



Comparing AI and Human Influencers: A Study of Consumer Perceptions in the Fashion Industry

Jana Dennenmoser

Dissertation written under the supervision of professor Mónica Borges.

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the MSc in Management with a specialization in Strategic Marketing, at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 18. March 2025.

Abstract

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in social media has led to the growth of AI influencers who are challenging the dominance of human influencers in digital marketing. This dissertation examines how AI influencers compare to human influencers in relation to trust, perceived authenticity and their ability to build parasocial relationships, particularly in the fashion industry on Instagram. The study combines a quantitative survey with 199 participants and qualitative interviews with eight Instagram users, using a mixed-methods approach. The results show that human influencers are perceived to be above AI influencers in terms of perceived expertise, trustworthiness and authenticity, leading to stronger parasocial interactions and higher purchase intentions. While AI influencers benefit from visually curated content and controlled brand messages, their lack of personal experience and emotional engagement limits their effectiveness in building trust and influencing consumer decisions. These findings contribute to the understanding of AI-driven influencer marketing and offer practical implications for brands considering AI influencers for their advertising strategies.

Keywords: AI influencers, human influencers, trust, authenticity, parasocial interactions, purchase intentions, fashion marketing.

Title: Comparing AI and Human Influencers: A Study of Consumer Perceptions in the Fashion Industry

Author: Jana Dennenmoser

Resumo

A ascensão da inteligência artificial (IA) nas redes sociais levou ao surgimento de influenciadores de IA, desafiando a liderança dos influenciadores humanos no marketing digital. Esta dissertação examina como os influenciadores de IA se comparam aos influenciadores humanos em termos de confiança, autenticidade percebida e sua capacidade de estabelecer relações parasociais, particularmente na indústria da moda no Instagram. Utilizando uma metodologia mista, o estudo combina uma pesquisa quantitativa com 199 participantes, e entrevistas (qualitativas) com oito utilizadores do Instagram. Os resultados indicam que os influenciadores humanos superam os influenciadores de IA em expertise percebida, confiabilidade e autenticidade, resultando em interações parasociais mais fortes e maiores intenções de compra. Embora os influenciadores de IA beneficiem de conteúdo visualmente elaborado e mensagens de marca controladas, a sua falta de experiências pessoais e de envolvimento emocional limita a sua eficácia na construção de confiança e influência nas decisões dos consumidores. Esses insights contribuem para a compreensão do marketing de influenciadores impulsionado por IA, oferecendo implicações práticas para marcas que pretendem considerar influenciadores de IA nas suas estratégias promocionais.

Palavras-chave: Influenciadores de IA, influenciadores humanos, confiança, autenticidade, interações parasociais, intenções de compra, marketing de moda.

Título: Comparing AI and Human Influencers: A Study of Consumer Perceptions in the Fashion Industry

Autor: Jana Dennenmoser

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my parents. Their constant support, love and dedication have made it possible for me to pursue my dreams and complete my Master's degree in Portugal. I am forever grateful for everything they have done to shape my future, and I can't wait to make them proud in the next chapter of my career.

A heartfelt thank you goes to my two incredible roommates, Danica and Carla, who were like sisters to me during my time in Lisbon. Living and studying abroad was a journey full of challenges but with them by my side made every challenge easier to overcome. I am equally grateful for all the great friends I made, both in Lisbon and at university. True friendship is invaluable, especially in tough times, and I truly believe that motivating and supporting each other makes challenges feel easier. The countless hours we spent studying together, uplifting one another and turning demanding days into memorable moments have been a crucial part of this journey.

A special thank you to Professor Mónica Borges for her continuous guidance and support throughout my work. Her insightful feedback and encouragement have given me the confidence that I was on the right track, allowing me to approach this final step in my academic career with a sense of accomplishment and pride.

Finally, I would like to thank Católica Lisbon for providing students with such an incredible learning environment in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. This experience has been one of the most enriching and transformative parts of my life, one that will always be close to my heart. It has taught me the importance of perseverance and how to appreciate even the smallest moments. The lessons I have learned here will undoubtedly shape my future, and for that, I will always be grateful.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background and Context.....	1
1.2 Problem Statement	1
1.3 Relevance of the Study.....	2
1.4 Dissertation Structure	3
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	4
2.1 Introduction to Social Media and Influencer Marketing	4
2.1.1 Human Influencers	5
2.1.2 AI Influencers.....	6
2.2 Trust and Authenticity in Influencer Marketing.....	8
2.2.1 Source Credibility	9
2.3 Emotional Engagement and Parasocial Interaction in Influencer Marketing.....	10
2.4 Purchase Intentions in Influencer Marketing.....	11
2.5 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses	12
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	15
3.1 Research Design	15
3.2 Participants and Sampling	15
3.3 Data Collection Methods	16
3.4 Experimental Design	17
3.5 Procedure.....	18
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	20
4.1 Quantitative Data Analysis.....	20
4.1.1 Descriptive Statistics	20
4.1.2 Evaluation of Scale Reliability.....	21
4.1.3 Correlations	22
4.1.4 Hypotheses Testing	23
4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis.....	27
4.2.1 Introduction to Qualitative Analysis	27
4.2.2 Interview Findings.....	27
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	31
5.1 Interpretation of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings.....	31

5.2 Theoretical Implications	32
5.3 Practical Implications	34
5.4 Limitations and Future Research	36
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION.....	38
REFERENCES.....	39
APPENDICES	47

Table of Figures

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework.....	144
------------------------------------	-----

List of Tables

Table 1 Sample Characteristics	20
Table 2 Correlation Matrix.....	23
Table 3 Group Statistics Influencer Type	24
Table 4 T-Test Results Hypothesis 1	25
Table 5 Descriptive statistics: Authenticity Hypothesis 2	25
Table 6 T-Test Results Hypothesis 2	26
Table 7 Descriptive statistics: PSI Hypothesis 3.....	26
Table 8 T-Test Results Hypothesis 3	27

Glossary

AI Influencer - A digital influencer is a fictitious personality that is produced and managed by AI, whether or not it is fully autonomous. Some AI influencers, such as **Lil Miquela**, are actually virtual influencers whose content is managed by human teams. However, they are commonly referred to as AI influencers in both academic literature and industry discussions, which is the definition this study follows.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

Over the last decade, social media has transformed the way people communicate, consume information and make purchases. Online platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram have transformed consumer behavior through providing constant connectivity and creating a space in which consumers are influenced by their peers and the content they interact with daily (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017, cited in Jegham et al., 2022). Instagram stands out among these platforms for its visual content, making it especially effective in industries where aesthetics are important for consumer engagement and brand building (Belanche et al., 2020).

