

Analysing The Influence of Virtual Influencers on Consumer Purchase Intentions and Brand Engagement

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ABSTRACT

As social media platforms and AI technology become more entrenched in today's marketing communication landscape, virtual influencers have emerged as significant digital players in the realm of brand marketing and engagement. A virtual influencer is a computer-generated persona that can engage with followers, promote items, and pass on brand messages via social media. As they continue to grow in usage, it becomes crucial to understand how they are impacting consumer attitudes, buying intentions, and brand interactions. This study investigates the impact of virtual influencers on purchase intentions and brand engagement. Specifically, consumer awareness and perceptions of virtual influencers, factors that can affect trust and credibility, the attractiveness of content and perceived authenticity, and the interaction with virtual influencers and consumer responses towards brands will be examined. A quantitative research approach was adopted for the study. The structured questionnaire was employed to gather primary data from a sample of 150 respondents. The obtained data was analyzed by means of proper descriptive and inferential statistical methods such as frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation and also correlation analysis. The study is anticipated to deliver empirical proof of the growing impact virtual influencers have on consumer behaviour and the boost they give brands with engagement. The results help to elucidate the ways in which consumer decision making processes are influenced by the digital personalities of technologically created images in an increasingly interactive and digitally-oriented marketplace. The study also provides valuable implications for marketers and brand managers in creating a successful digital marketing strategy using influencers and in strengthening a relationship between company and consumers with the help of the new types of communication using AI.

Keywords: Virtual Influencers; Consumer Behaviour; Purchase Intention; Brand Engagement; Social Media Marketing; Artificial Intelligence; Digital Marketing; Consumer Trust.

I. INTRODUCTION

With the speedy growth of social media, the way consumers interact with, review, and respond to brands has changed. Digital platforms have been changing the communication dynamics of marketing from a traditional, one-way promotion to more interactive, image-driven communication, with consumers able to engage with branded content continually. In this

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evolving landscape, influencer marketing has emerged as a significant part of digital marketing. With the advent of artificial intelligence, computer-generated imagery and smart digital technologies, the phenomenon has been taken to another level with the introduction of virtual influencers. Virtual influencers are digitally designed personalities that can be managed and designed through technological systems and are not human beings but are different from human influencers. They can create their own social media pages, post lifestyle content, interact with fans, and be involved in marketing campaigns for brands.

As virtual influencers become more common, they provide a unique twist in consumer-brand communication. They may draw attention and elicit interaction, and at the same time raise questions about their credibility, authenticity, and trustworthiness due to their careful construction of visual identities and content presentation. A computer-generated personality might be able to make different recommendations that would work better for the consumer than a human influencer. Thus, the knowledge of virtual influencers does not necessarily account for how successful they are as marketing communicators. Characteristics like perceived attractiveness, credibility, trustworthiness, quality of content, authenticity, and degree of interaction can lead to different consumers' interpretations and reactions to their messages.

Purchase intention is an important outcome of the exposure to the promotional communication as a consumer-behaviour perspective. Consumers can start taking an interest in a product after seeing the content of a virtual influencer, think about a recommendation while buying a product or feel more inclined to try out a brand being promoted. Meanwhile, an effective digital marketing experience doesn't need to be about an immediate purchase. Different consumers might follow brands, like and share content, comment on brand promotions, ask for more information and end up being continually interested in brands connected with virtual influencers. Thus, 'brand engagement' can be another valuable perspective from which virtual influencers can be analyzed.

This is especially pertinent when it comes to how a virtual influencer's communications can affect consumer response, as the digital audience is being exposed to various content forms where entertainment and social interaction are combined with commercial promotion. This communication could be dependent on not just the visibility of the virtual influencers but also on the consumers' perception of the recommendations and interaction with the content. Analyzing these connections can shed light on whether positive perceptions and real engagement correlate with intentions to purchase and brand engagement.

