



MA MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

AI INFLUENCERS VS HUMAN INFLUENCERS

***A comparative study of consumer perceptions of Authenticity,
Trust And Credibility on Instagram And Tiktok***

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AUTHOR'S STATEMENT ON AI

Generative AI was used as a supportive research, structuring and presenting tool throughout the production of this dissertation. Claude was used to aid discovery and comprehension of relevant research and to support initial exploratory research. Every piece of research referenced within the dissertation has been checked and evaluated by the researcher.

ChatGPT was used to aid structuring and presentation of the dissertation. This included structuring and formatting sections and chapters, improving the quality of written content, effective presentation of analysis and results, and supporting the formatting and content of figures, tables, captions, titles and appendices. Gemini has also been employed to aid in structuring and presentation of data within some tables and presentation of figures. However, the data used for the surveys were from Google Forms created by the author and the data used for content analysis was also generated and coded by the author.

No AI was used in the creation or fabrication of participants, survey data, statistical outputs or any primary data. All AI use was purely for research, structure and clarity purpose. checked and reviewed by the author. The author remains responsible for all outputs, analysis and content within the dissertation.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of AI and human influencers on perceived authenticity, trust and credibility among consumers on two social media platforms (Instagram and TikTok) and explores the relationship between these perceptions and purchase and engagement intention. Using a mixed methods approach, this study used a content analysis of 16 public content of both human and AI influencers as well as an online survey. 38 completed surveys were obtained. Using descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon signed rank tests comparisons were made between paired attributes across five constructs. In addition, elements of communication, self-disclosure, product promotion and interaction with the audience were also observed in the content analysis.

Slight differences were found in favour of the human influencers for perceived authenticity, trust and credibility however these were not found to be statistically significant. Purchase intention ($p = .028$) and engagement intention ($p = .004$) however was significantly higher for human influencers. Similar amounts of interaction with the audience and self disclosure were found between the AI and human influencers. Product promotion however was found to be more prevalent in the content of the human influencers.

Perceptions of authenticity, trust and credibility between AI and human influencers were found to be quite similar. However, human influencers were found to have more influence on purchase and engagement intention.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

Social media has transformed the dynamic of how brands engage with customers, creating a space where advertising is more creative, community and personalised content-led than traditional one way promotional messaging. At the center of this change has been influencer marketing, with social media stars serving as middlemen between businesses and viewers. Often their power isn't just about the size of their audience, but how relatable, sincere and credible they are seen to be attributes that can make commercial endorsements feel more personal than traditional advertising.

The emergence of computer and AI generated content and artificial intelligence has added digital communicators to the current social media landscape. There are AI and virtual influencers. These digital personas have a presence on social media and can produce content and interact with their followers in a way that is similar to that of a human influencer. The usage of these terms are often used interchangeably however they do not mean the same thing (see Section 2.3 for further information). Non-human influencers are becoming more of a significant trend in influencer marketing as opposed to simply a technological experiment. Sands et al. (2022) explored the use of AI in the context of influencer marketing; whilst Allal-Chérif, Puertas and Carracedo (2024) explored the effectiveness of human versus virtual influencers in marketing.

The difference between human and artificial influencers is crucial in the current context of influencer marketing. Traditionally, influencer marketing has always utilised characteristics inherent to the human experience. Human influencers are capable of delivering emotions, experiences and personal narratives to their audience. AI influencers, by contrast, are virtual personas, whose looks, actions and speech can be skilfully managed. This has practical implications for brands, but also raises problems of how customers assess their authenticity and trustworthiness.

However, the comparison is not simple and several studies do exist. Allal-Chérif, Puertas and Carracedo (2024) have found benefits to AI-based virtual influencers in terms of consistency and control. Lee and Ham (2023) have also found that knowing an influencer is virtual can impact reactions to persuasive content. Therefore, technological ability is not sufficient for being accepted as an effective communicator.

The key challenge addressed by this dissertation is this contradiction between technological capabilities and the perceived human authenticity. As AI-generated personalities get more complex, the challenge shifts from whether they can perform the visible roles of human influencers to whether customers interpret them in similar ways. Therefore, authenticity, trust and credibility are especially crucial as they relate to the relationship between the communicator's identity and the audience's inclination to accept that communicator as persuasive.

The study is focused on Instagram and TikTok especially. Both platforms are highly visual and creator-centric, where influencer content and commercial messages often blur together. Focusing on these platforms also provides a clear scope for studying how consumers encounter and judge human and AI influencers within the framework of contemporary social media culture.

1.2 Research Problem and Rationale

Research into AI and virtual influencers has increased over recent years with varying success in terms of implementation (Sands et al., 2022; Lee and Ham, 2023; Allal-Chérif, Puertas and Carracedo, 2024). However, perceived credibility, trust or authenticity in AI influencers cannot be measured purely on levels of visibility or engagement. This is important as engagement does not always imply levels of trust or persuasion.

The dissertation therefore analyses the customer perspective, rather than whether AI influencers are superior to human influencers in general. Such a distinction allows the study to look at where the differences are, how consumers understand those differences and what they could indicate for future usage of AI in influencer marketing.

1.3 Research Aim

The aim of this study is to compare AI influencers with human influencers by investigating consumers perspectives on authenticity, trust and credibility on Instagram and TikTok.

1.4 Research Question

How do AI influencers compare with human influencers in shaping consumers' perceptions of authenticity, trust and credibility on Instagram and TikTok?

1.5 Research Objectives

The study has four objectives:

1. To explore consumers perceptions of AI influencers on Instagram and TikTok.
2. To assess perceived authenticity, trust and credibility between AI and human influencers.
3. To examine whether these impressions are related to consumer engagement and purchase intention.
4. To reflect on the implications of such perspectives for the future usage of AI influencers in digital marketing.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The importance of this research lies in the fact that AI influencers contradict assumptions that have previously supported influencer marketing. If customers can ascribe authenticity, trust or credibility to an intentionally established digital identity, this can change the way in which these terms are perceived in relation to digital communication. However, if human experience continues to be the basis of customer trust, the business benefits of AI influencers may not automatically convert into persuasive power.

Hence, the study adds to an emerging research area by comparing human and AI influences across interconnected perceptual dimensions, rather than using technology innovation or commercial performance as sufficient indications of effectiveness. The findings may also be of practical value for brands contemplating when and for what objectives AI influencers are useful in social media communication efforts.

1.6 Dissertation Structure

Following Chapter 2 a literature review on influencer marketing, authenticity, trust, credibility and AI versus human influencers is presented, after which the research gap is identified. Chapter 3 the mixed-methods design encompassing the survey, the content analysis, data collection, analysis and ethics are discussed. Chapter 4 presents the findings. Chapter 5 evaluates the findings against the literature and the conceptual framework. Chapter 6 answers the research question, outlines the implications and limitations and advises future research.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Influencer Marketing in the Digital Age

Influencer Marketing is a form of digital influence which uses social media influencers as a bridge between a product and a consumer. A social media influencer is defined as a human who produces and shares content across specific niches such as technology, travel, beauty, fashion etc. (Zhang et al., 2025). However, influencer marketing is not just about selling a product. The marketing power of human influencers is embedded into their long term relationships with their consumers, personal stories and social media presence. Human influencers often create expertise across specific niches by sharing content, reviews, and recommendations. Influencers may also embed promotions into their story. Influencers can act as opinion formers by affecting purchase decisions, ratings, and brand awareness using their recommendations. Looi and Kahlor (2024) highlight.

Therefore, influencer effectiveness is partly contingent upon audience evaluations of the communicator. Looi and Kahlor (2024) identify expertise, trustworthiness, authenticity and perceived similarity as important characteristics, while sincerity and transparency can strengthen attitudes, follow intentions and purchase intentions. This relational component is what sets communication through influencers apart from more impersonal advertising.

Additionally, connections can be formed via interactive types of social media engagement that do not exist in the case of traditional celebrity influence. On social media platforms, both influencers and followers can interact via comments, likes, and other types of social media engagement while simultaneously being continuously exposed to the influencer's activities. Looi and Kahlor (2024) found that these types of social media interactions can allow for perceived intimacy that transcends one-way parasocial interactions and allow for more mutual relationships between influencers and their followers. Sands et al. (2022) found that influencers represent a different social role than traditional celebrities because they can be continuously observed due to the regularity of the interaction between the influencer and their followers online. Because of this, perceived social distance may be diminished. Thus, accessibility and relatability are important qualities of an influencer.

Nevertheless the same commercialisation that makes influencers attractive to companies also raises issues around authenticity and the persuasive aim of influencers. Influencer marketing communications are often personal in nature and endorsements are sponsored, so audiences need to judge whether the source appears independent, real and trustworthy. Lee and Ham (2023) emphasise that credibility in influencer communication incorporates perceptions of trustworthiness, expertise and source attractiveness, while trustworthiness itself relates to whether the communicator is believed to be honest and authentic. These beliefs are particularly relevant to the current research since technology advancements are calling into question the premise that an influential persona on social media must be a real entity.

AI and Virtual influencers are increasingly being adopted and can carry out a number of functions that have often been associated with human influencers in terms of communications and influence. However, it is important that they are not seen as equivalent to human influencers. Zhang et al. (2025) make a distinction between human influencers, virtual influencers and AI influencers. Virtual influencers are defined as digitally created influencers and AI influencers use models and algorithms in an attempt to emulate elements of human activity and content creation for marketing purposes. This also allows influencer marketing to extend beyond the purely human and allows exploration of whether elements that have been effective in influencing by human influencers (e.g. trust and credibility, authenticity) are equally effective with non human influencers.

