

Determinants of Consumer Trust in Virtual Influencers on Social Media in the Context of Artificial Intelligence Use

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Abstract

The development of artificial intelligence technologies and the growing importance of social media have led to the emergence of a new phenomenon in digital marketing—virtual influencers. These computer-generated characters operate on social media platforms in a manner similar to traditional influencers, promoting products, services, and brands. Despite the increasing popularity of virtual influencers in corporate marketing strategies, the number of studies examining consumer trust in this type of marketing communication remains limited. The aim of this article is to identify the determinants influencing consumer trust in virtual influencers on social media. The analysis focuses on factors such as perceived authenticity, transparency in the use of artificial intelligence, influencer credibility, and users' attitudes toward AI technologies. The research model was empirically verified through an online survey conducted among social media users. The results indicate that the authenticity and credibility of virtual influencers significantly influence the level of consumer trust. Moreover, transparency in the use of artificial intelligence and positive attitudes toward technology increase the acceptance of this form of marketing communication.

Keywords: Virtual influencers, consumer trust, artificial intelligence, social media marketing, influencer marketing.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of artificial intelligence technologies and the dynamic expansion of social media platforms have significantly transformed the landscape of contemporary marketing communication. Digital environments have created new forms of interaction between brands and

consumers, enabling companies to engage audiences through increasingly sophisticated and technology-driven communication strategies. One of the most recent phenomena emerging within this context is the growing presence of virtual influencers—computer-generated digital characters designed to operate on social media platforms in a manner similar to human influencers. Virtual influencers represent a novel form of marketing communication that combines elements of artificial intelligence, computer-generated imagery, and social media engagement. These digital entities publish content, interact with followers, and collaborate with brands in marketing campaigns, often achieving levels of popularity comparable to those of human influencers. From the perspective of organizations, virtual influencers offer several advantages, including full control over communication processes, the ability to design a consistent brand image, and the reduction of reputational risks associated with traditional influencer collaborations. Despite the growing interest in virtual influencers, existing research remains fragmented and predominantly exploratory. Prior studies have mainly focused on specific attributes of virtual influencers, such as realism, attractiveness, or disclosure (Belanche et al., 2021; Muniz et al., 2024), while offering limited insight into the integrated mechanisms through which consumer trust is formed in ai-generated entities. Moreover, much of the existing literature draws implicitly on frameworks developed for human influencers, without critically examining whether these mechanisms operate similarly in the context of artificial agents. From a theoretical perspective, there is still insufficient integration between research on influencer marketing and established theories of trust, such as the commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) or source credibility theory. As a result, the literature lacks a coherent explanation of how traditional determinants of trust—such as authenticity and credibility—translate into digitally constructed, non-human agents. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by developing and empirically testing a model that integrates key determinants of trust in virtual influencers, including authenticity, credibility, transparency, and attitudes toward ai. In doing so, the study contributes to a better understanding of whether trust-building mechanisms in human influencer marketing can be extended to ai-generated entities and how this trust translates into consumer purchase intentions. In response to these research gaps, the primary objective of this study is to identify the key determinants influencing consumer trust in virtual influencers operating on social media platforms and to examine the relationship between trust and consumers' purchase intentions. The study focuses on several factors that may shape consumer perceptions of virtual influencers, including perceived authenticity, transparency in the use of artificial intelligence technologies, perceived influencer credibility, and users' attitudes toward artificial intelligence. The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section presents a review of the literature concerning consumer trust in marketing communication and the role of virtual influencers in digital marketing. The subsequent section describes the research methodology, including the research model, hypotheses, and data collection procedure. The following section presents the results of the empirical analysis. These findings are then discussed in relation to existing research. The article concludes with a summary of the main findings, practical implications, limitations of the study, and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer Trust in Marketing Communication