In this context, the present study explores the consumer responses towards virtual influencers in the context of social-media marketing. It focuses on consumer awareness and perceptions, factors related to trust and credibility, purchase intention, and the connection between the interaction with virtual influencers and promoted brands. This exploration of the dimensions as a whole offers an empirical view of the new phenomenon of digitally crafted personalities in modern day consumer-brand communication.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For this reason, **Laszkiewicz (2023)** systematically reviewed the literature on the phenomenon of virtual influencers in marketing and consumer research. The review retrieved 35 peer-

reviewed articles, and the key themes that emerged were related to the popularity of the virtual influencers, their impact on attitudes and behavior of the consumer, and their increased usage in the consumer decision making process. Virtual influencers are a new field of marketing research – ‘a newfound space of technological creativity and communication of influencers,’ the study said. It also pointed out research gaps related to how virtual influencers impact consumers' responses. This review is valuable for the current study as it gives the conceptual context for the relevance of studying consumer perceptions, purchase related responses and consumer engagement with virtual influencers.

Khalfallah and Keller (2025) carried out a systematic literature review (SLR) to analyze the literature surrounding authenticity, ethics, transparency, consumer trust, and consumer engagement in the context of virtual influencer marketing (VIM). According to their findings, authenticity and transparency are key factors in consumers' assessments of virtual influencers, and trust is a critical mechanism which links the perception of virtual influencers with consumer engagement. The review also highlighted issues related to disclosure of the nature of the virtual influencers, potential deception, and the ‘uncanny valley’ effect. Variations in consumer reaction based on cultural and regulatory environments were also highlighted by the authors. This study is especially pertinent to the current study as it lends support to the present study to consider credibility, trust, authenticity, interaction and brand engagement as critical factors that make for the effectiveness of a virtual influencer.

Zhou, Liu and Dai (2026) investigated how virtual influencers can resolve the seeming paradox of being artificial and credible. Based on cognitive dissonance theory, the researchers applied two experimental designs and discovered that credibility can serve as a psychological mechanism that can neutralize consumers' concerns about lacking human authenticity. They posit that consumers can differentiate between the authenticity of an influencer as the (online) personality conveying the message and the authenticity/credibility of the product associated message. Understanding this difference is crucial in the context of consumer reactions to virtual influencers' calls to action when their authenticity is known, as certain consumers may still take up offers from virtual influencers even though they know that these are artificial. The current investigation of perceived credibility, trust and purchase intention in virtual influencer marketing is directly related to the study.

In the study ‘A Large-Scale Meta-Analytic Review of Virtual Influencer Marketing with 210 Independent Experimental Studies and 643 Effect Sizes’ **Barari, Eisend, and Kulczynski (2026)**, examine how virtual influencers are utilized in marketing and their impact on marketing outcomes. Their analysis focused on consumer engagement, consumer behavioural intentions, consumer credibility, consumer attractiveness, consumer novelty and consequences thereof. Based on the results, it can be seen that there is significant novelty and consumer engagement that can be achieved when using virtual influencers, although there might be some disadvantages in terms of perceived credibility, when compared to human influencers. The study also revealed that the impact of virtual influencers is dependent on their anthropomorphic appearance, message appeal and congruence, and the functioning of credibility and novelty. The results of these studies are relevant to the current study, as they show that the effectiveness

of virtual influencers cannot be measured by their beauty and that dimensions such as credibility, consumer engagement and intention to behave are relevant for empirical research.

Sharma and Kumar (2026) provided an overview of the evolution of virtual influencer marketing and explored the impact it has on consumer behaviors. In their review, they compiled 117 papers that were published in 31 different journals, showing that there has been a tremendous growth of academic interest in virtual influencers. The authors concluded that there is still a need to understand the impact of virtual influencers on consumers' responses, and that the results obtained in the literature are not always consistent. "The review thus highlights the need to look at the psychological and marketing mechanisms involved in consumer responses instead of the effectiveness of virtual influencers being universal." This view is very much aligned with the current study which focuses on awareness, perceptions, credibility and trust, purchase intention, and brand engagement as interrelated aspects of consumer response toward virtual influencer marketing.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the research study are stated as follows:

1. To understand the extent of awareness and perception that consumers have about the virtual influencers.
2. To find the factors affecting the trust and credibility of virtual influencers to consumers.
3. To assess how Virtual influencers affect consumer purchasing decisions.
4. To investigate the connection of virtual influencer engagement to consumption brand engagement.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The research design used was descriptive and analytical to explore the impact of virtual influencers on the purchase intent and brand engagement among consumers. The design enables to measure consumers' perceptions, attitudes, engagement and purchase related consumer response towards virtual influencers.

