

The Impact of Virtual Influencers: Emerging Trends and Opportunities

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Abstract

With the introduction of technology, Marketing has drastically changed over time. From traditional marketing to digital marketing now we are in era of virtual influencers. Emerged This report has combines evidences from 25 scholarly papers to identify the effectiveness of virtual influencers across various industries. The analysis reveals that virtual influencers also able to capture the consumer trust if they have good content quality, and authenticity in the post with disclosure details. As human influencers have already captured the market with these dimensions, when it comes to virtual also same dimensions are inculcated to capture the market. Key findings of the study indicate that virtual influencers can match or even can exceed human performance when properly presented in front of consumers. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge which navigates through direction which is rapidly Gowing domain.

Keywords: AI Influencers, Virtual Influencers, Consumer Trust, Brand Authenticity

Introduction

The technology driven world has changed marketing strategies altogether. With the introduction of digital marketing there was a major shift in the marketing sector. From celebrities to influencers, now to virtual influencers marketing scenario has seen tremendous change over period of time. As of 2026 companies are coming up with the concept of virtual influencers.

Virtual influencers are computer generated or AI generated persons who are designed interact with and engage audience on social media platform. How ever questions persist about their ability to connect with consumers in authentic way and connect with them. Raise of virtual influencers symbolizes fundamental shift in how brands perceive influence, authenticity and consumer engagement in digital era. Virtual influencers are also able to generate thousands of followers.

This research article aims to understand extend to which virtual influencers will be able to grab the market. Three dimensions under study are emerging trends, customer trust and brand integration opportunities that drive commercial adoption. Our analysis draws comprehensive review of peer reviewed literature, empirical research to provide understanding of rapidly changing marketing scenario. Significance of this study is not just limited to market practice. Virtual influencers challenge traditional perception of celebrity, human connection in digital environment.

Background and Theoretical Foundation

Defining Virtual Influencers

Virtual influencers also referred to AI influencers are AI generated influencers are digital persons created using technology, computer generated imagery to stimulate human like appearance on social media platform. These entities exist only in digital form yet they are able to provide long lasting impression in the mind of consumer by providing interactive environment with the followers. (Allal-Chérif, 2023)

For the purpose of this article, we adopt term Virtual influencer to understand then role of Artificial intelligence and technology.

Historical Context and Evolution

Th emergence of virtual influencers can be traced back to 2010. Example like Lil Miquela created in 2016 demonstrated the role of virtual influencers attracting brand partnership and achieving significant follower engagement.

Currently virtual influencers have transformed from experimental strategies to well established marketing channels. Industry projections estimate AI in social media is going to increase by 26.93 % by the end of 2026.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the concept of virtual influencers requires understanding of multiple theoretical traditions. Source credibility theory explains how followers or audience evaluate credibility. Three dimensions of source credibility that is trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness explain how consumers evaluate the information.

Marijke De Veirman et al. (2017) has empirically demonstrated in their study how influencer attributes enhance brand attitude and purchase intention. Study has taken few dimensions like attractiveness and follower count. Findings of the study also has mentioned about virtual influencers, which has will have impact on consumers when context is influencer.

Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) has investigated authenticity dimensions of the virtual influencers. Study throws lights on the fact that though virtual influencers are perceived less authentic than human transparency about their artificial nature can be used for increasing genuinity about them. Authentic story telling will increase consumer acceptance.

Sang Yeal Jin and Eun Jung Ryu (2020) has done a comparative study on human and virtual influencer. Study implemented quantitative analysis to understand effects of credibility, brand attitude and purchase intention. Findings of the study revealed that even virtual influencers can create same impact like human influencers if they can make use of dimensions like perceived attractiveness and expertise properly.

Yogesh K. Dwivedi et al. (2023) has investigated Trust formation in AI driven world of marketing. Findings of the study states that virtual influencers are more effective in providing interactive environment which even delivers personalised content delivery which enhances trust of consumers.

Methodology

This research article includes findings form a literature review of virtual influencer published between 2015 to 2026. The analysis drawn on 25 peer reviewed journal articles identified through google scholar, Taylor and Francis and research gate.

The selected studies employed different methods in their study like quantitative analysis, literature reviews, case studies and mixed methods. This provides strong foundation for understanding AI from all the perspectives.

First, we identified literature based on research question secondly, we have done thematic analysis of literature.

Emerging Trends in AI Marketing From Novelty to Strategic Marketing Channel

From experiments on virtual influencers to reality, marketing has changed altogether especially in recent years. It is well proven that even virtual influencers are able to generate good engagement rates. Sometimes even higher than human influencers engagement rate.

Various brands across various sectors are successfully implementing virtual influencers in their marketing profile. This widespread adoption is signal that marketing landscape is grown in such a way that wherein both virtual and human influencers exist.

Virtual Realism

De Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson (2019) has demonstrated in their study various types of influencers including virtual influencers. The findings of the study highlighted how follower count and popularity affect brand attitude and also increases credibility for the message given by them. Study also found that visual appeal of virtual influencers is the plus point in case of this.

