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The Power of Influence: How Influencer Marketing Shapes
Brand Trust and Purchase Intention

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Diana Olyvko BSc

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- ABSTRACT..... I**
- LIST OF TABLES III**
- LIST OF FIGURES III**
- LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS..... IV**
- 1. INTRODUCTION..... 1**
 - 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY1**
 - 1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY 2**
 - 1.3 RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY3**
 - 1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS 3**
 - 1.5 DELIMITATIONS.....4**
 - 1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS 5**
- 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK6**
 - 2.1 INFLUENCER MARKETING6**
 - 2.1.1 Fundamentals of Influencer Marketing6*
 - 2.1.2 Real (Human) Influencers..... 9*
 - 2.1.3 Virtual Influencers11*
 - 2.1.4 Comparative Perspective: Real vs. Virtual.....14*
 - 2.2 PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY16**
 - 2.2.1 The Concept of Authenticity in Influencer Marketing.....16*
 - 2.2.2 Authenticity Perceptions: Real vs. Virtual Influencers19*
 - 2.2.3 The Role of Authenticity in Building Brand Trust21*
 - 2.3 BRAND TRUST22**
 - 2.3.1 The Concept of Brand Trust22*
 - 2.3.2 Trust Transfer in Influencer Marketing23*
 - 2.3.3 Brand Trust as a Driver of Purchase Intention25*
 - 2.4 PURCHASE INTENTION27**
 - 2.5 AI SKEPTICISM29**
 - 2.5.1 The Concept of AI Skepticism29*
 - 2.5.2 Moderating Role in Influencer Context30*
- 3. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL32**
- 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....36**
 - 4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN.....36**
 - 4.2 STIMULUS DEVELOPMENT AND EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE37**
 - 4.3 SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION38**
 - 4.4 MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENTS39**
 - 4.5 DATA ANALYSIS METHODS41**
- 5. RESULTS42**
 - 5.1 PRELIMINARY RESULTS.....42**
 - 5.1.1 Data preparation and cleaning42*
 - 5.1.2 Sample profile and demographics43*

5.1.3. <i>Assessment of scales reliability</i>	43
5.1.4. <i>Descriptive statistics</i>	44
5.1.5. <i>Manipulation Check</i>	45
5.1.6. <i>Correlations Between Key Variables</i>	46
5.2 HYPOTHESES TESTING	47
5.2.1 <i>Direct Effects of Influencer Type, Authenticity, and Brand Trust</i>	47
5.2.2 <i>Sequential Mediation Analysis</i>	49
5.2.3 <i>Moderated Mediation Analysis</i>	50
5.2.4 <i>Summary of Hypotheses Testing</i>	51
6. DISCUSSION	52
6.1 INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS	53
6.2 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS	54
6.3 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS	56
7. CONCLUSION	58
7.1 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS	58
7.2 CONTRIBUTIONS	59
7.3 LIMITATIONS	60
7.4 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS	61
REFERENCES	64
APPENDICES	71
APPENDIX A: EXPERIMENTAL STIMULI	71
APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE	72
APPENDIX C: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS & CORRELATIONS	77
APPENDIX D: RELIABILITY ANALYSIS	77
APPENDIX E: MANIPULATION CHECK	78
APPENDIX F: PROCESS MODEL 6 OUTPUT	79
APPENDIX G: PROCESS MODEL 83 OUTPUT	81

ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has become an essential component of contemporary social media advertising. At the same time, the growing presence of virtual influencers raises important questions about how consumers perceive and evaluate this type of content. In particular, it remains unclear whether virtual influencers can generate the same level of authenticity and trust as real human influencers.

The aim of this study is to examine how influencer type affects consumer perceptions and behavioural responses. The study focuses on perceived authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention. In addition, it examines whether individual levels of AI skepticism moderate these relationships.

The study is based on a quantitative online experiment using a between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, in which they were exposed to a social media post featuring either a real or a virtual influencer promoting a fictitious brand. The collected data were analysed using regression, mediation, and moderated mediation analyses.

The results show that real influencers are perceived as more authentic than virtual influencers. Perceived authenticity has a strong positive effect on brand trust, which in turn increases purchase intention. While influencer type does not have a significant direct effect on purchase intention, a significant indirect effect was found through perceived authenticity and brand trust. Although AI skepticism was negatively associated with perceived authenticity, its expected moderating role in the relationship between influencer type and perceived authenticity was not statistically significant.

Overall, the findings suggest that influencer type does not directly determine consumer responses but operates through underlying psychological mechanisms. In particular, perceived authenticity serves as a key starting point in a sequential trust-building process that ultimately drives purchase intention. The study contributes to a better understanding of influencer marketing in the context of emerging digital technologies and provides practical insights for marketers working with both human and virtual influencers.

Keywords: influencer marketing, virtual influencers, perceived authenticity, brand trust, purchase intention, AI skepticism

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Influencer-Marketing ist zu einem zentralen Bestandteil der modernen Social-Media-Werbung geworden. Gleichzeitig wirft die zunehmende Verbreitung virtueller Influencer wichtige Fragen darüber auf, wie Konsumentinnen und Konsumenten diese Art von Inhalten wahrnehmen und bewerten. Insbesondere ist unklar, ob virtuelle Influencer ein vergleichbares Maß an Authentizität und Vertrauen erzeugen können wie reale menschliche Influencer.

Ziel dieser Studie ist es, zu untersuchen, wie der Influencer-Typ die Wahrnehmungen und Verhaltensreaktionen von Konsumentinnen und Konsumenten beeinflusst. Der Fokus liegt dabei auf wahrgenommener Authentizität, Markenvertrauen und Kaufabsicht. Darüber hinaus wird analysiert, ob individuelle Ausprägungen von KI-Skepsis diese Zusammenhänge moderieren.

Die Studie basiert auf einem quantitativen Online-Experiment mit einem experimentellen Between-Subjects-Design. Die Teilnehmenden wurden zufällig einer von zwei Bedingungen zugeordnet, in denen sie einen Beitrag in sozialen Medien mit entweder einem realen oder einem virtuellen Influencer sahen, der eine fiktive Marke bewirbt. Die Daten wurden mittels Regressions-, Mediations- und moderierter Mediationsanalysen ausgewertet.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass reale Influencer als authentischer wahrgenommen werden als virtuelle Influencer. Die wahrgenommene Authentizität hat einen starken positiven Einfluss auf das Markenvertrauen, welches wiederum die Kaufabsicht erhöht. Während der Influencer-Typ keinen signifikanten direkten Einfluss auf die Kaufabsicht hat, wurde ein signifikanter indirekter Effekt über wahrgenommene Authentizität und Markenvertrauen festgestellt. Obwohl KI-Skepsis negativ mit wahrgenommener Authentizität assoziiert war, konnte die erwartete moderierende Rolle im Zusammenhang zwischen Influencer-Typ und wahrgenommener Authentizität statistisch nicht bestätigt werden.

Insgesamt zeigen die Ergebnisse, dass der Influencer-Typ die Konsumentenreaktionen nicht direkt bestimmt, sondern über zugrunde liegende psychologische Mechanismen wirkt. Insbesondere fungiert die wahrgenommene Authentizität als zentraler Ausgangspunkt eines sequenziellen Vertrauensbildungsprozesses, der letztlich die Kaufabsicht beeinflusst. Die Studie trägt zu einem besseren Verständnis von Influencer-Marketing im Kontext neuer digitaler Technologien bei und liefert praxisrelevante Implikationen für den Einsatz sowohl menschlicher als auch virtueller Influencer.

Schlüsselwörter: Influencer-Marketing, virtuelle Influencer, wahrgenommene Authentizität, Markenvertrauen, Kaufabsicht, KI-Skepsis

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Measurement Instruments and Scale Sources	40
Table 2. Scale Reliability Assessment	44
Table 3. Scale Descriptive Statistics	45
Table 4. Manipulation Check Results	46
Table 5. Effect of Influencer Type on Perceived Authenticity	47
Table 6. Effect of Perceived Authenticity on Brand Trust.....	48
Table 7. Effect of Brand Trust on Purchase Intention.....	48
Table 8. Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects of Influencer Type on Purchase Intention	50
Table 9. Moderated Mediation Results and Index of Moderated Mediation	51
Table 10. Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results	52

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Visual Classification of Virtual Influencers	13
Figure 2. Conceptual Model of the Study	36

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
GAAIS	General Attitudes towards Artificial Intelligence Scale
RQ	Research Question
H	Hypothesis
SD	Standard Deviation
M	Mean
SE	Standard Error
CI	Confidence Interval
LLCI	Lower Level Confidence Interval
ULCI	Upper Level Confidence Interval
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
B	Unstandardized Regression Coefficient
α	Cronbach's Alpha
p	Probability Value
t	t-statistic
r	Pearson Correlation Coefficient
N	Sample Size

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Traditional advertising is steadily losing its persuasive power, giving way to more personalised and trust-based forms of communication. In this context, more and more brands rely on influencer marketing, based on the idea that real people with lived experiences are the most effective communicators. Meanwhile, recent advances in artificial intelligence fundamentally challenge the notion that persuasive communication depends on human authenticity.

Authenticity lies at the core of influencer marketing. When followers perceive an influencer as genuine, they are more likely to trust both the influencer and the promoted brand, rather than viewing the influencer as merely an advertising tool. This perception of sincerity has been identified as a key mechanism through which influencer communication shapes consumer attitudes and purchase behaviour (Audrezet et al., 2020).

At the same time, technological advancements have led to the emergence of virtual influencers – AI-generated digital personas that create content and promote products in a manner similar to human influencers. These entities have evolved from a niche phenomenon into a widely used marketing tool (Audrezet et al., 2025). Virtual influencers give brands more control over what is communicated, help maintain consistent messaging, and reduce reputational risks. At the same time, an important question remains: can a computer-generated character be perceived as truly authentic?

Existing research comparing real and virtual influencers has produced mixed and sometimes contradictory findings (Lou et al., 2023). More importantly, prior studies have largely focused on direct effects, offering only a limited understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which influencer type shapes consumer responses. In particular, the sequential role of perceived authenticity and brand trust remains underexplored, as does the role of individual differences such as AI skepticism in shaping these evaluations.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

This study examines how influencer type shapes consumer responses in social media advertising. Particular attention is paid to the psychological process through which perceived authenticity translates into brand trust and, ultimately, purchase intention. Specifically, the study tests whether influencer type (real versus virtual) affects purchase intention through a sequential mediation mechanism involving perceived authenticity and brand trust.

In addition, the study considers whether AI skepticism – understood as an individual tendency to question the reliability and appropriateness of AI-based systems – moderates the relationship between influencer type and perceived authenticity. By combining mediation and moderation within a single framework, the study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how consumers respond to different types of influencers in digital advertising.

Perceived authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention are central to this study, as they help explain how influencer marketing shapes consumer responses. These three constructs were selected not only for their individual relevance in prior research, but also because they reflect a coherent psychological sequence – one that captures how consumers move from evaluating influencer communication to forming brand trust and, ultimately, developing purchase intentions. Rather than treating influencer type as a direct predictor of behavioural outcomes, this study conceptualises it as the starting point of this process, addressing a key limitation in prior research where these constructs have often been examined in isolation, particularly in the context of AI-generated influencers.

To examine these relationships, the study adopts an experimental approach that allows for causal inference while maintaining a high level of control over the stimulus conditions.

Overall, the study aims to clarify the mechanisms through which influencer type influences consumer behaviour and to provide theoretically grounded insights into how consumers respond to the growing presence of AI-generated influencers in digital marketing.

1.3 Relevance of the Study

This study contributes at several levels, including theoretical, methodological, and practical aspects, while also addressing broader societal questions related to the role of artificial intelligence in digital communication.

Theoretically, the study reconceptualises authenticity as the initiating mechanism of a sequential trust-building process rather than a static predictor of consumer attitudes. This reframing offers insights into how persuasion operates in digitally mediated environments where the perceived genuineness of communicators is continuously evaluated. The study further extends trust transfer theory to AI-generated endorsers and moves beyond largely descriptive comparisons of real and virtual influencers toward a more structured causal explanation.

Methodologically, the experimental design addresses a core limitation of survey-based influencer research by enabling causal inference. The use of matched stimuli, a fictitious brand, and a moderated serial mediation framework allows for the simultaneous examination of both the underlying mechanisms and the boundary conditions under which these effects operate.

From a managerial perspective, the findings directly address a key strategic question: under what conditions can virtual influencers effectively shape consumer responses? As brands increasingly invest in AI-generated personas, understanding perceptions of authenticity becomes essential – not only for influencer selection, but also for designing communication strategies that foster trust and drive engagement.

Finally, as virtual influencers grow in prominence, questions of transparency, consumer awareness, and ethical persuasion become increasingly urgent. While the study does not aim to resolve these debates, it provides empirical grounding for a more informed discussion.

1.4 Research Questions

The overarching aim of this study is to examine how influencer type shapes consumer responses in social media advertising and whether individual attitudes toward artificial intelligence condition this process. To address this aim, two research questions guide the empirical investigation.

The first research question focuses on the mechanism through which influencer type affects consumer behaviour:

***RQ1:** How does influencer type (real vs. virtual) affect consumers' purchase intention through perceived authenticity and brand trust as sequential mediators?*

This question reflects the central argument that the effect of influencer type on behavioural outcomes operates through underlying psychological evaluations rather than as a direct relationship.

The second research question examines whether this process is conditioned by individual differences in attitudes toward artificial intelligence:

***RQ2:** Does AI skepticism moderate the effect of influencer type on perceived authenticity, thereby shaping the indirect effect on purchase intention through brand trust?*

This question captures the idea that consumers may differ in how they evaluate authenticity depending on their general orientation toward AI and asks whether these differences alter the overall indirect effect on purchase intention.

1.5 Delimitations

This study focuses on a clearly defined scope. First, the study is limited to a comparison between real (human) and virtual (AI-generated) influencers. Other distinctions within these categories – such as differences in audience size or in the degree of human likeness among virtual influencers – are not considered, as the primary aim is to isolate influencer type as the main independent variable.

Second, the research focuses on social media advertising as the context of investigation, with stimuli designed to resemble Instagram-style posts. The findings are therefore not intended to generalize to other forms of marketing communication, alternative content formats such as video or live streams, or offline environments.

Third, the study examines a specific set of psychological constructs – perceived authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention – within a sequential framework. While other relevant variables, such as attitude toward the advertisement, may also influence consumer

responses, they are not included in the present model in order to maintain conceptual clarity and analytical focus.

Fourth, AI skepticism is considered the only moderating variable. Other individual differences that may shape responses to virtual influencers – such as technological readiness, general trust propensity, or familiarity with AI-generated content – fall outside the scope of this research.

Finally, the empirical investigation is based on a between-subjects online experiment using a fictitious brand and a single utilitarian product category. While this design enhances internal validity and controls for prior brand attitudes, it deliberately abstracts from real-world brand familiarity, hedonic product contexts, and platform-specific dynamics.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into seven chapters, each serving a distinct function within the overall research process.

Chapter 1 introduces the study by outlining its background, purpose, and relevance, as well as the research questions and delimitations that define its scope.

Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework by reviewing relevant literature on influencer marketing, perceived authenticity, brand trust, purchase intention, and AI skepticism. It establishes the conceptual foundation for the research model.