2.2 Authenticity, Trust and Credibility in Influencer Marketing

Credibility, trust and authenticity are all related, but distinct components to the influence of an influencer. In influencer marketing authenticity can be defined by the perceived sincerity and genuineness of the influencer. This includes perceived authenticity in their communication and perceived sincerity in their intentions. Trust refers to the public's confidence in the influencer and source. Source credibility can be thought of as a more comprehensive judgement of the influencer's persuasive power, knowledge and trustworthiness. Lee and Ham (2023) use established research on source credibility and propose that influencer credibility can be broken down into expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness. Trustworthiness in this context is defined as the degree to which the influencer is perceived to be honest and authentic.

Human influencers may be seen as having lived experience and autonomy. Lee and Ham (2023) found that consumers attributed greater autonomy and higher-level intentions to human influencers, producing more favourable source-credibility evaluations. In their second study, decreasing perceived autonomy reduced the AI influencer's credibility and persuasion efficacy compared to the human situation.

Similar to Sands et al. (2022), the results do however highlight that trustworthiness does not necessarily equate to the overall impact of an influencer. In their experimental study, they discovered that AI influencers produced lower source trust compared to human influencers. However, participants were not less likely to report that they would like to follow an AI influencer and AI influencers produced stronger word of mouth intentions. Therefore, Sands et al. demonstrate that lower source trust does not always result in overall poorer replies from the audience. Their findings also indicate social distance as a potential explanatory mechanism, suggesting that trust is partly based on how psychologically close or familiar an influencer appears to the consumer.

Qualitative research shows that authenticity can also be the domain of non-human influencers. Allal-Chérif, Puertas and Carracedo (2024) found that virtual influencers could

appear authentic despite their fictional identity, particularly through consistent storytelling, personality and coherent backstories.

This apparent difference with Lee and Ham (2023) and Sands et al. (2022) is more an indication of caution than a simple resolution. Allal-Chérif et al. base their results on three cases from Brazilian retailers and interviews with 16 professionals in digital marketing, rather than on a direct experimental study of consumers' judgements of authenticity. The authors recognise the merit of extending their work by doing research that directly examines social-media users' perceptions. Their results therefore suggest that authenticity might theoretically be established by consistency, transparency and storytelling, but they do not demonstrate that consumers in general see virtual influencers as more authentic than humans.

In addition, recent experimental work reveals that trust of AI influencers is conditional, not stable. Zhang *et al.* (2025) found that AI influencers could enhance perceived trust when communicating functional advertising appeals, particularly where detailed information and rational analysis matched consumers' expectations of AI. Their results therefore confuse a simple human equals trustworthy versus AI equals untrustworthy dichotomy. Instead, it could be that trust depends on the appropriateness of the traits attributed to the influencer for the kind of message that is being transmitted.

Kim and Im (2026) provide another explanation for how positive perceptions of AI influencers may develop. In two trials with 957 people, they discovered that self-disclosure improved the mental humanlikeness of an AI influencer, which in turn improved perceived humanness and lowered eeriness. Later, higher humanness enhanced intention to follow the influencer's advice and led to more positive brand attitude. They conclude that physical humanness alone is insufficient, indicators implying ideas, feelings and vulnerability may be more significant for creating relational reactions to artificial communicators.

Overall, the literature does not support a view of authenticity, trust and credibility as natural advantages for human or AI influencers. Perceived autonomy and genuine experience may be beneficial for human influencers whereas transparency, coherent storytelling, appropriate content of message and humanlike relational cues may be developed for AI and virtual influencers to generate trust and authenticity. This unresolved tension makes these three variables particularly suitable for a direct comparison of consumer perceptions of human versus AI influencers in the current investigation.

2.3 The Emergence of AI and Virtual Influencers

Non-human social-media personalities are variously called virtual, CGI and AI influencers. It is important to distinguish between these words, as digital creation does not necessarily indicate AI operation. Zhang et al. (2025) define virtual influencers as digital personas created for social-media activity, whereas AI influencers incorporate algorithms or computational models to imitate aspects of human behaviour and produce content.

The rise of generative AI has made this distinction further challenging. Zhang *et al.* (2025) argue that AI influencers represent an evolution of the virtual-influencer model because generative technologies can reproduce aspects of human appearance, communication and creativity. But the authors also note that fully autonomous AI influencers are still rare, and that much of the content from influencers generated by AI is still overseen and edited by humans. So the term AI influencer should not imply complete independence from human producers. Instead, these identities can be fuelled by varied degrees of technology automation, but still be strategically driven by people or organisations.

Table 1. Distinguishing Human, Virtual and AI Influencers

Dimension	Human Influencer	Virtual influencer	AI influencer
Identity	Real Individual	Digitally Constructed Persona	Digitally constructed persona incorporating AI
Content/Behaviour	Created through human experience and activity	Scripted or digitally produced	Algorithms/models contribute to content or human like behaviour
Autonomy	Actual human agency	Apparent autonomy, generally human managed	Apparent or partial autonomy, human oversight remains common

Key strengths identified in the literature	Authenticity, relatability, empathy and adaptability	Consistency, predictability and controllability	Personalisation, scalability, data driven capability and potential real time interaction
Key limitations identified in the literature	Reputational risk, subjective bias and human constraints	Limited genuine interaction and emotional intelligence	Limited genuine human connection, empathy and questions around autonomy

Source: Adapted from Zhang et al. (2025).

Part of the financial appeal of virtual and AI influencers is the increased degree of control they give organisations. Unlike human influencers, a digital persona can be created, continuously maintained and formed around an organisation's intended reputation.

Allal-Chérif, Puertas and Carracedo (2024) similarly identify reduced exposure to problems such as unavailability, reputational scandal and divergence between an influencer's behaviour and a brand's values as important advantages of virtual influencers. Zhang *et al.* (2025) further associate AI influencers with scalability, personalisation and data-driven decision-making.

However these benefits lead to an important dilemma. The very organisational control that makes AI influencers attractive to marketers may also be used to remind viewers that the influencer is manufactured and managed with commercial intent. Lee and Ham (2023) demonstrate that customers may perceive that AI influencers do not possess independent goals because their activities are ultimately attributable to human controllers. These ideas about autonomy, in turn, influence the audience's judgements about the source and its persuasive intent. Thus, the level of technological sophistication does not itself answer problems of authenticity or trustworthiness.

Another concern is Humanlikeness Kim and Im (2026) distinguish physical from mental humanlikeness, showing that realistic appearance can support physical humanlikeness while self-disclosure can strengthen mental humanlikeness. The latter was especially crucial since it boosted the perceived humanness and decreased the eeriness.

Hence, the rise of AI influencers should not be interpreted as a substitution of human influencers for more technologically advanced ones. A different type of persuasive agent is introduced whose artificiality, level of autonomy, human-likeness and organisational control could affect the way customers interpret its communication. These features provide the ground for the more direct comparison of AI and human influencers discussed in the next section.

2.4 AI Influencers versus Human Influencers

There is no clear conclusion about the effectiveness of AI influencers versus human influencers. To avoid confusion, this section keeps the names used in published studies (ie, AI influencer and virtual influencer'), and uses evidence about virtual influencers only when it clearly informs the human versus artificial comparison. Overall the literature reveals that the relative effectiveness varies depending on the consumer outcome being studied, the qualities assigned to the influencer, the sort of message transmitted and the research situation. This is crucial because if we only consider engagement or purchase intentions, we may overlook the differences in psychological processes that lead to those outcomes.

Lee and Ham (2023) found that human influencers were perceived as more autonomous and intrinsically motivated, producing greater source credibility, attitudes and purchase intention. However, the design used a fabricated influencer and a controlled stimulus, which limited ecological validity. Thus, their findings reveal a credibility disadvantage for AI influencers under particular settings, not a universal human advantage.

Sands et al. (2022) also observed a reduced level of trust in AI influencers but complicate the claim that reduced trust always leads to reduced engagement. They found no significant difference between the intention to follow human and AI influencers but did observe higher levels of word-of-mouth intention towards AI influencers which could be due to the newness of the AI influencers. Social distance was also shown to make a contribution to consumer responses which implies that psychological distance affects attitudes towards AI influencers. Trust is seen to be separated from other indicators of influencer effectiveness and the reasons behind not treating these metrics as interchangeable are clarified by these results.

Looi and Kahlor (2024) analysed 99,680 Instagram posts from 424 human and virtual influencers in beauty, fashion and lifestyle and found greater engagement for humans. However, the study only covered Instagram, thus the result cannot be easily transferred to TikTok.

Allal-Chérif, Puertas and Carracedo (2024) present a more positive view of virtual influencers, identifying storytelling, reliability, brand control and constant availability as benefits. However their evidence is mostly drawn from cases of organisations and marketing professionals rather than from direct measurement of consumers.

Recent work implies that the human vs AI comparison may be essentially context-dependent. Zhang *et al.* (2025) found across three behavioural experiments that AI influencers were more effective when paired with functional advertising appeals, where trust was strengthened through detailed and rational communication. Human influencers were more effective with experiential appeals, which were particularly crucial for empathy. This is at odds with theories seeking to establish influencer type as a solitary driver of persuasion: the relevance of the communicator seems to depend in part on what is being conveyed.