4.2 Population and Sample

The target audience was users of social media who see virtual influencers and brands promoting themselves. The respondents were selected using appropriate sampling technique with a sample of 150 respondents. Familiarity and/or exposure to the social media content with virtual influencers were used as criteria for inclusion of respondents.

4.3 Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary data was used in the study. Data collection was primarily done by using a structured questionnaire and the respondents were directly interviewed. The secondary data were collected from research papers, journals, books, reports and reliable online sources

related to the virtual influencers, social media marketing, consumer behaviour, purchasing behaviour and brand engagement.

4.4 Research Instrument

The objectives of the study and literature search were used as a basis in developing a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised two parts: Demographic characteristics of the respondents and statements measuring knowledge, credibility, trust, attractiveness, interaction with virtual influencers, purchase intention and brand engagement. A five-point Likert scale was used for measuring attitudinal responses.

4.5 Study Variables

Consumer awareness, perceived credibility, trust, content attractiveness, interaction with virtual influencers, purchase intention, and brand engagement were the major variables in the study. Purchase intention and brand engagement were the key consumer outcome variables.

4.6 Data Collection

The data were primary, obtained from respondents (150) by using the structured questionnaire. The respondents were told the reason for conducting the study and the responses obtained were used for academic research.

4.7 Statistical Tools

The data collected was systematically classified, tabulated and analyzed with appropriate statistical techniques. The demographic profile and distribution of responses were presented in frequency and percentage. Mean and standard deviation were used to assess the level of consumer perceptions and responses. A Pearson's correlation analysis was used to assess the correlation between the factors related to virtual influencers, purchase intent, and brand engagement.

4.9 Results and discussion

The study aims to examine consumers' reactions to virtual influencers in relation to social media marketing. It takes a look at their perceived credibility, trust, attractiveness, interaction, purchase intentions and engagement with brands promoted by virtual influencers.

V. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

5.1 Demographics

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Sl. No.	Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Gender	Male	67	44.67
		Female	79	52.67



		Other	2	1.33
		Prefer not to say	2	1.33
		Total	150	100.00
2	Age	Below 18 years	8	5.33
		18–25 years	67	44.67
		26–35 years	42	28.00
		36–45 years	23	15.33
		46 years and above	10	6.67
		Total	150	100.00
3	Educational Qualification	Higher Secondary	15	10.00
		Undergraduate	58	38.67
		Postgraduate	43	28.67
		Professional qualification	29	19.33
		Other	5	3.33
		Total	150	100.00
4	Occupation	Student	49	32.67
		Salaried employee	46	30.67
		Business/Self-employed	21	14.00
		Professional	18	12.00
		Homemaker	11	7.33
		Other	5	3.33
		Total	150	100.00
5	Average time spent on social media per day	Less than 1 hour	13	8.67
		1–2 hours	38	25.33
		2–4 hours	59	39.33
		More than 4 hours	40	26.67

		Total	150	100.00
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According to the demographic profile, the majority (52.67%) of respondents were female and 44.67% were male, with a small percentage of respondents (2.67%) identifying as other or preferring not to provide details. In terms of age, nearly half of the respondents (44.67%) were aged 18–25 years and another 28.00% were aged 26–35 years, suggesting that most of the sample were younger consumers who may have a significant social media and digital marketing presence. As education qualification, the largest group was undergraduate (38.67%) followed by postgraduate (28.67%) and professional qualification (19.33%). Students represented 32.67% in occupation while the salaried employees came in second with 30.67%. The social media usage trend revealed that 39.33 % of respondents used social media for 2-4 hours a day, and 26.67 % used social media for more than four hours a day, which means that there's a significant amount of time that respondents spend online. The demographic characteristics, overall, offer a representative sample to analyze perceptions of virtual influencers, consumer purchase intentions and brand engagement.