Chapter 3 presents the hypotheses and the conceptual model of the study. Drawing on the theoretical framework, it formulates the proposed relationships between the key constructs and introduces the conditional process model guiding the empirical investigation.

Chapter 4 describes the research methodology, including the experimental design, stimulus development, data collection procedure, measurement instruments, and analytical approach. It explains how the study was conducted and how the data were analysed.

Chapter 5 reports the empirical results, presenting the findings of the preliminary analyses, hypothesis testing, and the sequential and moderated mediation analyses.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings in relation to the research questions and existing literature. It outlines the theoretical and practical implications of the results and considers their relevance for both researchers and practitioners.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarizing the key findings, outlining the study's contributions, acknowledging its limitations, and identifying directions for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter brings together research on influencer marketing, authenticity perceptions, and trust formation in digital environments to establish the theoretical basis for the present study. It first outlines the conceptual evolution of influencer marketing and clarifies the structural distinction between real and virtual influencers. Building on this foundation, the chapter examines perceived authenticity as a key psychological mechanism through which influencer communication shapes consumer evaluations. The discussion then turns to brand trust as a relational outcome emerging from authenticity perceptions, followed by purchase intention as the primary behavioural consequence of trust formation. Finally, AI skepticism is introduced as an individual-level boundary condition that may shape how consumers respond to AI-generated influencers in persuasive contexts.

2.1 Influencer Marketing

2.1.1 Fundamentals of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is a strategy that engages public figures and opinion leaders to raise brand awareness among consumers and increase their purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Industry data show rapid growth in this field. The global influencer marketing industry has grown more than threefold since 2020, reaching \$32.55 billion in 2025 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025a). This growth indicates that influencer marketing is no longer a supplementary tool but has become one of the main channels of brand communication. In 2025, more than a quarter of businesses spent over 10% of their marketing budgets on influencer campaigns, with some companies dedicating up to 50% to this channel (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025b).

Influencer marketing has emerged alongside broader transformations in the media landscape. Traditional mass media platforms such as television, radio, and print publications have gradually lost their dominant role, as social networks and digital communities have become the main spaces for information exchange. This shift has changed how brands and consumers interact. In digital environments, consumers are no longer just passive recipients of marketing messages; instead, they actively influence public perceptions of products and services (Vrontis et al., 2021). Social media has thus created conditions in which influencers can serve as intermediaries between brands and their audiences (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencers occupy a distinctive position between traditional celebrities and close personal contacts, forming a new category of opinion leaders (Belanche et al., 2021). As consumer skepticism toward conventional advertising has grown, brands have increasingly turned to influencers. By incorporating product mentions into personal narratives, influencers produce content that is perceived as more authentic and natural (Leung et al., 2022).

To understand this phenomenon more fully, it is worth considering its historical roots. Influencer marketing developed as a response to traditional celebrity endorsement. For many years, brands relied on well-known public figures to lend their appeal and credibility to promoted products. Over time, however, this approach revealed certain limitations, including high costs and potential reputational risks. These constraints encouraged companies to explore collaborations with social media influencers – individuals who had built substantial followings without being tied to traditional celebrity domains (Ahmed & Rathore, 2024). The technological foundation for this transition was provided by the emergence of Web 2.0, which enabled an environment where content could be continuously created and modified by users themselves (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The internet thus evolved into a two-way communication channel, allowing ordinary consumers to become content creators (Ahmed & Rathore, 2024). As media channels shifted, influencers started acting as intermediaries, shaping public opinion through blogs and social networks (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Several mechanisms help explain why influencer marketing is an effective persuasive tool. The first relates to the nature of interaction. While traditional advertising transmits messages in one direction, influencers engage their audiences in a dialogue built on personal connection. Through regular content, responses to comments, and sharing of everyday experiences, influencers

cultivate a sense of closeness with their followers. Parasocial interaction theory explains this process by focusing on factors such as language similarity, shared interests, interaction frequency, and the extent of self-disclosure, all of which help shape perceived interpersonal bonds with media figures (Kim & Kim, 2022).

This sense of closeness, in turn, reduces the psychological distance between the influencer and the audience, making followers more receptive to recommendations. Alongside this relational dimension, source and message credibility play an equally important role. The impact of influencer marketing is shaped by whether audiences see the influencer as trustworthy and consider the shared information to be credible (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023).

A further mechanism concerns the role of expertise. When an influencer is regarded as knowledgeable in a particular domain, their opinion carries greater weight. The two-step flow theory suggests that personal recommendations tend to have a stronger impact than mass media messages, as information spreads more effectively when mediated by opinion leaders. Digital platforms have extended the reach of such individuals to millions of users while preserving the directness that characterizes interpersonal communication (Ahmed & Rathore, 2024).

Finally, influencers serve as intermediaries who reframe brand messages into relatable personal narratives. A central element of their persuasive power is perceived authenticity. Followers tend to interpret influencer content as reflecting real experiences, partly because influencers are seen as independent creators who maintain control over the entire content process. When influencers consistently share personal opinions and product evaluations, their recommendations come across as sincere rather than commercially driven. This perception of authenticity strengthens trust and lowers resistance toward sponsored content (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023).

Together, these four mechanisms – parasocial relationships, source credibility, opinion leadership, and perceived authenticity – establish influencer marketing as a distinct form of brand communication and provide the theoretical foundation for examining how influencer type affects consumer perceptions and behaviour.

2.1.2 Real (Human) Influencers

In the digital space, influencers act as independent content creators who shape audience attitudes and perceptions. Their influence is built through the continuous creation and sharing of content across platforms such as blogs, short-form posts, and other interactive formats (Freberg et al., 2010). Over time, these individuals have built substantial networks of followers and are widely regarded as trusted guides or arbiters of taste within one or more specific niches (De Veirman et al., 2017).

The emergence of social media influencers is not an instantaneous process but develops gradually. At the outset, content creators typically act as ordinary participants on online platforms. With time, some acquire more advanced skills in producing increasingly sophisticated content, such as narrative stories, video materials, and visual compositions. As their audiences grow and engagement intensifies, these individuals transition into social media influencers capable of exerting systematic influence over their audiences (Audrezet et al., 2020).

In the early stages of this process, audiences are primarily drawn to influencers because they are perceived as peers rather than marketing professionals. The content shared by influencers typically reflects personal experiences and everyday life rather than corporate messaging. This relatability contributes to the perception that influencers communicate from a position similar to that of their audiences. As a result, influencer content often combines factual information about products or services with an emotional dimension that reflects how the influencer personally relates to the brand (Audrezet et al., 2020).

For human influencers, parasocial relationships play a central role in shaping audience responses. Through ongoing interaction on social media platforms – such as comments, reactions, and direct messages – audiences develop a sense of familiarity and perceived closeness with influencers. Although these relationships remain largely one-sided, they create the impression of a personal connection, which enhances emotional engagement and makes audiences more receptive to influencer recommendations (Audrezet et al., 2020).

For human influencers, perceived authenticity becomes especially important, as audiences tend to value content that reflects genuine personal experiences and intrinsic motivation rather than

purely commercial intent. When communication appears to be driven by personal interest and honest evaluation, it is more likely to be seen as sincere. When content comes across as overly strategic or financially motivated, it can make audiences less trusting and reduce the effectiveness of influencer endorsements (Audrezet et al., 2020).

One of the most common ways to categorize influencers is by follower count, with labels such as micro-, macro-, and celebrity influencers, although the specific thresholds are not identical across sources. Even though follower count may indicate network size and perceived popularity, it does not fully capture persuasive effectiveness (De Veirman et al., 2017).

The relationship between audience size and persuasive impact is therefore not straightforward. At higher levels of followership, social media influencers increasingly resemble traditional celebrities, and greater visibility does not necessarily translate into stronger persuasive effects. Macro- and celebrity influencers provide broad exposure; however, this often comes at the cost of reduced perceived authenticity and weaker relational closeness with audiences. In contrast, micro-influencers, who tend to engage more directly with their audiences, often demonstrate greater persuasive effectiveness through stronger personal connections and higher engagement rates (Kay et al., 2020).

Despite these advantages, human influencers also present certain limitations from a brand management perspective. Because influencers are independent individuals, their behaviour cannot be fully controlled by partnering brands. Spontaneous actions, personal controversies, or shifts in public image may generate reputational risks that extend beyond the influencer to the associated brand (Vrontis et al., 2021). Furthermore, the personal nature of influencer content means that brand messaging is inherently dependent on the influencer's individual choices, emotional state, and public conduct, which introduces an element of unpredictability into brand communication (Franke et al., 2023).

In summary, real influencers are characterised by their ability to cultivate trust-based relationships with audiences and by perceived authenticity rooted in personal experience and intrinsic motivation. However, their independence also introduces reputational risks for partnering brands. Recent advances in artificial intelligence and computer-generated imagery have given rise

to a new type of influencer that addresses some of these limitations – the virtual influencer, examined in the following section.

2.1.3 Virtual Influencers

Virtual influencers are digitally created figures present on social media platforms. They are created using computer-generated imagery or artificial intelligence and many resemble human beings in appearance and behaviour. They publish posts, express opinions, and interact with followers in ways comparable to human influencers. As a result, they may exhibit human-like qualities, including emotions, personality, and social behaviour (Moustakas et al., 2020).

Virtual influencers are typically developed and managed by external actors, such as brands, digital agencies, or individual creators. They are designed as fictional characters with distinct identities and coherent storylines. This narrative structure enables communication from a first-person perspective and supports audience engagement through ongoing content creation and social media interaction (Audrezet et al., 2025).

One important reason for the emergence of virtual influencers is the need for greater predictability in influencer marketing. Collaborations with human creators carry inherent reputational risks due to the limited ability of brands to control influencer behaviour. Virtual influencers offer a way to address these concerns. Their appearance, behaviour, and messaging are defined and managed by their creators, which allows companies to ensure consistency in brand representation and to avoid unexpected incidents that could affect brand image (Franke et al., 2023).

In addition to reputational considerations, economic and practical factors have supported the adoption of virtual influencers. They do not require travel, physical production environments, or personal contracts. These characteristics make them cost-efficient and well-suited for long-term brand communication strategies (Franke et al., 2023).

Technological development has further accelerated the rise of virtual influencers. Ongoing progress in computer-generated imagery and artificial intelligence has made it possible to create highly detailed digital characters with realistic appearances and interactive features. These technologies enable brands to develop virtual influencers that can engage audiences across different

digital platforms (Audrezet et al., 2025). At the same time, the use of virtual influencers allows brands to signal innovation and technological progress, thereby supporting a modern, forward-looking brand image (Franke et al., 2023).

Anthropomorphism is one of the defining characteristics of virtual influencers and refers to the attribution of human-like traits to non-human entities. Virtual influencers are often designed to resemble humans in appearance and communication style. They can express emotions, share opinions, and engage in social interaction with followers. Through these features, they display personality and emotional expression that resemble human social behaviour (Moustakas et al., 2020). To reinforce this perception, many virtual influencers are developed with detailed fictional backgrounds, including personal interests, relationships, or life events communicated consistently over time. Such narrative design helps create a coherent character identity and supports emotional connection with the audience (Yan et al., 2024).

Another characteristic of virtual influencers is their capacity to maintain a constant online presence. They can post content regularly and respond to followers without physical or time constraints. This continuous availability supports sustained engagement on social media platforms (Audrezet et al., 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that virtual influencers can achieve notable levels of audience interaction. Research reports an average engagement rate of 2.84% for virtual influencers compared to 1.72% for human influencers, as measured through likes, comments, shares, and other forms of audience response (Volles et al., 2024).

Virtual influencers differ in their level of visual realism, which can shape how audiences perceive and respond to them. While some are designed to closely resemble real humans, others appear clearly stylised or animated. These differences in visual design influence not only emotional reactions but also users' willingness to engage with virtual influencer content (Kim et al., 2024).

A key distinction among virtual influencers is based on visual characteristics, particularly the degree of human likeness. Based on this criterion, virtual influencers are commonly categorized into mimic-human, animated-human, and non-human types. Mimic-human virtual influencers are designed to be visually indistinguishable from real humans and typically feature realistic skin textures, facial expressions, and body proportions. A well-known example is Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela), whose highly realistic appearance and detailed biographical narrative have

contributed to her large social media following. Animated-human virtual influencers resemble humans but are presented in an explicitly stylised or animated form, making their artificial nature clearly visible. Anymalu (@anymalu_real) represents this category. Non-human virtual influencers adopt identities that are not human in form, such as animals or fantasy-like characters, while still performing the role of social media influencers. Guggimon (@guggimon) exemplifies this type (Yan et al., 2024).

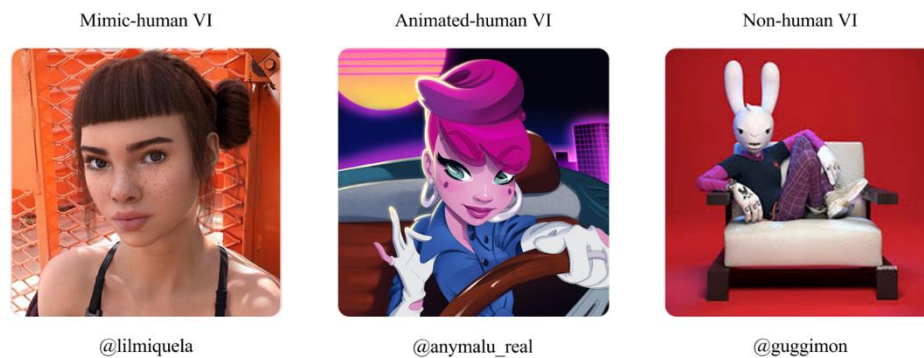


Figure 1. *Visual Classification of Virtual Influencers*

Beyond visual appearance, virtual influencers can also be differentiated based on their creation purpose. A common distinction is made between incarnate avatars and innate influential avatars. Incarnate avatars are developed to represent specific brands and function as long-term digital brand ambassadors, with their appearance and communication closely aligned with brand identity. In contrast, innate influential avatars are designed as independent digital personas with their own narratives and lifestyles, allowing them to collaborate with multiple brands over time in a manner similar to human influencers (Yan et al., 2024).

Although virtual influencers are becoming more widely used, their use also presents a number of challenges. Research consistently indicates that consumers tend to place less trust in virtual influencers than in their human counterparts. This lower trust is attributed to a perceived lack of genuine personal experience, which makes endorsement messages appear less credible (Lou et al., 2023). Virtual influencers may also struggle to establish deep emotional connections with audiences, as the absence of real lived experience limits the foundation for relational closeness (Mrad et al., 2025). These limitations suggest that while virtual influencers offer significant

strategic advantages, their persuasive effectiveness may depend on the specific context in which they are deployed.

2.1.4 Comparative Perspective: Real vs. Virtual

Real and virtual influencers differ in several fundamental ways. Human influencers build their online presence through personal experience, self-disclosure, and ongoing social interaction. Their identity is rooted in real life, which allows audiences to perceive them as relatable and genuine (Audrezet et al., 2025). By contrast, virtual influencers are digitally created personas whose appearance, personality, and communication style are deliberately shaped by brands or digital creators. Their narratives are strategically curated rather than shaped through lived experience (Mrad et al., 2025).