Table 2. Comparative Evidence on Human and AI/Virtual Influencers

Study	Comparison	Main Finding	Key Limitation/Qualification
Sands et al. (2022)	AI vs human	AI lower in source trust; no difference in intention to follow; AI higher in WOM	Different outcomes produce different conclusions
Lee and Ham (2023)	AI vs human	Humans stronger in credibility, attitudes and purchase intention	Fictitious influencer and controlled experimental stimulus
Allal-Chérif et al. (2024)	Virtual vs human	Virtual influencers may offer reliability, control and constructed authenticity	Primarily expert/case-study perspective
Looi and Kahlor (2024)	Virtual vs human	Humans generated greater observed Instagram engagement	Instagram only
Zhang et al. (2025)	AI vs human	AI stronger with functional appeals; humans stronger with experiential appeals	Effect depends on message type

Source: Author's synthesis based on Sands et al. (2022), Lee and Ham (2023), Allal-Chérif et al. (2024), Looi and Kahlor (2024) and Zhang et al. (2025).

Taken together, the comparative research offers no evidence to describe either sort of influencer as uniformly preferable. Human influencers seem to maintain advantages in autonomy, emotional experience and believability. AI and virtual influencers can profit from novelty, consistency, controllability and perceived competence in more rational forms of communication. More importantly, differences between research demonstrate that authenticity, trust, credibility and engagement respond differently to influencer type. Thus, the key study topic is not if consumers prefer humans versus AI, but how they evaluate both types on different perceptual dimensions and how these evaluations connect to subsequent consumer responses.

2.5 Consumer Responses and Platform Context

In the end, the value of influencer marketing is not about whether the influencer is regarded as real or credible, but whether such perceptions convert into engagement and behavioural intention. However, the literature suggests that these results cannot be accepted as direct or automatic outcomes of influencer type. Rather, consumer responses seem to be driven through psychological processes such as credibility, perceived humanness, message appropriateness and social distance.

Lee and Ham (2023), for example, connect source evaluation directly to behavioural outcomes. Their findings imply that the reduced source credibility of AI influencers can impair perceived persuasiveness and thus weaken attitudes and purchase intentions. Sands *et al.* (2022), however, demonstrate that behavioural responses are not always consistent with trust judgements: although AI influencers received lower source trust, participants were equally willing to follow AI and human influencers, while AI influencers generated stronger word of mouth intentions. Outcomes connected to engagement cannot then be used as proxies for authenticity, trust or credibility.

Kim and Im (2026) further demonstrate that responses to AI influencers can depend on how human the artificial communicator is perceived to be. Their research indicated that the stronger the perceived humanness, the larger the propensity to follow the advice of an AI influencer and the more favourable the attitude toward a company. eeriness, however, lowered these responses. Importantly, mental humanlikeness induced by signs such as self-disclosure was more powerful than physical realism alone. Thus, relationship-building conduct may be especially relevant when trying to understand why consumers interact with fake personalities.

Similarly, Zheng *et al.* (2026) demonstrate that engagement and purchase-related responses depend strongly on **message–influencer fit**. Three experiments with 1,137 participants showed that virtual influencers combined with rational appeals and human influencers combined with emotional appeals enhanced outcomes such as advertisement clicks, willingness to pay, post-sharing and purchase intention. Anthropomorphising virtual

influencers with humanlike life experiences also boosted their efficiency in conveying emotional messages. These data add support to the claim that the type of influencer is not enough to predict consumer behaviour.

Platform context is also a limitation. Most of the comparison evidence is based on experimental stimuli or Instagram. Sands et al. (2022) caution that Instagram findings may not transfer to TikTok, while Looi and Kahlor's (2024) large-scale Instagram analysis does not establish whether the same engagement advantage for humans occurs on TikTok.

This restriction of the platform is important, as the current study focuses on Instagram and TikTok. Rather than assuming that consumer views work the same in social-media environments, the study of users of both platforms provides an opportunity to evaluate AI and human influences in a wider contemporary perspective. Engagement and buy intention will consequently be viewed as downstream consumer responses to perceptions of authenticity, trust and credibility, rather than as proof of influencer performance in isolation.

2.6 Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

The literature review shows the impressive rise of research on AI and virtual influencers, although in its methodologies and results it continues to be fragmented. Existing studies have studied source trust, credibility, autonomy, humanlikeness, engagement and purchase-related responses, however these factors are frequently investigated separately and under distinct experimental settings. Therefore, a coherent description of the way consumers contrastively evaluate AI and human influencers across the intertwined notions of authenticity, trust and credibility is missing.

One source of this inconsistency is methodological. Experimental studies such as Lee and Ham (2023) and Sands *et al.* (2022) identify disadvantages for AI influencers in areas such as source credibility and trust, while Allal-Chérif *et al.* (2024) present a more favourable account in which virtual influencers can construct authenticity through coherent storytelling and reliability. However, the latter research is based on organisational instances and digital-marketing professionals, not directly on consumers' impressions. The authors urge future research from the standpoint of social-media users and quantitative study of aspects linked with loyalty and purchasing. Therefore the different techniques make direct comparison across studies challenging.

The second gap concerns the platform context. Much of the available comparative evidence is based on Instagram. Sands *et al.* (2022) specifically acknowledge that effects observed on Instagram may differ on other social-media platforms and identify TikTok as an important context for further investigation. Looi and Kahlor (2024) similarly provide extensive behavioural evidence from Instagram but do not establish whether their finding that human influencers generate greater engagement extends to TikTok. This remains an important gap in view of the rising multi-platform nature of influencer communication.

A third issue is that a growing number of recent studies show that the effectiveness of influencers is conditional rather than universal. Zhang *et al.* (2025) show that functional appeals can strengthen responses to AI influencers while experiential appeals favour human influencers. Zheng *et al.* (2026) similarly find that virtual influencers perform more effectively

with rational appeals and human influencers with emotional appeals, while anthropomorphism can reduce the disadvantage of virtual influencers in emotional communication. Sands *et al.* (2022) also caution that findings may vary across product categories and recommend extending comparisons beyond the contexts used in their experiments. These data demonstrate that the question of whether AI or human influencers are simply “better” is insufficient.

This study fills those gaps by directly examining consumer perceptions of AI and human influencers on Instagram and TikTok, using authenticity, trust and credibility as the core comparative dimensions. The study does not hypothesise that one sort of influencer is more persuasive than the other. Instead, it explores whether consumers perceive systemic distinctions between the two, and how these perceptions connect to engagement and purchase intention. The survey is supplemented by a small structured content analysis of public influencer posts to supplement these self-reported perceptions. This makes it possible to take consumer evaluations into account and to do so in combination with observable communication practices without taking those practices as direct measures of authenticity, trust or credibility.

Hence, the conceptual framework defines the type of influencer as the main comparative aspect. Engagement and purchase intention are considered as downstream consumer-response factors, while authenticity, trust and credibility are the core perceptual qualities. Importantly, the approach does not presume that authenticity inherently leads to trust, or that trust always leads to purchase intention. Rather these linkages will be explored empirically rather than pre imposed.

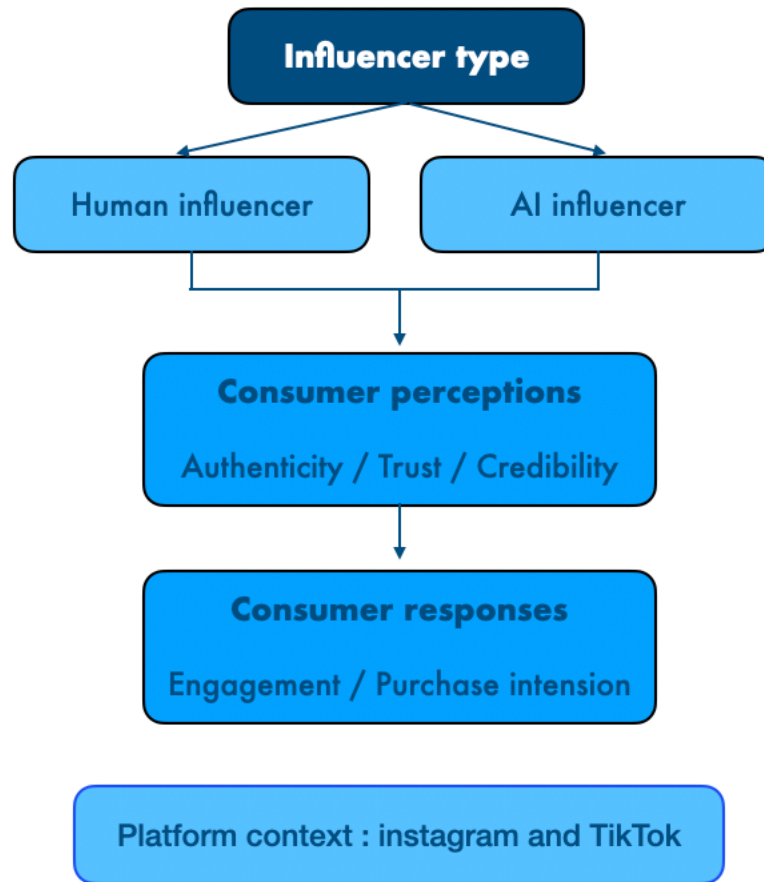


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis informed by Sands et al. (2022), Lee and Ham (2023), Allal-Chérif et al. (2024), Looi and Kahlor (2024), Zhang et al. (2025), Kim and Im (2026) and Zheng et al. (2026).