For this reason, Instagram has quickly become the preferred channel for influencer marketing (Belanche et al., 2020). The platform's design allows for a combination of personal and commercial material, creating an atmosphere for influencers to effortlessly integrate brand endorsements into their content, commonly blurring the line between real personal recommendations and paid promotions (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021a). Mishra & Ashfaq, (2023) explain, that it is important to the success of influencer marketing that influencers can build consumer trust especially through characteristics like authenticity.

While human influencers have dominated this market for years, the development of AI influencers is starting to change the field. These artificial identities can interact with their followers in the same way as the human influencers. AI influencers offer brands increased control over their messaging as they are free from the potential traps of human influencers, such as personal scandals (Thomas & Fowler, 2021).

1.2 Problem Statement

In the rapidly evolving digital marketing landscape, the fashion industry heavily relies on influencer marketing on visual platforms like Instagram to engage consumers and drive purchase intentions. While human influencers have been extensively studied and are known to build trust and relationships with followers, the emergence of AI influencers introduces new dynamics that are not yet fully understood. The effectiveness of AI influencers compared to human influencers, especially regarding trust, perceived authenticity, parasocial interactions and influence on purchase intentions, remains underexplored. This lack of understanding creates a significant problem for fashion brands seeking to make informed decisions about collaborating with influencers to optimize their marketing strategies. Therefore, this thesis aims

to investigate how AI and human influencers are different in their ability to build trust, establish authenticity, foster parasocial interactions, and influence consumer purchase behavior. Specifically, it aims to answer the following Research Questions:

RQ1: How do AI influencers compare to human influencers in terms of their credibility

RQ2: How do consumers' perceptions of authenticity differ when engaging with Fashion AI influencers versus human influencers?

RQ3: How do parasocial interactions develop between followers and AI influencers compared to human influencers in the fashion industry?

1.3 Relevance of the Study

From an academic perspective, this research addresses a significant gap in literature by comparing the effectiveness of AI influencers and human influencers, especially as it regards the factors that lead to trust building and their impact on purchase intentions. While the role of human influencers in digital marketing has been extensively studied, previous studies such as Sands et al. (2022) and Thomas & Fowler (2021) indicate that academic understanding of AI influencers remains limited, with their credibility, authenticity, and persuasive power not yet fully examined in the literature. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that product-influencer fit has a major effect on consumers engagement with influencers and purchase decisions, especially in the fashion industry (Belanche et al., 2020). Consumers are more likely to interact with influencers whose image and persona align with the products they endorse. However, the significance of AI influencers remains relatively unexplored. In addition, there is a need to explore the development of parasocial relationships with AI influencers. Parasocial interactions (PSIs), meaning one-sided relationships that audiences form with media figures, have been extensively studied in the context of human influencers, where stronger parasocial bonds lead to greater trust and purchase intentions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). However, the degree to which AI influencers can foster similar relationships remains underexplored as well. By examining how AI influencers compare to human influencers in developing PSIs, this study extends theoretical insights into consumer psychology and digital marketing effectiveness. This dissertation examines how AI influencers compare to human influencers on Instagram regarding different factors in the context of the fashion industry. From a practical and managerial standpoint, our study's insights are important for fashion brands that rely heavily

on influencer marketing to reach target audiences. By understanding how consumers form trust, perceive authenticity and build parasocial relationships with both AI and human influencers, brands can make more informed decisions about which type of influencer to collaborate with. Since Instagram and other platforms create impulsive buying behavior, especially in the fashion industry (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021), recognizing which influencers drive stronger trust and purchase intentions can lead to more effective campaign strategies in this field. This study will help marketers optimize their influencer strategies by enabling them to select the most suitable influencers to meet brand objectives and consumer expectations in the fashion sector.

1.4 Dissertation Structure

After this Introduction, the dissertation starts with a Literature Review on the importance of influencer marketing, the growing role of social media platforms and the rise of AI influencers. It also explores central topics like purchase intention, parasocial interaction and the Source Credibility Model. This review points out gaps that our study seeks to address and leads to the formulation of hypotheses that are analyzed in the following chapters. Next, in the Methodology section, the mixed-methods research design including a survey and semi-structured interviews is explained. . The Data Analysis and Results section focus on finding important trends and connections between variables, while the qualitative analysis deeper explores concepts like trust and purchase intention that the survey did not fully capture.

The results from both approaches are integrated in the Discussion and interpreted within the framework of current theory and literature. We also discuss theoretical and practical implications of our study and provide guidance on how businesses can make efficient use of both AI and human influencers. Key contributions, limitations, and recommendations for future research directions are outlined in the dissertation's conclusion.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction to Social Media and Influencer Marketing

The rise of the Internet has revolutionized traditional marketing by driving digitalization, which can be seen in the fast increase of online media platforms. (Yu et al., 2020). Among the many platforms that have benefited from this digitalization, Instagram stands out as a big player in social media, especially in visual-based industries like the fashion industry (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

"Instagram is an online, mobile phone photo-sharing, video-sharing, and social network service (SNS) that enables its users to take pictures and videos, and then share them on other platforms" (Frommer, 2010, as cited in Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). The number of Instagram users worldwide has grown steadily in the years 2020 to 2023, from 1.04 billion in 2020 to 1.35 billion in 2023 (Dixon, 2024). This trend is expected to continue and reach 1.44 billion by 2025.

On an individual level, social media has assisted in moving personal relationships into the digital world while giving consumers the opportunity to engage in conversations about a variety of topics, including discussions about branded products (Riedl & Luckwald, 2019).

This means that with the development of the internet, the traditional definition of word-of-mouth (WOM), in which people exchange recommendations and opinions with one another face-to-face, has moved into the digital sphere which led to electronic word-of-mouth, or eWOM (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). In this new model, customers use online channels like social media to share their opinions, experiences and suggestions regarding goods and services.

