WWW.IJRPR.COM

International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Virtual Influencers in Fashion: Do People Trust a Non-Human Model?

Sneha Chauhan[1], Dr. Rahul Kushwaha[2]

[1] PG Scholar, National Institute of Fashion Technology, Daman

[2] Assistant Professor, FMS - National Institute of Fashion Technology, Daman

ABSTRACT

AI-created characters are popping up more and more in fashion marketing, giving rise to a new kind of influencer called virtual influencers. These digital personalities are super popular with young people on social media, but there's still some doubt about how trustworthy they are compared to real-life influencers. This study looks into how young people see virtual influencers, whether they trust their product recommendations, and how they compare them to traditional human influencers. It also checks out how things like age, gender, and experience with digital media affect these opinions. The data was collected through a questionnaire given to NIFT students across different campuses. The results should help brands figure out if virtual influencers can be credible alternatives to human models and guide marketers in planning their strategies.

Keywords- Virtual Influencer, Digital Fashion, Consumer Trust, Artificial Intelligence, Social Media

Introduction

Fashion marketing has changed a lot with the rise of social media, with influencers now playing a key role in helping brands connect with their audiences. In the past, fashion brands worked with real influencers to build online relationships, but now a new trend has emerged: virtual influencers—digital characters that look like real people and engage with followers online.

As virtual influencers continue to gain popularity, marketers and researchers are increasingly questioning whether people can trust a digital persona as much as they would a real individual. Traditional influencers usually build credibility through personal experiences, authenticity, and emotional connections, whereas virtual influencers offer benefits such as consistent branding, full control over their image, and unlimited customization options. they do not experience life and genuine emotions, creating a connection with audiences can be more difficult.

Since fashion revolves around self-expression, showcasing personal style, and engaging with others, it is crucial for individuals to place trust in an influencer to fully appreciate their influence. Perceptions of virtual influencers can vary depending on factors such as age, particularly among younger, technologically proficient individuals who are more receptive to adopting new technologies.

This study examines consumer perceptions by comparing the levels of trust they place in virtual influencers versus real influencers and investigates how various demographic factors affect this trust. The results aim to assist fashion brands in determining whether AI influencers can serve as a dependable component of their future marketing strategies.

Objectives of the Study

1. To compare consumer perceptions and acceptance of virtual influencers with those of human influencers.
2. To examine how demographic characteristics (age, gender, and digital literacy) shape consumer attitudes toward virtual influencers.

Literature Review

1. Credibility, Trust & Purchase Intention: Virtual Influencers vs. Traditional Influencers

A review titled "Virtual Influencers, Real Impact: A Narrative Review on Credibility, Generational Trust, and Purchase Intention in Digital Marketing" analyzes multiple studies and highlights that key factors such as trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, authenticity, and consistency are crucial for building consumer trust and fostering engagement with brands. The review notes that although virtual influencers (VIs) are effective in maintaining consistency and controlling brand messaging, they may encounter challenges in being perceived as authentic. It also examines the role of parasocial relationships—the emotional connections followers form with influencers—in the effectiveness of influencer marketing, emphasizing that different generations respond differently to VIs. This study was published in the Sinergi International Journal.

3. Anthropomorphism & Authenticity: Human-like Traits Influence Consumer Engagement with Virtual Influencers

The study "Anthropomorphism and Authenticity: Exploring the Dynamics of Virtual Influencers in Contemporary Marketing" examines

how giving virtual influencers human-like traits (anthropomorphism) affects consumer perceptions of them. The findings show that when virtual influencers are depicted with more human-like characteristics—in appearance, behavior, or storytelling—their perceived authenticity increases, which in turn enhances consumer engagement and willingness to accept virtual influencers despite their non-human nature. University Malaysia Sarawak

4. **Virtual Influencers' Persuasive Impact and Underlying Mechanisms (Source Credibility & ELM)**

In "The Power of Virtual Influencers: Impact on Consumer Behaviour and Attitudes in the Age of AI," the authors examine how virtual influencers affect consumers' buying decisions. They use ideas from Source Credibility Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to demonstrate that factors like trustworthiness, attractiveness, and perceived expertise significantly influence purchasing behavior. They also highlight that virtual influencers can sway consumers using a combination of central and peripheral cues, which is somewhat different from the techniques typically used by traditional human influencers.