Trust is one of the fundamental elements of relationships between consumers and companies (Dryl, 2012). In marketing literature, trust is most commonly defined as an individual's belief in the credibility, reliability, and integrity of a partner involved in the market exchange process. Morgan and Hunt (1994) indicate that trust plays a key role in building long-term relationships between entities participating in

market exchanges, influencing both customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Górska-Warsewicz, 2026). In the context of digital marketing, the role of trust is particularly significant because consumers often make purchasing decisions based on information available on the internet (Pizlo, 2025). The lack of direct contact with a product and a seller means that internet users must rely on the opinions of other consumers, product reviews, and influencer recommendations. As a result, the credibility of the information source becomes one of the key factors influencing the effectiveness of marketing communication. Sundar (2008) argues that trust in digital environments is strongly associated with the perceived credibility of the information source. Consumers are more likely to trust marketing messages originating from individuals whom they perceive as competent, authentic, and trustworthy (Dryl, 2015). In the case of influencer marketing, trust is often built through long-term relationships between influencers and their followers. Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) emphasize that influencer authenticity is one of the most important factors influencing audience trust. Authenticity may be understood as the consistency between an influencer's image and the content they present, as well as the sincerity of communication with their audience. Influencers who are perceived as authentic are able to build stronger relationships with their followers and more effectively influence their attitudes and purchasing behaviors. In academic literature, influencers are defined as individuals who possess the ability to influence the opinions and behaviors of other users through their activity on social media and their network of followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Freberg et al. (2011) indicate that influencers represent a specific category of opinion leaders operating in the digital environment, whose importance results from their ability to shape opinions and build relationships with audiences. Unlike traditional forms of advertising, communication conducted by influencers is often perceived by users as more authentic and less formal, which contributes to increasing the level of trust in the presented content (Hewapathirana & Perera, 2024).

Virtual Influencers as a New Marketing Tool

The development of artificial intelligence technologies and computer graphics has led to the emergence of a new phenomenon in digital marketing—virtual influencers (Yin et al., 2026). Virtual influencers are computer-generated digital characters that operate on social media platforms in a manner similar to traditional influencers. They publish photos, videos, and other types of content, interact with users, and collaborate with brands in marketing campaigns (Ahmed & Gohar, 2025). Jin and Ryu (2020) indicate that virtual influencers may be perceived by social media users as attractive and innovative. Through the use of advanced technologies, they can present a unique visual identity and create engaging marketing content (Aniket, Kaushik & Sivathanu, 2026). Virtual influencers are often designed in accordance with specific marketing strategies, enabling brands to precisely align their image with marketing communication objectives (Mesquita et al., 2026). From the perspective of companies, virtual influencers offer several potential advantages. Most importantly, they enable full control over marketing communication and the influencer's public image. Unlike traditional influencers, virtual influencers do not make autonomous decisions and do not engage in actions that could negatively affect a brand's reputation. As a result, companies can reduce the risks associated with influencer collaborations (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019). However, research conducted by Belanche, Casaló & Flavián (2021) indicates that virtual influencers can build audience trust if they are perceived as authentic and transparent in their marketing communication. Previous studies identify several key factors influencing consumer trust in virtual influencers (Hussain & Singh, 2026). One of the most important factors is perceived authenticity, which refers to the extent to which influencer communication is perceived as natural and consistent with their public image. Informing users that an influencer is a virtual character

may increase perceptions of honesty and credibility in marketing communication. Therefore, transparency regarding the use of artificial intelligence technologies plays a crucial role (Pieper, Griewatz & Morgenroth, 2026). Another factor influencing trust is the perceived credibility of the influencer (Muniz, Stewart & Magalhães, 2024). Credibility may be associated with the influencer's competence, the quality of published content, and their reputation among audiences. Users' attitudes toward artificial intelligence technologies may also play an important role. Individuals who are more open to new technologies may be more willing to accept virtual influencers as sources of product information (Rehman, Hassan & Behera, 2026). Due to the dynamic development of artificial intelligence technologies and the growing popularity of virtual influencers, further research in this area is necessary. In particular, it is important to examine the role of authenticity, transparency, and credibility in building consumer trust toward virtual influencers (Bhatnagr, 2026). Understanding these relationships may provide valuable insights for companies using virtual influencers in their marketing strategies and contribute to the development of research on the use of artificial intelligence in social media marketing communication (Siwach & Ashfaq, 2025).

