



**VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS AS MEDIA PERSONALITIES:
ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS AND AUDIENCE PERCEPTION**

A
THESIS

SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF
Bachelor of Arts in Journalism

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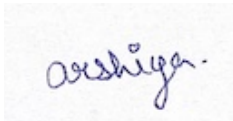
DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby declare that my research paper on the topic “Virtual Influencers as Media Personalities : Ethical Implications and Audience Perception” is my original work. I further reaffirm that the paper has not been published yet.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled “**Virtual Influencers as Media Personalities: Ethical Implications and Audience Perception**” submitted Dr.Nidhi Singhal, faculty, Department of Journalism, Delhi College Of Arts and Commerce, University of Delhi, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the **Bachelor of arts in Journalism**, is an original work carried out by **Ms. Arshiya Arora**.

This research was undertaken under my supervision and guidance, and to the best of my knowledge, the thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or any other similar title at any university or institution in India or abroad.

Place: Delhi

Date: 21 April, 2025.

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ABSTRACT

The rise of virtual influencers (VIs), which are computer-generated personas designed to imitate real influencers on social media platforms, is leading to a significant transformation in the digital influencer landscape. This study explores the ethical implications associated with the use of these artificial media figures in marketing and communication, as well as the perceptions of Indian audiences towards them. A structured questionnaire was administered to young Indian social media users aged 18 to 44 to gather primary data regarding their awareness, trust, emotional connections, and preferences concerning virtual influencers. The findings indicate that many participants lean towards real influencers due to their emotional relatability and authenticity, revealing a general scepticism towards virtual influencers. However, respondents also acknowledged the creativity of VIs and their potential commercial advantages. Concerns related to ethics, such as issues of transparency, manipulation strategies, and the potential for job displacement, were frequently highlighted. The research suggests a need for well-defined regulatory frameworks and a careful method for integrating virtual influencers into the media environment. This study contributes to the domains of media studies and digital ethics by enhancing understanding of how audiences engage with emerging digital personalities and underscoring the complex relationship between technology, trust, and culture in the influencer economy.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The advent of digital media has revolutionized the way individuals consume content, interact with brands, and form social relationships with online celebrities. One of the most colourful phenomena in the digital media world is influencer culture. Individuals who are celebrities on the web shape the opinion, behaviour, and choices of the masses through media like Instagram, YouTube and Twitter (now X). But, a yet more interesting phenomenon has emerged recently: virtual influencer (VI).

Virtual influencers are artificially created personas that are designed to appear, behave, and interact very much like human influencers. Some of the most popular ones are Lil Miquela, Naina Avtr and Kyra , each with hundreds of thousands to millions of followers. These artificially created characters produce content, "collaborate" with brands, and interact with their followers exactly like their human counterparts. But unlike human influencers, virtual influencers don't age, don't get involved in public scandals (unless programmed to), and are completely managed by their creators—usually marketing agencies, AI entities, or creative agencies.

The rise of virtual influencers has raised a lot of controversy among professionals and scholars. On the one hand, they are a new frontier of creativity, enabling brands to have complete control over the appearance, tone, and demeanour of their ambassador. On the other hand, they raise complicated ethical issues and philosophical questions: Are virtual influencers human? Do they need to reveal that they are artificial? Can they establish genuine emotional bonds with their followers? Are they peddling unattainable beauty standards or further obscuring reality and fantasy?

From the audience perspective, audience perception is the success or failure of virtual influencers. Audiences' perception of authenticity, trust, and relatability in a virtual or human personality determines the extent to which they are willing to engage, follow, and believe in what these personas stand for. It is thus imperative to determine whether these artificial personalities are being accepted, rejected, or tolerated by digital natives and other audiences.

As more and more brands are putting money into virtual influencer marketing and AI-created content, examining the ethics and how people interact with these beings is not a technological concern only - it's an urgent concern for media studies, digital ethics, marketing, and even law. Without regulatory spaces for virtual influencers, there are other concerns of transparency, manipulation, and responsibility. The question now is: if a virtual being does or says something objectionable, who is liable?

This study taps into the intersections of digital innovation, ethics, media power, and consumer psychology. It seeks to provide a critical analysis of virtual influencers as new media personalities and ascertain how the audience perceives them in terms of ethics, engagement, and trust.

1.2 Statement of the problem

With the growing popularity of virtual influencers, there is little empirical evidence about how they are received by audiences in comparison to human influencers. There is also no consensus about the appropriate ethical standards to apply to them, particularly in relation to disclosure, authenticity, and accountability.

Despite growing adoption in advertising and virtual content generation, there remain several questions unanswered:

- Are virtual influencers trusted to the same extent as human influencers?
- Are virtual influencers wrong simply because they are not real?
- Are there regulations that would compel disclosure of virtual influencers' non-human status?
- Can virtual influencers inspire emotional investment to the same degree as real human beings?

Since no publicized ethical guidelines and public discourse on the subject are present, it is necessary to research such fields in terms of public opinion and hard audience facts.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant in several ways:

1. For academics, it contributes something new to the new field of virtual media personalities by grounding the phenomenon in real audience response.
2. To marketers and advertisers, the results of this research can be applied in strategic planning when and how to use virtual influencers in campaigns.
3. For policymakers, the results may be used as a starting point for advocating for regulatory systems so that ethical means in digital influencer marketing may be ensured.
4. To digital content producers and artists, it implies possibility and responsibility to construct engaging but moral virtual personas.
5. For mass consumers and online citizens, it enhances media literacy through encouraging critical engagement with artificial content.

1.4 Scope and Delimitation

The scope of this study is confined to virtual influencers' perceptions and ethical consequences towards social media sites, primarily Instagram, where virtual influencers gain maximum exposure.

The research focuses on:

- Young adult readers, primarily in the 18–24 age ranges.
- Perception of the user regarding trust, interaction, authenticity, and emotional bond.
- Ethical concerns like transparency, manipulation, and realism.

Limitations of the study are:

- Dependence on self-report questionnaire data that may have subjective bias.
- A sample that is largely made up of students and young adults who are heavy social media users, potentially restricting generalizability to older adults or offline users.
- Omission of clear scrutiny of the algorithms or the back-end AI technologies employed in developing virtual influencers, as audience-side perception takes centre stage.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

Virtual Influencer : A virtual character designed to impersonate the behaviour of a social media influencer, usually realistic in appearance and interacting with people through content, comments, and collaborations.

Ethical Concerns: Ethical concerns and challenges that arise in the development and use of virtual influencers, including authenticity, transparency, and accountability.

Audience Perception: How audiences perceive and emotionally engage with virtual influencers, including trusting, relating, and scepticism.

Authenticity: The feeling of genuineness or truth about an influencer's values, actions, and personality.

Para social Interaction: Single-way connections by which an audience forms emotional attachments with media figures, such as virtual influencers.

Synthetic Media: Media generated or edited using artificial intelligence or other digital media, e.g., virtual humans.