5. **Comparative Study: Virtual Influencers vs. Human Influencers in Fashion/Beauty Campaigns**

A recent article titled 'Exploring the Impact of Virtual vs. Human Influencers on Purchase Intentions in the Fashion and Beauty Industry' investigates consumer responses to virtual and human influencers within fashion and beauty campaigns. The study finds that human influencers are generally regarded as more trustworthy and effective, particularly in terms of expertise, emotional appeal, and long-term credibility. Nonetheless, virtual influencers may be more effective for certain products or when presented in a highly polished manner. The research also highlights potential drawbacks related to the 'uncanny valley' phenomenon or the perceived artificiality of virtual influencers. Source: ScienceDirect

6. **Demographic & Generational Effects: Engagement, Perceived Value, and Purchase Intention in VI Marketing**

The article "Perceived Value, Consumer Engagement, and Purchase Intention in Virtual Influencer Marketing: The Role of Source Credibility and Generational Cohort" (2025) examines responses from 331 consumers from Generations Y and Z to explore how different aspects of perceived value (informativeness, entertainment, novelty, incentives) and consumer engagement affect purchase intentions. The study shows that source credibility and generational cohort influence these effects; for example, Generation Z respondents are more affected by engagement, while older generations focus more on informativeness. The research emphasizes the important role of demographic factors in shaping consumer perceptions of virtual influencers. MDPI .

7. **Critical Perspectives on Virtual Fashion Influencers: Body Representation, Ethics, and Perception Issues**

The study 'Issues of Virtual Fashion Influencers' Reproduced Bodies: A Qualitative Analysis Based on Body Discourse' examines 115 active virtual fashion influencers from around the world and explores problems with how their bodies are represented—such as promoting standard beauty ideals, objectifying them, and potentially reinforcing harmful norms. The research emphasizes that even as virtual influencers gain popularity, their artificial, flawless bodies raise ethical and cultural concerns that could affect how some people perceive themselves and others. SpringerLink

8. **Mechanisms Enhancing Virtual Influencer Effectiveness: Companionship & Social Presence**

The working paper 'What Drives Virtual Influencer's Impact?' uses automated image and text analysis along with controlled experiments to show that virtual influencer posts featuring a "companion" (another person or avatar)—which conveys sociability or a community-oriented vibe—significantly boost perceived trust and engagement. Including another entity makes the virtual influencer appear more human-like, thereby enhancing trust and effectiveness. arXiv .

Research Methodology

A quantitative research method was adopted to analyze how young fashion consumers evaluate the credibility of virtual influencers. The study uses a descriptive design, as the intention is to observe existing attitudes without modifying or influencing respondent behavior. Information was collected from both primary and secondary sources.

Primary data was obtained through a structured questionnaire featuring close-ended items and Likert-scale statements related to trust, authenticity, and acceptance of influencers. The questionnaire was distributed to students from several NIFT campuses, ensuring a diverse representation of fashion-aware and digitally active respondents. In total, 100 valid responses were collected and analyzed.

Secondary data was gathered from published academic articles, marketing research papers, online journals, and industry reports that focus on influencer credibility, consumer behavior, digital marketing, and virtual personas. Convenience sampling was chosen because students were easily accessible and serve as a relevant group due to their high exposure to technology, social media, and branded fashion communications.

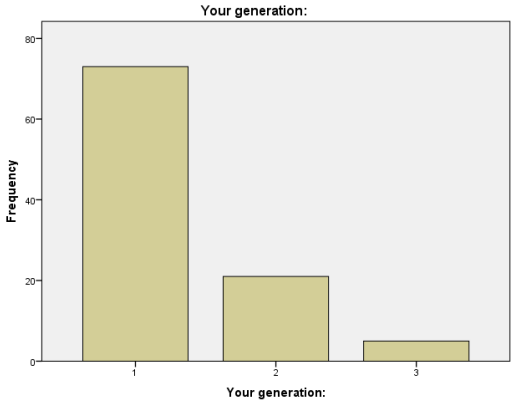
Before collecting data, a small pre-test was conducted to ensure the questions were clear and aligned with the research objectives. The collected responses were analyzed using descriptive statistical tools, including frequency distribution, percentage comparison, and demographic cross-analysis. These methods helped identify differences in consumer perceptions between virtual and human influencers and provided insights into how demographics influence trust and acceptance..