Although prior research consistently identifies authenticity and credibility as key drivers of trust in influencer marketing, the findings are not entirely consistent when applied to virtual influencers. For instance, while some studies suggest that transparency regarding AI increases trust (Pieper et al., 2026), others indicate that disclosure may reduce perceived authenticity and emotional engagement (Muniz et al., 2024). This inconsistency suggests that trust formation in the context of virtual influencers may involve additional psychological mechanisms not fully captured by existing models. To address this limitation, the present study draws on the commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and source credibility theory, which conceptualize trust as a function of perceived reliability, integrity, and expertise. In the context of virtual influencers, these dimensions are reinterpreted through technological attributes, such as algorithmic transparency and perceived artificiality. Furthermore, existing studies tend to examine individual determinants in isolation, with limited attempts to provide a holistic and integrated model. This study responds to this gap by synthesizing prior findings and testing a comprehensive framework that simultaneously considers multiple determinants of trust

METHODOLOGY

The study was designed to identify the factors determining the level of consumer trust in virtual influencers operating on social media and to examine the impact of this trust on users' purchase intentions. The analysis focused in particular on variables such as the perceived authenticity of virtual influencers, transparency in the use of artificial intelligence technologies, perceived influencer credibility, and users' attitudes toward AI technologies. It was assumed that these factors influence the level of consumer trust, which in turn may affect users' willingness to purchase products promoted through social media platforms. The study was conducted within a quantitative research paradigm and had an explanatory character, as its primary objective was to empirically verify the relationships between theoretical constructs derived from the literature review. Based on this review, a research model was developed assuming that perceived authenticity, transparency in the use of artificial intelligence, perceived influencer credibility, and users' attitudes toward new technologies constitute significant determinants of trust in virtual influencers. Furthermore, it was assumed that consumer trust in virtual influencers positively influences users' purchase intentions toward products promoted by these influencers.

In order to empirically verify the proposed relationships between the analyzed constructs, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

- H1:** The perceived authenticity of a virtual influencer positively influences consumer trust.
H2: Transparency in the use of artificial intelligence positively influences consumer trust.
H3: The perceived credibility of a virtual influencer positively influences consumer trust.
H4: A positive attitude toward AI technologies positively influences trust in virtual influencers.
H5: Trust in virtual influencers positively influences consumers' purchase intention.

To verify the proposed research model, an empirical study was conducted using an online survey. The measurement scales used in this study were adapted from prior validated research. Perceived authenticity and credibility were measured based on scales developed by Schouten et al. (2020) and Rehman et al. (2026), while trust and purchase intention items were adapted from established marketing literature (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Belanche et al., 2021). All items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). Data analysis was conducted using a two-step approach. First, reliability and validity of the measurement model were assessed using Cronbach's alpha and correlation analysis. Second, the structural relationships between constructs were tested using structural equation modeling. Construct validity was supported by high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > 0.80) and significant correlations between variables. Although the purposive sampling approach limits generalizability, it is appropriate for exploratory research focusing on active social media users, who represent the primary target group for influencer marketing. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section included questions related to the characteristics of respondents, including demographic variables and the frequency of social media use. The second section contained statements referring to the theoretical constructs analyzed in the study. A seven-point Likert scale was used to measure the variables, allowing for a relatively precise assessment of respondents' attitudes. The research population consisted of social media users who actively use platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook, which represent the primary environment in which influencers operate. A purposive sampling method was applied, based on the criterion of active social media use. This approach made it possible to reach respondents with experience in interacting with content published by influencers. The study was conducted among 250 respondents representing different age groups and varying levels of social media activity (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the research sample

Variable	Category	Number of respondents	%
Gender	Female	145	58.0%
	Male	105	42.0%
Age	18–24	82	32.8%
	25–34	96	38.4%
	35–44	45	18.0%
	45+	27	10.8%
Frequency of social media use	Daily	196	78.4%
	Several times a week	42	16.8%
	Less frequently	12	4.8%

Source: Own elaboration

The analysis of the sample structure indicates that the dominant group consisted of respondents aged between 18 and 34 (71.2%). This group is particularly active on social media and most frequently engages with content published by influencers. Furthermore, as many as 78.4% of respondents declared daily use of social media platforms, indicating a high level of exposure to marketing content published by influencers. The operationalization of variables included the measurement of perceived authenticity

of the virtual influencer, transparency in the use of artificial intelligence technologies, perceived influencer credibility, trust in virtual influencers, and purchase intention toward products promoted by them. Measurement indicators were formulated as statements referring to respondents' perceptions of communication conducted by virtual influencers on social media platforms.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In the first stage of the data analysis, the reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. This analysis was intended to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement indicators used to measure individual theoretical constructs (Table 2).