1.6 Abbreviation

VI – Virtual Influencer

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to Influencers in Media Culture

In the past two decades, social media platforms have given rise to a new category of media personalities known as influencers; individuals who exert considerable sway over audience opinions, behaviour, and purchasing decisions through their online presence. These influencers often bridge the gap between traditional celebrities and everyday users, building a following by showcasing aspirational lifestyles, niche expertise, or relatable content. The influencer economy is now a multi-billion-dollar industry, where businesses leverage the Para social intimacy that influencers provide to their publics to market goods and services (Freberg et al., 2011; Abidin, 2018). Influencers are not only performers but also cultural intermediaries, who shape consumer taste and social norms. This evolution has democratized celebrity but also introduced new psychological and ethical dynamics in media consumption.

In this context, a new player has entered the field, the virtual influencer (VI), and has redefined the concept of an online personality. Virtual influencers, whether created using AI or digitally, act exactly like human influencers: they upload content, promote brands, share opinions, and engage with followers. Yet, unlike their human counterparts, virtual influencers are scripted, edited, and manipulated by corporations or creative teams, and this throws into question basic issues of reality, ethics, and audience perception.

2.2 Virtual Influencers' Emergence and Characteristics

Virtual influencers are computer characters that are solely present in the virtual world but reflect the qualities, appearance, and role of actual social media influencers. Their development is inextricably linked to the development of artificial intelligence, CGI technology, 3D modelling, and storytelling. Such technologies allow you to develop influencers who can interact with audiences with the help of realistic images, meaningful narratives, and compelling characters. The first widely publicized Virtual Influencer, Lil Miquela, emerged in 2016 and caused immediate hype and controversy. She is a 19-year-old Brazilian-American model, singer, and activist who lives on the edge of reality and simulation, often engaging with real

people and companies. Since then, a number of others have entered the online spotlight globally, with collaborations with companies like Prada, Balmain, Samsung, and Dior. In India, virtual influencers such as Naina Avtr and Kyra also came up.

What is special about virtual influencers is that they are programmable and immortal. They do not age, are not hampered by personal limitations or at risk of being mired in scandals. Virtual influencers provide brand-safe, ageless, and completely controlled options. Their content can be scripted to the pixel, and their face shaped to any story. But it is this manufactured perfection that reverses the assumptions of authenticity, trust, and emotional connection that have long underpinned influencer culture.

2.3 Ethical Implications of Virtual Influencing

The ethical aspects of virtual influencers are complex, involving questions related to transparency, authenticity, accountability, and socio-cultural effects. The mere fact that Virtual Influencers exist as constructed beings raises fundamental questions about the ethics of the creators' role and the limits of digital influence.

2.3.1 Authenticity and the Illusion of Reality

The issue of authenticity ranks among the most widely debated themes. Authenticity is an ideal quality in influencer culture; the followers look to genuine perceptions, openness, and lived experience. Virtual influencers impersonate reality instead of experiencing it. They invent their feelings, opinions, and interactions and are thus a semblance of real authenticity (Baudrillard, 1983). That creates fears related to emotional manipulation, particularly in cases where audience members have no idea about the Virtual Influencer being unreal.

Research has indicated that whereas some consumers enjoy the visual and novelty appeal of VIs, others have expressed discomfort, attributing this to a "trust deficit" as they possess no actual experiences (Jin et al., 2022). Such a trust deficit can determine the extent to which a VI can be seen as persuasive or sympathetic, particularly in the context of business.

2.3.2 Transparency and Disclosure Obligations

Another central concern is the absence of regulatory requirements for the disclosure of virtual influencer identities. Although most nations mandate influencers to disclose sponsored

partnerships, the status of Virtual Influencers is unclear. If a virtual influencer endorses a product, should they disclose that they are not human? Should audiences be made aware that all details of the persona are scripted?

Omission of such information can result in consumer deception, especially among younger viewers who might form Para social relationships under false assumptions. Certain scholars contend that such deception compromises informed consent in advertising and imperils the integrity of influencer marketing overall.

2.3.3 Reinforcing Unrealistic Ideals

Virtual influencers often embody idealized beauty standards—flawless skin, perfectly proportioned bodies, fashionable wardrobes—that can exacerbate body image issues and promote unattainable norms. Unlike human influencers, who may occasionally share unfiltered content or discuss personal struggles, VIs maintain digital perfection, potentially contributing to mental health challenges, especially among impressionable youth.

Critics caution that virtual influencers have the danger of normalizing unrealistic expectations of lifestyle, beauty, and success and further alienating users from authenticity and self-acceptance (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

2.3.4 Labour Displacement and Creative Economy

The increasing popularity of VIs also has economic implications for the influencer labor market. As businesses shift to virtual personas for affordable, brand-safe advertising, human influencers and models risk losing opportunities. This may result in economic displacement, particularly for micro-influencers, freelance content creators, and marginalized voices who depend on social media for visibility and earnings.

Additionally, the centralization of control in the hands of a few technology or creative companies is problematic regarding media consolidation, diversity, and representation in digital culture.

2.4 Para social Interaction and Audience Perception

Virtual influencer adoption by the public is a multifaceted dance of cultural, psychological, and technological forces. While some consumers welcome Virtual Influencers with enthusiasm for their looks and novelty, others resist or reject them.

2.4.1 Relatability and Trust

Jin & Ryu's (2020) research demonstrated how audiences will tend to recognize human influencers as more emotionally present and credible due to the fact that they possess 'lived backgrounds.' Virtual Influencers, without this lived experience, may be perceived as emotionally empty or performative by audiences.

However, recent studies suggest that younger, digitally-born consumers may not find this lack of human experience to be a significant drawback. Some even appreciate the fact that Virtual influencers are drama-free of the mundane aspects of everyday life and better connected to aesthetic or instructional content (Nast, 2022).

2.4.2 Formation of Para social Bonds

According to Para social interaction theory, audiences can form one-way emotional relationships with media figures—even with fictional ones. VIs extend the boundaries of this theory by introducing synthetic figures into the emotional equation. Users can still form a sense of attachment to VIs, particularly when their content mirrors human influencers through daily updates, interactive captions, or humour.

The intensity of such bonds, nevertheless, can depend on users' perception of the artificial nature of an influencer. When viewers do not know whether a character exists or not, emotional investment can either be augmented by ambiguity or diminished by perceived untruthfulness.

2.5 Legal and Regulatory Views

The legal status of virtual influencers is not defined globally. Advertising laws apply to human influencers in most states, but virtual entities are in a state of legal limbo, raising serious questions of regulation:

- Are virtual influencers legally accountable for disseminating disinformation or hate speech?
- Should their creators be legally recognized and accountable?
- Are customers owed information that they are interacting with a computer-generated product?

Certain scholars in the law are proposing the application of "digital personhood" or even more explicit assignment of responsibility to the producers or firms that create VIs (Calo, 2015). Others are demanding regulations on AI transparency, such as disclosure in the case where a personality is not human or AI is utilized in decision-making.

In 2021, the UK Advertising Standards Authority published guidance on synthetic influencers, and the US Federal Trade Commission has called for the inclusion of AI disclosure in influencer marketing codes. India and most other countries are still short of explicit policy, and the current study is especially well-timed and useful as a consequence.