5.2 Consumer Responses towards Virtual Influencers

Table 5.2: Awareness of Virtual Influencers and Their Use in Promoting Products and Brands

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	6	4.00
Disagree	13	8.67
Neutral	20	13.33
Agree	61	40.67
Strongly Agree	50	33.33
Total	150	100.00

As visible on the table, there was a significant percentage of those who were aware of the possibility of having virtual influencers and their involvement in promoting products and brands. 74.00% agreed or strongly agreed that they would, and 13.33% were neutral. Only 12.67% expressed disagreement. The results show that there is a moderate awareness among consumers about the new trend of the use of virtual influencers in digital marketing.

Table 5.3: Attractiveness and Engagement of Virtual Influencers on Social Media

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	8	5.33
Disagree	16	10.67
Neutral	25	16.67
Agree	61	40.67

Strongly Agree	40	26.67
Total	150	100.00

The findings show that the respondents generally saw virtual influencers as appealing and engaging with social media. 67.34% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement while 16.67% were neutral. 2.16% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This indicates that virtual influencers can create substantial engagement by users of social media and that visual presentation and interactive content can attract a lot of attention.

Table 5.4: Perceived Credibility of Information and Product Recommendations

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	12	8.00
Disagree	25	16.67
Neutral	34	22.67
Agree	54	36.00
Strongly Agree	25	16.67
Total	150	100.00

This table shows a slightly more conservative view of the credibility of virtual influencers' information and product recommendations. While 52.67% agreed and strongly agreed that such recommendations were credible, 22.67% were neutral and 24.67% disagreed. The comparatively greater neutral and negative responses suggest that when consumers are evaluating recommendations of computer-generated personalities, credibility is still an important factor.

Table 5.5: Trust in Virtual Influencers When Promoting or Endorsing Products

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	14	9.33
Disagree	27	18.00
Neutral	37	24.67
Agree	51	34.00
Strongly Agree	21	14.00
Total	150	100.00

Results indicate that the consumer trust for the VIs is relatively low. 48.00% strongly agreed or agreed that they trusted virtual influencers when they were promoting or endorsing products, 24.67% were neutral and 27.33% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This means that although

virtual influencers may capture the consumers' attention, his trust could rely on factors like authenticity, transparency, quality of information, and consistency of brand communication.

Table 5.6: Influence of Virtual Influencer Content on Interest in Promoted Brands

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	7	4.67
Disagree	17	11.33
Neutral	27	18.00
Agree	61	40.67
Strongly Agree	38	25.33
Total	150	100.00

The findings show that the content of virtual influencers can raise the interest of the consumers in product brand promotion. 66.00% agreed or strongly agreed that such content made them more interested in brands, and 18.00% were neutral. Only 16.00% expressed disagreement. Results indicate that potentially there is an increased attention and curiosity to the brand products that virtual influencers are showing in their social media messaging.

Table 5.7: Influence of Interaction with Virtual Influencers on Brand Engagement

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	9	6.00
Disagree	18	12.00
Neutral	29	19.33
Agree	59	39.33
Strongly Agree	35	23.33
Total	150	100.00

The table shows that there is a positive correlation between brand engagement and interaction with virtual influencers among the respondents. Nearly 62.66% stated that they agreed or strongly agreed they were more engaged with the brands featured by the virtual influencers because of their interaction. Almost 20% were neither in agreement nor in disagreement, and 18.00% disagreed/strongly disagreed. This suggests that virtual influencers could offer another digital touchpoint for consumers to interact with brands.

Table 5.8: Likelihood of Considering Products Recommended by Virtual Influencers

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	11	7.33

Disagree	22	14.67
Neutral	31	20.67
Agree	58	38.67
Strongly Agree	28	18.67
Total	150	100.00

The results show that the respondents' purchase consideration is moderately positive. Fifty-seven percent of them (57.34%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were likely to buy something recommended by a virtual influencer. Twenty percent (20.67%) of them, however, were neutral and 22% (22.00%) disagreed and strongly disagreed. Therefore, the virtual influencers' recommendations seem to be relevant to purchase consideration, but perhaps not enough to predict consumer purchase behaviour.