The degree of autonomy also differs between the two influencer types. Human influencers act as independent individuals whose behaviour cannot be fully controlled by partnering brands. Their spontaneous actions or involvement in public controversies may generate reputational risks that extend to associated companies. Virtual influencers, in contrast, offer brands greater control over behaviour and content, enabling consistent brand representation and reducing the risk of unpredictable conduct (Franke et al., 2023).

Structural differences also relate to longevity and adaptability. Human influencers are subject to physical aging and personal development, which may alter their public image over time. Virtual influencers, however, do not age and can maintain the same appearance indefinitely (Mrad et al., 2025). Their identity and positioning can be modified without biological constraints, providing flexibility in long-term brand strategies (Audrezet et al., 2025).

The differences between human and virtual influencers make audience perception of virtual influencers a key issue. One important dimension is how closely they resemble humans. If a virtual influencer looks almost human but not fully realistic, this may create a sense of discomfort or unease, known as the uncanny valley effect. Evidence suggests that highly human-like virtual influencers can evoke uncanny feelings among consumers, which may reduce both engagement and purchase intention (Lou et al., 2023). Mimic-human virtual influencers tend to elicit stronger uncanny reactions than animated or non-human types, suggesting that greater realism does not

necessarily lead to more positive evaluations (Yan et al., 2024). Less human-like virtual influencers may therefore benefit from a sense of novelty that positively influences engagement (Kim et al., 2024).

Perceived human likeness is also linked to social presence – the extent to which users feel they are interacting with a real social entity. Anthropomorphic features such as warmth and interactivity can strengthen this perception (Davlembayeva et al., 2025). However, excessive realism may have the opposite effect: mimic-human virtual influencers sometimes generate lower social presence than animated types, as uncanny reactions reduce perceived relational closeness (Yan et al., 2024).

Beyond perceptual evaluation, the formation of relationships with influencers represents another important dimension of comparison. Human influencers develop parasocial relationships with their audiences through repeated interaction, self-disclosure, and the sharing of personal experiences. These one-sided emotional bonds create perceived familiarity and interpersonal closeness, strengthening relational attachment (Mrad et al., 2025).

Virtual influencers can also foster parasocial interaction. However, the underlying mechanisms differ. Their relational appeal is based on anthropomorphic cues, simulated personality traits, and designed emotional expression rather than lived experience. As a result, virtual influencers are often perceived as less similar to followers, particularly when their artificial nature is salient, which may weaken relational closeness and reduce engagement (Looi & Kahlor, 2024).

A further dimension of persuasive influence is perceived credibility. Human influencers are often trusted more when audiences believe that their recommendations are rooted in personal experience rather than strategic intent (Lou et al., 2023). In contrast, virtual influencers may face skepticism regarding the origin and sincerity of their messages, especially when their commercial nature is apparent. However, some evidence suggests that highly human-like virtual influencers can be evaluated more positively in terms of trust, depending on contextual factors such as sponsorship disclosure (Kim et al., 2024). These differences in perceived credibility and relational closeness may influence whether audiences process influencer communication at a superficial level or develop deeper acceptance of endorsement messages.

These differences have direct implications for marketing effectiveness. Research shows that virtual influencers can generate high levels of engagement on social media, in some cases exceeding that of human influencers, which has been attributed to their novelty and perceived uniqueness (Volles et al., 2024). However, higher engagement does not necessarily lead to stronger behavioural outcomes. Experimental evidence indicates that while virtual influencers can enhance brand awareness and online interaction, they may be less effective in increasing purchase intention. Human influencers tend to be more persuasive when their recommendations are perceived as grounded in real experiences, which in turn strengthens consumers' willingness to follow product advice (Lou et al., 2023).

Differences in effectiveness may also depend on product characteristics. Virtual influencers may perform particularly well in promoting utilitarian products, where informational value and functional usefulness are emphasized. However, when a product carries emotional or experiential value, human influencers may be more effective, since consumers tend to place greater importance on authenticity and personal connection in their evaluations (Belanche et al., 2024).

Previous research has not reached a clear conclusion on whether real or virtual influencers are more effective. While virtual influencers demonstrate strong potential in generating engagement and consistent brand communication, human influencers often exhibit advantages in terms of persuasive depth and behavioural intention. Such differences make it important to explore the psychological mechanisms through which influencer type affects consumer responses.

2.2 Perceived Authenticity

2.2.1 The Concept of Authenticity in Influencer Marketing

Within influencer marketing, perceived authenticity concerns whether followers see an influencer's communication as genuine and consistent with their personal identity. Rather than being a fixed personality trait, authenticity is understood as a perception that emerges from how audiences interpret an influencer's behaviour, motivations, and brand collaborations (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Authenticity is typically associated with communication that reflects personal values and preferences rather than actions driven primarily by external rewards (Kapitan et al., 2022). In social

media environments, this is reflected in elements such as sincerity, honesty in product recommendations, and a distinctive content style (Lee & Eastin, 2021). It also depends on the perceived alignment between an influencer's behaviour and the brands they promote. This alignment is interpreted by followers and plays an important role in shaping authenticity evaluations (Duffek et al., 2025). For this reason, authenticity in influencer marketing is best understood as a perceptual construct rather than an objective characteristic of the communicator (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Unlike source credibility, which focuses on expertise and trustworthiness, authenticity captures a broader evaluation. It includes emotional sincerity, personal investment in content, and the perception that the influencer acts in line with their identity (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Influencer marketing inherently involves a tension between personal expression and commercial activity. Influencers share personal experiences and opinions while simultaneously engaging in brand collaborations. When followers perceive that commercial interests dominate the content, authenticity evaluations tend to decrease. To manage this tension, influencers adopt different strategies. Some present brand collaborations as naturally embedded within their lifestyle and personal interests. Others emphasize transparency by clearly disclosing sponsored content and explaining their reasons for collaboration. This makes authenticity particularly fragile in commercial contexts (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Perceived authenticity has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct – not a single fixed attribute but a perception shaped by different types of cues that consumers use to evaluate whether an influencer appears genuinely “real.” Scholars typically identify five dimensions of authenticity: sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. Each of these reflects a different way in which consumers make sense of an influencer's behaviour, communication style, and overall persona (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Sincerity refers to the perception that an influencer is honest, warm, and down-to-earth. A sincere influencer is seen as presenting a version of themselves that feels consistent and relatable. In this sense, sincerity reflects the perceived alignment between how the influencer presents themselves and who they are believed to be, making it a key signal of genuine intention. Findings

suggest that sincerity is particularly relevant for how audiences evaluate the influencer and whether they intend to follow them (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Truthful endorsements capture whether brand collaborations are perceived as sincere recommendations rather than purely commercial activities. When endorsements are consistent with the influencer's lifestyle and values, they are more likely to be interpreted as authentic. This dimension has been shown to be especially important for purchase-related outcomes, indicating that perceived honesty in brand partnerships strongly influences consumer behaviour (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Another important aspect is visibility, which reflects the extent to which influencers share personal experiences, including both positive and negative aspects of their lives. Higher levels of self-disclosure can reduce the perceived distance between the influencer's public and private self, creating the impression that their content reflects real experiences rather than carefully managed presentation. By revealing imperfections and everyday challenges, influencers may appear more genuine to their audience (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Expertise, in this context, reflects the perception that an influencer has real knowledge or skill within their domain. Expertise is not only about formal qualifications but also about perceived passion and competence. When an influencer appears naturally skilled and knowledgeable, their content may be interpreted as more authentic, although its direct influence on purchase intention tends to be weaker compared to other dimensions (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

A further dimension is uniqueness, referring to the extent to which an influencer is perceived as original and distinct from others. Influencers who develop a recognizable style or voice are more likely to be seen as authentic, as their content appears to reflect personal creativity rather than imitation. This sense of originality contributes to audience engagement and differentiation in a highly saturated social media environment (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Although these dimensions represent distinct aspects of authenticity, they are not fully independent. Instead, they jointly contribute to an overall authenticity judgment. Sincerity and truthful endorsements relate more closely to perceived honesty and moral integrity, reflecting whether the influencer appears to act in the genuine interest of their audience. Visibility connects

to social authenticity, capturing the willingness to present a more complete and less filtered self. Expertise and uniqueness, in turn, reflect identity-based authenticity, as they relate to whether the influencer's content and persona appear genuinely their own. Overall, these dimensions suggest that authenticity is evaluated through a combination of emotional, behavioural, and identity-related cues (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Authenticity is further shaped by the broader relational context in which influencers operate. It emerges from the interaction among the influencer, the brand, and the audience rather than existing independently. The consistency between an influencer's established identity and their commercial collaborations influences how authenticity is evaluated. Several properties contribute to this evaluation, including expertise, connectedness, originality, transparency, and integrity. When these elements fit together coherently, audiences are more likely to perceive the communication as credible and authentic (Duffek et al., 2025).

Authenticity also functions as a mechanism in persuasive processes. Experimental evidence indicates that the effect of endorser type on consumers' willingness to pay operates through perceived authenticity. When endorsers are perceived as independent content creators rather than as paid promoters directed by brands, authenticity perceptions and willingness to pay are significantly higher (Kapitan et al., 2022).

Whether these dimensions apply equally to human and virtual influencers, however, remains an open question. This becomes particularly relevant when comparing different types of influencers and forms the basis for the following section.

2.2.2 Authenticity Perceptions: Real vs. Virtual Influencers

Perceived authenticity is evaluated through cues related to identity, motivation, and consistency of communication. Because authenticity is formed within the interaction between influencer, brand, and audience, structural differences in influencer type influence how these cues are interpreted. Real and virtual influencers differ fundamentally in the nature of their identity, which shapes the way followers assess sincerity, conviction, and personal alignment (Duffek et al., 2025).

In social interactions, individuals typically infer intentions, emotions, and experiences behind a message. This process becomes less straightforward in the case of virtual influencers, whose communication is generated rather than personally experienced (Mrad et al., 2025).

Human influencers are perceived as individuals with personal histories, emotions, and independent preferences. Their recommendations can therefore be interpreted as grounded in lived experience. Communication is more likely to be perceived as authentic when it appears to be rooted in personal values and lived experience rather than external incentives. When endorsements seem consistent with personal identity, authenticity perceptions tend to remain more stable. Virtual influencers, by contrast, are computer-generated characters whose identities and messages are developed by creative teams. In such cases, promotional communication may be interpreted as strategically designed rather than personally experienced, which can influence perceptions of authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020).

The role of lived experience becomes particularly relevant when evaluating authenticity in the context of different product types. Products involving emotional or experiential consumption rely more strongly on signals of personal use and genuine enjoyment, making authenticity cues linked to individual experience especially salient. In contrast, for utilitarian products, the absence of lived experience may be less critical, as functional value becomes more central to consumer evaluation (Belanche et al., 2024).

Emotional reactions further influence authenticity perceptions. When virtual influencers closely resemble real humans in appearance and expressed attitudes, perceived similarity may generate discomfort or feelings of creepiness. Such reactions significantly reduce perceived authenticity and weaken emotional attachment. Because sincerity represents a core dimension of authenticity, discomfort associated with artificial similarity can undermine authenticity evaluations (Kim & Baek, 2023).

The way audiences evaluate virtual influencers also depends on whether their artificial nature is disclosed. When consumers are explicitly informed that an influencer is AI-generated, authenticity perceptions may change. Disclosure can reduce perceived deception and support more stable evaluations, as audiences adjust their expectations accordingly. At the same time, awareness of artificial origin may increase scrutiny of the influencer's communication, making authenticity

more difficult to establish. How consumers respond to this awareness is not uniform, as consumers' views on artificial intelligence may shape how authenticity cues are interpreted in the context of AI-generated communicators. Together, these findings indicate that authenticity perceptions of virtual influencers are not uniformly negative but depend on contextual factors such as transparency and the degree of disclosed artificiality (Lou et al., 2023).

Nonetheless, structural differences in lived experience suggest that virtual influencers are at a disadvantage in authenticity assessments, particularly in emotionally driven contexts.

2.2.3 The Role of Authenticity in Building Brand Trust

Perceived authenticity is relevant for trust formation because it shapes how audiences interpret the influencer's motives. When an influencer is perceived as authentic, their communication tends to be seen as sincere and consistent with personal values rather than driven mainly by commercial motives. In this sense, authenticity functions as a signal that reduces uncertainty about the endorser's motives, making audiences more willing to rely on the recommendation (Lee & Eastin, 2021). This is particularly relevant in contexts where consumers cannot directly verify the sincerity behind an endorsement, as authenticity cues help lower perceived risk (Kapitan et al., 2022).

Two specific dimensions of authenticity are particularly important in this process. Sincerity reflects whether the influencer appears emotionally genuine and personally committed, while truthful endorsements capture whether product recommendations are perceived as honest and not exaggerated. When followers perceive both of these dimensions – sincerity and truthful endorsements – promotional content is more likely to be interpreted as a genuine recommendation rather than a purely persuasive message (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

These perceptions do not remain limited to evaluations of the influencer. The way the promoted brand is perceived is also shaped by the endorsement itself, since the influencer represents the most visible source of the message. If the endorser is seen as authentic, the promoted brand is less likely to be seen as using manipulation and more likely to be evaluated in a positive and trustworthy way (Kapitan et al., 2022). This reflects the logic of trust transfer, whereby positive evaluations of a source extend to the associated brand when a meaningful connection between the

two is perceived (Stewart, 2003). Experimental evidence shows that authenticity perceptions can explain why different types of endorsers lead to different brand-related outcomes, including consumers' willingness to pay (Kapitan et al., 2022).

Research in virtual influencer contexts supports a similar logic. When audiences perceive virtual influencers as authentic, they tend to report stronger emotional attachment and more positive behavioural intentions, showing that authenticity can still lead to favourable responses despite the artificial nature of the endorser (Kim & Baek, 2023). Direct evidence also shows that perceived authenticity of virtual influencers can have a strong positive effect on brand trust, supporting the proposed link at the brand level (Putra et al., 2025).

Overall, prior research supports the idea that perceived authenticity helps create a more trustworthy interpretation of influencer endorsements, which can extend to the endorsed brand. Based on this reasoning, perceived authenticity is expected to positively influence consumers' trust in the promoted brand – the first step in a sequential process through which influencer type ultimately shapes purchase intention.

2.3 Brand Trust

2.3.1 The Concept of Brand Trust

Brand trust is a central concept in relationship marketing because it explains why consumers continue to rely on a brand over time. In market situations, consumers rarely have complete information about products, services, or future performance. Decisions, therefore, often involve uncertainty and potential risk. Trust helps reduce this uncertainty by allowing consumers to feel confident that a brand will meet their expectations in future interactions (Delgado-Ballester, 2004).

Originally developed in interpersonal contexts, the concept of trust has been extended in branding research to the consumer-brand relationship, reflecting the belief that a brand will behave in a predictable and responsible way when consumers depend on it (Delgado-Ballester, 2004).

Brand trust captures consumers' confidence in a brand's reliability and intentions when their decisions involve some degree of risk. This definition highlights two important elements.

First, trust is future-oriented. It is not only based on past experiences but also on expectations about how the brand will act in the future. Second, trust becomes relevant especially when consumers feel vulnerable or uncertain (Delgado-Ballester, 2004).

