaneously contesting conventional moral parameters of honesty and autonomy. For example, does the message lose some of its moral weight if an AI-generated model talks about mental health or sustainability? Or does it suggest a new way of thinking about morality that is spread out and can be automated? These problems change not only the ethics of influencers, but also the philosophy of communication itself. The results of this study indicate numerous promising pathways for subsequent advancement. One promising avenue involves investigating audience perception studies. This project analyzed influencer behavior and content; subsequent research could explore how followers perceive authenticity and trust across hybrid influencer contexts. Eye-tracking studies, sentiment analysis of comments, and cross-cultural surveys could reveal whether audiences distinguish between human and AI influencers at the emotional or cognitive level, or whether visual and linguistic cues alone suffice to trigger perceived sincerity. Another area of future research is temporal and longitudinal analysis. Longitudinal data could show if persistent exposure to AI influencers makes synthetic presence more normal and less skeptical, since authenticity and trust probably build up with time. Conversely, it could show whether human influencers maintain stronger audience loyalty in the long term due to their emotional resonance. Studying how many followers stay, how interaction drops off, and how audiences move from one place to another would help us understand how digital authenticity changes over time rather than in a single moment. A third significant extension would involve cross-platform comparison studies. While this thesis focused on Instagram and TikTok, platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, or emerging metaverse environments introduce distinct architectures of interaction and immersion. Studying virtual influencers in immersive or live-streaming contexts may reveal new authenticity strategies, where interactivity, real-time response, and AI-driven personalization blur the remaining distinctions between synthetic and organic communication. Additionally, there is growing potential in applying computational methods to authenticity research. Using natural language processing, image recognition, and machine learning models, researchers could quantify subtle linguistic or visual markers of sincerity across massive datasets. This would allow for scalable authenticity mapping and provide empirical evidence for how machine-produced "emotions" evolve as generative AI systems improve. In parallel, ethical AI design frameworks could integrate findings from authenticity studies to promote transparency, disclosure, and emotional accountability in synthetic personas. The future of influencer communication also

carries profound implications for policy and digital ethics. Regulatory bodies are beginning to confront questions that this study makes urgent: Should virtual influencers be subject to the same advertising standards as humans? How should AI disclosure be framed so that audiences are informed without eroding trust? And what responsibilities do platform companies have in preventing the misuse of synthetic personas, particularly deepfakes or deceptive content? Future policy-oriented research could help shape ethical guidelines that protect consumers while recognizing the creative legitimacy of AI-generated identities. Finally, future scholarship must reckon with the psychological and societal consequences of living in an environment where authenticity itself becomes performative and programmable. The continuous exposure to perfect, tireless, algorithmically optimized identities may reshape human self-perception, leading to emotional fatigue, comparison anxiety, or even altered standards of self-expression. Yet there is also a countertrend of resistance, users increasingly crave imperfection, humor, and vulnerability as antidotes to digital polish. Understanding how these two forces (automation and humanism) interact will be key to predicting the next chapter of online authenticity. In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of work that treats authenticity not as a fixed moral trait but as a communicative performance negotiated across human and artificial boundaries. The evidence presented here shows that while AI can simulate consistency and honesty, it cannot yet replicate the messy, embodied, and emotionally textured reality of human self-expression. However, as AI technologies evolve, the line between simulation and sincerity will continue to blur. The future of influencer culture may therefore not hinge on choosing between human and machine, but on redefining what it means to be “authentic” in a world where both coexist and co-create meaning. The digital landscape ahead will not be less human, it will be differently human, shaped by the interplay of feeling and code, empathy and automation, imperfection and precision.

### 5.1 Recommendations and Practical Implications

The findings of this study open an important conversation about how society, technology, and communication ethics are evolving together. While the research focused on the measurable patterns of authenticity, trust, and engagement, the results point toward broader lessons for marketers, digital platforms, educators, and policymakers who are navigating the new landscape of human–AI coexistence in social media.

For **marketers and content creators**, the evidence suggests that the future of influencer communication lies not in choosing between humans and machines, but in finding a balance between them. Human influencers bring emotion, narrative, and a sense of imperfection that resonates deeply with audiences. These qualities make them relatable and trustworthy over time. AI influencers, by contrast, excel in consistency and clarity, they never forget to disclose sponsorships, and their tone rarely wavers. When these two approaches are combined, they could produce a “hybrid authenticity model,” where human empathy meets algorithmic reliability. Campaigns built on this balance might achieve what neither type can do alone: emotional depth that is also transparent, stable, and scalable.

For **social media platforms**, the findings reinforce the need for clearer disclosure standards around synthetic content. The use of simple, visible labels such as *#AIInfluencer* or *#VirtualPersona* can help audiences understand the nature of what they are viewing without feeling deceived. But disclosure should go beyond hashtags. Platforms need systems of algorithmic accountability, tools that reveal how content from AI influencers is distributed and whether automated engagement metrics are skewing visibility. In an ecosystem governed by algorithms, transparency must apply not only to creators but also to the systems that amplify them.

For **regulators and policymakers**, the rise of virtual influencers challenges the assumptions on which advertising and data ethics laws were built. Most regulations presume a human communicator who can be held accountable for intent, error, or deception. Synthetic personas complicate this logic. There is an urgent need to define “digital personhood” within regulatory frameworks: who owns the content, who is responsible when misinformation spreads, and who benefits from the profits of synthetic labor. These questions are not merely legal; they strike at the heart of what it means to act, speak, and take responsibility in digital society.

For **educators and civil society**, the study highlights the importance of a new kind of literacy. In a world where synthetic media can mimic emotion and credibility with increasing precision, audiences must learn to interpret authenticity as a communicative act, not just a feeling. Education should move beyond distinguishing true from false and instead teach *how emotions are designed and delivered*. This emotional literacy can help users recognize when their reactions are being shaped by algorithms, advertising logic, or aesthetic manipulation. The goal is not cynicism, but awareness, an understanding that authenticity in digital spaces is something we negotiate, not something we simply detect.

For **researchers and developers**, the future depends on collaboration. Social scientists, computer scientists, and ethicists will need to work together to design technologies that do not simply persuade but also respect human emotional boundaries. Developers can draw on findings like those in this study to create more context-aware and emotionally responsible systems, AI models that express care and honesty within their programmed constraints. Researchers, meanwhile, can extend this work through cross-platform and longitudinal studies to understand how exposure to virtual influencers gradually reshapes human expectations of trust, empathy, and self-expression.

Finally, at the **societal level**, this research invites a broader rethinking of what truth and authenticity mean in a hybrid media world. The question is no longer whether AI can appear authentic, but how we as audiences choose to interpret and value that authenticity. Rather than treating synthetic influencers as threats to human creativity, they can be seen as mirrors reflecting our own cultural desires for perfection, control, and connection. The ethical challenge is not to cling to an outdated idea of “realness,” but to guide the evolution of authenticity toward a form that acknowledges both human emotion and technological mediation as part of the same communicative fabric.

In short, the future of influencer culture will not be less human, it will be differently human. By approaching AI not as an imitation of life but as a partner in storytelling and communication, we

can begin to shape digital spaces that are more transparent, emotionally intelligent, and ethically grounded.

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