Table 5.9: Influence of Virtual Influencer Endorsements on Purchase Intention

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	10	6.67
Disagree	24	16.00
Neutral	32	21.33
Agree	57	38.00
Strongly Agree	27	18.00
Total	150	100.00

As stated in the table, the virtual influencer endorsement has a significant relationship with consumers' intention to buy. Results indicated 56.00% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that endorsements affected their purchase decision, while 21.33% were neutral. An additional 22.67% disagreed. The findings indicate that using virtual influencers endorsements is part of the consumer analysis in the decision making process when it comes to products or brands that are promoted, however, this is not the case for every consumer.

Table 5.10: Influence of Virtual Influencers on Consumer Interaction with Promoted Brands

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	8	5.33
Disagree	18	12.00
Neutral	30	20.00
Agree	60	40.00

Strongly Agree	34	22.67
Total	150	100.00

The findings show that virtual influencers can provoke consumers to follow, like, comment, share or any other digital engagement on the promoted brands. 62.67% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, and 20.00% did not agree or disagree. Only 17.33% disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting that virtual influencer content could help spur consumer engagement with brands on social-media platforms.

Table 5.11: Development of a Favorable Brand Relationship through Virtual Influencer Engagement

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	9	6.00
Disagree	19	12.67
Neutral	31	20.67
Agree	59	39.33
Strongly Agree	32	21.33
Total	150	100.00

The findings suggest that consumers can have positive relationships with the brands they are promoted through when they engage with virtual influencers on a regular basis. Altogether, 60.66% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that such engagement could foster positive relationship with a brand. Approximately 20.67% of the respondents were neutral, and 18.67% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This indicates that ongoing interactions with virtual influencers can help in building a brand relationship and engagement with a significant segment of the consumer base.

5.3 Hypothesis Testing

Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) was used for hypothesis testing to identify the direction and strength of the association between the selected variables related to a virtual influencer and the key consumer outcome variables. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. Statistically significant relationship is considered in a significance value (p) less than 0.05.

H₀₁: No significant difference exists between consumers' perceptions of virtual influencers (awareness, attractiveness, credibility, trust and perceived influence) and their purchase intention.

Table 5.12: Relationship between Virtual Influencer Perceptions and Consumer Purchase Intention

Variables	Mean	SD	Pearson's r	p-value	Significance
Awareness and perceptions of virtual influencers	3.91	0.96	0.476	<0.001	Significant
Attractiveness and engagement	3.73	1.05	0.431	<0.001	Significant
Perceived credibility	3.37	1.17	0.512	<0.001	Significant
Trust in virtual influencers	3.25	1.19	0.548	<0.001	Significant
Influence of virtual influencer content	3.71	1.05	0.589	<0.001	Significant
Purchase intention	3.47	1.15	—	—	—

N = 150; Significance level = 0.05 (two-tailed).

The Pearson correlation between consumers' attitude towards virtual influencers and their purchase intention is displayed in table 5.12. The findings show that all the dimensions selected in the study are positively and statistically related to purchase intention. Awareness and perceptions had a positive correlation with purchase intention ($r = 0.476$, $p < 0.001$) and attractiveness and engagement had a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.431$, $p < 0.001$). Perceived credibility was more positively related to purchase intention ($r=0.512$, $p<0.001$), and trust was more positively related ($r=0.548$, $p<0.001$). A positive relationship with highest coefficient was found between the perceived influence of virtual influencers content and purchase intention ($r = 0.589$, $p < 0.001$). All the p-values are less than 0.05, therefore the null hypothesis H_01 is rejected. Thus, the results show that the awareness, perception, attractiveness evaluation, perceived credibility, trust, and perceived influence of virtual influencers have a significant relationship with their purchase intention.