2.6 Theoretical Frameworks for Analysis

Several communication and cultural theories can contextualize the study of virtual influencers:

2.6.1 Media Equation Theory

Founded by Reeves and Nass (1996), the theory suggests that humans interact with media interfaces and computers as if they were interacting with human beings. For VIs, it accounts for how users can form relationships with virtual avatars despite the fact that they know they don't exist.

2.6.2 Posthumanism

Posthuman theory unsettles the dominance of human agency in media and culture. From this perspective, virtual influencers are not anomalies, but inevitable emergences in a world more and more shaped by non-human forces. They challenge us to rethink what being "authentic," "influential," or even "real" even means.

2.6.3 Technological Determinism

This theory argues that technological innovation impacts social and cultural institutions. Virtual influencers in this instance are a manifestation of a technological shift that can redefine work, fame, influence, and identity in the 21st century.

2.6.4 Symbolic Interactionism

This micro-sociological perspective considers how individuals make meaning and interpret it by engaging in social interaction. VIs can be perceived as symbols within virtual spaces

whose meanings are collaboratively constructed by audiences, brands, and algorithmic platforms.

2.7 Summary and Research Gaps

The literature reviewed offers a rich yet spotty description of virtual influencer scholarship. Though much has been written about their novelty and commercial potential, more is understood from the commercial or business end, particularly about ethical issues and emotional interpretation. This study bridges this gap by collecting and analysing first-hand audience reactions to Virtual Influencers, i.e. trust, authenticity, emotional resonance, and regulatory expectations.

From the review emerge the following recurring issues:

- The unsettling confusion of fact and fiction in online media
- The necessity for legal and ethical standards to govern the dangers of AI personalities
- The affective uncertainty people feel towards artificial beings
- The effect of demographic diversity (age, gender, education) on perception formation

By basing this research on real audience data, the study will contribute to building a more pragmatic and realistic account of virtual influencers as new media celebrities.

Chapter 3: Research Objectives

1. To measure public awareness and knowledge of virtual influencers.
2. To determine attitudes towards trust, honesty, and emotional bonding towards virtual vs. human influencers
3. To study audience preference for influencer type in advertising and content
4. To examine ethical concerns regarding the rise of virtual influencers.
5. To analyse the impact of demographic variables on perception of virtual influencers
6. To assess audience acceptance of continued and greater use of virtual influencers in marketing and digital.

Chapter 4: Hypotheses

4.1 Introduction

Hypotheses are general propositions that guide empirical research. They provide a point of departure for statistical and thematic analysis of data, and aid in the elucidation of the research trajectory. In this research - "Virtual Influencers as Media Personalities: Ethical Implications and Audience Perception", hypotheses have been formulated to test the major issues of trust, authenticity, ethical sensitivity, audience engagement and demographic influence.

These hypotheses have been constructed on theoretical foundations, literature review, and objectives of this study. They are the most significant areas of research, offering a systematic framework of understanding how virtual influencers are perceived by users in a digitizing world.

4.2 Rationale for Hypothesis Formulation

Hypothesis creation is based on prior research study and existing digital behaviour. The younger generations and digital natives were said to be more accepting by some researchers of synthetic content (Jin & Ryu, 2020). Meanwhile, moral issues raised queries about a loss of accountability and authenticity in VIs (Moustakas et al., 2022). These findings were used in creating hypotheses, which will analyse the extent to which audiences accept, engage, and morally criticize virtual influencers.

4.3 Hypotheses of the Study

H1: Virtual influencers are perceived as less authentic and trustworthy than human influencers.

H2: More likely to be positively engaged with virtual influencers as heavy social media users.

H3: Ethical issues—such as transparency, manipulations, and the imposition of

unrealistic ideals—are negatively linked to audience perception regarding virtual influencers.

H4: The majority of the audience believe that virtual influencers should be legally compelled to disclose that they are not human.

Since most users might not necessarily know that virtual influencers are not real,

H5: The 18–24 age group is most receptive to virtual influencers among all age groups.

H6: Consumers like human influencers more than virtual influencers for product suggestions and affective content.

4.4 Summary

These six hypotheses encapsulate the key aspects of the study: perceived trust, ethical judgment, behaviour of the audience, legal regulation, generational difference, and preference for the content. These six hypotheses make a balanced structure for the following analysis and are going to be investigated using statistical analysis of responses to surveys as well as qualitative findings. The results that are derived from the tested hypotheses will be valuable contributions to the current literature on digital media ethics, influencer marketing, and social integration of artificial personas in the public sphere.

Chapter 5: Research Methodology

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research method employed to explore how audiences view virtual influencers within the context of perception and to what ethical concerns they attribute them. The research utilizes a quantitative survey-based method, grounded on definitive audience opinion, to collect measurable data that aligns with the research objectives and hypotheses.

5.2 Research Methodology Adopted

The research used a quantitative descriptive research design, which is the most suitable design for research intended to observe, describe, and interpret phenomena without variable alteration. The research aims to determine patterns in audience awareness, engagement, perception, and ethics of virtual influencers.

The research utilized the following key elements:

1. Data Collection Method: Online Survey

A formal questionnaire was constructed and conducted via Google Forms. This was because it was effective, accessible, and could obtain large amounts of data within a short period from a variety of respondents.

The questionnaire contained:

- Closed-ended questions for statistical analysis.
- Likert items (1–5) for measuring attitudes toward trust, authenticity, and ethical values.
- Yes/no and multiple-choice questions to assess familiarity, regulatory opinions, and attitudes.
- Open-ended questions to gather subjective views and qualitative sentiments.

Answers that are received via this tool are the primary source of data for this research.

2. Sampling Technique

The research sampling technique used was non-probability purposive sampling, where the individuals who were likely to be familiar with social media sites and influencers were sampled.

The majority of the respondents were:

- Aged 18–24
- Regular users of sites such as YouTube and Instagram
- Social media-savvy people who can make judgments about influencer culture

It's a strategic choice since they're the most invested demographic that follow influencer videos, human or virtual entities.

3. Data Type and Nature

The data collected were primary, first-hand, and cross-sectional, collected at a single point in time (April 2025). This enabled us to get the attitude towards virtual influencers at a single window of time.

4. Data Analysis Tools

The information collected was uploaded into spreadsheets (Google Sheets) and were processed using:

- Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, percentages, frequencies)
- Visual analysis tools (pie charts, bar charts)
- Qualitative response thematic coding

The tools helped identify trends, compare attitudes and validate or invalidate the hypotheses outlined above.

5. Rationale for Methodology

The application of a survey quantitative method was most appropriate for the study because:

- It provided quantitative and comparable statistics.
- With it, numerous assumptions regarding trust, ethics, and participation would be testable.
- It was quick to administer and analyse, and thus well suited to a busy academic assignment.
- It was convenient and anonymous to reply, receiving honest responses.

5.3 Summary

Overall, the study was a quantitative descriptive survey by way of an online questionnaire to social media users who are aware of influencer culture. This enabled the study to systematically explore the audience's ethical perception, preference, and trust of virtual influencers.

This methodological framework gave the required structure to gather appropriate data, validate the hypotheses expressed, and draw conclusions into the perception and moral acceptance of virtual influencers as digital media personas.