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual structure of the current investigation. It positions influencer type (AI vs human) as the primary comparison and explores variations in perceived authenticity, trust and credibility. These perceptions are then analysed according to consumer responses, engagement and buy intention on Instagram and TikTok. The paradigm is comparative, not rigidly causal, meaning that the study does not presume that

one construct leads automatically to another but rather experimentally investigates the correlations.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach and Design

The present study applies a mixed-methods research approach, integrating an online quantitative survey and a structured comparative content analysis of AI and human influencer posts on Instagram and TikTok. The survey investigates consumer perceptions of authenticity, trust and credibility, and engagement and purchase intention. The content analysis investigates observable differences in the ways in which AI and human influencers communicate and present themselves online.

The two methodologies address different parts of the research subject. The poll provides a snapshot of how customers are evaluating AI and human influencers . The content analysis provides contextual information concerning communication techniques connected with each type of influencer . The content analysis combines simple categories coding with short qualitative interpretation of repeating patterns, thereby allowing the study to compare audience perceptions with observable content qualities, rather than a single piece of proof.

The design was cross-sectional and comparative. Survey responses were collected within a specific recruitment period, and influencer postings were deliberately picked on Instagram and TikTok. The datasets were first examined separately and then integrated thematically (Looi and Kahlor, 2024).

3.2 Sampling Strategy and Participants

The survey and content analysis components employ separate sampling strategies.

The survey adopts a non-probability convenience and snowball sampling approach. Participants are recruited via personal, university and social-media networks. Entrants must be 18 years of age or older and use Instagram, TikTok or both. The frequency of exposure to influencer content and prior knowledge of AI or virtual influencers are recorded as participant characteristic variables and not as exclusion criteria.

The aim of the survey is to provide a pragmatic convenience sample and not a statistically representative sample of all Instagram and TikTok users, given the short recruiting time and the exploratory nature of the study. The total number of completed and useable responses is provided in Chapter 4. Participants complete the questionnaire online after reading the Participant Information Sheet and giving informed consent.

The content analysis was performed on two AI influencers (Imma and Miquela) and two human influencers (Wisdom Kaye and Leonie Hanne) chosen through purposeful sampling in substantially equivalent fashion and lifestyle contexts. The final sample consisted of 16 public posts, balanced by influencer type and platform, with two Instagram and two TikTok posts per influencer. This balanced structure supported comparison while keeping the sample manageable (Looi and Kahlor, 2024).

Selected Instagram and TikTok posts were logged systematically with an identification code and basic metadata including influencer type, platform, publication date, content format and publicly visible engagement indicators. Posts were analysed using the simplified coding framework outlined in Section 3.4. The content sample was used for contextual comparative purposes rather than for population-level engagement rate estimation.

3.3 Survey Design and Measures

The quantitative part is done by a brief structured questionnaire, using Google Forms. The form begins with the Participant Information Sheet and consent agreements. It then has 10 survey questions that are primarily closed ended. The initial questions gather demographic data and social media habits, including Instagram/TikTok use, exposure to influencer content, and previous knowledge of AI or virtual influencers.

The main contrast is presented through two simultaneous multiple choice grids. One for human influencers and one for AI influencers. Each grid asks respondents to score authenticity, trust, credibility, engagement intention, and purchase intention on the same seven point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The phrasing is identical in both grids, thus the two types of influencers can be compared side by side on the same respondent.

These constructs are chosen based on the material discussed in Chapter 2. Comparative influencer research has similarly distinguished source trust and credibility from behavioural outcomes such as following and purchase intentions (Sands et al., 2022; Lee and Ham, 2023). The present questionnaire employs brief single item indicators of each dimension to minimise completion time and maximise participation in the available recruiting period.

There are three more questions, which explore the general preference of respondents for human vs AI product recommendations, if knowing that an influencer is AI-generated or AI-powered influences trust and whether respondents would be more willing to engage with an AI influencer on Instagram or TikTok. To prevent uncertainty, a short definition of human and AI influencers is given before the AI-focused questions.

The Google Form was previewed for clarity, question flow, required-response settings and technical functionality before to distribution. Appendix C shows the final questionnaire used in data collecting.

3.4 Content Analysis and Coding Framework

The observable characteristics of AI and human influencer posts on Instagram and TikTok were analysed using a structured comparative content analysis. The coding method was developed to be brief in order to ensure the analysis would be proportionate to the scope of the dissertation. It focused on communication features identified as relevant in the literature, including message style, self-disclosure, promotional content, audience interaction and visible engagement (Looi and Kahlor, 2024; Zheng et al., 2026; Kim and Im, 2026).

Table 3. Content Analysis Coding Framework

Coding dimension	Indicative categories
Influencer type	AI / Human
Platform	Instagram / TikTok
Content format	Static image / Carousel / Short-form video / Other
Message style	Rational/informational / Emotional/experiential / Mixed
Personal/self-disclosure	Absent / Present
Promotional content	Non-promotional / Promotional
Sponsorship disclosure	Absent / Present / Not applicable
Audience interaction cue	Absent / Present
Engagement indicators	Likes / Comments / Shares / Views where available

Source: Author's coding framework informed by Looi and Kahlor (2024), Zheng et al. (2026) and Kim and Im (2026).

The categories allow for a consistent comparison while keeping a direct link to the scientific topic of the study. Message style refers to the distinction between rational/informational and emotional/experiential communication. Personal or self-disclosing content captures

whether a post provided personal experience, sentiment or narrative detail. Promotional and sponsorship categories captured the commercial background. Audience-interaction signals documented explicit invites to remark, engage, share or otherwise contribute. A preliminary codebook was developed and a small fraction of posts were originally analysed to detect unclear categories and increase uniformity in coding. In posts showing patterns of repeated contact, brief qualitative remarks were also made. Engagement indicators were evaluated only as observable audience responses, not as direct indication of authenticity, trust or trustworthiness, which were measured through the survey.

The coding sheet for the 16 sampling posts, is displayed in Appendix E.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection takes place via two parallel components. The online questionnaire is sent first through the recruitment channels described in Section 3.2. The Participant Information Sheet and consent declarations are at the top of the same Google Form. The survey is only accessible to participants who are aged 18 or above and have given their approval. Responses will be collected over a defined recruiting time and reviewed for eligibility and completeness prior to analysis.

We also collect public postings of selected AI and human influencers on Instagram and TikTok within a specified sampling period. Eligible postings are systematically tagged according to the methodology described in Table 3, including platform, type of influencer, date of publication, content format and available engagement metrics.

In the first stage of preparation and analysis, the survey data and the content-analysis data are kept separate because they represent different kinds of evidence. Findings are then thematically presented in Chapter 4 and interpreted in light of literature in Chapter 5.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data sets from the survey and the content analysis are evaluated first individually and then incorporated in the interpretation.

The responses to the survey were screened for completeness and eligibility prior to calculating descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarise participant characteristics, social-media use, acquaintance with AI influencers, and the direct preference questions. For the seven-point paired evaluations of authenticity, trust, credibility, intention to engage and intention to purchase means, standard deviations, medians and response distributions were compared between human and AI influencers.

Within-respondent comparisons were available as the same respondents scored both influencer kinds with parallel questions. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were employed to investigate pairwise differences between human and AI-influencer evaluations for the five key measures. The exploratory convenience sample and the ordinal answer scale meant that the inferential findings were regarded with caution and not as evidence of causality.

Content-analysis data were summarised using basic frequencies and percentages to compare communication styles between AI and human influencers. Where relevant, brief qualitative notes supported recurring patterns. Public engagement indicators were interpreted cautiously and within platform context, as engagement may reflect positive, negative or curiosity-driven responses rather than audience attitudes alone (Looi and Kahlor, 2024).

Finally, the results from both datasets are combined according to the themes of Chapter 4, knowledge and perceptions of AI influencers, authenticity, trust and credibility, and engagement and buy intention. This structure allows survey perceptions to be assessed together with relevant observable communication behaviours without combining the two pieces of data into one measure.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for the study was issued by City St George's, University of London prior to main data collection. The approved ethics documentation consisted of the Participant Information Sheet, consent forms and the proposed survey protocols. Ethical approval is evidenced in the appendices.

The online poll was open to voluntary participation from anyone 18 years of age and older. Before starting the questionnaire, participants were given information about the goal of the research, how their data would be used and their rights as research participants. Participants gave informed consent before proceeding.

Only information relevant to the research aims was obtained. The poll was meant to collect replies anonymously and no personally identifying information was provided in the dissertation. The research data were processed in compliance with the ethical approval procedures of the University.

The content analysis component solely used publicly available Instagram and TikTok postings. No private accounts, direct messages or restricted content was included. Content and engagement metrics were utilised only for scholarly analysis and are publicly available.

3.8 Methodological Limitations

Several methodological constraints should be highlighted. First, the survey used convenience and snowball sampling and obtained 38 valid replies, therefore the sample cannot be considered statistically representative of all Instagram and TikTok users. Single-item scales for each of the five core constructs were also used in the survey in order to ensure brevity but at the expense of measurement quality over longer, well-established multi-item scales. Furthermore, personal interpretation, platform experience and prior exposure to AI influencers may have affected the self-reported responses given.

Secondly, the research is cross-sectional, capturing impressions at a single point in time, not the evolution of sentiments with increased exposure with AI influencers. It thus emphasises comparative patterns and connections and not causal relationships. The findings should also be interpreted in the light of previous studies that have shown consumers' responses may be influenced by their acquaintance with online influencers.