Table 2. Reliability of measurement scales

Variable	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Perceived authenticity	3	0.87
AI transparency	3	0.84
Perceived credibility	3	0.88
Attitude toward AI	3	0.86
Trust in influencers	3	0.91
Purchase intention	2	0.85

Source: Own elaboration

The obtained Cronbach's alpha values exceed the threshold of 0.80 for all analyzed variables, indicating high reliability of the applied measurement scales. The highest value was observed for the variable "trust in virtual influencers" ($\alpha = 0.91$), suggesting very high internal consistency of the measurement indicators. The results of the reliability analysis confirm that the applied measurement instruments can be considered appropriate for further statistical analysis. In the next stage of the analysis, a correlation analysis was conducted to determine the strength and direction of relationships between the analyzed variables. The results indicate the presence of statistically significant relationships between the examined constructs (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1 Authenticity	1				
2 AI transparency	0.42**	1			
3 Credibility	0.55**	0.38**	1		
4 Trust	0.63**	0.47**	0.61**	1	
5 Purchase intention	0.48**	0.39**	0.53**	0.68**	1

Source: Own elaboration $p < 0.01$

The strongest relationship was observed between perceived authenticity and trust in virtual influencers ($r = 0.63$). This indicates that an increase in the perceived authenticity of a virtual influencer is associated with a higher level of trust among social media users. A strong correlation was also identified between perceived influencer credibility and trust ($r = 0.61$). Respondents who perceived virtual influencers as credible sources of product information were more likely to report a high level of trust in this form of marketing communication. The structural model analysis showed that all proposed research hypotheses were confirmed. The strongest influence on consumer trust in virtual influencers was observed for

perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.41$). This result indicates that the authenticity of virtual influencer communication is a key factor determining the level of trust among social media users (Table 4).

Table 4. Structural model results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t	p
H1	Authenticity $\rightarrow$ Trust	0.41	6.12	<0.001
H2	AI Transparency $\rightarrow$ Trust	0.29	4.38	<0.001
H3	Credibility $\rightarrow$ Trust	0.37	5.44	<0.001
H4	Attitude toward AI $\rightarrow$ Trust	0.24	3.71	<0.01
H5	Trust $\rightarrow$ Purchase intention	0.58	8.26	<0.001

Source: Own elaboration

Perceived influencer credibility ($\beta = 0.37$) and transparency in the use of artificial intelligence technologies ($\beta = 0.29$) also significantly influence trust. These results indicate that social media users pay close attention to the honesty of marketing communication and the credibility of presented content. The strongest relationship in the model was observed between trust and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.58$), confirming that trust in virtual influencers may significantly influence consumers' purchasing decisions. The obtained results indicate that consumer trust in virtual influencers is determined by several key factors. The most important role is played by perceived authenticity, which has the strongest influence on the level of trust among social media users. Perceived influencer credibility and transparency in the use of artificial intelligence technologies in marketing communication also play a significant role. Furthermore, the results confirm that consumer trust directly influences purchase intention toward products promoted by virtual influencers. This suggests that building trust in virtual influencers may represent an important element of marketing strategies implemented by companies using social media platforms.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study provide important insights into the mechanisms shaping consumer trust toward virtual influencers operating on social media platforms. The empirical analysis indicates that the perception of virtual influencers by social media users is a complex process influenced by several interrelated factors (Arkan, 2026). In particular, elements such as the perceived authenticity of marketing communication, influencer credibility, transparency in the use of artificial intelligence technologies, and users' general attitudes toward emerging technologies play a significant role. The strongest predictor of trust in virtual influencers was perceived authenticity of communication (Sundar, 2008). This finding is consistent with previous studies on influencer marketing, which indicate that authenticity represents one of the key factors influencing the relationship between influencers and their audiences (Rehman, Hassan & Behera, 2026). In social media environments, users particularly value communication that is perceived as natural, consistent, and aligned with the image of the individual or entity publishing the content. In the context of virtual influencers, the issue of authenticity becomes especially important because their digital nature may raise doubts regarding the credibility of marketing messages. However, the results of this study suggest that virtual influencers may still be perceived as authentic, provided that the communication conducted through them is consistent and credible from the audience's perspective. Another important factor influencing the level of trust is the perceived credibility of the virtual influencer. Respondents who considered virtual influencers to be reliable sources of product information demonstrated higher levels of trust in the content they publish. This finding confirms the importance of source credibility in shaping consumer attitudes. In marketing