Two dimensions are commonly used to explain brand trust: brand reliability and brand intentions. Brand reliability refers to the perception that a brand can keep its promises and perform consistently across different situations. Brand intentions, in contrast, refer to the belief that the brand is honest, benevolent, and concerned with the consumer's interests. This dimension captures the expectation that the brand will not exploit consumers' vulnerability for short-term gain. Together, these two components indicate that trust involves both a performance-based evaluation and a relational judgment about motives (Delgado-Ballester, 2004).

Brand trust should be clearly distinguished from behavioural outcomes such as purchase intention or loyalty. While trust can influence these outcomes, it represents a psychological belief rather than an action itself. It reflects an internal evaluation of the brand's dependability and integrity. Behavioural intentions may follow from trust, but they are conceptually separate constructs (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

The formation of brand trust is influenced by how consumers interpret brand-related information and experiences. Different information sources contribute to the development of brand knowledge, which in turn supports or weakens trust evaluations. When consumers perceive brand-related signals as consistent and credible, they are more likely to develop trust toward the brand. Trust, therefore, develops through interpretative processes in which consumers assess the reliability and meaning of available information (Wang et al., 2010).

In influencer marketing, brand-related signals are often communicated through endorsers rather than directly by the brand. As a result, brand trust is frequently formed through indirect mechanisms in which perceptions of the communicator shape brand evaluations, a process explained by trust transfer theory, discussed in the following section.

2.3.2 Trust Transfer in Influencer Marketing

Trust transfer theory explains how trust established toward one entity can extend to another related entity. When individuals trust a familiar and credible source, this trust may influence

evaluations of a related but less familiar target, provided that a meaningful connection between the two is perceived. The theory is particularly relevant in situations characterized by uncertainty, where individuals lack direct experience with the target and therefore rely on trusted intermediaries to reduce perceived risk. In such contexts, previously established trust serves as a heuristic that guides evaluation of the new entity (Stewart, 2003).

The transfer of trust relies on the perceived entitativity between the source and the target – that is, the degree to which the two entities are seen as belonging to a cohesive unit. When a perceiver views two entities as interacting, similar, or sharing a common fate, they tend to assume consistency between them and form impressions of the unknown target based on their existing evaluation of the trusted source. This cognitive process means that once an initial impression of one entity is formed, information about the related entity is interpreted in a way that confirms that impression. The strength of trust transfer therefore depends on how clearly and logically the connection between the source and target is perceived (Stewart, 2003).

In influencer marketing, trust transfer unfolds through a triadic relationship between followers, influencers, and brands. Followers may already trust an influencer due to prior interactions, perceived expertise, or relational closeness. When an influencer endorses a brand, this endorsement establishes a visible and symbolic connection between the influencer and the brand. As a result, trust that was initially directed toward the influencer can extend to the endorsed brand (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2024).

The literature points to two distinct processes through which this transfer takes place. One is a cognitive process based on perceived entitativity, through which followers infer the trustworthiness of the brand from their existing trust in the influencer. The communication process, in contrast, operates through the co-presentation of the influencer and the brand in endorsement content, creating additional opportunities for the transfer of positive feelings and behavioural dependency. Through this process, not only cognitive but also affective and behavioural dimensions of trust may extend from the influencer to the brand (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2024).

Empirical evidence supports this mechanism across different contexts. Trust in a social media influencer has been shown to positively and directly influence trust in an endorsed product, demonstrating that trust transfer can occur even between entities belonging to different

categories – in this case, a person and a brand (Hu et al., 2019). Further research confirms that influencer trust is positively associated with brand trust in social media marketing, and that the strength of this transfer may depend on the perceived congruence between the influencer and the brand (Almahdi et al., 2022).

Trust is not a single-dimensional construct. It includes cognitive elements related to perceptions of reliability, competence, and expertise, as well as affective elements associated with emotional security and confidence. Cognitive trust is typically grounded in rational evaluations of whether a source appears capable and dependable, whereas affective trust is rooted in emotional bonds and perceived relational closeness. These components do not necessarily operate in the same way. Cognitive trust is more likely to extend when consumers perceive a logical and consistent connection between the influencer and the endorsed brand. In contrast, affective trust may extend through emotional association and identification with the influencer. This distinction suggests that trust transfer represents a multidimensional psychological process rather than a simple spillover effect (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2024).

This is particularly relevant in the context of the present study, where participants encountered a fictitious and unfamiliar brand. Under such conditions of limited prior brand knowledge, trust transfer from the influencer becomes one of the primary mechanisms through which initial brand trust can be formed.

Overall, trust transfer theory provides a theoretical explanation for how influencer-based communication contributes to the formation of brand trust. As a mechanism of uncertainty reduction, it explains how consumers rely on trusted intermediaries when direct information is limited and clarifies how evaluations of the influencer can translate into the brand-related outcomes examined in this research.

2.3.3 Brand Trust as a Driver of Purchase Intention

Brand trust plays a central role in translating brand evaluations into behavioural outcomes. When consumers consider purchasing a product, they often face imperfect information about its quality, reliability, or future performance. Under such conditions, trust serves as a psychological mechanism that reduces perceived vulnerability and helps consumers feel more secure in their

choices. A brand perceived as reliable, competent, and honest builds confidence and reduces fear of negative outcomes, thereby facilitating the transition from evaluation to action (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

The relationship between brand trust and purchase intention is therefore theoretically grounded in risk-reduction logic. Brand trust reflects a stable belief that the brand will act in the consumer's interest and deliver the expected value. In contrast, purchase intention represents a forward-looking behavioural tendency - the consumer's readiness or willingness to buy the product in the near future. When trust is present, hesitation decreases because the perceived likelihood of dissatisfaction or failure is reduced. As a result, consumers feel more confident about committing to a transaction. Trust thus operates as a mechanism that transforms positive brand evaluations into concrete behavioural intentions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Studies consistently indicate that brand trust and purchase intention are positively connected. Greater trust in a brand tends to go together with a stronger intention to buy, showing that trust has a direct effect on consumers' willingness to purchase. These findings indicate that trust is not merely an abstract relational construct but a measurable predictor of behavioural outcomes. By strengthening confidence in the brand and reinforcing expectations of positive performance, trust increases the likelihood that favorable attitudes translate into purchase decisions (Dam, 2020).

This relationship becomes particularly relevant in digital and influencer-based communication environments. In online settings, consumers frequently rely on mediated content, endorsements, and symbolic cues rather than direct experience with the product. Under such conditions, brand trust functions as a stabilizing factor that compensates for limited physical interaction with the product. Evidence from virtual influencer endorsements suggests that brand trust is important for purchase intention and works together with credibility-related mechanisms in digital advertising contexts. Thus, whether trust is developed through traditional brand-building activities or through influencer-driven communication strategies, it remains a key determinant of consumers' behavioural intentions (Chaihanchai et al., 2024).

Taken together, the reviewed evidence positions brand trust as a fundamental driver of purchase intention, justifying its role as a direct antecedent within the present research model. The following section examines purchase intention as the primary behavioural outcome of this process.

2.4 Purchase Intention

Purchase intention can be understood as a consumer's conscious willingness or readiness to buy a product, reflecting the motivational state that comes before actual buying behaviour (Spears & Singh, 2004). Within consumer behaviour theory, intention occupies a central position because it functions as the most immediate antecedent of action. In the Theory of Planned Behaviour, behavioural intention is shaped by personal evaluations, perceived social expectations, and the degree of control a person feels over the behaviour, making it the closest predictor of actual action. Purchase intention, therefore, captures the psychological commitment that precedes the act of buying (Ajzen, 1991).

It is important to separate purchase intention from actual purchase behaviour. Purchase behaviour refers to the observable act of acquiring a product, whereas purchase intention reflects a behavioural tendency that signals the likelihood of such action. The transition from intention to behaviour may be influenced by situational constraints, economic resources, or contextual factors. Studies of online consumers show that the intention–behaviour relationship can differ depending on cultural and economic conditions, which means that intention is a strong, but not perfect, predictor of behaviour (Peña-García et al., 2020). Despite this potential gap, purchase intention remains one of the most widely accepted and theoretically justified indicators of consumer action in marketing research (Ajzen, 1991).

In consumer decision-making, purchase intention arises from cognitive and affective evaluations of a brand. Consumers assess attributes such as quality, value, and reliability, and these evaluations shape their readiness to buy. Positive assessments increase the likelihood that intention will develop, whereas negative evaluations reduce this probability (Spears & Singh, 2004). Perceiving a brand as trustworthy and capable of delivering expected benefits increases the likelihood of stronger purchase intention. It can therefore be understood as a form of behavioural readiness resulting from underlying brand-related judgments (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Empirical research consistently confirms that purchase intention is systematically influenced by brand-related constructs such as trust and perceived value. Studies in branded product contexts demonstrate that trust significantly predicts consumers' willingness to buy, positioning purchase intention as a measurable link between psychological evaluation and marketplace behaviour. These findings reinforce the view that purchase intention is not merely a theoretical abstraction but a construct that reflects meaningful behavioural readiness (Dam, 2020).

Purchase intention is particularly relevant in influencer marketing contexts. The way influencers communicate can affect how authentic consumers perceive them to be, which may later influence brand trust. Evidence also shows that when influencer content is informative, it can increase trust in branded content and make consumers more willing to buy endorsed products (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Prior research suggests that purchase intention may represent the outcome of a broader evaluative process in which influencer characteristics shape perceptions of authenticity, which in turn contribute to the formation of brand trust and ultimately influence consumers' willingness to buy (Kim & Kim, 2022). Accordingly, purchase intention may be seen as a behavioural outcome that translates influencer-related perceptions into marketplace consequences (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2024).

In the context of real versus virtual influencers, purchase intention may vary depending on how consumers evaluate authenticity and human-likeness. Differences in perceived authenticity between human and AI-generated influencers can alter trust formation and consequently influence purchase intention. Findings in this area remain mixed. Some studies show that real influencers generate stronger purchase intention because they are seen as more authentic and relatable, whereas other studies suggest that virtual influencers can produce similar or even stronger effects through idealized imagery and novelty. This mixed evidence indicates that the effect of influencer type on purchase intention likely depends on additional factors, including authenticity perceptions and attitudes toward AI-generated content (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2024).

In empirical research, purchase intention is commonly measured using established multi-item self-report scales that capture consumers' likelihood or willingness to buy a product. Within

this approach, purchase intention is treated as a construct that captures consumers' readiness to act toward a specific product or brand (Spears & Singh, 2004).

Taken together, the reviewed evidence positions purchase intention as a construct that is highly sensitive to the perceived authenticity of the communicating source. As influencer type introduces systematic variation in how authenticity and trust are perceived, it follows that individual differences in how consumers evaluate AI-generated personas may further shape this process. One such individual-level factor is AI skepticism, which is examined in the following section as a moderator of the relationship between influencer type and perceived authenticity.

2.5 AI Skepticism

2.5.1 The Concept of AI Skepticism

Despite rapid technological development and increasing integration of artificial intelligence into consumer environments, individuals do not always respond positively to algorithmic decision-making. Existing studies show that people often prefer decisions made by humans to those generated by algorithms, even when the algorithms perform at the same level or better. This tendency has been conceptualized as algorithm aversion, referring to the tendency to avoid relying on algorithmic systems after witnessing them make mistakes. Individuals tend to evaluate algorithmic mistakes more critically than comparable human errors, which leads to reduced trust and decreased willingness to rely on automated systems (Dietvorst et al., 2015).

However, subsequent research has demonstrated that consumer responses to algorithms are not uniformly negative. Under certain conditions, individuals may display algorithm appreciation, meaning that they rely more heavily on algorithmic advice than on human recommendations, particularly when algorithms are perceived as data-driven, objective, and capable of processing large amounts of information. This suggests that acceptance of AI depends on contextual and perceptual factors rather than on a generalized rejection of artificial intelligence. Together, findings on both aversion and appreciation indicate that reactions to AI are shaped by psychological expectations rather than by performance alone (Logg et al., 2019).

Beyond general trust in performance, resistance to artificial intelligence is particularly pronounced in domains involving personal identity, emotions, or subjective preferences.

Individuals are less willing to accept algorithmic recommendations in areas perceived as highly personal, partly because they believe that AI fails to recognise individual uniqueness and contextual nuances. In such contexts, algorithmic agents may be perceived as impersonal or mechanistic, thereby undermining trust and perceived suitability (Longoni et al., 2019). Further distinctions have been identified between utilitarian and hedonic consumption contexts. AI tends to be evaluated more favorably in utilitarian settings that emphasize efficiency and accuracy, whereas in hedonic contexts involving emotional experience or identity expression, human agents are often preferred. These findings suggest that resistance to AI intensifies when decision domains require perceived empathy, intuition, or individualized understanding (Longoni & Cian, 2020).

Overall, these patterns indicate that attitudes toward artificial intelligence are not uniform. Prior research shows that people differ in how they generally evaluate AI, with some expressing optimism about its potential and others focusing more strongly on concerns related to reliability, ethics, loss of human control, and wider societal risks. These attitudinal orientations have been conceptualized as relatively stable individual differences and can be distinguished along positive and negative evaluative dimensions. Individuals scoring higher on negative orientations tend to report stronger concerns about errors, misuse, and the erosion of human agency (Schepman & Rodway, 2023).

Such negative orientations reflect more than situational discomfort and represent relatively stable evaluative tendencies toward artificial intelligence (Schepman & Rodway, 2023). As an individual-level difference, they may influence how consumers evaluate AI-driven agents in socially embedded contexts.

2.5.2 Moderating Role in Influencer Context

The role of AI skepticism becomes particularly relevant in contexts where AI-generated agents perform socially embedded roles. Influencer marketing represents such a context, as influencers act not only as sources of information but also as figures associated with authenticity, reliability, and perceived social connection. Utilitarian AI applications are usually associated with efficiency and accuracy, whereas influencer communication is situated in a more hedonic and identity-related context shaped by emotional resonance and self-expression (Longoni & Cian, 2020).

It is important to distinguish between situational reactions to algorithms and more stable individual differences. Algorithm aversion typically emerges after observing specific algorithmic errors (Dietvorst et al., 2015). In contrast, AI skepticism reflects a more enduring evaluative orientation that exists prior to direct interaction (Schepman & Rodway, 2023). As such, it may influence how individuals interpret cues associated with artificial agents from the outset. In contexts where authenticity and perceived human understanding are important, these prior beliefs are likely to shape how signals of artificiality are evaluated (Longoni et al., 2019).

Research on trust further suggests that evaluations of AI-based agents differ not only in terms of perceived competence but also in affective dimensions of trust. Although artificial agents may be perceived as capable and efficient, they often elicit lower levels of affect-based trust compared to human agents (Glikson & Woolley, 2020). Influencer communication relies strongly on affective trust, including perceptions of sincerity, warmth, and genuineness – dimensions that are particularly salient in hedonic and identity-related contexts where emotional resonance matters more than functional accuracy (Longoni & Cian, 2020). Individuals with stronger skeptical orientations toward AI may therefore be more sensitive to perceived deficits in emotional authenticity when evaluating virtual influencers (Schepman & Rodway, 2023).

In contexts where brand evaluations depend on perceived authenticity, AI skepticism may function as an individual-level factor that shapes consumer responses to AI-generated influencers. Individuals with higher levels of skepticism may interpret the artificial origin of such figures as inconsistent with expectations of genuineness, whereas those with lower levels of skepticism may evaluate them in a manner more similar to human agents.