Distribution of Respondents by Generation

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	73	73.7	73.7	73.7
	2	21	21.2	21.2	94.9
	3	5	5.1	5.1	100.0
	Total	99	100.0	100.0	

TABLE NO. 1.1

The table shows the ages of the people who participated in the survey. Most are from Generation Z, accounting for 73.7%, indicating that the survey mainly reflects younger, digitally savvy individuals. Millennials make up 21.2%, while Generation X and older generations represent only 5.1% of respondents. This suggests that the survey results, particularly regarding interactions with virtual influencers, are likely influenced by younger people who are more active on digital platforms and follow social media trends. The data clearly shows that if you want to understand how people feel about and engage with virtual influencers, it makes sense to focus on Generation Z and Millennials.



GRAPH 1.1

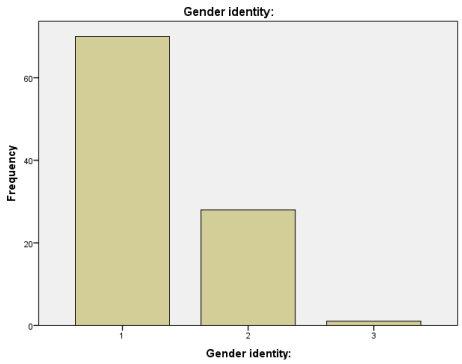
The bar chart breaks down people by different generations. Most are in Generation 1, followed by Generation 2, with the fewest in Generation 3. This shows that the group is mainly made up of younger people who are very engaged with digital technology.

Respondent Distribution by Gender Identity

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	70	70.7	70.7	70.7
	2	28	28.3	28.3	99.0
	3	1	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	99	100.0	100.0	

TABLE NO. 1.2

The table shows that most respondents identify as Gender 1 (70.7%), followed by Gender 2 (28.3%), with only one person (1.0%) identifying as another gender. This indicates that the sample is primarily composed of Gender 1 participants, which could influence overall trends in perceptions, preferences, and participation in the study. Because there are very few respondents from other gender identities, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about these groups, so caution is needed when interpreting results for all genders.



GRAPH 1.2

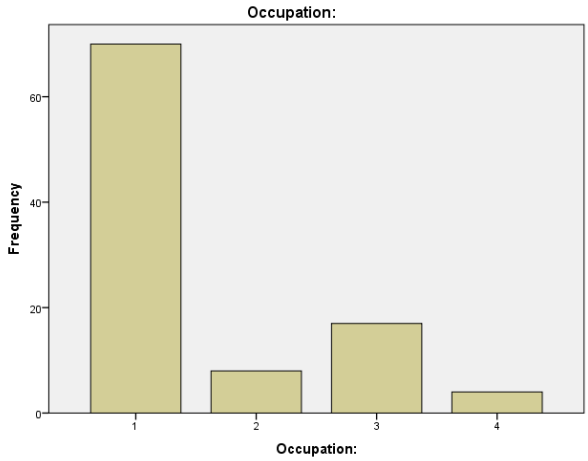
The bar graph shows the number of people in three 'Gender Identity' categories. Most people are in Category 1, with the bar reaching about 70. Category 2 is the next largest, with around 28 people, showing a significant drop from the first category. Category 3 is the smallest, with fewer than 5 people, much lower than the other two categories.

Respondent Distribution by Occupation

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	70	70.7	70.7	70.7
	2	8	8.1	8.1	78.8
	3	17	17.2	17.2	96.0
	4	4	4.0	4.0	100.0
	Total	99	100.0	100.0	

TABLE NO.1.3

The table shows the occupations of the respondents. Most are employed in Occupation 1 (70.7%), followed by Occupation 3 (17.2%), Occupation 2 (8.1%), and Occupation 4 (4.0%). This suggests that the majority of survey participants come from Occupation 1, which could influence the observed trends and the conclusions of the study. Since the other occupational groups make up a smaller percentage, care should be taken when generalizing these results to the wider population.



GRAPH 1.3

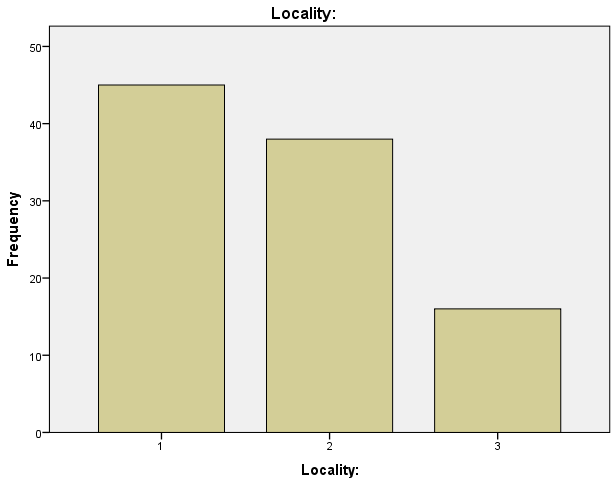
The bar graph clearly indicates that Occupation Category 1 is by far the most prevalent, with a frequency of approximately 70. Category 3 is the second most prevalent at around 17, while Category 2 (approximately 8) and Category 4 (approximately 4) are far less represented in the sample.