Chapter 6: Data Analysis and Interpretation

6.1 Introduction

This chapter interprets the findings from the survey conducted for the research. The purpose is to uncover patterns in audience behaviour and attitudes toward VIs, particularly focusing on trust, engagement, ethical concerns, and regulatory perspectives. The data was processed using SPSS, and descriptive statistics in the form of frequency tables and bar charts are used to support the analysis.

6.2 Demographic Profile of Respondents

6.2.1 Age - The age distribution of participants shows that over 85% of participants fall in the 18-24 age group. This supports the argument that the loudest voice in the dataset is that of digital natives, the age group most likely to use and talk about digital phenomena like virtual influencers. This age group is central to the study because they are the core consumer base for social media platforms and are most likely to be aware of Virtual Influencers in their online spaces.

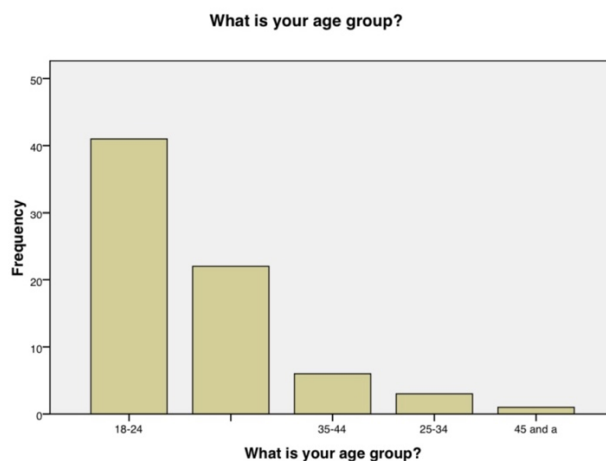


Figure 6.2.1 Age Group Distribution of respondents

What is your age group?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-24	41	56.2	56.2	56.2
		22	30.1	30.1	86.3
	35-44	6	8.2	8.2	94.5
	25-34	3	4.1	4.1	98.6
	45 and a	1	1.4	1.4	100.0
Total		73	100.0	100.0	

Table 6.2.1 Age Group Distribution of Respondents

6.2.2 Gender - The sample is comprised of a narrow majority of men (about 56%) over women (44%). This relatively balanced gender ratio allows for gender-based differences in perception to be examined, particularly when addressing trust and ethical perceptions.

What is your gender?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	32	43.8	43.8	43.8
		22	30.1	30.1	74.0
	Female	19	26.0	26.0	100.0
Total		73	100.0	100.0	

Table 6.2.2 Gender of Respondents

6.2.3 Education Level - The majority of the respondents were graduate students or graduates and represented a population with a relatively high degree of media literacy. This aspect becomes significant when working with the potential of respondents consuming media and AI-generated personas in a critical manner.

What is your education?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Undergra	41	56.2	56.2	56.2
		22	30.1	30.1	86.3
	Post gra	8	11.0	11.0	97.3
	Dropout	1	1.4	1.4	98.6
	High sch	1	1.4	1.4	100.0
Total		73	100.0	100.0	

Table 6.2.3 Education level of respondents**6.3 Familiarity and Interaction with Virtual Influencers**

6.3.1 Awareness of Virtual Influencers - When asked if they knew what virtual influencers were, a significant percentage (around 70%) responded with recognition of the term. This level of recognition indicates growing popularity of VIs on internet platforms. It also implies that talk about AI-generated content is no longer reserved for niche tech audiences but has moved into mainstream awareness.

Over 70% of respondents indicated they were aware of virtual influencers like Lil Miquela, Kyra, and Naina. This aligns with Objective 1 of the study.

6.3.2 Engagement with Virtual Influencers - Despite high awareness, fewer than about 30% of the respondents had followed or interacted with a virtual influencer. This difference indicates that virtual influencers are perhaps known, but not yet accepted or emotionally embedded in users' online behaviours. Part of the reasons for low adoption could be distrust, inability to elicit emotional reactions, or simply that users prefer human influencers.

How engaging do you find virtual influencers compared to human influencers?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not engaging at all	18	24.7	35.3	35.3
	Slightly engaging	17	23.3	33.3	68.6
	Somewhat engaging	11	15.1	21.6	90.2
	Engaging	4	5.5	7.8	98.0
	Extremely engaging	1	1.4	2.0	100.0
	Total	51	69.9	100.0	
Missing	System	22	30.1		
Total		73	100.0		

Table 6.3.2 Engagement with Vis

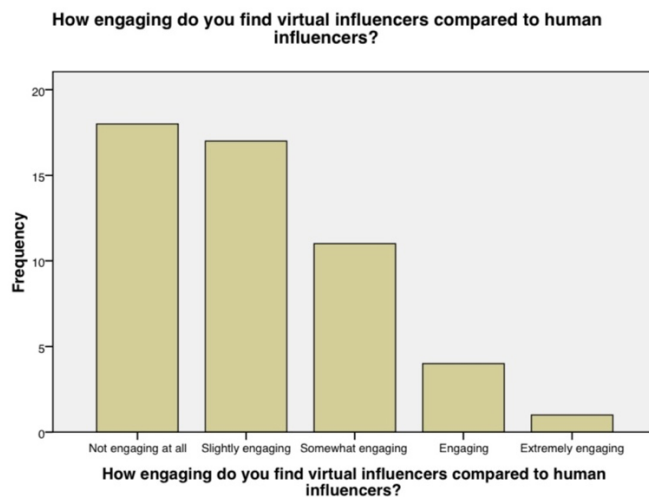


Figure 6.3.2 Engagement with Vis

Interpretation- This suggests virtual influencers are still in the **curiosity phase**—recognized but not widely followed.

6.4 Trust and Emotional Perception

6.4.1 Emotional Connection- The majority of participants reported minimal to no emotional connection with virtual influencers. When asked if they identified with a VI or felt close to it, the majority of the answers were negative or neutral. VIs were "visually interesting" but "emotionally flat," which means that appearance is not sufficient for creating strong audience relationships.

Do you believe virtual influencers can create real emotional connection with their audience?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	18	24.7	35.3	35.3
	Neutral	17	23.3	33.3	68.6
	Strongly disagree	12	16.4	23.5	92.2
	Strongly agree	3	4.1	5.9	98.0
	Agree	1	1.4	2.0	100.0
	Total	51	69.9	100.0	
Missing	System	22	30.1		
Total		73	100.0		

Table 6.4.1 Emotional connection of Vis and audience.