literature, credibility is frequently identified as one of the key determinants of marketing communication effectiveness, as it influences how audiences interpret messages and the level of engagement they demonstrate (Hewapathirana & Perera, 2024). The analysis of the results also highlights the significant role of transparency in the use of artificial intelligence technologies. Respondents reported higher levels of trust toward virtual influencers when marketing communication was perceived as transparent and openly acknowledged the use of AI technologies. Such transparency may reduce users' uncertainty and alleviate potential concerns related to the use of algorithms in marketing communication processes (Aniket, Kaushik & Sivathanu, 2026). This finding aligns with the broader discussion on ethical aspects of artificial intelligence in marketing, emphasizing the importance of transparency and responsibility in communication with consumers. Another factor influencing the perception of virtual influencers is users' attitudes toward artificial intelligence technologies. Respondents who demonstrated more positive attitudes toward new technologies were more likely to trust virtual influencers and accept their presence on social media platforms. This suggests that the perception of virtual influencers may partly depend on the overall level of acceptance of digital technologies among users. As artificial intelligence technologies continue to develop and become increasingly present in consumers' everyday lives, it can be expected that the acceptance of such marketing communication tools will gradually increase. A particularly significant finding of this study is the strong relationship between trust in virtual influencers and purchase intention toward products promoted by them. This result indicates that trust serves as a key mediating mechanism between the perception of the influencer and consumers' purchasing behavior. Consequently, the effectiveness of marketing campaigns involving virtual influencers largely depends on brands' ability to build credible and authentic marketing communication. From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to the ongoing discussion on whether trust formation mechanisms developed for human interactions can be extended to artificial agents. The results suggest that traditional determinants of trust—such as authenticity and credibility—remain relevant even in the context of AI-generated influencers, which supports the applicability of established trust theories in digital environments. However, the study also highlights the importance of technology-specific factors, such as AI transparency and attitudes toward artificial intelligence. This indicates that trust in virtual influencers is not solely a replication of human-based mechanisms but rather a hybrid construct combining social and technological dimensions.

CONCLUSION

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that companies planning to incorporate virtual influencers into their marketing strategies should pay particular attention to the design of their marketing communication. Building an authentic image of the virtual influencer, ensuring consistency in communication, and transparently informing users about the nature of the technologies used are crucial factors. Such actions may contribute to increasing consumer trust and improving the effectiveness of marketing communication on social media platforms. Despite the significant findings, the study has certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. One of the main limitations concerns the nature of the research sample. The study was conducted among social media users, which means that the results primarily reflect the perceptions of this particular group of users. Future research could expand the sample to include other consumer groups, which would allow for more representative findings. Another limitation is the relatively limited number of variables analyzed in the study. Future research could incorporate additional factors that may influence the perception of virtual influencers, such as the visual realism of the character, communication style, or the level of interaction with social media users. Another promising direction for future research may involve examining cultural differences

in the perception of virtual influencers. Perceptions of artificial intelligence technologies and levels of trust in new forms of marketing communication may vary depending on cultural contexts. Comparative studies conducted across different countries could provide valuable insights into global trends in the use of virtual influencers in marketing. Finally, an interesting avenue for future research could involve analyzing the long-term impact of virtual influencers on relationships between brands and consumers. As the popularity of this phenomenon continues to grow, it becomes increasingly important to understand how virtual influencers influence the development of consumer loyalty and their long-term attitudes toward brands. This study contributes to the literature by providing an integrated model of trust in virtual influencers and demonstrating that trust plays a central mediating role between influencer characteristics and consumer purchase intentions.

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