A study by Lee et al. (2015) identified five primary motives for Instagram use among Korean users: social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escapism, and peeking. Whereas a different study of Sheldon & Bryant (2016) found that the main motives for using Instagram in the U.S. are monitoring/knowing about others, documentation, coolness and creativity. These motives highlight Instagram's role in allowing users to follow others, document life moments, express creativity and increase their popularity.

A lot of brands have started using social media platforms to more successfully promote their products or services especially by working with influencers, as these platforms continue to influence consumer behavior (Gomes et al., 2022). Given this growing interest of brands in digital influencers in recent years, it is essential to improve the current understanding of influencer marketing.

Brands are using individuals as influencers which have a sizable online followings and produce a lot of interaction, likes and comments, which are also called social media influencer (SMI), to capitalize on social media platforms and increase the effectiveness of their social media marketing campaigns (Kay et al., 2023).

Between 2016 and 2024, influencer marketing expenses on social media platforms grew dramatically globally. Just 1.7 billion US dollars were spent by businesses on influencer marketing in 2016 (Statista, 2024). These investments did increase over the next years, reaching 9.7 billion US dollars in 2020 and 16.4 billion US dollars in 2022. Spending increased to 21.1 billion US dollars by 2023. This expansion shows the growing importance of influencer marketing as a strategy used by brands to interact with customers.

Customers' purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by social media platforms like Instagram, especially when they see product advertisements that leads to impulsive purchases (Singh et al., 2023). This is also known as impulse buying, where users decide what to buy while casually scanning their feeds.

Moreover, Instagram is an important platform for fashion brands due to its focus on visual representations, which are essential for showcasing fashion products (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). The platform influences the buying process by increasing user enjoyment, often leading to impulsive buying behavior as it encourages consumers to skip the evaluation phase of decision making process.

In general, Instagram functions as a major communication and marketing platform for the fashion industry, helping to build brand value, nurture customer loyalty and influence brand preferences (Torregrosa Puig et al., 2023). Social media has become an essential channel for fashion brands to communicate with their audience by building interaction, engagement and personalized connections.

2.1.1 Human Influencers

One of the most significant developments in the online marketplace over the past ten years is influencer marketing, in which popular online figures use their power to influence consumers' decisions in favor of branded goods and concepts (J. A. Lee et al., 2015). Furthermore, they are seen as a figure of admiration for being a "trusted tastemaker" in one or more specialized fields (De Veirman et al., 2017).

In contrast to traditional media, which promotes top-down communication, social media allows for two-way communication between influencer and follower and lets users be part of activities or life experiences that the Influencers have shared from the bottom up (Dijkmans et al., 2015). By connecting with their audience through this wide interpersonal communication medium, influencers appear more relatable than traditional celebrities.

According to Boerman (2020), Influencers are classified either as micro-influencers or meso/macro-influencers based on the quantity of followers they have and the amount of money they make. Even though they have a recognized level of expertise, micro-influencers are regarded as non-professional because they interact with a community of fewer than 100,000 followers (Rakoczy et al., 2018). Professionals who make their living through influence are known as meso/macro-influencers. Typically, they have a substantial following that enables them to bring in a sum of money (Baudier et al., 2023).

Djafarova & Bowes, (2021) report that "in the fashion industry, Instagram is the most used platform by opinion leaders". Due to the highly visual nature of Instagram, fashion brands can increase brand loyalty and influence consumer behavior, often leading to impulse purchases.

2.1.2 AI Influencers

Davenport et al. (2020) explain that Artificial intelligence (AI) is expected to have an impact on changes in consumer behavior as well as marketing strategies, company structures, sales procedures and customer service alternatives in the future.

Marketers can integrate AI into their endorsement strategies in many different ways (Thomas & Fowler, 2021b). In addition to bots, which generally have no visual representation and are not easily mistaken for humans, marketers are increasingly focusing on virtual endorsers or so-called AI Influencers. These figures have a human-like appearance and rely on a combination of technology and human support in their interactions.

Yan et al. (2024) explain that these digital characters are categorized in research using two main factors: the purpose behind their creation and their visual characteristics. According to Silva et al., (2022), the creation purpose of these characters relates to their ability to represent particular brands. Anthropomorphization is the degree to which a character resembles a human being (Mrad et al., 2022). According to research, a virtual character will be viewed as more believable and competent, the more anthropomorphic it is. The ones that are mimicking humans

are more likely to be seen in public social settings, like on Instagram, where they might serve as brand ambassadors (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021).

AI influencers can create multiple variations of posts in response to consumer sentiment (Campbell et al., 2020). This ability is facilitated by AI-driven problem solving, which allows the AI influencer to test different versions of content on different platforms or for different audiences. The AI continuously evaluates consumer reactions and behavior to these variations and optimizes content in real time.

AI influencers have even more advanced mechanisms that allow them to analyze and respond to user-generated content in a way that human influencers cannot (Kietzmann et al., 2018). Using technologies such as natural language processing, AI can interpret the subtitles of human language in social media posts to gain deeper insights into consumer sentiment. In addition, AI image recognition enables the analysis of photos and videos uploaded by users, providing valuable insights into authentic consumer behavior (Kietzmann et al., 2018). These capabilities enable AI influencers to continuously evaluate and optimize content in real time based on consumer reactions, which could allow them to outperform human influencers in understanding and engaging with audiences.

Because these AI Influencers have their own personas presented to the public with unique stories it allows for more intensive and engaging interactions between followers and influencers in the virtual space (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021).

By using AI influencers for their campaigns, brands can reduce the likelihood of "human errors" (Moustakas et al., 2020). Besides, they allow brands to maintain better control over their behavior as well as the content. Unlike human influencers, whose personal choices can influence public perception of the brands they represent, AI influencers are digital creations without an "offline life," ensuring their "online persona" stays unaffected by external factors. Moreover, the main differences or benefits of AI compared to human influencers are according to Baudier et al., (2023) their availability at all times, their linguist status, the absence of illness, the constant display of politeness and empathy, ability to remain calm in the face of violent remarks or customers and they are not affected by mood swings. They can also handle a bigger amount of work without feeling tired, which allows them to interact more with others and in the same time become more socially available.