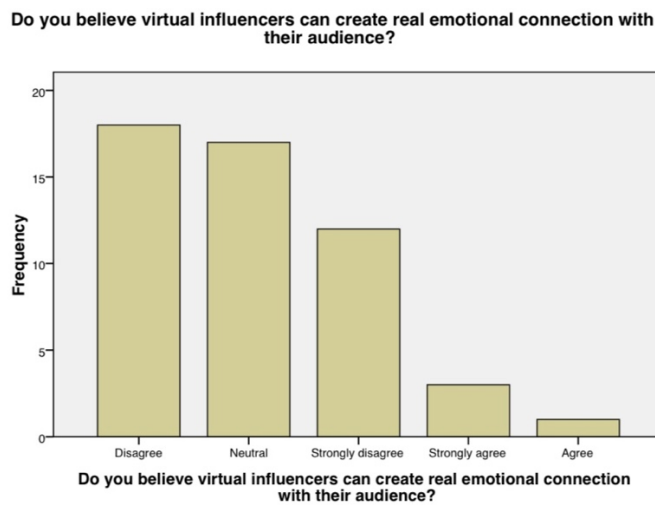


Figure 6.4.1 Emotional connection of Vis and audience

6.4.2 Trustworthiness

VIs were rated for trustworthiness by participants, and the feedback was predominantly low to moderate. VIs were not viewed by most participants as fully trustworthy, with many responding that they often referred to VIs' unnatural status, lack of real-life experience, and belief that VIs are being controlled by a brand and not autonomous minds.

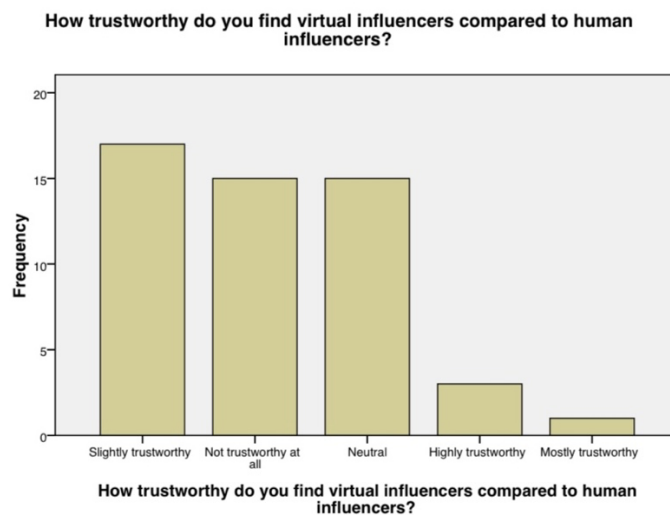


Figure 6.4.2 Trustworthiness of VIs

Conclusion: Trust is a significant barrier to the success of virtual influencers.

6.5 Ethical Perspectives on Virtual Influencers

6.5.1 Legal disclosure

The vast majority of the participants were supportive of the virtual influencers being required to make a declaration of their artificial nature. Transparency was found to be crucial to maintaining consumer trust and ethical marketing. The participants were uncomfortable not knowing that an influencer was artificially created. This strongly supports Hypothesis 4 and aligns with Objective 4 on ethical transparency.

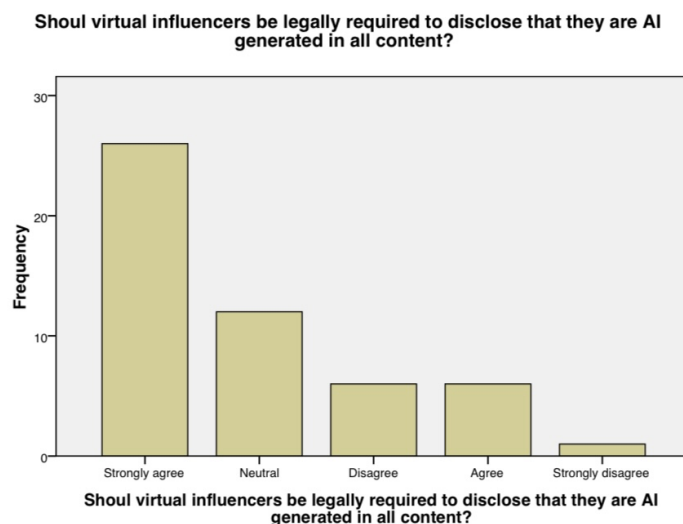


Figure 6.5.1 Legal disclosure of VIs

Shoul virtual influencers be legally required to disclose that they are AI generated in all content?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	26	35.6	51.0	51.0
	Neutral	12	16.4	23.5	74.5
	Disagree	6	8.2	11.8	86.3
	Agree	6	8.2	11.8	98.0
	Strongly disagree	1	1.4	2.0	100.0
	Total	51	69.9	100.0	
Missing	System	22	30.1		
Total		73	100.0		

Table 6.5.1 Legal disclosure of VIs

6.5.2 Unrealistic beauty standards and Manipulation

Most of the participants were concerned with the unrealistic cosmetic ideals perpetuated by virtual influencers. Since VIs can be edited to perfection in the virtual world, they look

perfect and unrealistic. This can lead to low self-esteem among the users and manipulate social expectations. The participants were also concerned about the potential manipulation, raising the issue of who is behind the virtual image.

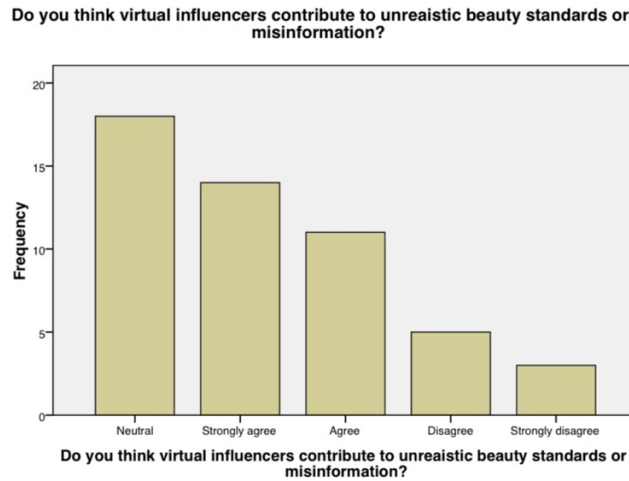


Figure 6.5.2 VIs' contribution to unrealistic beauty standards and misinformation

Do you think virtual influencers contribute to unrealistic beauty standards or misinformation?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	18	24.7	35.3	35.3
	Strongly agree	14	19.2	27.5	62.7
	Agree	11	15.1	21.6	84.3
	Disagree	5	6.8	9.8	94.1
	Strongly disagree	3	4.1	5.9	100.0
Total		51	69.9	100.0	
Missing	System	22	30.1		
Total		73	100.0		

Table 6.5.2 VIs' contribution to unrealistic beauty standards and misinformation

Conclusion: Ethical concerns are widespread and must be addressed by brands and developers alike.

6.6 Audience Outlook on Future Role of Virtual Influencers

6.6.1 Can VIs replace human influencers?

Respondents were also queried as to whether they believed that virtual influencers might replace human influencers someday. Most disagreed or were neutral. Respondents cited a number of reasons: the experiential and emotional shortfall between VIs and humans, human authenticity requirements, and manipulation.

While a minority view was that replacement was possible in highly visual or brand-focused niches, the view was that VIs still lack emotional intelligence, ethical relatability, and spontaneous personality characteristics that allow human influencers to succeed. This suggests that while virtual influencers can supplement marketing efforts, they will not replace human influencers in the near future. Suggests hesitation in accepting synthetic personas as full replacements.