The content analysis uses a purposeful selection of 16 public posts to be used for contextual comparison instead of representation of all influencer content. Differences in follower size, platform norms, content format and account characteristics limit direct comparison of engagement indicators (Looi and Kahlor, 2024).

Lastly, the coding was carried out by one researcher and hence had an element of interpretive judgement. To eliminate ambiguity a preset codebook, an initial assessment of a limited subset of postings, and consistent application of the categories was employed. These constraints imply that the findings should be viewed as exploratory and context-bound rather than universal to all influencer or platform scenarios.

CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The findings derived from the two research components of the study, the online consumer survey, and the comparative content analysis of AI and human influencer posts on Instagram and TikTok, are presented in this chapter. The chapter begins with a description of the participant profile and social-media use. It next reports awareness and impressions of AI influencers, followed by authenticity, trust and credibility, then engagement and buy intention.

Instead of presenting the two datasets as two entirely different studies, relevant content-analysis observations are included alongside the survey findings inside these theme sections. The survey scores are the key evidence of consumer perceptions . The content analysis gives contextual information relating to observable aspects such as message style, self-disclosure, promotional content, cues to audience-interaction and visible engagement. A detailed analysis in regard to the literature and conceptual framework is left to Chapter 5.

4.2 Participant Profile and Social Media Use

From the survey, a total of 40 replies were obtained. Two replies were omitted from analysis because participants reported that they did not use either Instagram or TikTok, a requirement for eligibility for platform use in the study. The final analytical sample was therefore 38 responders.

The sample was relatively younger. Of the 38 valid responses received, 60.5% (n=23) were 18-24 years old and 31.6% (n=12) were 25-34 years old. A further 2.6% (n=1) were aged 45-54 and 5.3% (n=2) were aged 55 or above. No respondents were aged 35-44. Gender was assessed, with 60.5% (n=23) of the participants being female and 39.5% (n=15) male.

The social-media use was heavily skewed toward Instagram. Most respondents, 60.5% (n=23), reported using both TikTok and Instagram, whereas 39.5% (n=15) used Instagram solo. No genuine responders reported using only TikTok. No genuine responders reported using only TikTok.

Figure 2 summarises platform use within the final analytical sample.

Q3. Which of the following social media platforms do you use?

38 responses

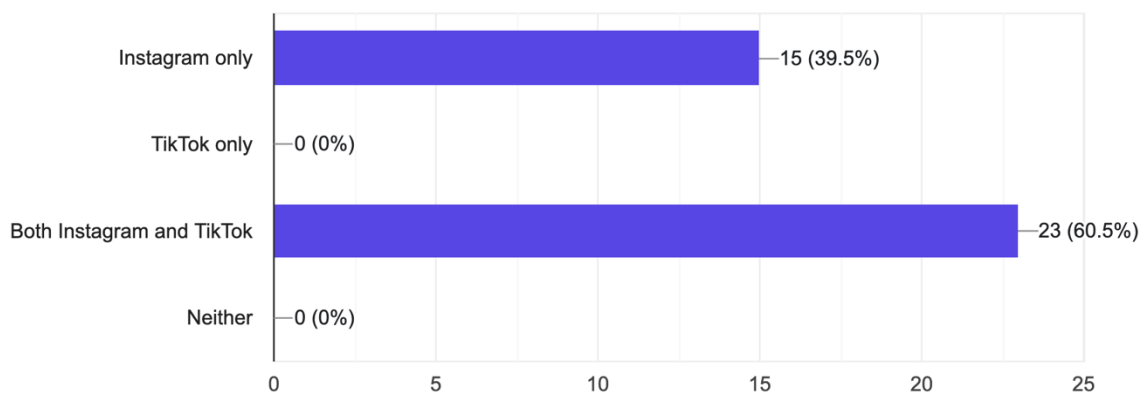


Figure 2. Participant Social Media Use

Source: Author's survey data

Sample participants frequently saw influencer content. About three-fifths of respondents (60.5%, n=23) reported seeing influencer content on a daily basis, and the rest (39.5%, n=15) reported seeing influencer content a few times a week. This means that all respondents in the final sample were regularly exposed to influencer content on the studied platforms.

4.3 Awareness and Perceptions of AI Influencers

Knowledge of AI or virtual influences was diverse among the sample, however, no respondents indicated to be entirely unaware with them. Of the 38 responders, 39.5% (n=15) were fairly familiar, 28.9% (n=11) were slightly familiar, 26.3% (n=10) were very familiar and 5.3% (n=2) were highly familiar . Thus, 71.1 % of the respondents indicated to be at least moderately familiar with AI or virtual influencers before completing the study.

Figure 3 shows respondents prior familiarity with AI or virtual influencers.

Q5. Before taking this survey, how familiar were you with AI or virtual influencers?
38 responses

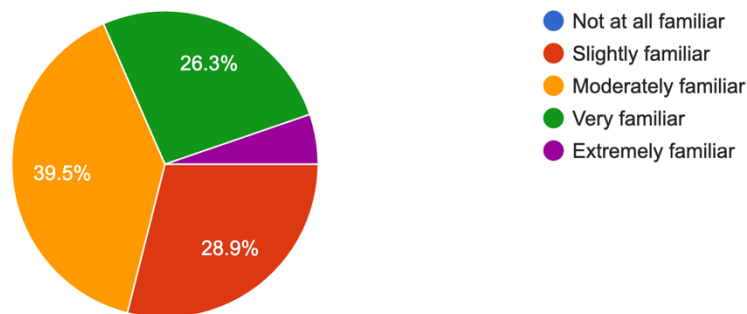


Figure 3. Respondents Familiarity with AI or Virtual Influencers

Source: Author's survey data.

When asked whose recommendations of products they would most likely favour, the answers were mixed. The majority stated no preference between AI and human influencers (34.2%, n=13), followed by those preferring human influencers (31.6%, n=12). A further 21.1% (n=8) chose AI influencers and 13.2% (n=5) said they would not depend on either.

Mixed responses were also elicited by knowing that an influencer was AI-generated or AI-powered. Their trust in the recommendation was not affected for 36.8% (n=14). Overall, 28.9% (n=11) indicated they were somewhat or considerably less inclined to trust the recommendation, while 26.3% (n=10) indicated they were somewhat or much more likely to accept the recommendation. The other 7.9% (n=3) were uncertain.

Preferences for platforms to interact with AI influencers were also mixed. Instagram was chosen by 42.1% (n=16) and 36.8% (n=14) said they were equally likely to engage on Instagram as TikTok. 13.2% (n=5) selected TikTok only and 7.9% (n=3) were undecided.

4.4 Authenticity

Participants rated the authenticity of human and AI influencers using the same seven-point agreement scale. Human influencers received a slightly higher mean authenticity rating ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.20$) than AI influencers ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.50$). The median rating for both influencer types was 5, corresponding to “somewhat agree”.

For human influencers, 63.2% ($n=24$) of respondents selected either “somewhat agree” or “agree” that they perceived them as genuine and authentic, compared with 57.9% ($n=22$) for AI influencers. Negative responses were somewhat more frequent for AI influencers: 28.9% ($n=11$) expressed some level of disagreement with their authenticity, compared with 21.1% ($n=8$) for human influencers.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of respondents authenticity ratings for human and AI influencers.

Q6. Human influencer perceptions Thinking generally about HUMAN social-media influencers on Instagram and TikTok, indicate how much you agree with each statement.

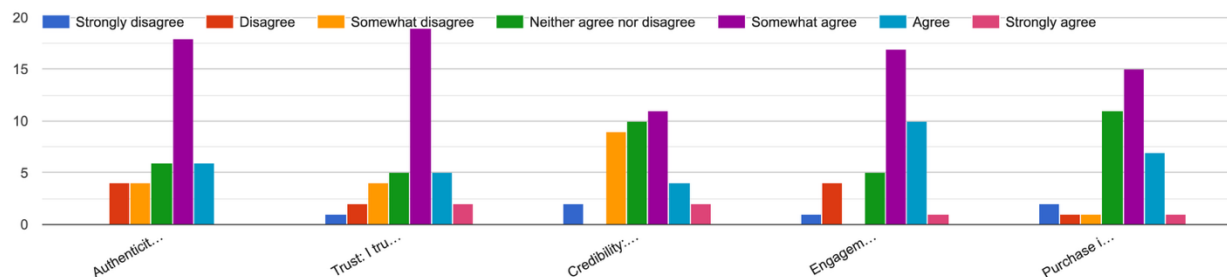


Figure 4. Perceptions of Human Influencers

Source: Author's survey data

Figure 5 shows respondents perceptions of AI influencers across the same survey measures.

Q7. AI influencer perceptions Thinking generally about AI social media influencers on Instagram and TikTok, indicate how much you agree with each statement.