Due to perceptions of lower costs or the benefits of AIs, marketers may find AI Influencers appealing, however, these benefits may be misleading, as they can become more expensive than human influencers with a similar follower count (Baklanov (2019) referenced by Thomas & Fowler (2021).

A startup in Los Angeles named Brud manages three popular AI Influencer: Lil Miquela, Bermuda and Blawko (Thomas & Fowler, 2021b). Lil Miquela was named by the TIME magazine as one of the most influential people on the Internet in 2018 and is described as a style icon who has already advertised for luxury brands like Prada, Balenciaga and Kenzo. Blawko, is one of few male AI Influencers who also promoted several products for brands such as Netflix, Nike and Del Taco.

2.2 Trust and Authenticity in Influencer Marketing

Especially on Social Media, trust and authenticity have been shown to be a crucial point. Lou & Yuan (2019) investigated how the credibility and perceived quality of a message affect consumer trust in brand content on social media. Their results showed that consumers' willingness to buy depend heavily, among other factors, on how trustworthy they perceive the message to be.

Consumers tend to associate certain brands with the celebrities endorsing them, which strengthens their perceptions of attractiveness and trustworthiness which also contributes to the brand's credibility (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). According to Djafarova & Rushworth, (2017), an influencer is only really influential if he/she is perceived as credible, attractive, trustworthy and knowledgeable about the product he/she is recommending.

However, skepticism towards influencers is growing as followers increasingly doubt the authenticity of personal stories that seem overly curated or associated with brands (Kleinman, 2019). In addition, there are cases of influencers not fully labeling sponsorships or faking brand partnerships, contributing to a growing distrust of influencer marketing.

A lot of these concerns are eliminated by AI influencers because they are not real individuals (Tan (2019), as cited in Arsenyan & Mirowska (2021). There is no ethical dilemma with branding and the chance of transgressions is reduced because their "behavior" and image can be adjusted in the background. Although viewers are fully aware that they are consuming produced content, AI influencers have the potential to reduce concerns about authenticity because they are "authentically fake" (Wills, 2019).

On the other hand, Feng et al. (2023) explain that AI Influencers, compared to Human Influencers, may lack the authenticity that human influencers have which may lead to not enough trust from consumers. Previous studies have found that, although followers might support AI influencers in noncommercial campaigns, they are less likely to accept them in advertisements and tend to trust them less when it comes to promoting products or services (Choudhry et al., 2022)

The Uncanny Valley Theory raises additional difficulties for the trust and authenticity dynamics of AI influencers. According to this theory, artificial beings that resemble humans, such as AI influencers, have the potential to create feelings of unease or eeriness (Mori et al., 2012) . This reaction happens when virtual entities seem nearly human, but not quite, which lowers their attractiveness and has the potential to decrease consumers' trust in AI influencers since they may find it more difficult to connect with audiences in a genuine way due to their lack of emotional depth or human traits.

2.2.1 Source Credibility

A solid framework for understanding how influencers build trust is the Source Credibility Model. This model, based on the work of Ohanian (1990), breaks credibility down into three main dimensions: Expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness. Ohanian (1990) describes source credibility as “a term commonly used to imply a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message.”

Expertise is the perceived knowledge and competence of the influencer. Research consistently shows that an expert source is more effective in changing attitudes and promoting behaviors, as shown by Hovland et al. (1953). Listeners are more willing to follow advice from expert sources. With human influencers, expertise comes from their professional background or personal experience, which makes their endorsements more convincing (Baudier et al., 2023). With AI influencers, on the other hand, expertise is perceived through the technical sophistication and quality of the information they provide, as they lack practical experience.

Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which the audience believes that the influencer is honest and reliable. Giffin (1967) stated that trust is essential for persuasion of the audience. This is confirmed by studies such as McGinnies & Ward (1980), which show that trustworthy communicators are persuasive regardless of their level of expertise. However, AI influencers face greater challenges in building trust due to their artificial nature. Baudier et al. (2023)

emphasize that perceived humanity, i.e. the extent to which AI influencers appear human, can increase their trustworthiness, especially when they show emotionally intelligent behavior.

Lastly, Attractiveness includes both physical appearance and general likeability. Studies show that more attractive communicators are generally more persuasive, which is also confirmed by Joseph (1982), who found that attractive sources have a consistently positive influence on audience attitudes and product evaluation. For human influencers, this often comes from their personal style and charisma (Baudier et al., 2023). In contrast, AI influencers may have flawless, digitally created appearances but risk triggering the "uncanny valley" effect that was discussed in the previous section.

2.3 Emotional Engagement and Parasocial Interaction in Influencer Marketing

To improve their interactions with humans, AI Influencer can identify, comprehend and communicate emotions through the use of Artificial Emotional Intelligence (AEI) algorithms (F. Yan et al., 2021). Löffler et al. (2018) define the mimicking of human emotions in this context artificial emotions.

When virtual characters show these artificial emotions in a “theatrical” way, they can increase user engagement through likes or comments, which in turn strengthens the connection between the audience and the media characters (J. Yu et al., 2024). In recent years, engagement has become an important metric for evaluating the success of social media marketing campaigns. Engagement rate refers specifically to the level of interaction between users and social media content, including actions such as likes and comments. 'Like' behavior is usually associated with positive emotions such as joy and enthusiasm, while comments indicate a higher level of interaction and engagement. Within the marketing literature, studies have shown a positive relationship between user engagement and brand loyalty, trust and reputation.

Sokolova & Kefi (2020) explain that the purchase behavior of consumers in the field of social media, besides credibility, is also influenced by parasocial connections. The term para-social interaction (PSI) describes the one-sided bond that grows through mass media, such as radio, television, or Internet platforms, between an audience member and a media figure (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The intimacy between the audience and the performer is formed by this relationship, which seems to be face-to-face. Especially those who feel isolated are drawn to this phenomenon because the performer generates emotional responses from the audience by making them feel involved. Sokolova & Kefi (2020) explain that the relationship between social media users and influencers can be compared to this interaction. The study of Su et al. (2021)

concluded that online comments on the influencers social media posts had a positive effect on the para-social connection. They found that followers felt a stronger connection with influencers who received more positive comments, and this led to greater trust and influence over the information the influencer shared.