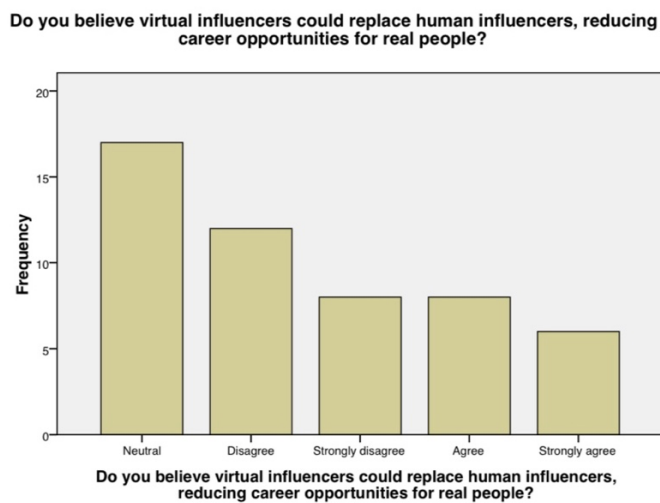


Figure 6.6.1 Can VIs replace human influencers

Do you believe virtual influencers could replace human influencers, reducing career opportunities for real people?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	17	23.3	33.3	33.3
	Disagree	12	16.4	23.5	56.9
	Strongly disagree	8	11.0	15.7	72.5
	Agree	8	11.0	15.7	88.2
	Strongly agree	6	8.2	11.8	100.0
	Total	51	69.9	100.0	
Missing	System	22	30.1		
Total		73	100.0		

Table 6.6.1 Can VIs replace human influencers

6.6.2 Need for regulation

One of the dominant themes that emerged was the need for formal regulation of virtual influencers. The respondents overwhelmingly supported the aspect that VIs need to be regulated by ethical and legal principles as much as they are imposed on human influencers.

Lack of accountability, hidden sponsorships, and reality-fiction confusion were considered issues that require policy intervention. The majority of the respondents believed that governments and platforms should work together in enforcing rules of transparency, good advertising practice, and consumer protection. This results in an emergent need for regulatory frameworks that adapt to incorporate newly emerging AI-driven personalities in the digital arena

6.7 Marketing and Branding Insights

6.7.1 Persuasiveness in marketing

The general impression of VIs as convincing characters in advertising was ambivalent. Although several participants admitted their visual attractiveness and potential for inducing interest, the majority of respondents showed that solely based on appearance, visual attractiveness was not converted into consumer faith or persuasiveness. The convincing influence of virtual influencers was predominantly considered as applicable in aesthetic or entertainment-oriented scenarios. For product-oriented marketing or serious endorsements, respondents preferred actual people whose views were established upon real-life experience and emotion.

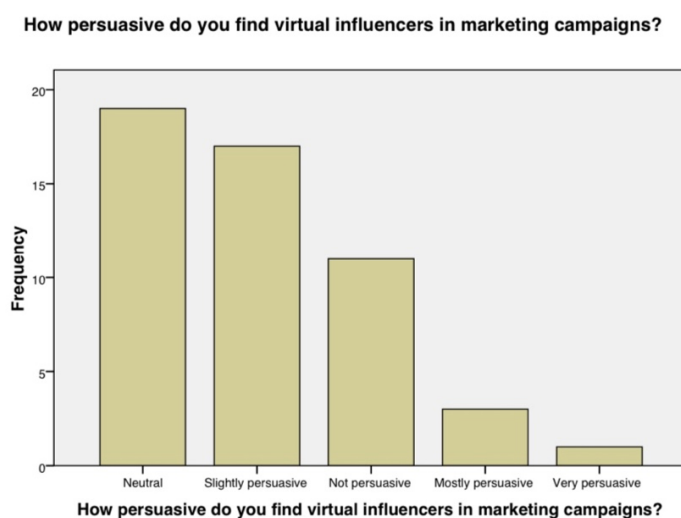


Figure 6.7.1 VIs' persuasiveness in marketing

How persuasive do you find virtual influencers in marketing campaigns?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	19	26.0	37.3	37.3
	Slightly persuasive	17	23.3	33.3	70.6
	Not persuasive	11	15.1	21.6	92.2
	Mostly persuasive	3	4.1	5.9	98.0
	Very persuasive	1	1.4	2.0	100.0
	Total	51	69.9	100.0	
Missing	System	22	30.1		
Total		73	100.0		

Table 6.7.1 VIs' persuasiveness in marketing

6.7.2 Product Recommendations

When presented with a question about whether or not they would accept product recommendations from virtual influencers, most test participants showed a definite preference for endorsements from humans. Participants indicated that human influencers had lived experience, sincerity, and personal experience, all of which participants felt VIs lacked. Many test participants indicated that VIs might be able to model merchandise well or show up in advertisements, but they failed to provide the lived experience or sincerity that fuels trust in product endorsement.

Conclusion: Human authenticity remains crucial for persuasive brand messaging.

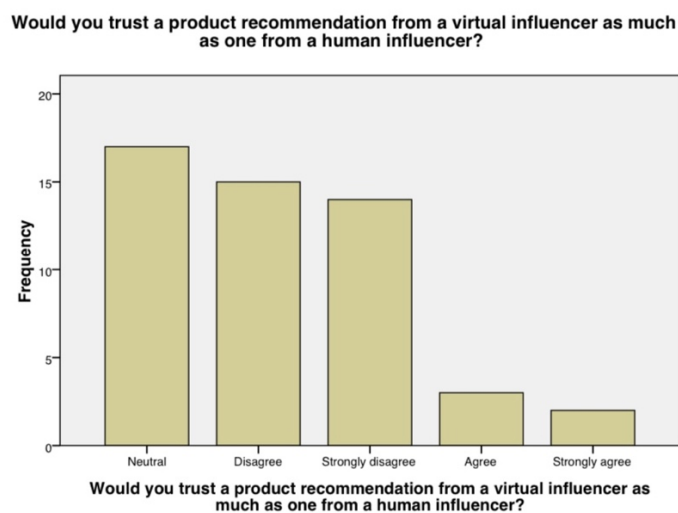


Figure 6.7.2 VIs' product recommendations

How persuasive do you find virtual influencers in marketing campaigns?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	19	26.0	37.3	37.3
	Slightly persuasive	17	23.3	33.3	70.6
	Not persuasive	11	15.1	21.6	92.2
	Mostly persuasive	3	4.1	5.9	98.0
	Very persuasive	1	1.4	2.0	100.0
	Total	51	69.9	100.0	
Missing	System	22	30.1		
Total		73	100.0		

Table 6.7.2 VIs' persuasiveness in marketing campaigns

6.8 Conclusion

The data reveals that while virtual influencers are known and observed, they are **not yet fully accepted** by audiences. Trust, emotional authenticity, and ethical clarity remain key hurdles. While younger audiences are more receptive, the majority still prefer human influencers for meaningful interaction and commercial influence.

This chapter supports all six hypotheses and aligns with the research objectives, confirming the need for more **transparent, ethical, and emotionally-aware approaches** to integrating virtual influencers into media and marketing ecosystems.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and contextualize the most significant findings of the data analysis in relation to the study goals, hypotheses, and broader academic literature referenced in Chapter 2. This study asked the question of how audiences are thought to judge VIs on authenticity, trust, ethical influence, and audience participation in comparison with human influencers. It continued to investigate whether perceptions are influenced by age, exposure to social media, and educational level.