Based on this reasoning, AI skepticism is expected to influence how influencer type shapes perceived authenticity. More skeptical individuals are therefore likely to see a clearer difference in authenticity between real and virtual influencers. Taken together, the concepts discussed in this chapter – influencer type, perceived authenticity, brand trust, purchase intention, and AI skepticism – provide the basis for the hypotheses and research model presented in the next chapter.

3. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Building on the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2, this chapter formulates the hypotheses guiding the empirical investigation and presents the conceptual model of the study. The proposed model links influencer type to consumer responses through a sequential process involving perceived authenticity and brand trust, with purchase intention as the final outcome. In addition, AI skepticism is introduced as a moderating variable influencing the initial stage of this process.

Although a growing body of research has examined differences between real and virtual influencers, the findings remain inconclusive. Prior studies report mixed results regarding their relative effectiveness, particularly in relation to purchase intention. This suggests that influencer type may not influence behavioural outcomes directly but rather operates through underlying psychological mechanisms that are not yet fully understood.

Perceived authenticity and brand trust have consistently been identified as key constructs in explaining influencer effectiveness. However, they are often examined separately, without considering how they jointly shape consumer responses. To address this limitation, the present study proposes a sequential framework in which authenticity and trust represent consecutive stages linking influencer type to consumer behaviour.

An additional gap concerns the role of individual attitudes toward artificial intelligence. While such attitudes have been widely studied in technology-related contexts, their relevance in influencer marketing remains limited. Consumers who are more skeptical toward AI may evaluate virtual influencers differently from those with more favorable attitudes. This possibility motivates the inclusion of AI skepticism as a moderating variable in the proposed model.

Real influencers are individuals who communicate through their own personal experiences and identities on social media. Their content often reflects personal opinions, everyday activities, and self-expression. These characteristics provide cues of sincerity and intrinsic motivation, which are important elements of perceived authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). When followers interpret influencer content as grounded in real experience rather than strategic construction, perceptions of authenticity are more likely to emerge and remain stable (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Virtual influencers, by contrast, are digitally created personas whose appearance, narratives, and endorsements are managed by external actors (Moustakas et al., 2020). Although they may appear realistic, their communication is typically designed and controlled by brands or creative teams. Because perceptions of authenticity depend on signals of personal conviction and identity consistency (Lee & Eastin, 2021), such structural differences may influence how audiences interpret authenticity cues.

The literature suggests that the artificial nature of virtual influencers can complicate how their authenticity is evaluated. Since these influencers lack real-life experiences and personal histories, audiences may perceive their communication as less genuine (Lou et al., 2023). The absence of lived experience may therefore place virtual influencers at a disadvantage when audiences evaluate authenticity (Duffek et al., 2025). As a result, real influencers are expected to be perceived as more authentic than virtual influencers.

***H1:** Real influencers will be perceived as more authentic than virtual influencers.*

When influencer communication appears authentic, audiences tend to interpret promotional content as genuine recommendation rather than strategic persuasion. This can reduce doubts about the motives behind the endorsement and strengthen the credibility of the message (Lee & Eastin, 2021). As a result, authenticity may affect not only perceptions of the influencer but also evaluations of the endorsed brand.

Brand trust refers to consumers' confident expectations that a brand is reliable and acts in the consumer's interest in situations involving uncertainty (Delgado-Ballester, 2004). In influencer marketing settings, audiences may transfer trust in the communicator to the promoted brand when they view the endorsement as genuine. Research suggests that authenticity in influencer communication contributes to more positive brand perceptions and reinforces consumers' confidence in the endorsed brand (Kapitan et al., 2022). Direct empirical evidence confirms that perceived authenticity of influencers has a strong positive effect on brand trust (Putra et al., 2025).

Based on this reasoning, higher perceived authenticity is expected to increase consumers' trust in the endorsed brand.

***H2:** Perceived authenticity will positively influence brand trust.*

Brand trust plays a central role in shaping consumers' purchase intentions. When consumers trust a brand, they believe it is reliable and capable of fulfilling its promises. Trust reduces perceived risk and uncertainty, which are common barriers in purchase situations (Delgado-Ballester, 2004).

In digital marketing contexts, where consumers often rely on online communication and limited product information, trust becomes particularly important. When a brand is perceived as trustworthy, consumers are more willing to rely on the brand and consider purchasing its products. Prior research consistently demonstrates that higher levels of brand trust are associated with stronger purchase intentions (Dam, 2020).

Based on this reasoning, higher levels of brand trust are expected to increase consumers' purchase intention toward the endorsed product.

H3: Brand trust will positively influence purchase intention.

The preceding hypotheses point to a sequential process linking influencer type to purchase intention. Influencer type is expected to affect how authentic influencer communication is perceived to be, and these authenticity perceptions are then expected to shape brand trust. When influencer communication is seen as authentic, audiences are more likely to view endorsements as sincere, which can strengthen confidence in the promoted brand (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

This reasoning reflects the logic of trust transfer, whereby positive evaluations of a communication source extend to the associated brand when a meaningful connection is perceived (Stewart, 2003). When audiences perceive an influencer as authentic, this perception may transfer to the endorsed brand, contributing to the formation of brand trust. Brand trust then plays an important role in shaping purchase intention, since consumers are more likely to consider buying from brands they perceive as reliable and honest (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

What makes this process sequential rather than simply mediated is that perceived authenticity and brand trust represent two distinct psychological stages. Perceived authenticity shapes how consumers interpret the influencer's communication, whereas brand trust translates this evaluation into a readiness to act, ultimately influencing purchase intention.

Taken together, these relationships imply that influencer type affects purchase intention not directly, but through a sequential pathway involving perceived authenticity and brand trust.

***H4:** The effect of influencer type on purchase intention will be sequentially mediated by perceived authenticity and brand trust.*

Although the proposed model assumes that influencer type influences perceived authenticity, this relationship may vary across individuals depending on their attitudes toward artificial intelligence. Consumers differ in the degree to which they trust or question AI-based technologies, and these attitudes may shape how they interpret communication from virtual influencers (Schepman & Rodway, 2023).

AI skepticism refers to a general tendency to doubt the reliability, intentions, or appropriateness of artificial intelligence systems. Individuals with higher levels of AI skepticism are more likely to question the credibility and sincerity of AI-generated content. In the context of influencer marketing, this skepticism may make consumers more sensitive to cues of artificiality in the communication of virtual influencers (Schepman & Rodway, 2023).

Consumers who are more skeptical toward artificial intelligence may therefore perceive virtual influencers as less authentic than consumers with lower levels of AI skepticism, particularly in identity-relevant and hedonic contexts such as influencer marketing (Longoni & Cian, 2020). This suggests that AI skepticism may further amplify differences in authenticity perceptions between real and virtual influencers.

***H5:** AI skepticism will moderate the relationship between influencer type and perceived authenticity.*

Based on the proposed hypotheses, the present study introduces a conditional process model in which influencer type affects purchase intention through two sequential mediators: perceived authenticity and brand trust. Authentic influencer communication can strengthen consumers' trust in the brand and thereby increase purchase intention. AI skepticism is proposed as a moderating factor influencing the first stage of this process, specifically the relationship between influencer type and perceived authenticity. This framework integrates both mediation and moderation mechanisms and allows the examination of whether the indirect effect of influencer type on

purchase intention varies across different levels of AI skepticism. The study’s conceptual model is presented in Figure 2.

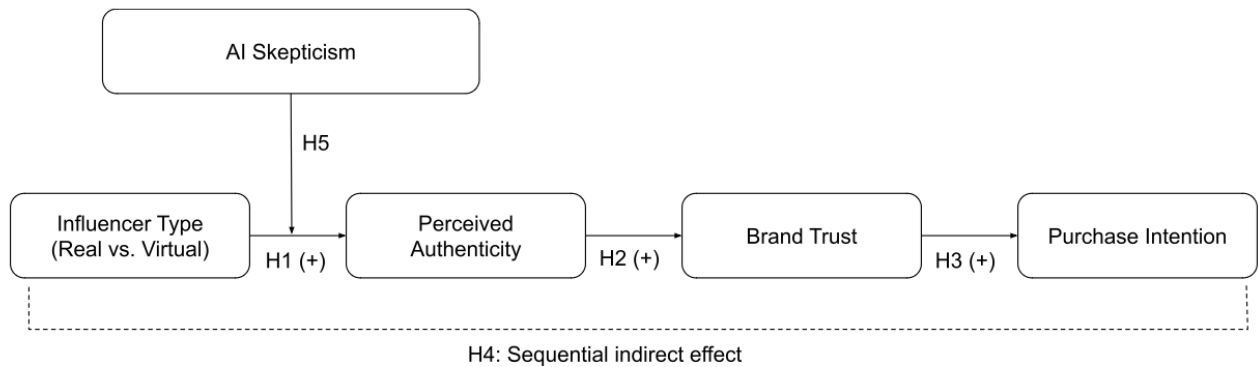


Figure 2. *Conceptual Model of the Study*

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodological approach adopted in this study. It outlines the research design, the experimental procedure, the sample and data collection process, the measurement instruments, and the data analysis methods. The aim of this chapter is to provide a clear overview of how the empirical study was conducted.

4.1 Research Design

Based on the theoretical framework presented in the previous chapters, this study employs a between-subjects online experimental design to examine the effect of influencer type on consumer responses in a social media advertising context.

In a between-subjects design, each participant is exposed to only one experimental condition, and treatment effects are estimated by comparing independently randomized groups (Charness et al., 2012). This approach minimizes carryover and comparison effects that may arise when participants evaluate multiple stimuli, thereby supporting the isolation of the focal manipulation.

The study used two experimental conditions that differed only in the influencer type presented in the advertisement: either a real (human) influencer or a virtual (AI-generated) influencer. Participants were randomly allocated to one of the two conditions and viewed one

Instagram-style post promoting the product. They then provided evaluations based solely on the stimulus presented in their assigned condition.

To strengthen internal validity and reduce potential confounds, all stimulus characteristics other than influencer type were held constant across conditions. A fictitious brand was used to minimize bias stemming from prior brand familiarity and pre-existing brand attitudes.

The independent variable was influencer type (real vs. virtual). The dependent variables were perceived authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention. The experiment was implemented via a standardized online questionnaire hosted on the QuestionPro platform. After exposure to the stimulus, participants completed multi-item scales measuring the focal constructs. Following data screening and cleaning procedures, the final sample comprised 248 valid responses, which exceeds commonly recommended minimum sample sizes for mediation and moderated mediation analyses and provides sufficient statistical power to test the proposed hypotheses.

4.2 Stimulus Development and Experimental Procedure

For this experiment, static Instagram-style posts were developed to closely resemble authentic influencer advertising content. To ensure experimental rigor, each participant was exposed to only one stimulus, thereby maintaining a single-exposure design and preventing cross-condition contamination.

The advertised product was a pair of wireless headphones marketed under the fictitious brand name *SoundFlow*. Headphones were selected as the focal product because they represent a gender-neutral, everyday technology product with broad appeal across consumer segments, regardless of gender or lifestyle. This product choice helped minimize potential confounding effects related to product involvement, category-specific preferences, or differential relevance across respondent groups.

Two stimulus versions were created, corresponding to the two experimental conditions: a real (human) influencer condition and a virtual (AI-generated) influencer condition. Both posts featured the same product, identical caption text, the same influencer username, the same location tag, and a comparable visual layout. In both conditions, the influencer was depicted wearing *SoundFlow* headphones in a casual urban setting. The only systematic difference between the

conditions was whether the depicted influencer was a real human or a computer-generated virtual character. Visual differences were intentionally minimized and restricted to those necessary to ensure a clear distinction between real and virtual representations.

In the virtual influencer condition, participants were explicitly informed that the featured character had been created using artificial intelligence. Specifically, this information was presented as part of the written instructions shown to participants prior to stimulus exposure, rather than within the stimulus itself. This disclosure was included to ensure transparency and to enable participants to evaluate the content with full awareness of the influencer's artificial nature.

The experimental procedure followed a standardized sequence. After providing informed consent, participants completed a brief screening section and responded to items measuring AI Skepticism, which served as a moderator in the subsequent analyses. At the next stage, the survey software assigned participants to one of the two experimental conditions with roughly equal probability. After viewing the assigned stimulus, they completed the main questionnaire, which assessed perceived authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention. The survey concluded with a manipulation check, demographic questions, and a debriefing statement. Visual examples of the experimental stimuli and the complete survey questionnaire are provided in the Appendix.

4.3 Sample and Data Collection

The data collection was conducted through the QuestionPro online survey platform. To ensure that respondents could meaningfully evaluate the experimental stimuli, the study included only adults between 18 and 45 years of age who reported using social media at least once a week. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling, with the survey link shared across social media, student networks, and online communities in order to reach a broader and more varied group of respondents.

The data collection process lasted three weeks. The median completion time for the questionnaire was approximately four minutes. In total, 256 responses were initially recorded. Three responses were excluded for failing to meet the predefined eligibility criteria related to age or frequency of social media use. Five additional cases were removed during subsequent data screening and cleaning procedures, as described in Section 5.1.1.

After applying all exclusion criteria, the final analytical sample consisted of 248 valid responses. The distribution of participants across the two experimental conditions was approximately balanced, with 127 assigned to the real influencer condition and 121 to the virtual influencer condition. This distribution reflects successful random assignment by the survey platform. A detailed overview of sample characteristics and demographic information is provided in Section 5.1.2.

This study followed standard ethical principles for research with human participants. Respondents took part voluntarily and did not receive any financial or material compensation. Informed consent was obtained before the survey began, and respondents were informed about the general purpose of the study, the anonymous collection of data, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. No personal data were collected, and all responses were analysed only in aggregated form. The study involved minimal risk because respondents only evaluated a fictitious social media post and completed standard survey questions.

4.4 Measurement Instruments

All constructs in this study were measured using established multi-item scales adapted from prior research. Unless otherwise specified, all items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Minor wording adjustments were made to ensure suitability for the social media advertising context and the fictitious brand used in the experiment, without altering the conceptual meaning of the original items.

AI Skepticism served as a moderator in the research model and was therefore measured at the outset of the survey, prior to participants' exposure to the experimental stimuli. This construct was assessed using the negative subscale of the General Attitudes toward Artificial Intelligence Scale (GAAIS) developed by Schepman and Rodway (2023). The scale captures individuals' negative attitudes toward artificial intelligence, including discomfort, distrust, perceived risk, and concerns about the potential negative consequences of AI technologies. The negative GAAIS dimension consists of eight items and has been widely validated in prior research examining human-AI interaction and consumer responses to artificial intelligence. Measuring AI Skepticism prior to stimulus exposure was methodologically important. It ensured that the obtained ratings reflected participants' stable individual predispositions rather than reactions to the specific influencer content encountered during the experiment.

After exposure to the stimulus, participants provided evaluations of both the influencer and the advertised brand. Perceived authenticity was assessed using a seven-item scale adapted from Lee and Eastin (2021). This scale assesses how an influencer is perceived by the audience as genuine, sincere, honest, and authentic. Participants evaluated the influencer in the social media post using statements that reflected perceived authenticity. The scale is well-suited for experimental research in influencer marketing contexts and demonstrated high internal consistency in the present study.