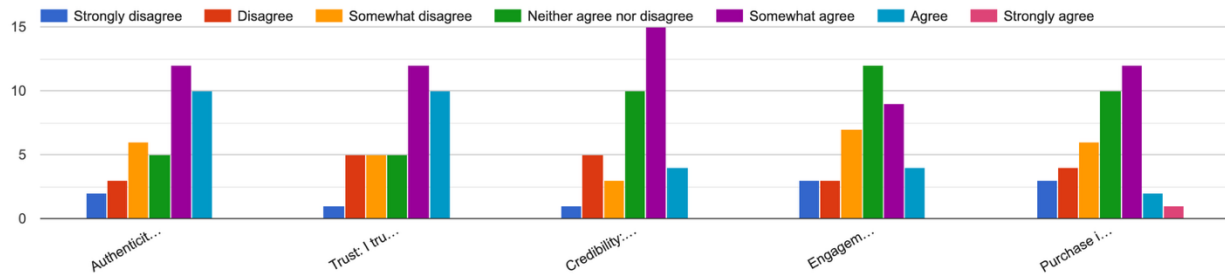


Figure 5. Perceptions of AI Influencers

Source: Author's survey data

Despite these differences, the overall ratings were relatively similar. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test found no statistically significant difference between participants' authenticity ratings of human and AI influencers ($p = .812$). Within this sample, therefore, human influencers did not demonstrate a clear authenticity advantage over AI influencers.

Six out of eight (75%) of postings had personal or self disclosing content for both AI and human influencers. Imma and Miquela employed personal experiences, emotions and identity related narratives, whereas the human influencers also used lifestyle related narratives. This similar use of self-disclosure sets the background for the minute variance in the judgements of authenticity in the survey.

4.5 Trust and Credibility

Participants tended to trust human influencers slightly more than non-human influencers. Human influencers received a trust score of 4.63 (SD = 1.30) on average, whereas AI influencers received a trust score of 4.37 (SD = 1.48). Median rating was 5 across all influencer categories. Overall, 68.4% (n=26) of respondents agreed to some degree that they trusted human influencers to give honest product recommendations, compared with 57.9% (n=22) for AI influencers. Conversely, 28.9% (n=11) showed some level of scepticism for AI influencers, compared to 18.4% (n=7) for human influencers.

However, the matched comparison revealed no statistically significant difference in trust ratings between human and AI influencers (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $p = .453$). The disparity in the descriptive data should therefore be regarded with caution.

Even the credibility ratings were more in accord. Average believability ratings were 4.26 (SD=1.37) for human influencers and 4.18 (SD=1.29) for AI influencers. Median value was 4 for human influencers and 4.5 for AI influencers. Again, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed no statistically significant difference between the two influencer types ($p = .860$). Overall, the results suggest that human influencers were rated somewhat better on average for both trust and credibility, but the differences in our sample were rather tiny and statistically nonsignificant.

The two samples showed more distinction in business communication. 50% of the human-influencer posts (4/8) included overt product-based content or promotional messaging, whereas for AI-influencers this was 12.5% (1/8). One human TikTok post also had a clear paid-partnership disclosure: The existence of promotion, however, is not indicative of higher or lower trust or trustworthiness. Instead, our data reveal disparities in the commercial context in which the sampled influencers spoke.

4.6 Engagement and Purchase Intention

The gap between human and AI influencers was more evident when it came to engagement intention. The mean engagement rate for human influencers was 4.76 (SD = 1.36), and for AI influencers it was 3.87 (SD = 1.38). Median was 5 for human influencers and 4 for AI influencers. Overall, 73.7% (n=28) of respondents reported some level of agreement that they would interact with content from a human influencer, compared to 34.2% (n=13) for AI influencers. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test revealed this difference to be statistically significant ($p = .004$).

The pattern of intention to acquire was comparable. Mean ratings for human influencers were 4.61 (SD = 1.28) and AI influencers 3.89 (SD = 1.45). The median purchase-intention rating was 5 for human influencers and 4 for AI influencers. While 60.5% (n=23) indicated some readiness to consider buying a product recommended by a human influencer, this dropped to 39.5% (n=15) for an AI influencer.

The difference in purchase intention was also statistically significant by the Wilcoxon signed-rank test ($p = .028$). The most important difference between the two types of influencer, therefore, was at the level of behavioural intention in our sample. That is, respondents were more likely to interact with human influencers' content and consider things that human influencers suggested.

For both AI and human influencers, cues for audience participation existed in three of eight postings (37.5%). There was a huge gap in visible engagement between influencers and individual postings. Some of the human-influencer posts had especially high numbers of visible interactions, and individual AI-influencer posts received strong engagement too. Variation in follower size, publication date, platform norms and content structure across the sample means raw engagement counts were not viewed as directly comparable metrics of influencer efficacy .

4.7 Summary of Findings

The survey results point to a more complex comparison between AI and human influences, rather than a consistent preference for either group. Among the 38 valid respondents, the familiarity with AI or virtual influencers was relatively strong, with 71.1% indicating at least moderate acquaintance. Overall, preferences for recommendations were varied as well, with “no preference” being the largest single response category.

Authenticity, trust and credibility were perceived somewhat similarly amongst the two types of influencers. Mean ratings for human influencers were somewhat higher on all three categories, but none of the differences were significant. However, differences for behavioural intentions were more pronounced. Respondents indicated significantly greater propensity to engage with human-influencer content than AI-influencer content ($p = .004$) and significantly larger buy intention for products recommended by human influencers ($p = .028$).

The results thus suggest that, in this sample, AI influencers were evaluated relatively similarly to human influencers on the central perceptual dimensions of authenticity, trust and credibility, while human influencers retained a stronger advantage in reported engagement and purchase intention.

The content analysis mostly supported the more nuanced view from the survey. Both AI and human influencers commonly employed personal and experiential communication; however, the selected posts of human influencers had a greater proportion of product-focused or promotional content. The rate of audience-interaction cues was similar between groups. These patterns add contextual support to the findings of the survey, without implying that customer impressions are determined by observable content qualities alone.

CHAPTER 5 - FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings in connection to the study topic, conceptual framework and literature evaluated in chapter 2. The results highlight subtle comparisons between AI and human influencers rather than a clear advantage to either group. Human influencers had a little higher average rating for authenticity, trust and credibility than their robot counterparts, but these differences were not statistically significant. There were larger variations in behavioural intentions, as respondents reported considerably higher propensity to engage with human-influencer content and to consider products recommended by human influencers.

These findings are discussed in relation to the content analysis, which gives contextual evidence of how AI and human influencers communicate through self-disclosure, promotional content and audience engagement cues. The chapter begins with a discussion of authenticity, followed by trust and credibility, and then engagement and buy intention. It then combines these findings to analyse what they say about consumers' evaluation of AI and human influencers on Instagram and TikTok and to answer the study's research question.

5.2 AI versus Human Influencers: Authenticity

The findings about authenticity question the idea that human influencers have an inherent advantage simply because they are genuine people. The mean authenticity score of human influencers was somewhat higher than that of AI influencers ($M = 4.47$ vs. $M = 4.37$) but the difference was modest and not statistically significant ($p = .812$). The median rating for both types of influencer was likewise 5. So these results give no evidence for a clear authenticity difference between AI and human influencers in this sample.

This contrasts somewhat with Lee and Ham (2023), who found that greater perceived autonomy and intrinsic motivation strengthened evaluations of human influencers. Being aware that an artificial influencer is ultimately human-controlled can potentially undermine perceptions of authenticity. In the current investigation, however, the little human advantage was not statistically significant.

The result is more consistent with the argument made by Allal-Chérif, Puertas and Carracedo (2024) that authenticity can be constructed through communication practices rather than depending entirely on whether an influencer is biologically human. Their research indicated that consistent and transparent storytelling can assist virtual influencers in creating a credible social identity even when the audience is aware of the artificiality of the persona. It is important to point out that their study was primarily based on case studies and interviews with marketing professionals and did not directly compare with consumers. The present findings thus provide a relevant consumer perspective: in this small sample, the awareness that an influencer was fake did not seem to impede respondents from awarding very equal authenticity ratings. While this does not prove that AI influencers are equally authentic in a broader community, it does imply that artificiality alone may not be enough to determine authenticity perceptions.

This finding is further put into context by the content analysis. Six out of eight postings from AI and human influencers included personal or self-disclosing communication. Imma and Miquela often shared personal tales about their experiences, emotions, or identity in a manner akin to the intimate communication usually connected with human influencers. The

human influencers in the sample also used personal experiences and lifestyle narratives. Similarities in these observable communicative practices may shed light on the survey's failure to find a significant authenticity gap between the two types of influencers.

This pattern is particularly relevant to Kim and Im (2026), who found that self-disclosure can increase the perceived mental humanlikeness of AI influencers. Their research offers clues that signals expressing ideas, feelings and personal experience can make an artificial influencer appear more humanlike and lower perceptions of eeriness. The present content analysis is not able to prove that self-disclosure directly led to the authenticity evaluations of the respondents, because the survey participants were not asked to rate the individual postings that were coded. However, the sampled AI influencers' frequent use of personal communication indicates that attributes conventionally associated with human authenticity might also be part of an artificial influencer's communication strategy.

The results therefore support a more flexible conception of authenticity in current influencer marketing. While human experience may continue to provide an important basis for authenticity, consumers may also assess whether an influencer communicates regularly, personally and convincingly. The artificial construction in this investigation did not result in any statistically detectable disadvantage for authenticity. Rather, authenticity seems to be a perceptual decision, perhaps assisted by communication methods such as narrative and self-disclosure even when viewers know that the influencer itself is not human.