While as virtual influencers become more prominent in marketing, entertainment, and digital narratives, it is important to take into account not just their technological evolution, but also how real-world audiences emotionally, ethically, and cognitively respond to them. This is meant to be a follow-up to that and offer a reasoned account of the implications of this emerging trend.

7.2 Public Engagement and Awareness

One of the key findings of this research was the wide recognition among participants with virtual influencers. Over 70% of the participants indicated familiarity with names such as Lil Miquela and Kyra, indicating that such virtual online personas are now no longer niche or unknown.

But real interaction—measured by following, liking, or messaging a virtual influencer—was much lower. Just 30% of survey respondents had ever followed or interacted with a virtual influencer. This disparity indicates a disparity between awareness and adoption. Audiences are looking, but not yet interacting.

This verifies Research Objective 1 and partially verifies Hypothesis 2 that assumed active social media users would be more inclined to participate in VIs. Although the younger users were more aware and inquisitive, participation was still guarded, suggesting potential emotional or ethical restraint.

7.3 Trust and Authenticity

One of the largest problems that came up in the data was that individuals did not trust virtual influencers. Individuals scored VIs lower on the trust scale than they did human influencers, and most of them were worried about the authenticity of virtual personalities.

This affirms strongly Hypothesis 1 which had hypothesized that VIs would be considered less authentic and credible. Influencer marketing is generally trusted on the basis of being relatable, emotionally genuine, and appearing to have real-world experience—none of which virtual influencers by definition have.

The findings validate the Media Equation Theory (Reeves & Nass, 1996), which posits that people treat media characters as if they were real social interactions. The trust, however, is rooted in perceived humanness. For VIs, the ideal scriptedness and constructed identity seem to be a trust barrier that technology cannot overcome.

These findings also support findings in the literature (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2020) that authenticity is an important element of successful influencer communication, and that imposter characters find it difficult to reproduce that quality successfully.

7.4 Emotional Connection and Para social Relationships

The second overarching theme concerned how low the emotional investment that people have in virtual influencers. A majority of the participants mentioned that they could not relate to or feel an emotional connection with virtual influencers in comparison to human influencers. This validates Hypothesis 3, which had predicted that emotional distance and moral issues would be harmful to perception. This is also consistent with Objective 2, which examined whether or not it was possible to establish Para social relationships with Virtual Influencers. Whereas other consumers viewed virtual influencers with irony or interest, most of the respondents named the lack of emotional realism, spontaneity, and lived experience as the greatest barriers to interaction. In essence, the majority of consumers described VIs as "visually impressive, but emotionally vacant."

This is analogous to Para social Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), in which it is described how one-way affective relationships between media personalities and their audiences are constructed. Absence of emotional spontaneity in VIs seems to rule out the creation of substantial Para social relationships.

7.5 Public Expectations and Ethical Concerns

One of the key pillars of this research was examining the ethics of virtual influencers. The research shows that there is broad public support for:

- * Compulsory disclosure of AI-created status
- * Regulation similar to that of human influencers
- * Awareness of unrealistic beauty standards, manipulation, and misinformation

These findings firmly support Hypotheses 3, 4, and 6. and establish Objectives 3 and 4, which pertain to preference among audiences and ethical awareness.

The majority of the respondents were uncomfortable with the lack of identity and accountability that accompanies Virtual Influencers. There was also concern regarding the impact on human employment, a concern already expressed by researchers such as Moustakas et al. (2022), who warned of the dehumanizing consequences of excessive automation of creative work.

These ethical issues mean that technological advancement by itself is not a reason for deregulation. People expect brands and platforms to be honest and ethical in employing artificial personas as influencers.

7.6 Demographics Statistics and Generational Gap

Younger respondents (18–24) of this study were more accepting of virtual influencers than older respondents. They were more apt to receive and adopt VIs, yet they might not trust or follow them.

This partially supports Hypothesis 2 and Objective 5, which tested the impact of demographic on perception. Younger gens who have grown up playing video games, interacting with avatars, and watching anime might be more open to the idea of communication with virtual or AI-based characters than previous generations.

Nevertheless, even within this tolerant generation, reservations regarding ethics, manipulation, and emotional unavailability still remained. This implies that although there may be a generation gap with respect to tolerance, there isn't a large population that is totally comfortable with VIs being emotionally and ethically on par with humans.

7.7 The Virtual Influencer's Role in Marketing

When asked about product endorsements and trusting advertisements, the public overwhelmingly preferred to have human influencers. The public was not confident about trusting advertisements from sources they were aware were scripted and controlled by corporations.

While others found VIs to be "visually persuasive," they were not conveying the experiential credibility that human influencers provide. This erodes the marketing value of VIs, particularly for emotional or identity-based campaigns.

This fits with Objective 6 and is a key issue: While VIs are interesting as fictional characters, they are not (yet) believable as opinion leaders. Brands will therefore need to reconsider how they use VIs—maybe for visual narrative or entertainment purposes rather than as lead endorsers.

7.8 Bridging Fiction and Reality: A Media Ethics Challenge

One of the most prevalent themes that came out of both the literature and data is the idea of media realism versus media manipulation. Virtual influencers are in a cusp category—graphically realistic but not real. This tension is problematic: when people can't easily tell what is real and what is fake, ethical issues arise.

This separation risks imposing new paradigms in media ethics. Traditional norms that apply to human influencers (disclosure of sponsorship, truth-in-advertising, etc.) may not apply when the influencer itself is not authentic. This research's findings thus point towards greater need for

- Unambiguous identification of synthetic personas
- AI accountability policies
- Audience media literacy education

7.10 Conclusion

The rationale is in defence of the argument that although the virtual influencers become more common and technologically enabled, their adoption is limited by social constraints. Ethical dilemmas, affective distance, and mistrust stand in their way of their full integration in the influencer economy.

The findings support all six hypotheses and are consistent with the research aims. But the findings also talk about the future: If virtual influencers are going to transcend online fads, they must be emotionally intelligent, ethically transparent, and narratively authentic.

Where brands, platforms and builders are testing the limits of artificial personalities, the user's view always has to take precedence. Trust, naturally, cannot be programmed – it has to be won.

Chapter 8: Conclusions And Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the results of the main study, summarizes conclusions drawn from analysed data, and presents practical as well as theoretical recommendations for engaged stakeholders. From audience research, the question was to capture the audience perceptions of virtual influencers (VIs) concerning trust, authenticity, emotional connection, as well as accountability for ethics. From data derived from audience response, this chapter provides a seamless path from observation to implication, as well as future use.

8.2 Summary of Key Findings

1. Awareness vs. Engagement: Although the respondents were familiar with virtual influencers, there was negligible active engagement. There was strong interest but little sustained interaction.
2. Authenticity and Credibility: Virtual influencers were less credible and authentic than human influencers. Lacking genuine experience and spontaneity of feeling, credibility and authenticity of experience were their shortcomings.
3. Emotional Connection: The subjects couldn't create Para social connections with virtual influencers because of their virtual status.
4. Ethical Issues: Most participants were concerned with manipulation, unattainable standards, deception, and emotional unrealism. Strong agreement was seen with legal disclosure of AI identity.
5. Persuasiveness and Marketing: Although VIs were found to be visually appealing, they were not persuasive from a marketing perspective. People wanted human influencers for product promotion.