Respondent Distribution by Locality/Area of Residence

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	45	45.5	45.5	45.5
	2	38	38.4	38.4	83.8
	3	16	16.2	16.2	100.0
	Total	99	100.0	100.0	

TABLE NO. 1.4

The table shows how respondents are distributed by their locality. Nearly half of the respondents come from Locality 1 (45.5%), followed by Locality 2 (38.4%) and Locality 3 (16.2%). This indicates that the sample is primarily from Localities 1 and 2, which could influence overall trends in perceptions and engagement. The smaller proportion from Locality 3 means that findings from this group may be less representative, so caution should be exercised when generalizing the results to all localities. ... ...



GRAPH 1.4

The bar graph showing how different localities are spread out shows that Locality 1 comes up the most, with around 45 mentions. Locality 2 is not far behind, with about 38 mentions, and Locality 3 is mentioned the least, with just around 16. So, most people are from Locality 1 and Locality 2. ..

Engagement with Virtual Influencers Across Gender Identities

Count

Gender identity		Have you ever engaged with or followed a virtual influencer instead of a human influencer?"			Total
		1	2	3	
	Yes, frequently	40	15	15	70
	Sometimes	4	12	12	28
	No, never	0	1	0	1
Total		44	28	27	99

TABLE NO. 1.5

The table shows how people interact with virtual influencers based on their gender. The data shows that most people interact with virtual influencers quite often, especially those identifying as Gender 1 (40 people). Occasional interaction is more evenly spread among different genders, while only a very small number said they never interact with them. This suggests that gender seems to affect how often people engage, with Gender 1 being the most active. Overall, virtual influencers are quite popular, though the level of engagement varies by gender.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	17.441[a]	4	.002
Likelihood Ratio	18.813	4	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.868	1	.001
N of Valid Cases	99		

TABLE NO. 1.6

The chi-square test shows a clear connection between gender identity and how people interact with virtual influencers ($\chi^2 = 17.44$, $p = 0.002$). This indicates that engagement habits differ by gender, with some genders interacting more frequently than others.

Visibility of Virtual Influencers Across Localities

Locality		"How visible or prominent are virtual influencers compared to human influencers in your local digital environment (social media, apps, online communities)?"			Total
		1	2	3	
:	**1. Very visible / frequently noticed**	19	24	2	45
	1. Moderately visible / sometimes noticed	10	23	5	38
	1. Not visible / rarely noticed	2	9	5	16
Total		31	56	12	99

TABLE NO. 1.7

The table shows that most people notice virtual influencers in their local digital space. Among the respondents, 45 consider them very visible, while 38 find them somewhat visible. Locality 2 has the highest visibility, and Locality 3 the lowest. This indicates that virtual influencers are generally noticed, though their visibility varies by area.

CHI- SQUARE

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.062[a]	4	.026
Likelihood Ratio	10.674	4	.030
Linear-by-Linear Association	9.882	1	.002
N of Valid Cases	99		

TABLE NO.1.8

The Chi-Square test shows there's a real link between where people live and how much they notice virtual influencers ($p = 0.026$), which means people in different places see them differently. The solid Linear-by-Linear Association ($p = 0.002$) points to a clear trend: as locations change, the visibility of virtual influencers changes in a predictable way

Perceived Brand Promotion of Virtual Influencers Across Localities

Locality:		How do you think brands are influencing consumer perception and acceptance of virtual influencers compared to human influencers?"			Total
		1	2	3	
	1. strongly promoting virtual influencers	35	2	8	45
	2 somewhat promoting virtual influencers	23	3	12	38
	3 Not promoting	9	2	5	16
Total		67	7	25	99

TABLE NO. 1.9

The table shows that most respondents think brands are actively promoting virtual influencers, with 45 saying 'strongly promoting' and 38 saying 'somewhat promoting.' Locality 1 sees the highest level of promotion, while Localities 2 and 3 are slightly behind, indicating that brand strategies affect public perception of virtual influencers differently depending on the location.