5.3 AI versus Human Influencers: Trust and Credibility

Findings showed a similar pattern in trust and credibility alongside authenticity. Human influencers obtained significantly higher mean ratings for trust ($M = 4.63$) compared to AI influencers ($M = 4.37$), and credibility scores were also marginally better for humans ($M = 4.26$) than for AI influencers ($M = 4.18$). However, neither difference was statistically significant ($p = .453$ for trust; $p = .860$ for credibility). This implies that while respondents did hold a modest descriptive preference for human influencers, the gap was not substantial enough within this sample to yield a discernible difference in perceived trustworthiness or credibility between the two influencer categories.

These findings are less pronounced than those reported by Lee and Ham (2023), whose experimental research found that human influencers benefited from greater perceived autonomy and intrinsic motivation, which contributed to stronger source-credibility evaluations and more favourable persuasive outcomes. Their findings show that customers would evaluate AI influencers less positively when they know that the communicator is ultimately managed by humans. In the present investigation, however, awareness of artificiality did not lead to a statistically significant credibility deficit. This may indicate that consumers are growing more familiar with fake influencers, or that credibility judgements depend on more than just source type. The findings cannot explain why there was just a modest change, but they suggest that being AI-generated does not necessarily mean an influencer cannot be adequately credible.

The trust findings also differ somewhat from Sands et al. (2022), who found lower source trust for AI influencers than human influencers. Importantly, Sands et al. also showed that lower trust did not translate consistently into weaker behavioural responses, since intention to follow did not significantly differ and AI influencers generated stronger word-of-mouth intentions. This distinction is crucial to the current study in that it emphasises the idea that trust, credibility and behavioural reaction should not be considered as interchangeable outcomes. The present respondents trusted and believed human influencers slightly more,

although the differences were tiny, while the differences were significantly bigger later in engagement and buy intention.

Zhang et al. (2025) provide another useful explanation for why AI influencers may not always experience a substantial trust disadvantage. The study indicated that AI influencers might create a greater trust effect when combined with functional and rational advertising appeals, whereas human influencers were more effective in experiential circumstances where empathy was a more crucial factor. Thus, trust may be partly dependent upon the extent to which the attributes given to the influencer are consistent with the type of message being transmitted. The present study did not modify message type experimentally and so cannot directly examine this process. The absence of a meaningful trust difference, however, is consistent with the more general notion that trust is conditional and not just a function of whether an influencer is human or artificial.

Content analysis also revealed differences in commercial communication between the two influencer groups. A larger proportion of human influencers had noticeable product-related or promotional content. Only one post from an AI-influencer in the sample was categorised as promotional. An explicit compensated partnership disclosure was also present in one human TikTok post. None of these findings should be construed as direct proof of more or less trust, the mere presence of promotion does not establish trustworthiness. Rather, they suggest that the human and AI influencers studied were working in relatively distinct business contexts, which may affect the way in which audiences perceive their message.

Overall, the findings suggest a small descriptive advantage for human influencers in terms of trust and credibility, but not one that is statistically significant. The data thus do not support a basic premise that consumers inherently distrust artificial influencers. Instead, they are more consistent with the concept that trust and credibility are a function of a mix of source attributes, message context and perceived fit. This supports the larger thesis of the dissertation that the success of AI influencers should be considered conditional, not fundamentally less effective than human influencers.

5.4 Implications for Engagement and Purchase Intention

The most notable distinction between AI and human influences was behavioural intention. Respondents indicated considerably stronger propensity to engage with human-influencer content than AI-influencer content, with mean ratings of 4.76 and 3.87 respectively ($p = .004$). The same pattern was found for purchase intention with human influencers scoring an average of 4.61 compared with AI influencers at 3.89, a difference that was also statistically significant ($p = .028$). These results show that the relatively slight variations seen in authenticity, trust and credibility did not necessarily transfer into similarly small differences in planned behaviour.

This distinction is essential because recent research indicates that perceptual judgements and behavioural reactions do not necessarily move in the same direction. Sands et al. (2022) found lower source trust for AI influencers, yet no significant difference in intention to follow and stronger word-of-mouth intentions for AI influencers in their study. The data here demonstrate a different pattern: participants did not report statistically significant differences in authenticity, trust or credibility, but they were substantially more inclined to connect with human influencers and heed their product suggestions. This means that customers may see AI influencers as somewhat favourable at a perceptual level, but prefer human influencers in terms of making a decision to act on a recommendation or interaction.

The results are more closely aligned with Lee and Ham (2023), who connected lower source credibility for AI influencers with weaker persuasive outcomes and purchase intention. However, the current study did not demonstrate the same strong credibility disadvantage. somewhat the behavioural gap arises although credibility scores are somewhat close. This shows a possible role of additional factors, beyond credibility in influencing behavioural preference, but the present research design does not allow us to determine which mechanisms may be at play.

Message context may be one such factor. Zhang et al. (2025) found that AI influencers were more effective when paired with functional appeals, whereas human influencers performed more strongly in experiential contexts. Zheng et al. (2026) similarly found that virtual

influencers were more effective with rational appeals, while human influencers were more effective with emotional appeals, although anthropomorphic cues could improve virtual-influencer performance in emotional communication. These research imply that consumers can be more inclined to respond behaviourally when the influencer type corresponds to the nature of the message. As the current poll examined general engagement and purchase intention rather than reactions to specific message types, this theory cannot be directly tested, but it does provide a useful understanding of why human influencers may still hold a behavioural edge.

The content analysis further supports caution in interpreting engagement. In three out of eight postings, both AI and human influencers included audience-interaction indicators, but visible participation varied significantly from post to post. Looi and Kahlor (2024) found that human influencers generated greater observed engagement across a large Instagram dataset, but their study was limited to Instagram. The sample of current content is much smaller and encompasses both Instagram and TikTok, hence raw likes, comments, shares and views cannot be used to determine a general engagement advantage. Direct comparison is not appropriate, given differences in follower numbers, publishing date, content format and platform conventions.

Overall, the findings imply that the greatest advantage of human influencers was at the level of desired customer behaviour rather than at the level of fundamental perceptual judgement. AI influencers were not rated drastically lower on authenticity, trust or credibility, but respondents were nevertheless less eager to engage with their material or contemplate buying things they advised. Therefore, for marketers, the success of AI influencers may depend not only on their realistic appearance but also on the communication formats developed to turn positive perceptions into greater behavioural responses.

5.5 Overall Interpretation in Relation to the Research Question

The research question asked: **How do AI influencers compare with human influencers in shaping customers perceptions of authenticity, trust and credibility on Instagram and TikTok?** In general, the results suggest that the comparison is not marked by a simple human advantage across all aspects. Human influencers obtained somewhat higher mean scores for authenticity, trust and credibility, but none of these differences were statistically significant. But the biggest disparities were shown in engagement and purchase intent, when respondents demonstrated a much larger preference for human influencers.

This pattern supports the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2 where authenticity, trust and credibility were seen as linked but separate perceptual characteristics and engagement and buy intention were situated as downstream consumer responses, rather than automatic outcomes. The results illustrate why this difference is essential. In terms of perception, AI influencers could be judged in a very comparable manner to human influencers, but eliciting lesser intended behavioural responses. Therefore, positive opinions of an AI influencer should not automatically be understood as readiness to interact with the influencer or to act on their advice.

The results further add to the wider research covered in this dissertation that finds no consistent effectiveness of either sort of influencer. Lee and Ham (2023) and Sands et al. (2022) report disadvantages for AI influencers in credibility or source trust under particular conditions, whereas Allal-Chérif, Puertas and Carracedo (2024) suggest that virtual influencers can construct authenticity through coherent storytelling and reliability. Zhang et al. (2025) and Zheng et al. (2026) further demonstrate that influencer effectiveness may depend on message type and the fit between the communicator and the appeal being used. The present findings are consistent with this conditional interpretation rather than with the idea that artificiality simply impacts audience response.

This interpretation is reinforced by the content analysis, which reveals that the sampled AI influencers participated in many of the same communicative activities as those associated with human influencer culture. Cues of audience involvement were similarly prevalent, as

was personal or self-disclosing content in the AI and human samples. This demonstrates that AI influencers can imitate communication techniques that have historically been linked to relatability and personal identity. The results of the poll further indicate that a behavioural preference for human influences does not necessarily emerge from a similarity in communication style.

Overall, the study suggests that consumers do not inherently reject AI influencers as unauthentic, untrustworthy or lacking credibility. In this sample, AI influencers were comparatively rated in a manner similar to human influencers across these three perceptual aspects. But, human influencers still had a more evident edge in terms of whether or not respondents would engage with material or purchase a product being promoted. The answer to the research question is therefore that AI and human influencers are possibly perceived more similar than expected in terms of authenticity, trust and credibility but human influencers still seem to have a stronger advantage in translating those perceptions into intended consumer behaviour.

CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of the Study

The aim of this dissertation was to assess the influence of AI influencers versus human influencers on consumers' impression of authenticity, trust and credibility on Instagram and TikTok. A mixed methods design comprised an online survey and comparative content analysis of 16 publically available influencer postings. The poll yielded 38 valid replies. Content analysis was performed to analyse communication strategies of two AI influencers and two human influencers.

The results indicated that human influencers had somewhat higher mean ratings for authenticity, trust and credibility, however, there were no statistically significant differences. More significant variations were found in behavioural intention. The respondents reported much higher readiness to engage with human influencer content and evaluate products recommended by human influencers. The content analysis also revealed that both AI and human influencers often employed personal and experiential communication, implying that the AI influencers are progressively embracing many of the same communication strategies linked to human influencer culture.