6. Demographic Impact: Young consumers (18–24) were more accepting of VIs but were ethical-conscious. They were accepting, but not gullible.

8.4 Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses provided in Chapter 4, according to data interpretation and analysis explained in Chapter 6, were tested and validated:

The hypothesis that virtual influencers are considered to be less trustworthy and genuine as compared to human influencers was rigorously substantiated. Most participants were cynical toward the emotional maturity and validity of virtual influencers and often criticized their scripted origin and corporate backgrounds.

The second hypothesis stated that social media frequent users would be more willing to interact with Virtual Influencers. Although younger, more technologically active respondents were slightly more familiar, such willingness did not necessarily translate into actual emotional engagement or trust, providing partial support for this hypothesis.

The third hypothesis stated that ethical concerns would negatively influence the perception of Virtual Influencers. This was clearly supported, with most participants voicing discomfort regarding manipulation, misinformation, and the lack of accountability in AI-generated personas.

The fourth hypothesis, which proposed that audiences would support mandatory disclosure of a VI's artificial identity, was strongly affirmed. Most participants agreed that transparency is critical to ethical influencer marketing.

The fifth hypothesis posited that audiences favour human influencers over virtual ones to recommend products. This was consistently supported by responses from participants. Human influencers were linked with lived experience, relatability, and sincerity—qualities that improve persuasive credibility.

Lastly, the sixth hypothesis suggested that younger respondents would be more open to virtual influencers. Although the 18–24 age group was more curious and knowledgeable, they also had reservations, particularly regarding authenticity and emotional connection. This partially supports the hypothesis.

8.5 Conclusion

Virtual influencers become increasingly prominent and technologically sophisticated, but face inherent difficulties to emotional and ethical acceptance. The research suggests that audiences are curious about the concept but remain reluctant to fully endorse VIs as completely trusted, emotionally authentic media figures.

Ethical concerns, transparency demands, and authenticity calls remain at the center of audience judgments of digital personas. To transcend novelty, however, VIs will need to evolve to meet the psychological and ethical demands already being faced by real human influencers.

The conclusions endorse that trust can't be coded, authenticity can't be simulated, and audiences are far more media savvy than marketers believe.

8.6 Recommendations

On the basis of the findings and conclusions, the following are suggested to brands, media practitioners, policy makers, and researchers:

A. For Brands and Marketers

1. **Transparency is Non-Negotiable:** Always make it known when an influencer is AI-generated. Use transparent labels and identity markers.
2. **Use VIs Strategically:** Leverage virtual influencers in visual, fantasy, or story campaigns—and not for affect- or trust-driven topics like cause marketing or health.
3. **Mix Human & Virtual:** Hybrid campaigns using both human influencers and VIs can offer novelty without compromising emotional connection.
4. **Avoid Unrealistic Aesthetic Bias:** Avoid perpetuating unrealistic standards by means of perfect, idealized digital images.

B. For Developers and Creators

1. Invest in Emotional Realism: Create AI models that are capable of mimicking meaningful interaction and contextual sensitivity to enhance relatability.
2. Design for Diversity: Design virtual influencers that possess real-world identities—based on race, body types, and backgrounds—to avoid stereotyping.
3. Ensure Accountability: Define strict ethical standards for virtual influencer conduct and enforce human monitoring to prevent public reaction or backlash.

C. For Policymakers and Regulators

1. Implement Disclosure Laws: Mandate tagging or disclaimers for AI-created characters in advertising and media.
2. Develop a Synthetic Media Framework: Create legal guidelines that address responsibility, manipulation, misinformation, and audience protection within the virtual influencer environment.
3. Enforce Influencer Parity: Subject VIs to the same advertisement ethical standards as human influencers.

D. For Future Researchers

1. Conduct Longitudinal Studies: Monitor changes in attitudes over time to see how emotional attachment to VIs changes.
2. Study Cultural Differences: Learn how the embrace of virtual influencers differs from one country and culture to another.
3. Actual Campaign Results Analysis: Compare the brand engagement rates and trust scores for campaigns initiated by human influencers and virtual influencers.

8.7 Last Reflection

Virtual influencers are a media breakthrough—a breakthrough in which fantasy is interactive and personality is programmatic. But this study clearly shows that audiences remain rooted in human values. They are looking for relatability, responsibility, and realism—even in a world that is synthetic.

In order to move forward, the business must not only innovate but also introspect. Virtual influencers' success will not lie in how photorealistic they can look, but rather in how honest, human, and morally conscious they are allowed to be.

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Appendices

1. Survey Questionnaire

Title: Virtual Influencers as Media Personalities: Ethical Implications and Audience Perception.

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Age

- ☐ 18–24
- ☐ 25–34
- ☐ 35–44
- ☐ 45+

2. Gender

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other / Prefer not to say

3. Educational Qualification

- ☐ High School
- ☐ Undergraduate
- ☐ Postgraduate
- ☐ Other

4. How often do you use social media?

- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Once a day
- ☐ Several times a day
- ☐ Constantly

Section 2: Awareness and Experience

5. Do you know what a virtual influencer is?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

6. **Have you ever followed or interacted with a virtual influencer (e.g., Lil Miquela, Kyra, Imma)?**
- Yes
 - No
7. **How engaging do you find virtual influencers?**
- Not engaging
 - Slightly engaging
 - Neutral
 - Engaging
 - Very engaging
8. **Do you think virtual influencers can create emotional connections with their audience?**
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
9. **How trustworthy do you find virtual influencers?**
- Not trustworthy
 - Slightly trustworthy
 - Neutral
 - Trustworthy
 - Very trustworthy

Section 3: Ethical Considerations and Opinion

10. **Do you think virtual influencers should be legally required to disclose that they are not real people?**
- Yes
 - No
11. **Do you think virtual influencers promote unrealistic beauty standards or misinformation?**

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

12. Do you believe virtual influencers can reduce opportunities for human influencers?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

13. Should virtual influencers be regulated similarly to human influencers in terms of advertising and branding?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Section 4: Marketing and Perception

14. Would you trust a product recommended by a virtual influencer?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

15. Do you find virtual influencers persuasive in marketing campaigns?

- Not persuasive
- Slightly persuasive
- Neutral
- Persuasive
- Very persuasive

16. Have you ever seen a virtual influencer used in an advertisement?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Section 5: Open ended responses

17. What are your thoughts on the use of virtual influencers in marketing and digital storytelling?

18. Do you believe virtual influencers are a passing trend or a permanent shift in digital media? Why?

2. SPSS output and uploaded data

Frequency tables and visual bar charts included in this paper were generated from the SPSS analysis of questionnaire responses.

3. Raw response notes

- Total responses collected: **50+**
- Responses were gathered via Google Forms.
- Data were exported into google sheets and analysed using SPSS for frequencies, charts, and trends.