Brand trust was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Delgado-Ballester (2004). The scale captures consumers' confidence in the reliability, honesty, and integrity of the advertised brand. The original brand trust scale distinguishes between brand reliability and brand intentions. In this study, a unidimensional version was used, as in prior experimental research. This approach is particularly appropriate for single-exposure advertising contexts, where overall brand trust represents the focal construct of interest.

Purchase intention was assessed using a three-item scale adapted from Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal (1991). This scale measures consumers' self-reported likelihood and willingness to purchase the advertised product. The items capture behavioural intention rather than actual purchase behaviour, which is appropriate given the experimental and hypothetical nature of the social media advertising stimulus.

Construct	Scale Source	Items (n)	Scale
AI Skepticism	Schepman & Rodway (2023)	8	7-point Likert scale
Perceived Authenticity	Lee & Eastin (2021)	7	7-point Likert scale
Brand Trust	Delgado-Ballester (2004)	4	7-point Likert scale
Purchase Intention	Dodds et al. (1991)	3	7-point Likert scale

Table 1. Measurement Instruments and Scale Sources

The complete survey questionnaire, including all measurement items, is provided in the Appendix B.

4.5 Data Analysis Methods

The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics. To test the proposed mediation and moderation effects, the PROCESS macro for SPSS was employed (Hayes, 2018).

Before conducting the main analyses, the dataset was screened for incomplete and invalid responses. Composite variables were computed by averaging the items of each multi-item scale after reliability had been confirmed. Detailed information regarding data preparation and data cleaning procedures is provided in Section 5.1.1.

The reliability of the measurement scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. Means and standard deviations were reported for all variables. To examine bivariate relationships among the key constructs – perceived authenticity, brand trust, purchase intention, and AI skepticism – Pearson correlation coefficients were computed.

To ensure that participants correctly identified the influencer type shown in the stimulus, a manipulation check was included in the study (real human influencer vs. virtual AI-generated influencer). Recognition accuracy was assessed by comparing participants' responses to the manipulation check item with their assigned experimental condition. The results of the manipulation check are reported in Section 5.1.5.

All statistical analyses were evaluated at the $\alpha = 0.05$ significance level. Prior to hypothesis testing, the data were examined for univariate outliers, normality, and homogeneity of variance. No severe violations of statistical assumptions were detected. Missing data were minimal due to the online survey's mandatory response format.

To test the hypothesized relationships, two analytical models were estimated using the PROCESS macro. First, a sequential mediation model (PROCESS Model 6) was applied to examine the direct and indirect paths specified in H1-H3, as well as the sequential indirect effect on purchase intention (H4). Second, a moderated mediation model (PROCESS Model 83) was estimated to assess whether AI skepticism conditions the effect of influencer type on perceived authenticity and, in turn, alters the indirect effect on purchase intention (H5). For both models, indirect effects were estimated using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals, in line with established methodological recommendations.

5. RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the empirical analyses conducted in this study. It is divided into two main sections. Section 5.1 reports the preliminary results, including data preparation and cleaning, sample characteristics, scale reliability, descriptive statistics, manipulation check results, and correlations between the key variables. Section 5.2 presents the results of the hypothesis testing, including analyses of direct effects, sequential mediation, and moderated mediation.

5.1 Preliminary results

5.1.1. Data preparation and cleaning

Data for this study were collected through an online survey. In total, 256 responses were initially recorded. Prior to the main analyses, the dataset was screened in accordance with standard data preparation procedures. The screening procedure led to the removal of eight cases in total. Three participants did not meet the predefined eligibility requirements, and five were excluded due to incomplete responses or data quality issues. The cleaned dataset comprised 248 valid cases.

All multi-item constructs were prepared for analysis by computing composite variables. Scale scores were calculated by averaging the corresponding items for each construct, with higher values consistently reflecting higher levels of the respective construct. Scale scores were computed only for respondents with complete data across all items of a given scale.

The experimental condition variable was coded as a categorical variable, with the real influencer condition coded as 1 and the virtual influencer condition coded as 2. A binary indicator was also constructed to capture whether each participant accurately recognised the influencer type shown in their assigned condition.

The final cleaned dataset was subsequently used for all descriptive, correlational, and hypothesis-testing analyses.

5.1.2. Sample profile and demographics

The final sample consisted of 248 participants. Regarding age distribution, 46.1% of respondents were between 26 and 35 years old, followed by 27.3% aged 18-25 and 25.8% aged 36-45.

In terms of gender, 57.4% of respondents identified as male, 41.8% as female, and less than one percent selected other options or preferred not to disclose their gender.

Regarding geographic distribution, the majority of participants resided in the European Union (67.7%), followed by non-EU European countries (24.3%). The remaining respondents were located in North America, Asia, and other regions.

The sample demonstrated a high level of social media engagement, with more than 90% of participants reporting daily use of social media platforms. Instagram was the most frequently used platform (46.2%), followed by YouTube (21.1%) and Facebook (13.9%).

Overall, the demographic characteristics indicate that the sample consists of active social media users within the target age range, making it well-suited for examining influencer marketing effects in digital advertising contexts.

5.1.3. Assessment of scales reliability

The internal consistency of all multi-item constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. All measurement scales demonstrated satisfactory to excellent internal consistency, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of $\alpha = .70$.

Specifically, AI Skepticism ($\alpha = .868$), perceived authenticity ($\alpha = .922$), brand trust ($\alpha = .957$), and purchase intention ($\alpha = .942$) all exhibited strong internal consistency. These findings support the reliability of the measurement instruments and justify the use of composite variables for subsequent analyses. An overview of the reliability coefficients for all scales is presented in Table 2. Detailed reliability output is provided in Appendix D.

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
AI Skepticism	.868	8

Perceived Authenticity	.922	7
Brand Trust	.957	4
Purchase Intention	.942	3

Table 2. Scale Reliability Assessment

5.1.4. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics for all study variables are presented in Table 3. All variables were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Overall, the mean values indicate moderate to relatively low evaluations across the key constructs measured in the study.

AI Skepticism showed a mean value of 3.98 (SD = 1.21), suggesting a moderate level of skepticism toward artificial intelligence among respondents. This indicates that, on average, participants neither strongly rejected nor fully accepted AI-based technologies, reflecting a balanced but cautious general attitude toward AI.

Perceived authenticity of the influencer yielded a mean score of 3.61 (SD = 1.30), indicating moderate perceptions of authenticity. This suggests that respondents did not perceive the influencer content as highly authentic on average, but evaluations varied considerably across individuals.

Brand trust demonstrated a mean value of 3.47 (SD = 1.35), reflecting relatively low to moderate levels of trust in the advertised brand. Given that the brand was fictitious and unfamiliar to participants, this finding is consistent with expectations and indicates meaningful variance in trust evaluations.

Purchase intention had the lowest mean score among the study variables (M = 2.77, SD = 1.45), suggesting generally low purchase intentions for the advertised product. This pattern aligns with the experimental use of a fictional brand and a single-exposure advertising stimulus, which limits the formation of strong purchase intentions.

Across all variables, standard deviations indicate substantial variability in responses, suggesting that the data provide sufficient dispersion for subsequent correlational and regression-based analyses.

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
AI Skepticism	3.977	1.208
Perceived Authenticity	3.608	1.299
Brand Trust	3.467	1.347
Purchase Intention	2.770	1.449

Table 3. Scale Descriptive Statistics

5.1.5. Manipulation Check

To verify whether the influencer type had been recognised correctly, participants completed a manipulation check. After seeing the post, they indicated whether the featured influencer was a real human or an AI-generated virtual influencer. Responses were compared with the assigned experimental condition, and a binary indicator of correct recognition was created.

Overall, 81.5% of participants correctly identified the influencer type (n = 202), indicating that the manipulation was largely successful (see Table 4). However, recognition accuracy differed substantially between the two experimental conditions. Participants exposed to the virtual influencer showed a very high level of correct recognition (94.2%), whereas recognition accuracy in the real influencer condition was notably lower (69.3%), with nearly one-third of participants misclassifying the real influencer as virtual.

This asymmetry indicates that virtual influencers were more easily and consistently recognised as such, whereas real influencers were more prone to misclassification.

Importantly, manipulation check performance was not used as an exclusion criterion, and all participants were retained for subsequent analyses. This decision was made because the study focuses on participants' subjective evaluations of authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention,

which remain theoretically meaningful regardless of explicit recognition accuracy. Detailed condition-specific recognition patterns are reported in Appendix E.

Recognition accuracy	n	Percent
Incorrect recognition	46	18.5%
Correct recognition	202	81.5%
Total	248	100%

Table 4. Manipulation Check Results

5.1.6. Correlations Between Key Variables

Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the bivariate relationships among the key study variables: perceived authenticity, brand trust, purchase intention, and AI Skepticism.

Perceived authenticity was strongly and positively correlated with both brand trust ($r = .741, p < .01$) and purchase intention ($r = .647, p < .01$), indicating that higher perceptions of influencer authenticity were associated with greater trust in the advertised brand and stronger purchase intentions for the promoted product.

Brand trust showed a strong positive association with purchase intention ($r = .785, p < .01$), suggesting that participants with higher levels of trust in the brand also reported stronger purchase intentions.

AI Skepticism showed statistically significant negative correlations with all post-exposure constructs. Specifically, AI Skepticism was negatively associated with perceived authenticity ($r = -.235, p < .01$), brand trust ($r = -.266, p < .01$), and purchase intention ($r = -.245, p < .01$). These findings suggest that individuals with higher levels of skepticism toward artificial intelligence tended to evaluate influencer authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention less favorably.

Overall, the correlation results reveal statistically significant and theoretically consistent relationships among the key variables, providing an appropriate empirical foundation for the subsequent mediation and moderated mediation analyses. Detailed correlation coefficients are reported in Appendix C.

5.2 Hypotheses testing

To test the proposed hypotheses, a series of regression-based analyses was conducted using the PROCESS macro for IBM SPSS Statistics (Hayes, 2018). The analytical strategy followed the conceptual model presented in Chapter 3 and consisted of three main steps: (1) testing the direct effects hypothesized in H1-H3, (2) examining the proposed sequential mediation mechanism (H4), and (3) assessing the moderating role of AI Skepticism (H5).

All mediation and moderation analyses were estimated using a bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Statistical significance was evaluated at $\alpha = .05$. Before the moderation analysis, AI Skepticism was mean-centred to reduce potential multicollinearity and facilitate interpretation of the interaction term.

5.2.1 Direct Effects of Influencer Type, Authenticity, and Brand Trust

H1: Effect of influencer type on perceived authenticity

Hypothesis 1 proposed that real influencers would be perceived as more authentic than virtual influencers. To test this hypothesis, perceived authenticity was regressed on influencer type using PROCESS Model 6.

The results revealed a statistically significant effect of influencer type on perceived authenticity ($B = -0.48$, $SE = 0.16$, $t = -2.95$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [-0.80, -0.16]). The experimental condition was coded as 1 = real influencer and 2 = virtual influencer. The negative coefficient indicates that authenticity ratings were significantly lower for virtual influencers ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.39$) than for real influencers ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.16$).

Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Perceived Authenticity	Influencer type (1 = real, 2 = virtual)	-0.48	0.16	-2.95	.003

Table 5. Effect of Influencer Type on Perceived Authenticity

H2: Effect of perceived authenticity on brand trust

Hypothesis 2 stated that perceived authenticity would positively influence brand trust. To test this hypothesis, brand trust was regressed on perceived authenticity while controlling for influencer type.

The results revealed a strong and statistically significant positive effect of perceived authenticity on brand trust ($B = 0.75$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 16.71$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.67, 0.84]). This finding indicates that higher perceived authenticity was associated with greater trust in the endorsed brand.

Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Brand trust	Perceived Authenticity	0.75	0.04	16.71	< .001

Table 6. Effect of Perceived Authenticity on Brand Trust

H3: Effect of brand trust on purchase intention

Hypothesis 3 proposed that brand trust would positively influence consumers' purchase intention. To test this hypothesis, purchase intention was regressed on brand trust while controlling for influencer type and perceived authenticity.

The results indicated a strong and statistically significant positive effect of brand trust on purchase intention ($B = 0.76$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 12.09$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.64, 0.88]). This finding indicates that higher levels of brand trust were associated with stronger purchase intentions.

Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Purchase Intention	Brand trust	0.76	0.06	12.09	< .001

Table 7. Effect of Brand Trust on Purchase Intention

5.2.2 Sequential Mediation Analysis

H4: Sequential mediation of perceived authenticity and brand trust

Hypothesis 4 proposed that the effect of influencer type on purchase intention would be sequentially mediated by perceived authenticity and brand trust. This hypothesis was tested using PROCESS Model 6, which allows the estimation of indirect effects through multiple mediators operating in sequence.

The total effect of influencer type on purchase intention was not statistically significant ($c = -0.28$, $SE = 0.18$, 95% CI $[-0.64, 0.08]$), indicating that influencer type alone did not exert a reliable overall effect on purchase intention. A non-significant total effect does not preclude mediation and is consistent with contemporary mediation analysis frameworks (Hayes, 2018). However, when perceived authenticity and brand trust were included as sequential mediators, the direct effect of influencer type on purchase intention became positive and statistically significant ($c' = 0.31$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI $[0.08, 0.54]$). This pattern, in which the direct and indirect effects operate in opposite directions, is consistent with contemporary mediation frameworks and does not preclude the presence of meaningful indirect effects (Hayes, 2018).

The sequential indirect effect of influencer type on purchase intention, mediated by perceived authenticity and brand trust, was negative and statistically significant (indirect effect = -0.27 , $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI $[-0.47, -0.09]$). The analysis also revealed significant indirect effects through perceived authenticity alone (Ind1 = -0.08 , 95% CI $[-0.18, -0.01]$) and through brand trust alone (Ind2 = -0.24 , 95% CI $[-0.44, -0.06]$), suggesting that each mediator also independently contributes to the overall indirect effect. For all three indirect paths, the bootstrap confidence intervals did not include zero, confirming the presence of reliable mediation effects.

These findings indicate that the effect of influencer type on purchase intention is indirect and operates through a two-stage psychological sequence: virtual influencers are perceived as less authentic, which weakens brand trust and consequently reduces purchase intention.

Taken together, the results provide strong support for the hypothesised sequential mediation pathway.

Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Effect Type	Effect	Boot SE	95% LLCI	95% ULCI
Total Effect	-0.28	0.18	- 0.64	0.08
Direct Effect	0.31	0.12	0.08	0.54
Sequential Indirect Effect (Influencer Type → Authenticity → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention)	-0.27	0.10	-0.47	-0.09

Table 8. Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects of Influencer Type on Purchase Intention

Note. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. Full PROCESS Model 6 output is provided in Appendix F.

5.2.3 Moderated Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis 5 proposed that AI Skepticism would moderate the relationship between influencer type and perceived authenticity, thereby influencing the indirect effect of influencer type on purchase intention through perceived authenticity and brand trust. This hypothesis was tested using PROCESS Model 83, which allows for testing moderation at the first stage of a sequential mediation model. AI Skepticism was mean centered prior to analysis to facilitate interpretation of the interaction term.

The interaction term between influencer type and AI Skepticism did not reach statistical significance in predicting perceived authenticity ($B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.13$, $t = 0.86$, $p = .39$, 95% CI [-0.14, 0.37]). AI Skepticism showed a significant negative main effect on perceived authenticity ($B = -0.42$, $SE = 0.20$, $p = .041$), suggesting that higher AI skepticism was associated with lower authenticity evaluations irrespective of the influencer condition. Accordingly, the effect of influencer type on perceived authenticity remained stable across different levels of AI Skepticism.