6.2 Answer to the Research Question

The findings reveal that AI influencers were evaluated rather similarly to human influencers in terms of authenticity, trust and credibility, with no statistically significant differences across all three dimensions. Conversely, human influencers achieved much higher engagement rates and purchase intentions. Thus, the answer to the research question is that artificiality does not necessarily hinder consumers to perceive an influencer as authentic, trustworthy or credible, but that human influencers still have a stronger advantage at this point when these perceptions become intended consumer behaviour.

6.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings add to the expanding literature on AI influencers by supporting a more conditional view of influencer effectiveness. In this sample, authenticity, trust and credibility were not significantly different between AI and human influencers, showing that perceptions should not be seen as automatic benefits of human communicators. Rather, the results suggest that artificial influencers might be evaluated quite positively, in particular when they employ communication methods such as personal narrative and self-disclosure.

In practice, the findings indicate marketers should not assess AI influencers exclusively on the basis of their perceived credibility or authenticity. The greater human advantage in engagement and purchase intent suggests that positive impressions of AI influencers do not necessarily translate into customer behaviour. Therefore, brands may need to evaluate the type of message, the platform context and the degree of humanlike communication when selecting how to deploy AI influencers within campaigns.

AI influencers can be especially valuable for marketers where consistency, control and scalable communication are goals, while human influencers may continue to be more effective where the target depends on stronger behavioural response, emotional connection or purchase persuasion. The findings thus encourage a selective rather than substitutive use of AI influencers in digital marketing campaigns.

6.4 Limitations

There are some limitations to be addressed in the interpretation of the findings. First, the survey used convenience and snowball sampling, and 38 valid replies were received. The sample was therefore limited and not statistically typical of all Instagram and TikTok users. The findings are preliminary and not generalisable to a wider population.

Second, the questionnaire used simple, single-item assessments of authenticity, trust, credibility, intention to engage and intention to purchase. This made the survey brief but limited the measurement depth compared to standard multi-item measures. The cross-sectional approach also recorded impressions at one point in time only and cannot demonstrate causal correlations between kind of influencer and consumer response.

The extent of the content analysis was equally constrained. The research was based on 16 purposively selected public posts by four influencers that were coded by one researcher. Differences in follower size, platform standards, publishing date, and content style all restricted direct comparison of visible engagement metrics. Hence, the content analysis was employed as contextual evidence and not as a representative indicator of influencer performance.

6.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Future study should explore these findings on bigger and more heterogeneous samples to establish whether the very slight changes in authenticity, trust and credibility hold across varying demographic groupings and levels of AI influencers' acquaintance. Established multi-item measures would also allow for more depth and enable stronger assessment of the links between perceptions and behavioural intentions.

Future research might look at more direct comparisons between Instagram and TikTok, as the nature of each platform may impact how audiences respond to AI and human influencers. Experiments could also modify the message kind, self-disclosure, sponsorship and humanlike cues to find the aspects that increase or diminish customer responses to AI influencers.

Finally, larger-scale content studies across additional influencers, product categories and time periods would help to evaluate whether the communication patterns revealed in this study are prevalent across the wider influencer environment rather than exclusive to the four accounts analysed here.

6.6 Final Conclusion

This dissertation demonstrates that the comparison between AI and human influencers is more complex than a simple preference for one over the other. In this study, AI influencers scored equivalent to human influencers in terms of authenticity, trust and credibility, regardless of the fact that human influencers had a distinct advantage in terms of engagement and buy intention.

These results imply that artificiality in and of itself does not preclude an influencer from being seen as credible or authentic. However, the capacity to build positive views does not imply that AI influencers can induce the same behavioural response as human influencers. So their effectiveness appears to depend on how they are employed, what kind of communication is chosen and in which context consumers encounter them.

AI influencers should not be seen as a replacement for human influencers, but rather as a different kind of digital communicator with varying strengths and weaknesses depending on the marketing objective.

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❓ TIME — Lil Miquela's inclusion among influential internet personalities was mentioned within Allal-Chérif et al. (2024).

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT GUIDE SHEET

PARTICIPANT GUIDE SHEET

Study Title

AI Influencers vs Human Influencers: Audience Perceptions of Authenticity, Trust, and Credibility in Digital Marketing

Invitation To Participate

You are invited to participate in a research study for a postgraduate dissertation at City St George's, University of London. Prior to considering your participation, it is essential to be aware of the purpose of the research and the details of your involvement.

Purpose Of The Study

This study aims to investigate audience perceptions of AI-generated influencers versus human influencers, focusing on authenticity, trust, and credibility in digital marketing.

Why Have I Been Invited?

You have been invited to participate due to your active engagement on social media platforms like Instagram or TikTok, and your potential familiarity with influencer content.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

Upon your consent to participate, you will be required to complete a brief online survey. The survey will include questions regarding your perceptions and opinions of AI influencers

and human influencers.

The survey will take approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete.

Do I Have To Take Part?

Participation is entirely optional. You may withdraw at any point before submitting your responses, without the necessity of providing reason.

Are There Any Risks?

This research involves minimal risk. No enquiries of sensitive or personal nature will be asked.

Confidentiality And Data Protection

All responses will remain anonymous, and no personally identifiable information will be gathered. Data will be securely maintained and utilised exclusively for academic purposes in this dissertation.

What Will Happen To The Results?

The outcomes of this study will be utilized in a postgraduate dissertation and may be incorporated into academic reports. Individual participants will remain unidentifiable in all outputs.

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

The following consent statements were presented to participants through Google Forms. Participants were required to select all statements before proceeding with the study.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

*

Please read the statements below and indicate your agreement before proceeding :

Please select ALL statements to proceed.

- ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Guide Sheet.
- ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before submitting my responses.
- ☐ I understand that my responses will be anonymous and used for academic research purposes only.
- ☐ I am aged 18 or above.
- ☐ I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

APPENDIX C: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

AI INFLUENCERS VS HUMAN INFLUENCERS

* Indicates required question

AI INFLUENCERS VS HUMAN INFLUENCERS

AI Influencers vs Human Influencers: Their Impact on Consumer Trust and Brand Perception in Digital Marketing

Q1. What is your age group? *

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55+

Q2. What is your gender? - optional

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other: _____

Q3. Which of the following social media platforms do you use? *

- ☐ Instagram only
- ☐ TikTok only
- ☐ Both Instagram and TikTok
- ☐ Neither

Q4. How often do you encounter influencer content on Instagram or TikTok? *

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ Several times a week
- ☐ About once a week
- ☐ Less than once a week
- ☐ Rarely or never

For this survey, an AI influencer refers to a computer generated or AI powered digital persona that operates on social media and creates or shares content in ways similar to a human influencer. A human influencer refers to a real person who creates social media content and may recommend or promote products and brands.

Q5. Before taking this survey, how familiar were you with AI or virtual influencers? *

- ☐ Not at all familiar
- ☐ Slightly familiar
- ☐ Moderately familiar
- ☐ Very familiar
- ☐ Extremely familiar

*

Thinking generally about HUMAN social-media influencers on Instagram and TikTok, indicate how much you agree with each statement.

[illegible]

*

Thinking generally about AI social media influencers on Instagram and TikTok, indicate how much you agree with each statement.

[illegible]

Q8. Overall, whose product recommendations would you be more likely to prefer? *

- ☐ Human influencers
- ☐ AI influencers
- ☐ No preference
- ☐ I would not rely on either

Q9. If you know that an influencer is AI generated or AI powered, how does this affect your trust in their recommendation? *

- ☐ It makes me much more likely to trust it
- ☐ It makes me somewhat more likely to trust it
- ☐ It makes no difference
- ☐ It makes me somewhat less likely to trust it
- ☐ It makes me much less likely to trust it
- ☐ Not sure

Q10. On which platform would you be more likely to engage with an AI influencer? *

- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ TikTok
- ☐ Equally likely on both
- ☐ Neither
- ☐ Not sure

APPENDIX D: ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethics application ETH2526-1678	STATUS
ETH2526-1678	Approved
Tanya Gavi Reddy	LOW RISK
independent project	Report adverse event
	Copy as a new application

APPENDIX E: CONTENT ANALYSIS CODING SHEET**Table E1. Content Analysis Coding Sheet**

Influencer	Platform	Post	Message style	Personal/self-disclosure	Promotional	Audience interaction cue
Imma	Instagram	1	Experiential	Yes	No	Yes
Imma	Instagram	2	Experiential	Yes	No	No
Imma	TikTok	1	Experiential/emotional	Yes	No	No
Imma	TikTok	2	Informational/product-focused	No	Yes	No
Miquela	Instagram	1	Experiential	No	No	No
Miquela	Instagram	2	Experiential/emotional	Yes	No	No
Miquela	TikTok	1	Experiential/personal	Yes	No	Yes
Miquela	TikTok	2	Informational	Yes	No	Yes
Wisdom Kaye	Instagram	1	Mixed/product-focused	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wisdom Kaye	Instagram	2	Experiential	Yes	No	No
Wisdom Kaye	TikTok	1	Informational	No	Yes	Yes
Wisdom Kaye	TikTok	2	Experiential	No	No	No
Leonie Hanne	Instagram	1	Experiential/emotional	Yes	No	No
Leonie Hanne	Instagram	2	Mixed/product-focused	Yes	Yes	No
Leonie Hanne	TikTok	1	Experiential/emotional	Yes	No	No
Leonie Hanne	TikTok	2	Mixed/product-focused	Yes	Yes	Yes