Bizjak Zabukovec & Faganel, (2024) explain that the terms PSI and parasocial relationship (PSR) describe two different types of one-sided interactions that viewers experience with media characters. PSI occurs during direct contact with the media character, with viewers experiencing a sense of intimacy and engagement although they recognize the interaction as one-sided and illusory (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This feeling is created in real time, triggered by behaviors such as looking into the camera or directly addressing the viewer and simulating an interpersonal relationship. In contrast, PSR develops over time through repeated exposure and continues outside of direct interaction with the media persona. PSR represents a longer-term, sustained connection that the viewer feels with the character beyond the immediate experience of PSI.

A study from Mrad et al. (2022) shows that followers are drawn to anthropomorphic virtual influencers because they perceive them as human and then start to connect with AI influencers. The followers' interaction with the AI influencer is improved when human-like traits like feelings, friendliness, a sense of belonging, and accessibility are in line with the AI influencer. The followers' descriptions of their relationship with the AI influencer as a friendship and a sense of belonging provide evidence of an emotional attachment between the two parties.

2.4 Purchase Intentions in Influencer Marketing

"Purchase Intention refers to the likelihood or willingness of a consumer to buy a specific product or service. It reflects the consumer's conscious plan to make a purchase based on factors like perceived value, need, and attitude toward the product" (Dodds et al., 1991).

According to Su et al. (2021) "Purchase intention is the audiences' future willingness to purchase products". Moreover, they explain that, by following the advice of social media influencers, followers are encouraged to make decisions about what to buy through informational influence. Importantly, Influencers offer credibility to the information by giving audiences informed recommendations when in the right phase, when they are searching for products. Information that meets the needs of the audience in that specific search phase increases the purchase intentions. This is also confirmed by Mazzarolo et al., (2021) who explain that customers in general are more likely to follow and interact with content on

Instagram accounts that meets their needs which results in positive attitudes as well as purchase intention.

According to previous research, AI influencers have little impact on consumers' purchase intentions (Lou et al., 2023). The study investigated how AI Influencers affect customer behavior. For that purpose, they conducted a survey of which not one respondent mentioned buying something because an AI Influencer recommended it. The authors concluded that factors including low similarity to followers, perceived lack of authenticity and weak parasocial interactions, decrease the power of AI influencers to encourage followers to buy things, which are mostly the reason for this lack of impact on purchase decisions.

In contrast, according to a study by Wilke (2023), the different influencer types have the same impact on Instagram users' degree of purchase intention, regardless of the kind of influencer.

These conflicting findings point to a knowledge gap regarding the influence of AI influencers on purchase intentions. To find out if AI influencers are less effective or if specific circumstances affect their influence, it is crucial to look further into this subject. Clarifying these discrepancies will contribute to help brands choose the type of influencers for their marketing campaigns with greater knowledge.

2.5 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Based on previous research mentioned in our literature review, we can assume that AI influencers may lack the authenticity of human influencers, resulting in a lower level of trust. Choudhry et al. (2022) for example, found that followers are less accepting of AI influencers in advertising and tend to trust them less when they promote products or services. In the context of influencer marketing, source credibility plays a significant role in determining the influencer's ability to drive consumer behavior. Human influencers, benefiting from their real-world expertise and emotional authenticity, are perceived as more credible and trustworthy. In contrast, AI influencers, despite their flawless appearances, often struggle to give the same level of credibility because of their artificial nature, which impacts all three dimensions of source credibility: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Baudier et al., 2023). Therefore, associated with our first research question, it is hypothesized that AI influencers are less effective than human influencers in building source credibility:

RQ1: How do AI influencers compare to human influencers in terms of their credibility (expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness)?

- **H1a:** AI influencers are perceived as having lower expertise than human influencers.
- **H1b:** AI influencers are perceived as less trustworthy than human influencers.
- **H1c:** AI influencers are perceived as less attractive than human influencers.

The literature shows that an influencer's perceived authenticity is important for establishing trust and credibility. Feng et al. (2023) highlight that AI influencers may struggle to convey authenticity. Therefore, while perceived authenticity is important for both AI and human influencers, it is expected to have a stronger effect with human influencers, leading to the following hypothesis, associated with our second research question:

RQ2: How do consumers' perceptions of authenticity differ when engaging with Fashion AI influencers versus human influencers?

- **H2:** AI influencers are perceived as less authentic than human influencers.

Lastly, Mrad et al. (2022) indicate that while followers can develop emotional attachments to AI influencers through anthropomorphism, these relationships may not be as strong as those with human influencers. Furthermore, studies mentioned that AI influencers have limited impact on purchase intentions (Lou et al., 2023), possibly due to weaker parasocial interactions. Therefore, it should be hypothesized that parasocial connections are stronger with human influencers.

RQ3: How do parasocial interactions develop between followers and AI influencers compared to human influencers in the fashion industry?

- **H3:** Parasocial interactions are weaker with AI influencers compared to human influencers.

Stemming from these hypotheses, it is possible to build the following conceptual framework:

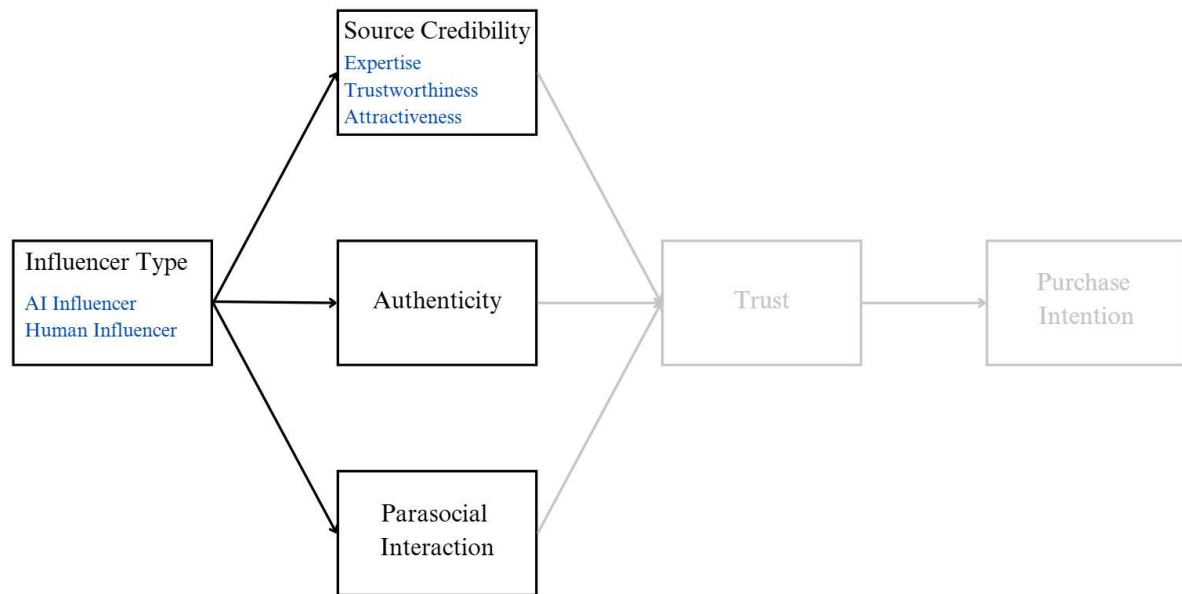


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

To assess the perceptions of Instagram users regarding human vs. AI influencers, this study uses a mixed-methods research design that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study intends to investigate the three fundamental constructs that derived from our literature review: source credibility, parasocial interaction (PSI), and perceived authenticity.

Whereas the quantitative analysis allows for statistically valid and generalizable conclusions about the relationships between the variables, the qualitative analysis offers in-depth insights into the motivations, attitudes and perceptions of the participants, especially regarding purchase intentions and trust-building processes when facing AI influencers.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The target population of our study are Instagram users of all genders and ages. Since the objective is to collect general opinions from a diverse group of Instagram users, regardless of their familiarity with AI influencers, there won't be any prerequisite for participants to follow the influencers' accounts. Still, regardless of whether they follow AI or human influencers, participants must have an Instagram account and actively follow at least one influencer.

To determine the required sample size for the online survey, a power analysis was carried out using the G*Power software. This analysis was based on the following parameters:

Effect size ($d=0.4$): A moderate effect size was selected. Specifically, $d=0.4$ means a significant but realistic difference in the perception of AI compared to human influencers in terms of source credibility, perceived authenticity and parasocial interaction (PSI).

Significance level ($\alpha=0.05$): A standard significance threshold was chosen to control for Type I error and to make sure that the observed differences were unlikely to be due to chance.

Statistical significance ($1-\beta=0.8$): A power level of 0.8 was chosen to minimize the risk of type II errors and to ensure an 80% probability of detecting an effect if it exists.

Number of groups: The participants were divided into two groups - those that answered the questions after being confronted with AI influencers and those that have been confronted with human influencers, reflecting the independent variable.

Based on these parameters, the G*Power analysis indicated that a total sample size of approximately 200 participants (100 per group) would be enough to detect meaningful differences with sufficient statistical power. By calculating the sample size in advance and defining the parameters on the basis of established standards, this study ensures that the results are both statistically valid and methodologically stringent.

To initiate the recruitment process for this study, the survey was shared with both personal and professional contacts, mostly on LinkedIn and Instagram. These platforms helped ensure a relevant initial pool of participants by offering an effective way to quickly collect responses from participants who were familiar with social media and with influencers. However, there was a chance of demographic skew because these networks were primarily made up of female students in their mid-twenties. Additional methods were used to reduce this bias.

One of these methods was SurveySwap.io, a platform that allows response exchanges among researchers, that helped the survey reach a wider range of respondents with different academic and professional backgrounds. Additionally, Prolific Academic Platform was also used to recruit participants to further guarantee demographic diversity. Prolific allowed for targeted recruitment, removing the limitations of the original sample and improving its diversity.

For the qualitative Data analysis, eight active, female Instagram users with an interest in fashion content, were selected using a purposive sampling method. This decision was made for the following reasons. To first, match the primary demographics of the survey participants and ensure that participants engage with influencer content, making them ideal for an in-depth discussion on trust and authenticity. To increase their familiarity with AI influencers, participants were asked to follow Lil Miquela for two weeks prior to the interview. This allowed them to form a more informed opinion about her content, which enabled a more comprehensive discussion about parasocial interactions, authenticity and purchase intentions. The participants were informed beforehand that Lil Miquela is an AI Influencer.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

The data for the quantitative study was collected using a structured online survey on Qualtrics. (Appendix II)

Firstly, participants had to answer two filter questions to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. Later, they were asked some questions about their social media use and behavior on this platform. Participants were then randomly assigned to view either the Instagram profile of a

human influencer or that of an AI influencer. These profiles included realistic feeds, posts, comments, as well as a fashion product post to ensure that the stimuli were very similar to actual Instagram content. After viewing their assigned profile, participants answered questions about the influencer using validated scales to measure three constructs: Source Credibility, Perceived Authenticity and PSI.

Source credibility was measured using Ohanian's (1990) scale, which measures expertise ($\alpha=0.88$), trustworthiness ($\alpha=0.86$) and attractiveness ($\alpha=0.89$). This scale is known for its robustness in measuring perceptions of credibility in a marketing context. (Appendix I.1)

Perceived authenticity was measured using Moulard et al. (2015) scale ($\alpha=0.87$), which measures the perceived authenticity of the influencer's content. (Appendix I.2)

Parasocial interaction was measured using an adapted version of Lee and Jang's (2013) 7-item scale as described by Kim (2022). This scale has been shown to be highly reliable ($\alpha = .95$) and was selected due to its usefulness for measuring parasocial relationships in the context of platforms such as Instagram. The items, designed to capture the nature of PSI with social media influencers, were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). (Appendix I.3)

At the end of the survey, participants were asked for demographic information like age, gender, education level and occupation. This section allowed for a deeper analysis of participant characteristics. Qualtrics' flexibility ensures that the survey is executed randomly, which means that participants were assigned randomly to one of two experimental conditions.

For the qualitative analysis, data was collected via semi-structured interviews conducted online using Microsoft Teams. The interviews aimed to provide deeper insights into the findings of the quantitative study, particularly regarding trust and purchase intentions, which were not captured in the survey. Participants were encouraged to express their thoughts freely, allowing for a nuanced understanding of their perceptions of AI versus human influencers.