To further examine the pattern of results, conditional effects of influencer type on perceived authenticity were estimated at three levels of AI Skepticism: low (-1 SD), mean (0), and high (+1 SD). The effect of influencer type on perceived authenticity remained negative and statistically significant at low ($B = -0.61$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = .009$, 95% CI [-1.06, -0.15]) and mean levels of AI Skepticism ($B = -0.48$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [-0.80, -0.16]). At high levels of AI Skepticism,

the effect was also negative but not statistically significant ($B = -0.35$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = .13$, 95% CI [-0.80, 0.10]).

The index of moderated mediation was examined to assess whether AI Skepticism moderated the overall indirect effect of influencer type on purchase intention through the sequential mediators. The index was not statistically significant (index = 0.06, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [-0.10, 0.25]), as the bootstrap confidence interval included zero. This confirms that AI Skepticism does not condition the strength of the indirect effect through perceived authenticity and brand trust.

Although AI Skepticism was negatively correlated with perceived authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention (as reported in Section 5.1.6), it did not function as a boundary condition that altered the proposed sequential mediation mechanism. The lack of moderation suggests that the psychological pathway from influencer type to purchase intention, via perceived authenticity and brand trust, operates similarly across individuals' general attitudes toward artificial intelligence. Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

Effect	B	Boot SE	t	p	95% CI [LL, UL]
Interaction Effect: Influencer Type × AI Skepticism → Authenticity	0.11	0.13	0.86	.39	[-0.14, 0.37]
Index of Moderated Mediation: Influencer Type → Authenticity → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention	0.06	0.09	-	-	[-0.10, 0.25]

Table 9. Moderated Mediation Results and Index of Moderated Mediation

Note. AI Skepticism was mean centered prior to analysis. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. Full PROCESS Model 83 output is provided in Appendix G.

5.2.4 Summary of Hypotheses Testing

The results of the hypothesis testing are summarized in Table 10. Overall, four of the five hypotheses received empirical support. Real influencers were perceived as significantly more authentic than virtual influencers (H1), and perceived authenticity positively influenced brand trust (H2), which in turn positively influenced purchase intention (H3). The results of the sequential mediation analysis showed that the effect of influencer type on purchase intention operates through

a two-step psychological process involving perceived authenticity and brand trust (H4). However, AI Skepticism did not significantly moderate the relationship between influencer type and perceived authenticity (H5), indicating that the proposed mediation mechanism operates consistently across varying levels of AI Skepticism.

Hypothesis	Result
H1: Real influencers will be perceived as more authentic than virtual influencers.	Supported
H2: Perceived authenticity will positively influence brand trust.	Supported
H3: Brand trust will positively influence purchase intention.	Supported
H4: The effect of influencer type on purchase intention will be sequentially mediated by perceived authenticity and brand trust.	Supported
H5: AI Skepticism will moderate the relationship between influencer type and perceived authenticity.	Not supported

Table 10. Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results

6. DISCUSSION

This section focuses on the main findings of the study and relates them to the research questions and prior literature. It further addresses the theoretical and practical implications of the results, together with their broader significance for understanding influencer marketing in the context of real and virtual influencers.

6.1 Interpretation of the Findings

This study provides empirical evidence on how influencer type shapes consumer responses through underlying psychological mechanisms. The findings suggest that influencer type functions less as a direct driver of consumer behaviour and more as a starting condition that initiates a sequence of psychological evaluations – a distinction that has important implications for how influencer effectiveness is conceptualized and measured. The results are discussed below in relation to the proposed hypotheses.

The findings support the hypothesized advantage of real influencers in generating perceptions of authenticity (H1). Participants exposed to the real influencer condition evaluated the content as more authentic than those in the virtual condition. This result is consistent with prior research suggesting that human influencers benefit from cues related to personal experience, identity consistency, and emotional expressiveness – qualities that consumers interpret as signals of sincerity and genuine motivation (Lee & Eastin, 2021). In contrast, virtual influencers are computer-generated personas whose narratives and endorsements are externally managed. Because of this, they may appear less genuinely involved in what they promote (Lou et al., 2023).

Perceived authenticity, in turn, had a strong positive effect on brand trust (H2). Consumers are more likely to trust the endorsed brand when influencer communication appears genuine rather than strategically constructed. This pattern is consistent with trust transfer theory, which suggests that trust associated with a source can extend to the promoted brand when a meaningful connection between the two is perceived (Stewart, 2003). In this sense, authenticity appears to be a key mechanism through which influencer evaluations shape brand-level perceptions.

Brand trust then showed a strong positive effect on purchase intention (H3). When consumers trust a brand, they are more likely to consider purchasing its products. This is especially important in the context of this study, where the brand was fictitious and participants had no prior experience with it. In such situations, trust becomes one of the main factors guiding decision-making, as it reduces uncertainty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

The sequential mediation analysis (H4) is one of the most important findings of this study. Although influencer type did not show a significant total effect on purchase intention, the indirect

effect operating through perceived authenticity and brand trust was statistically significant. Interestingly, the direct effect became positive once the mediators were included, indicating that the direct and indirect effects operate in opposite directions. This pattern suggests that influencer type does not directly determine consumer behaviour but operates through underlying psychological mechanisms – initiating a sequence of evaluations in which virtual influencers are perceived as less authentic, which weakens brand trust and, in turn, lowers purchase intention. Even without a significant direct effect, this type of indirect relationship remains theoretically meaningful (Hayes, 2018).

The only hypothesis that was not supported concerned the moderating role of AI skepticism (H5). Contrary to expectations, skepticism toward artificial intelligence did not significantly change the relationship between influencer type and perceived authenticity. The mediation pathway remained similar across participants. At the same time, AI skepticism was negatively associated with perceived authenticity, indicating that although it did not modify the relationship between influencer type and authenticity, it still shaped overall evaluations of influencer content.

A possible explanation lies in the distinction between general attitudes and context-specific reactions. AI skepticism reflects a broad orientation toward AI, but influencer marketing operates in a more personal and emotionally driven context. In such cases, consumers may rely more on communication quality and perceived sincerity than on abstract beliefs about AI (Longoni & Cian, 2020).

Taken together, these findings suggest that the mechanism linking influencer type to consumer behaviour operates in a similar way across different levels of AI skepticism. In this context, consumer responses continue to be shaped primarily by perceived authenticity and brand trust.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study go beyond confirming that real influencers outperform virtual ones. Instead, they offer a step-by-step explanation of how this difference develops – through a sequence of psychological evaluations that begins with perceived authenticity and leads to purchase

intention via brand trust. The following section discusses what these findings mean for existing theory.

First, the study provides a clearer understanding of the mechanism behind influencer effectiveness. Previous research has shown that human influencers are often perceived as more authentic, but this has mainly been treated as a descriptive result. By embedding this difference within a sequential causal model, the study moves beyond descriptive comparisons and offers a process-level explanation of how influencer endorsements shape consumer responses.

Second, the findings offer a more detailed understanding of the role of authenticity. In much of the earlier literature, authenticity is discussed as a factor that directly influences consumer attitudes or intentions (Lee & Eastin, 2021). However, the results of this study suggest that its role is more indirect. Authenticity acts as the starting point of a trust-building process rather than as a final outcome. This highlights that authenticity is important not only because it affects perceptions of the influencer, but because it helps build confidence in the brand.

This is particularly relevant in the context of AI-generated influencers. In such cases, the absence of lived experience may limit the ability to generate authenticity cues that initiate trust formation. By showing that authenticity operates as the first step in a sequential process, the study extends trust transfer theory beyond its traditional application to human endorsers (Stewart, 2003).

Third, the study contributes to the understanding of virtual influencers. Existing explanations often focus on novelty effects, lack of trust, or the uncanny valley. The findings here suggest a more specific explanation. Virtual influencers may be less effective because their communication lacks signals of personal experience and genuine involvement (Lou et al., 2023). This means that the key issue is not only their artificial nature, but also how their content is interpreted by consumers. In this sense, the study shifts the focus from what virtual influencers are to how they communicate, offering a more nuanced explanation of why they are often perceived as less authentic.

Finally, the results provide an important insight into the role of AI skepticism. The expectation was that more skeptical consumers would respond more negatively to virtual

influencers, but this was not supported. This suggests that general attitudes toward AI may not always translate into specific consumer responses (Schepman & Rodway, 2023).

One possible explanation is that there is a difference between general attitudes and context-specific evaluations. AI skepticism reflects a broad orientation toward artificial intelligence as a technology. However, influencer marketing is a more personal and emotionally driven context. In such situations, consumers may rely more on communication quality than on abstract beliefs about AI (Longoni & Cian, 2020).

This suggests the need for more differentiated ways of conceptualizing AI-related attitudes in consumer research, especially by distinguishing between general technology orientations and context-specific responses to AI-generated communicators.

These theoretical insights have direct implications for how brands and practitioners approach influencer marketing in practice, as discussed in the following section.

6.3 Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the study offers useful insights for brands, marketing agencies, and developers working with influencer marketing.

One of the most direct conclusions is that human influencers continue to offer an advantage in contexts where building brand trust and encouraging purchase intention are central objectives. This does not imply that virtual influencers should not be used. However, their use should be more strategic. In product categories where emotional connection matters most, the authenticity of the message plays a central role (Belanche et al., 2024). This is especially relevant in areas such as lifestyle, wellness, or personal care. In these contexts, consumers are more sensitive to how genuine the communication feels. While virtual influencers offer advantages such as control and cost efficiency, these benefits may not fully compensate for lower perceived authenticity, especially when consumers encounter a brand for the first time.

Another important implication relates to how marketing effectiveness is evaluated. The results show that purchase intention does not emerge immediately after exposure to influencer content. Instead, it develops through a process that starts with perceived authenticity and continues

with brand trust. This means that commonly used metrics such as reach, or short-term engagement do not fully capture campaign effectiveness. Brands may benefit from also measuring how authentic the content is perceived and how much trust it generates. These indicators can provide a clearer understanding of why a campaign performs well or poorly.

For marketing agencies, the results highlight the importance of how content is created, not only who delivers it. Authenticity depends strongly on communication style, consistency, and the perceived sincerity of the influencer. Content that feels overly scripted or disconnected from the influencer's usual voice may reduce effectiveness. This suggests that agencies should focus more on building strong matches between brands and influencers and allow space for more natural communication. Over time, this approach is likely to lead to more stable and credible results.

The findings are also relevant for brands that already work with virtual influencers or are considering doing so. Virtual influencers are not necessarily ineffective, but their success may depend on the context. They may perform better in campaigns that focus on product features or informational value, where emotional authenticity is less central (Belanche et al., 2024). In such cases, the consistency and control offered by virtual influencers can even become an advantage.

For those involved in designing virtual influencer personas, the results suggest that visual realism alone is not enough. What matters more is how the influencer communicates. A clear identity, consistent tone, and alignment between the influencer's values and the brand play a key role in how authenticity is perceived (Duffek et al., 2025). Even a highly realistic virtual character may not be effective if the content feels artificial or overly commercial. This highlights the importance of narrative and communication design, not only visual quality.

Finally, the findings provide an important message regarding AI skepticism. The results show that differences in skepticism toward AI did not significantly change how consumers responded to influencer content. This suggests that brands do not need to segment their audience based on general attitudes toward artificial intelligence. Instead, the focus should remain on the quality of communication. If the content feels authentic and trustworthy, it can be effective across different audience groups.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study examined how influencer type shapes consumer responses in social media advertising, with a focus on the psychological mechanisms linking perceived authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention. A between-subjects online experiment was conducted in which participants were exposed to either a real or a virtual influencer promoting a fictitious brand. The results demonstrate that influencer type shapes consumer behaviour not through a direct path, but through a sequence of psychological evaluations that begins with perceived authenticity and culminates in purchase intention.

Returning to the first research question – how influencer type influences purchase intention through the sequential mediation of perceived authenticity and brand trust – the findings provide clear support for this indirect pathway. Real influencers were perceived as significantly more authentic than virtual influencers, and this difference carried over into brand trust and, ultimately, purchase intention. The absence of a significant direct effect further highlights that what matters is not simply which type of influencer consumers are exposed to, but how that exposure is interpreted. Perceived authenticity emerged as the critical first step in a process that determines whether an influencer endorsement translates into consumer action.

With regard to the second research question – whether AI skepticism moderates the effect of influencer type on perceived authenticity – the results do not support this proposition. The sequential pathway linking authenticity, trust, and purchase intention remained stable across participants with varying levels of AI skepticism. This suggests that consumer responses to influencer content are shaped more by communication-related cues such as tone, sincerity, and consistency than by prior attitudes toward artificial intelligence. How an influencer communicates appears to play a more important role than influencer type alone.

Taken together, the findings suggest that influencer effectiveness is best understood as a process rather than a direct outcome. It is not influencer type alone that drives consumer behaviour, but the extent to which the communication is perceived as genuine – a principle that is likely to become even more important as virtual influencers continue to grow in prominence.

7.2 Contributions

Building on the findings and theoretical insights presented in the preceding chapter, this study makes five interrelated contributions to the literature on influencer marketing and AI-generated communication.

First, the study contributes to influencer marketing research by moving beyond outcome-level comparisons between real and virtual influencers. By establishing an empirically tested sequential pathway, it provides a process-level account of how influencer type shapes consumer behaviour – an explanation that has been largely absent from the existing literature.

A second contribution concerns the role of perceived authenticity. While previous research often treats authenticity as a direct predictor of consumer responses, the findings suggest that its importance lies in how it supports the development of trust. This helps explain why authenticity plays such a central role in influencer marketing and how it operates within the broader persuasion process.

A third contribution concerns the understanding of virtual influencers. Rather than attributing their weaker performance only to their artificial nature, the findings point to a more specific explanation. Virtual influencers may be less effective because their content lacks the kind of communicative signals – such as personal experience and genuine involvement – that consumers use to evaluate authenticity. This shifts attention from what virtual influencers are to how their communication is perceived, which may be more useful both for researchers and for practitioners working with AI-generated personas.

Regarding AI skepticism, the results offer an important insight into its role in influencer marketing. Because no moderating effect was found, general attitudes toward artificial intelligence do not appear to strongly shape evaluations of influencer content in this context. This finding suggests that broader views of technology should be distinguished from consumer responses that emerge in specific marketing situations.

Finally, the study makes a methodological contribution by combining influencer type, perceived authenticity, brand trust, and AI skepticism within one moderated serial mediation

model. This model helps to examine the psychological processes behind influencer effectiveness and may also be useful for future research in other contexts.

7.3 Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted considering several limitations.

One important limitation relates to the experimental setting. The study was based on a single exposure to influencer content featuring a fictitious brand. While this allowed for a high level of control, it does not fully reflect real-world conditions. In practice, consumers are exposed to influencer content multiple times and often have prior experience with a brand. Because of this, the strength and dynamics of the observed relationships – especially those involving trust and purchase intention – may evolve differently over time.

A second limitation concerns the use of self-reported measures. Although constructs such as purchase intention are widely used in marketing research, they do not always translate into actual behaviour. Participants may indicate a willingness to buy without acting on it in real situations, which can lead to an overestimation of behavioural effects. Future research could address this by including behavioural measures, such as actual purchase decisions, click behaviour, or other observable actions.