Jin and Ryu (2021) examined in their studies how effective are virtual influencers as drivers of purchase intention. Findings of the study reveals that consumers especially Gen Z positively accept virtual influencers. Gen Z are basically technical oriented who are ready to accept innovations in the field. Study also concludes visual aesthetics helps in enhancing purchase intention

Kim and Kim (2023) has done comparative analysis comparing virtual influencer with human influencers. Findings of the study revealed that when it comes to trust human influencers are considered to be trustworthy when compared to virtual influencers. But when it comes to fashion and beauty products visual presentation dominates.

Yuan and Lou (2020) were aiming to understand relationships between virtual influencers and followers. Findings of the study clearly states that followers are able to connected with virtual influencers though connection is one sided. It's also highlighted that strength of the band depends on the story telling and perceived realism of virtual influencers.

Personalisation

Hyejin Lee and Sora Kim (2023) have conducted empirical study on how realism of virtual influencers effects consumers perception on brand and enhances purchase intention. It was explored in the study that virtual influencers with human like expressions, body movement and social interaction will improve consumer's attitude

Consumer Trust and Authenticity Dynamics

Lou, Tan, and Chen (2022) highlighted in their study how consumers compare virtual influencers with actual human influencers which is very important to understand acceptance level. findings of the study were not in much favour of virtual influencers, which says people are still not able to accept virtual influencers in line with dimensions like authenticity. But it's also suggested that when content is delivered with good content quality and transparency still company can cope up with sales using virtual influencers.

Moustakas et al. (2020) demonstrated in their study how virtual influencers combine artificial intelligence, storytelling and graphics which brings life to virtual influencer and represents the brand. Findings of the study reveals how Artificial intelligence altogether changed marketing perspective and how authenticity is technologically constructed.

Isabel R. Marques and Beatriz Casais (2022) have investigated in their study role of authenticity in connection with virtual influencer. Findings of the study highlighted that perceived authenticity of the content and information provided will enhance brand attachment.

Marques and Casais (2022) have demonstrated in their study how virtual influencers raises ethical concerns especially with reference to disclosure. Study also highlighted there are possibilities consumers may feel deceived if they are unaware of the fact that its virtual influencers. Study makes it clear that whenever virtual influencers are used it is important to be transparent regarding policies and procedures.

Bermudez, Karl, and He (2021) has examined the role of virtual influencers in consumer brand relationship. The visual representations used by virtual influencers helps the consumers in brand recall. Study reveals that digital avatars can be of great use in building brand association especially in fashion sector.

Transparency and Disclosure Effect

Transparency plays a critical role in forming consumer trust. Studies indicates that once the source is disclosed or when there is no hidden agenda behind promotion it will enhance trust. findings of the studies reveals that audience are willing to engage with the virtual influencers also provided there is proper disclosures in the advertisement.

Human Vs Virtual Influencers

Comparative studies examining virtual and human influencers showed mixed results. many studies showed that there is no much differences when it comes to following any kind of influencer. (S. Sands, 2022).

Brand Integration Opportunities

Primary advantage of virtual influencer is control over message and representation. Human influencers content may be changing according to the conditions of the brand policy. But virtual influencers usually will be programmed as per the guidelines of companies which will perfectly align with brand values and communication strategies. (Agwulonu,2026)

The consistency provided by virtual influencers will align with global market requirements as uniform messaging is the basic requirement in those areas. (kour, 2020)

Cost Efficiency

Initial cost of development of virtual influencer may be high. But once its programmed it will eliminate ongoing expenses associated with human talent and other un predictable expenses that may arise in case of human influencers. (V. Jain, 2025)

Research conducted by (Kralj ,2025) highlights that brands can achieve higher return on investment by implementing virtual influencer.

Discussion

This analysis of virtual influencer reveals rapid growth of AI and virtual influencers and its implications. The results demonstrated virtual influencers have transitioned from experiments to reality capturing huge market. Brands are enjoying consistency, scalability and cost efficiency. Success of virtual influencers is universal. Effectiveness of the same depends on transparent disclosure, design and aligning with consumer value.

Theoretical Implication

The rise of virtual influencers requires refinement in several domains. Source credibility theory requires understanding of how credibility is evaluated when sources are not humans and artificial and making them trustworthy is the major task. The concept of authenticity itself requires redefining from traditional aspects to modern one.

Traditional idea of authenticity lied in human who represented it unlike now where we have virtual reality where authenticity needs to be redefined.

Practical Implications for Marketers

For successful implementation virtual influencers, it requires investment in narrative development and visual realism. Transparency and disclosures are also essential for building trust and maintaining loyal consumers. Hybrid strategies including human and virtual influencers can create better impact.

Robust data privacy protection and compliance with regulatory is much required as a part of ethical consideration.

Limitation and Future Direction

Though virtual influencers are gaining popularity, there are several limitations. majority of the research happened in the field focuses on small number of virtual influencers. The rapid growth of technology may be not be matching the existing results.

When comparisons are done between human and virtual influencer trust dimension may be conflicting which may reflect difference in design of the study.

Long term impact of virtual influencer also is under research and that can be also be covered in future research. Possible negative impacts of virtual influencers also are under study and requires further data to be analysed on the same.

Comparative research across various products, plat forms and cultural context also could be considered in future studies.

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