Chi-square

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.243[a]	4	.374
Likelihood Ratio	4.237	4	.375
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.879	1	.090
N of Valid Cases	99		

TABLE NO. 1.10

The Chi-Square test shows that there is no significant relationship between where people live and their perception of brands promoting virtual influencers ($p = 0.374$). This implies that opinions about brand promotion of virtual influencers are generally similar regardless of location. The Linear-by-Linear Association ($p = 0.090$) also does not reveal any clear pattern among the categories. ...

Influencer Content Preference by Gender Identity

Count						
Gender identity:		"Which type of influencer content do you prefer to follow or engage with the most?"				Total
		1	2	3	4	
+	1. 1 Virtual influencers (fully digital personalities)	63	5	0	2	70
	2 Human influencers (real-life personalities)	18	2	5	3	28
	1. 3 None / I do not follow influencer content	1	0	0	0	1
Total		82	7	5	5	99

TABLE NO. 1.11

The table shows that a majority of respondents (70 out of 99) prefer virtual influencers, indicating a strong inclination toward fully digital personalities. Human influencers are preferred by 28 respondents, while only 1 respondent does not follow any influencer content. This suggests that virtual influencer content is currently more engaging and popular across gender identities in the surveyed group.

Chi-square

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	16.878[a]	6	.010
Likelihood Ratio	16.721	6	.010
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.864	1	.003
N of Valid Cases	99		

TABLE NO. 1.12

Data Interpretation: The Chi-Square test shows a significant relationship between gender identity and the type of influencer content preferred by individuals (p = 0.010). The Linear-by-Linear Association (p = 0.003) indicates a clear trend, suggesting that gender identity seems to influence whether individuals prefer virtual or human influencers, with most favoring virtual influencers.

Findings Based on the Analysis:

1. Strong Connection: Where people live seems to really affect how aware they are of virtual influencers online (Chi-Square p = 0.026). Basically, your location plays a part in how noticeable these influencers
2. Regional Trend: The Linear-by-Linear Association (p = 0.002) shows a clear pattern – some areas are more aware of virtual influencers than others.
3. . Differences by Location: People living in Locality 2 notice virtual influencers the most, while those in Locality 3 notice them the least.
4. Overall Visibility: Even with these regional differences, most people feel that virtual influencers are at least a bit visible online.

Conclusion

The analysis indicates that an individual's geographic location significantly influences their awareness of virtual influencers online. Awareness levels differ across regions, with Locality 2 exhibiting the highest recognition and Locality 3 the lowest. This suggests that regional factors, including social media usage, internet accessibility, and engagement in online communities, impact the extent to which people notice and interact with virtual influencers. Despite these regional disparities, the majority of individuals find virtual influencers at least somewhat noticeable, implying that they maintain a relatively strong overall presence, even if their visibility varies by location.

REFERENCE

- Kim, D., & Wang, Z. (2023). The ethics of virtuality: navigating the complexities of human-like virtual influencers in the social media marketing realm. *Frontiers in Communication*, *8*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1205610https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/communication/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1205610/full
- Oosterom, E. B., Baytar, F., & Maher, M. (2023). Fashion Marketing with Virtual Humans as Influencers. In *virtual* (pp. 163–178). https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003264958-13https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.1201/9781003264958-13/fashion-marketing-virtual-humans-influencers-evrim-buyukaslan-oosterom-fatma-baytar-mona-maher
- Guthrie, S. (2020). Virtual influencers. In *virtual* (pp. 271–285). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429322501-20https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429322501-20/virtual-influencers-scott-guthrie
- Yang, C. (2025). Influencers (Human vs Virtual). In *Influencers (Human vs virtual)* (pp. 99–121). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-72916-4_5https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.1201/9781003264958-13/fashion-marketing-virtual-humans-influencers-evrim-buyukaslan-oosterom-fatma-baytar-mona-maher
- Mouritzen, S. L. T., Penttinen, V., & Pedersen, S. (2023). Virtual influencer marketing: the good, the bad and the unreal. *European Journal of Marketing*, *58*(2), 410–440. https://doi.org/10.1108/ejm-12-2022
- Guthrie, S. (2020). Virtual influencers. In *virtual* (pp. 271–285). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429322501-20
- Nissen, A., Conrad, C., & Newman, A. (2023). https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3544548.3580943? Investigating the Perceptions and Evaluations of Virtual Versus Human Instagram Influencers. *Are You Human*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3580943 https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3544548.3580943