3.4 Experimental Design

The quantitative study followed a between-subjects experimental design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: to be exposed to either a human or an AI influencer on Instagram to make it possible to investigate how the type of influencer affects participants' perceptions of three constructs.

This approach ensures that each participant is exposed to only one condition, which minimizes the risk of bias that could occur if participants evaluated both influencer types. This design is especially suitable for measuring first impressions, a critical factor in influencer marketing where users often form a judgment based on first contact.

The qualitative study followed an exploratory approach and complemented the quantitative study by delving deeper into trust and purchase intentions, which had been identified as crucial factors in the literature review but not directly assessed in the survey. To gain more comprehensive insights, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who had been asked to follow Lil Miquela (the AI influencer) for two weeks prior to the interview. This longer period in contact with the AI influencer allowed for a more natural exploration of parasocial interactions and authenticity over time.

By combining both methods, this research ensures a comprehensive analysis of the impact of AI and human influencers on audience perceptions that goes beyond statistical trends and provides in-depth insights into consumer perceptions.

3.5 Procedure

The quantitative study was active online from the 11th to the 19th of November 2024. The average duration of responses, after removing outliers, was approximately 4:05 minutes. In total 258 people took part in the survey, of which 222 fully answered the questionnaire. Some respondents were eliminated according to the criteria described in section 3.2. After cleaning the dataset from respondents that didn't pass the screening questions, 199 participants were left for further analysis. Out of these participants, 99 were assigned to the Human Influencer and 100 participants were assigned to the AI Influencer.

The interviews were conducted between November 28 and December 1, 2024. A total of eight semi-structured online interviews were conducted, lasting between 10 and 27 minutes, with an average duration of 18.5 minutes. The participants were exclusively female students between the ages of 24 and 26, which corresponds to the main demographics of the respondents in the quantitative survey. This match ensured the consistency of the sample while allowing for a deeper exploration of their perceptions.

To ensure that respondents were familiar with the AI influencers' content, they were asked to follow Lil Miquela on Instagram for two weeks prior to the interviews. This contact allowed participants to form a more informed opinion, particularly in relation to parasocial interactions,

as they had more time to engage with the AI influencer's content than in the survey. Participants were asked questions about personal details of Lil Miquela to assess whether they had formed a parasocial connection with her over the two-week exposure period. The decision to focus solely on one AI influencer in the qualitative study was made to allow for comparison, as participants could naturally compare Lil Miquela to their favorite human fashion influencers, making the comparison more intuitive rather than introducing a completely unfamiliar human influencer. The interview questions focused on key topics such as trust, authenticity, emotional engagement and purchase intent. Participants were asked how they perceived Lil Miquela's content, how they felt about her recommendations and whether they connected with her. They were also asked to suggest how AI influencers could improve their credibility and engagement strategies.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

4.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

4.1.1 Descriptive Statistics

A total of 199 participants completed the survey, of which 125 were women (62.8%), 72 men (36.2%) and 2 participants (1.0%) who preferred not to state their gender. The average age of the participants was 26.5 years (SD=5.2), ranging from 18 to 45 years, with an average age of 24 years. Most participants were students (40%), 30% were in full-time employment. In terms of education, 50% had a bachelor's degree, 35% had a master's degree, and 15% had other educational backgrounds. Ninety-nine participants (50%) saw the human influencer, of which 2 participants (1.0%) reported knowing this influencer prior to the survey.

Table 1 Sample Characteristics

Variable	Categories	N	%
Gender	Female	125	62.8%
	Male	72	36.2%
	Prefer not to say	2	1.0%
Age (Mean, SD)	26.5 years (SD=5.2)		
Education	Bachelor's degree	99	50%
	Master's degree	70	35%
	Other	30	15%

A hundred participants (50%) saw the AI influencer of which 18 participants (9.0%) reported knowing this influencer prior to the survey. When it comes to Instagram usage, the participants showed a high level of engagement with Instagram, which was an important factor for increased validity and reliability of the study's results. 82.4% visited the platform several times a day, and 8.0% accessed it once a day. Less frequent use was rare, with a minimal percentage using the platform weekly or infrequently. The average frequency of use was 4.67 (SD = 0.816), meaning that most users used the platform daily. In terms of interacting with influencer content, almost 40% did so daily and 29.1% weekly. Fewer participants said they interacted monthly or rarely, and 7.0% never engaged with such content. The average frequency of interaction was

2.21 (SD = 1.305), reflecting moderate overall engagement, which is important for the results of this study. Authenticity proved to be an important factor in the evaluation of influencers: 45.2% rated it as “very important” and 30.7% as “extremely important”. Only a small proportion considered it to be of little or no importance. With an importance rating mean of 3.95 (SD = 0.966), authenticity is clearly a key factor for most participants. The participants reported engaging in a variety of activities on Instagram, with the most frequent being watching stories, selected by 79.4% of participants. This was closely followed by watching reels/videos (69.8%) and browsing posts (67.8%). Other common activities included engaging with friends (59.3%) and messaging friends (48.2%). Less frequently reported activities were following influencers (31.2%), posting personal content (22.6%), and engaging with brands (14.1%). The participants in the sample followed a diverse range of influencers on Instagram, with lifestyle influencers being the most popular category, followed by 62.3% of participants. Other commonly followed types included fashion influencers (49.7%), fitness influencers (46.7%), and food influencers (47.7%). Beauty influencers were followed by 43.2% of participants, while travel influencers were followed by 41.7%. Less commonly followed influencer types included technology influencers (14.6%), gaming influencers (16.6%), and those classified as other influencers (17.1%).

4.1.2 Evaluation of Scale Reliability

The scales used in this study demonstrated excellent internal consistency, ensuring the reliability of the measured constructs. The Source Credibility scale, consisting of 14 items across three sub-dimensions, showed high overall reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.945$). Each sub-dimension also showed high internal consistency: Attractiveness ($\alpha = 0.906$, 5 items), Trustworthiness ($\alpha = 0.942$, 4 items), and Expertise ($\alpha = 0.930$, 5 items).