The study also focuses on only one specific representation of a virtual influencer. In reality, virtual influencers differ in terms of visual realism, storytelling, transparency, and communication style. The responses observed in this study therefore reflect reactions to a particular type of virtual influencer rather than to the broader category. As a result, the findings may not capture the full range of possible consumer responses to different types of AI-generated personas.

A related limitation concerns the asymmetry in how the two experimental conditions were presented. In the virtual influencer condition, participants were explicitly informed that the depicted character had been created using artificial intelligence. No equivalent disclosure was made in the real influencer condition. While this reflects common practice in influencer marketing research, it introduces an asymmetry that may have independently influenced authenticity perceptions, beyond the effect of influencer type itself.

Another point to consider is the type of stimulus used in the experiment. The study relied on static Instagram-style posts, whereas influencer content in real settings often includes video, stories, or live streams. These formats may engage audiences differently and influence perceptions of authenticity in other ways. The findings may therefore not fully generalize to more dynamic content formats.

A further limitation relates to the measurement of AI skepticism. In this study, it was treated as a general attitude toward artificial intelligence. However, responses to AI-generated influencers may depend more on the specific context in which the content is presented. The absence of a moderating effect may therefore be linked to how the construct was measured rather than its actual relevance. This suggests that more context-specific measures could provide a clearer understanding of how AI-related attitudes influence consumer responses.

Finally, the composition of the sample may limit the generalizability of the findings. Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling, with most respondents coming from European countries. As perceptions of authenticity, trust, and artificial intelligence can vary across cultures, the present findings may not transfer equally well to other settings. Future studies could strengthen the robustness of the results by including more diverse and cross-cultural samples.

These limitations highlight several opportunities for future research, which are discussed in the following section.

7.4 Future Research Directions

The findings of this study suggest several directions for future research on influencer marketing and AI-generated communication.

Future research could investigate whether the proposed mechanism operates differently across product categories and brand contexts. The present study focused on a functional product and a fictitious brand in order to control prior attitudes. However, influencer marketing is especially prominent in hedonic and identity-related categories such as fashion, beauty, and lifestyle. In these contexts, emotional engagement and self-expression may play a stronger role, which could change

the importance of authenticity and trust. Future research could also explore how the model performs when real brands are used, where existing brand perceptions may influence consumer responses.

Future research could also pay closer attention to the diversity of virtual influencer designs. This study examined a human-like virtual influencer, but virtual personas vary widely in their visual style, level of realism, and narrative structure. More stylized or clearly non-human representations may lead to different evaluations, particularly in terms of perceived authenticity. Comparing different types of virtual influencers could help identify which design elements strengthen or weaken their effectiveness.

The role of time and repeated exposure also deserves further attention. This study captures consumer responses after a single interaction, while real-world influencer marketing often involves ongoing engagement. As consumers become more familiar with an influencer, perceptions of authenticity and trust may evolve. This may be especially relevant for virtual influencers, whose identities are constructed rather than lived. Longitudinal or field-based studies could provide valuable insight into how these relationships develop over time.

Another important direction is to focus more strongly on behavioural outcomes. While purchase intention is a well-established measure, it does not always reflect actual behaviour. Including behavioural indicators, such as real purchase decisions, click behaviour, or engagement data, would provide a more complete understanding of how influencer marketing affects consumer actions.

Individual differences represent another promising area for further research. The non-significant role of AI skepticism suggests that other variables may offer greater explanatory power. Factors such as technological readiness, familiarity with virtual influencers, perceived competence of AI, or preference for human interaction may help explain when and for whom virtual influencers are most effective. Developing more context-specific measures of AI-related attitudes in marketing environments could also strengthen future research.

Finally, future studies could explore how different content formats influence consumer responses. Video content, live streams, and interactive stories may engage audiences differently

than static posts and could produce varying authenticity perceptions. Examining whether the sequential pathway identified in this study holds across different formats would provide a stronger understanding of how influencer effects operate in real-world settings.

Overall, these directions highlight the need for a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of how influencer marketing operates in increasingly AI-driven environments.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Experimental Stimuli

The following figures present the experimental stimuli used in the study. Both stimuli were identical in all aspects except for influencer type (real vs. virtual).



Figure A1. Real Influencer Stimulus



Figure A2. Virtual Influencer Stimulus

Appendix B: Survey Questionnaire

This appendix presents the questionnaire used in the experimental study. The survey was administered online using QuestionPro. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (real vs. virtual influencer) and completed the following sections.

Informed Consent and Data Protection

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this scientific study. This survey investigates how people perceive and respond to content on social media platforms. It is conducted as part of a Master's thesis at the University of Vienna. The collected data may be reviewed by the thesis supervisor and examiner for academic evaluation purposes and may be stored in accordance with Art. 89 Para. 1 GDPR. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. You may discontinue at any time without consequences.

Yes, I consent to participate

No, I do not consent

Section 1: Screening

1. Which age group do you belong to?

Under 18 (*excluded from study*)

18–25

26–35

36–45

Over 45 (*excluded from study*)

2. How often do you use social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube)?

Daily

Several times a week

Once a week

Less than once a week (*excluded from study*)

Never (*excluded from study*)

Section 2: AI Skepticism

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about Artificial Intelligence.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree):

- Organisations use Artificial Intelligence unethically.
- I think artificially intelligent systems make many errors.
- I find Artificial Intelligence sinister.
- Artificial Intelligence might take control of people.
- I think Artificial Intelligence is dangerous.
- I shiver with discomfort when I think about future uses of Artificial Intelligence.
- People like me will suffer if Artificial Intelligence is used more and more.
- Artificial Intelligence is used to spy on people.

Scale source: Schepman & Rodway (2023), Negative GAAIS subscale.

Section 3: Stimulus Exposure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. Each participant was exposed to only one influencer post (between-subjects design).

Condition 1 – Real Influencer (Stimulus A)

Instruction shown to participants in the real influencer condition:

In the following, you will see an Instagram post created for this study. The influencer shown in this post is a typical social media influencer. Please view the post carefully. Afterward, you will be asked to answer several questions about this influencer and the brand presented in the post.

Condition 2 – Virtual Influencer (Stimulus B)

Instruction shown to participants in the virtual influencer condition:

In the following, you will see an Instagram post created for this study. The influencer shown in this post is a social media influencer created using artificial intelligence

(AI-generated influencer). Please view the post carefully. Afterward, you will be asked to answer several questions about this influencer and the brand presented in the post.

Visual examples of both stimuli are provided in Appendix A.

Section 4: Perceived Authenticity

Based on the post you just viewed, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)

- This influencer seems kind and good-hearted.
- This influencer is sincere.
- This influencer comes off as very genuine.
- This influencer is down-to-earth.
- Although they post ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.
- This influencer gives very honest reviews on brands.
- The products and brands they endorse vibe well with their personality.

Scale source: Lee & Eastin (2021).

Section 5: Brand Trust

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about SoundFlow headphones based on the post you just viewed.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)

- I trust SoundFlow as a brand.
- I feel I could rely on SoundFlow.
- SoundFlow seems like an honest brand.
- SoundFlow appears to be a safe brand.

Scale source: Delgado-Ballester (2004).

Section 6: Purchase Intention

(1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)

- I would be likely to purchase SoundFlow headphones.
- I am willing to buy SoundFlow headphones.

- There is a strong probability that I would purchase SoundFlow headphones.

Scale source: Dodds et al. (1991).

Section 7: Attention Check

What type of product was promoted in the post?

- Headphones
- Coffee
- Sunglasses
- Smartphone

Section 8: Manipulation Check

1. The influencer in this post is:

- A real person (human influencer)
- An AI-generated influencer

2. To what extent did you perceive this influencer as artificial?

(1 = Not at all, 7 = Completely artificial)

Section 9: Demographics

Gender:

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Region:

- European Union
- Europe (non-EU)
- North America
- Asia
- Other

Social media usage frequency:

- Never
- Rarely
- Monthly
- Weekly
- Daily

Debriefing

Dear Participant,

Thank you for completing this survey. The purpose of this study was to explore how people evaluate real versus AI-generated influencers, and how these evaluations shape perceptions of authenticity, brand trust, and purchase intention. All influencer images, posts, and product endorsements were created exclusively for scientific purposes. The brand SoundFlow and the influencers presented were fictitious, and no actual commercial partnerships exist. Your participation is fully anonymous, and your data will be used solely for academic research within the Master's thesis project at the University of Vienna.

Appendix C: Descriptive Statistics & Correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
AI Skepticism	3.98	1.21	-			
Perceived Authenticity	3.61	1.30	-.235**	-		
Brand Trust	3.47	1.35	-.266**	.741**	-	
Purchase Intention	2.77	1.45	-.245**	.647**	.785**	-

Table C1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Note. $N = 248$. Values represent Pearson correlations.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Appendix D: Reliability Analysis

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
AI Skepticism	8	.868
Perceived Authenticity	7	.922
Brand Trust	4	.957
Purchase Intention	3	.942

Table D1. Internal Consistency of Measurement Scales

Note. $N = 248$. All scales demonstrated satisfactory to excellent internal consistency.

Appendix E: Manipulation Check

Recognition Accuracy	n	%
Incorrect recognition	46	18.5%
Correct recognition	202	81.5%
Total	248	100.0%

Table E1. Overall Recognition Accuracy of Influencer Type

Experimental Condition	Identified as Real	Identified as Virtual	Total
Condition 1 (Real Influencer)	88 (69.3%)	39 (30.7%)	127 (100%)
Condition 2 (Virtual Influencer)	7 (5.8%)	114 (94.2%)	121 (100%)
Total	95 (38.3%)	153 (61.7%)	248 (100%)

Table E2. Recognition Accuracy by Experimental Condition

Note. Condition 1 = real influencer; Condition 2 = AI-generated influencer. $N = 248$.

Appendix F: PROCESS Model 6 Output

Regression Results

	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	4.323	0.255	16.942	.000	3.820	4.825
Influencer Type	-0.480	0.163	-2.953	.003	-0.800	-0.160

Table F1. Regression Coefficients for Perceived Authenticity (Outcome Variable)

$$R^2 = .034, F(1, 246) = 8.722, p = .003$$

	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	1.254	0.263	4.775	.000	0.737	1.771
Influencer Type	-0.320	0.116	-2.764	.006	-0.548	-0.092
Perceived Authenticity	0.745	0.045	16.711	.000	0.657	0.833

Table F2. Regression Coefficients for Brand Trust (Outcome Variable)

$$R^2 = .562, F(2, 245) = 157.382, p < .001$$

	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	-0.897	0.270	-3.328	.001	-1.429	-0.366
Influencer Type	0.308	0.115	2.671	.008	0.081	0.535
Perceived Authenticity	0.161	0.064	2.508	.013	0.035	0.287
Brand Trust	0.759	0.063	12.090	.000	0.635	0.882

Table F3. Regression Coefficients for Purchase Intention (Outcome Variable)

$$R^2 = .637, F(3, 244) = 142.446, p < .001$$

Total and Direct Effects

Effect Type	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Total Effect	-0.283	0.184	-1.541	.125	-0.644	0.079
Direct Effect	0.308	0.115	2.671	.008	0.081	0.535

Table F4. Total and Direct Effects of Influencer Type on Purchase Intention

Indirect Effects

Indirect Path	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total Indirect	-0.591	0.151	-0.898	-0.306
Ind1: cond → auth → buy	-0.077	0.043	-0.180	-0.011
Ind2: cond → trust → buy	-0.243	0.096	-0.440	-0.060
Ind3: cond → auth → trust → buy	-0.271	0.098	-0.474	-0.088

Table F5. Indirect Effects of Influencer Type on Purchase Intention

Note. *X* = influencer type (1 = real, 2 = virtual); *M1* = perceived authenticity; *M2* = brand trust; *Y* = purchase intention. Bootstrap samples = 5,000; 95% confidence intervals.

Appendix G: PROCESS Model 83 Output

Regression Results

	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	4.332	0.248	17.447	.000	3.843	4.821
Influencer Type (cond)	-0.486	0.158	-3.072	.002	-0.798	-0.174
AI Skepticism (aisk)	-0.421	0.205	-2.055	.041	-0.824	-0.018
Interaction (cond × aisk)	0.113	0.131	0.857	.392	-0.146	0.371

Table G1. Regression Coefficients for Perceived Authenticity (Outcome Variable)

$R^2 = .093$, $F(3, 244) = 8.336$, $p < .001$

Note. ΔR^2 for interaction = .003, $F(1, 244) = 0.734$, $p = .392$.

	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	1.254	0.263	4.775	.000	0.737	1.771
Influencer Type (cond)	-0.320	0.116	-2.764	.006	-0.548	-0.092
Perceived Authenticity (auth)	0.745	0.045	16.711	.000	0.657	0.833

Table G2. Regression Coefficients for Brand Trust (Outcome Variable)

$R^2 = .562$, $F(2, 245) = 157.382$, $p < .001$

	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	-0.897	0.270	-3.328	.001	-1.429	-0.366
Influencer Type (cond)	0.308	0.115	2.671	.008	0.081	0.535
Perceived Authenticity (auth)	0.161	0.064	2.508	.013	0.035	0.287
Brand Trust (trust)	0.759	0.063	12.090	.000	0.635	0.882

Table G3. Regression Coefficients for Purchase Intention (Outcome Variable)

$R^2 = .637$, $F(3, 244) = 142.446$, $p < .001$

Conditional Indirect Effects

AI Skepticism Level	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low (-1 SD)	-0.103	0.066	-0.256	-0.005
Mean (0)	-0.078	0.042	-0.173	-0.012
High (+1 SD)	-0.057	0.044	-0.154	0.017

Table G4. Conditional Indirect Effects of Influencer Type on Purchase Intention via Perceived Authenticity (cond → auth → buy)

Index of Moderated Mediation: Index = 0.018, BootSE = 0.028, 95% CI [-0.030, 0.086]

Indirect Path	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
cond → trust → buy	-0.243	0.097	-0.438	-0.063

Table G5. Unconditional Indirect Effect of Influencer Type on Purchase Intention via Brand Trust (cond → trust → buy)

AI Skepticism Level	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low (-1 SD)	-0.362	0.171	-0.714	-0.037
Mean (0)	-0.273	0.093	-0.466	-0.094
High (+1 SD)	-0.200	0.123	-0.429	0.062

Table G6. Conditional Indirect Effects of Influencer Type on Purchase Intention via Perceived Authenticity and Brand Trust (cond → auth → trust → buy)

Index of Moderated Mediation: Index = 0.064, BootSE = 0.089, 95% CI [-0.099, 0.254]

Note. *X* = influencer type (1 = real, 2 = AI-generated); *M1* = perceived authenticity; *M2* = brand trust; *Y* = purchase intention; *W* = AI skepticism (mean-centred). Bootstrap samples = 5,000; 95% confidence intervals.

USE OF AI TOOLS

In accordance with the University of Vienna's guidelines on good academic practice, the following AI-based tools were used during the preparation of this thesis: Grammarly was used for spelling and grammar checking, and DeepL was used to support translation and language clarification. All suggestions and outputs were carefully reviewed and verified by the author. The research design, data collection, statistical analyses, interpretation of findings, and all substantive intellectual contributions are entirely the author's own work.