H₀₂: No significant relationship exists between consumers' interaction with virtual influencers (influencer content interaction, brand interaction, and perceived relationship-building) and their brand engagement.

Table 5.13: Relationship between Virtual Influencer Interaction and Consumer Brand Engagement

Variables	Mean	SD	Pearson's r	p-value	Significance
Interaction with virtual influencer content	3.68	1.08	0.574	<0.001	Significant
Influence on interaction with promoted brands	3.63	1.10	0.621	<0.001	Significant

Favorable brand relationship through influencer engagement	3.57	1.12	0.603	<0.001	Significant
Consumer brand engagement	3.61	1.06	—	—	—

N = 150; Significance level = 0.05 (two-tailed).

The correlation between the interaction with virtual influencers and the consumers' engagement with the brand is displayed in Table 5.13. The results show that all the selected dimensions are positively and statistically related to brand engagement. There was a high significant correlation between interaction of virtual influencer contents and brand engagement ($r = 0.574$, $p < 0.001$). A higher positive correlation was found between the influence of virtual influencers on interaction with promoted brands and brand engagement ($r = 0.621$, $p < 0.001$). Likewise, a positive and significant correlation was found between the development of a favorable brand relationship through the engagement of influencers and Brand Engagement ($r = 0.603$, $p < 0.001$). All the p-values obtained are less than the 0.05 significance level and therefore, the stated null hypothesis H_02 is rejected. Research results show that the interaction with virtual influencers has a high correlation with the interaction between consumers and the brands that are promoted by the virtual influencers.

The results of the hypothesis tests suggest that there is empirical evidence of a significant positive relationship between the two major outcome variables for consumers and the major variables related to virtual influencers. The first hypothesis revealed that there were significant relationships between consumer awareness, attractiveness, credibility, trust and perceived influence of VI and purchase intention, ranging from $r = 0.431$ to $r = 0.589$. The second hypothesis found that the relationship between consumer interaction with virtual influencers with brand engagement was significant and positive, ranging from $r = 0.574$ to $r = 0.621$. Both the null hypotheses were thus rejected at the 5% level of significance. The findings show that there is a significant relationship between perception and evaluative factors on virtual influencers and consumers' purchase intentions, and the relationship between interaction with virtual influencers and engagement with promoted brands is significant.

VI. CONCLUSION

The current study explored the impact of virtual influencers on consumer purchasing intentions and brand engagement in the context of social-media based marketing. "The results show that virtual influencers have effectively become a significant part of the modern digital communication, especially among consumers who are highly exposed to social-media." The demographic profile showed that there was a significant number of respondents in younger age brackets and 2+ hours of social media per day." The descriptive results also show that, overall, consumers' awareness and perception of virtual influencers is positive, with a significant number finding them appealing and interesting, and recognising that they can raise consumer interest in promoted brands. But the credibility and trust perceptions were comparatively moderate, indicating that consumers take a more critical stance towards the recommendations made by a virtual influencer. Over half of the respondents said that they would consider purchasing a product recommended by a virtual influencer, and a comparable percentage said

that the virtual influencer endorsement would impact their purchasing decision, underscoring the relevance of virtual influencers in the consumers' product evaluation and decision making process.

The study also demonstrated that there is a positive correlation between virtual influencers' interaction with customers and brand engagement. Many respondents said that the engagement with virtual influencers sparked engagement with promoted brands, and helped build positive brand relationships. The results of Pearson's correlation analysis showed that the correlation between the perceptions of a virtual influencer and the purchase intention was positively significant and the correlation between the interaction of a virtual influencer and brand engagement was positively significant, which led to the rejection of the two null hypotheses. In general, the results show that virtual influencers' value goes beyond grabbing consumer attention and includes awareness, credibility, interaction, purchase consideration, and brand follow-up. The results thus highlight the value of credible, transparent, authentic, engaging, and brand-appropriate content of virtual influencers for marketers and brand managers. With the ongoing transformation of marketing communication by artificial intelligence and digital media technologies, systematic understanding of consumer perceptions and responses will continue to be significant for effective virtual influencer strategies and building consumer-brand relationships.

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