The Perceived Authenticity scale, consisting of 3 items, demonstrated high reliability as well (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.941$). Similarly, the Parasocial Interaction (PSI) scale, which measured participants' perceived connection with the influencers across 7 items, showed also high internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.892$). (Appendix IV.1)

These high Cronbach’s Alpha values demonstrate that all scales used in this study are highly reliable and internally consistent across the sample. This suggests that the items within each scale cohesively measure their respective constructs, providing a robust foundation for further statistical analysis and interpretation of results. The excellent reliability also supports the

validity of using these scales to compare perceptions of AI and human influencers regarding the factors of Source Credibility, Perceived Authenticity, and Parasocial Interaction.

4.1.3 Correlations

The analysis revealed a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between the frequency with which participants visit Instagram and their assessment of influencers' competence ($r=0.142$). This suggests that people who often browse Instagram are slightly more likely to rate influencers as knowledgeable or competent. However, there were no significant relationships between the frequency of Instagram use and the other constructs such as source credibility, trustworthiness, attractiveness, or parasocial interaction.

Source Credibility was strongly positively correlated with its elements Trustworthiness ($r=0.828$), Attractiveness ($r=0.860$), and Expertise ($r=0.895$). Source Credibility showed strong positive correlations with its three sub-dimensions. These significant correlations suggest that these three dimensions are closely associated with Source Credibility, supporting their conceptual alignment within the construct. Furthermore, Source Credibility showed a strong positive correlation with Perceived Authenticity ($r=0.800$), which may indicate that influencers perceived as credible are also likely to be seen as authentic. Another correlation was found between Source Credibility and PSI ($r=0.628$), suggesting that influencers that are seen as highly credible are more likely to build parasocial connections with their audience. Perceived Authenticity was found to have a strong positive correlation with Trustworthiness ($r=0.856$), suggesting that influencers perceived as trustworthy are more likely to be considered authentic. Authenticity was also positively associated with Expertise ($r=0.655$) and Attractiveness ($r=0.588$). Furthermore, Perceived Authenticity showed a strong correlation with PSI ($r=0.727$), suggesting that influencers perceived as authentic are more likely to build parasocial connections with their followers.

When examining PSI, it was also strongly positively correlated with Trustworthiness ($r=0.692$), hinting that influencers that are perceived as trustworthy are more likely to build strong parasocial connections with their audience. A moderate positive relationship was observed between PSI and Expertise ($r=0.528$), while there was a weaker but still existing correlation between PSI and Attractiveness ($r=0.427$). These findings show that even though attractiveness contributes to parasocial interaction, it is less impactful when compared to trustworthiness and authenticity.

Table 2 Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. How often do you check Instagram?	1.000	0.083	0.025	0.034	0.142*	0.093	0.003
2. Source Credibility	0.083	1.000	0.828*	0.860*	0.895*	0.800*	0.628*
3. Trustworthiness	0.025	0.828*	1.000	0.568*	0.624*	0.856*	0.692*
4. Attractiveness	0.034	0.860*	0.568*	1.000	0.651*	0.588*	0.427*
5. Expertise	0.142*	0.895*	0.624*	0.651*	1.000	0.655*	0.528*
6. Perceived Authenticity	0.093	0.800*	0.856*	0.588*	0.655*	1.000	0.727*
7. Parasocial Interaction	0.003	0.628*	0.692*	0.427*	0.528*	0.727*	1.000

4.1.4 Hypotheses Testing

To test the hypotheses, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare perceptions of expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness for Human and AI Influencers. The grouping variable was Influencer Type, with two levels: human influencer and AI Influencer. The dependent variables were expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness. The human influencer group had n=99 participants and the AI Influencer group included n=100 participants. The sample sizes for both groups fit the assumptions of normality due to the Central Limit Theorem. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was conducted for each dependent variable to assess the assumption of homogeneity of variances. Where Levene's test was significant, t-values and degrees of freedom were adjusted accordingly. The results of the independent-samples t-tests were as follows:.

Starting with trustworthiness (**H1a**) the descriptive Statistics show that human influencers were rated higher in trustworthiness (M=4.35, SD=1.26) compared to AI Influencers (M=3.28,SD=1). The T-Test Results show that the difference was statistically significant (t(197)=5.45,p<.001). Moreover, a large effect size (d=0.772) was measured, showing a difference in perceived trustworthiness. These results provide strong support for H1a, confirming that AI influencers are perceived as significantly less trustworthy than human influencers.

For **H1b** attractiveness, the descriptive Statistics showed that human influencers were perceived as more attractive ($M=5.40$, $SD=0.89$) than AI Influencers ($M=3.68$, $SD=1.18$). The T-Test Results were highly significant ($t(183.50)=11.63$, $p<.001$). The effect size was very large ($d=1.648$), highlighting a distinct difference in attractiveness.

For the third hypothesis (**H1c**) expertise, the descriptive Statistics showed that human influencers scored higher in expertise ($M=5.32$, $SD=1.21$) compared to AI Influencers ($M=4.02$, $SD=1.51$). The difference was again statistically significant in the T-Test ($t(189.09)=6.67$, $p<.001$). And lastly, a large effect size ($d=0.945$) was observed, indicating a considerable difference in expertise.

Table 3 Group Statistics Influencer Type

Variable	Influencer Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Trustworthiness	Human Influencer	99	4.353	1.260	0.127
	AI Influencer	100	3.280	1.507	0.151
Attractiveness	Human Influencer	99	5.402	0.887	0.089
	AI Influencer	100	3.676	1.184	0.118
Expertise	Human Influencer	99	5.315	1.213	0.122
	AI Influencer	100	4.022	1.508	0.151

The findings indicate significant differences in perceptions of trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise between Human and AI Influencers. human influencers were perceived as significantly more trustworthy, attractive, and knowledgeable compared to their AI counterparts, with all differences demonstrating large or very large effect sizes. The hypothesis H1b is supported, showing that AI influencers are perceived as significantly less attractive.

Table 4 T-Test Results Hypothesis 1

Variable	Levene's Test (p)	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differe nce	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Trustworthiness	0.085	5.448	197	<0.001	1.074	0.685	1.462
Attractiveness	0.005	11.642	183.498	<0.001	1.726	1.433	2.019
Expertise	0.006	6.669	189.093	<0.001	1.293	0.911	1.676

To address the hypothesis H2 again independent-samples t-test was conducted as well as comparing perceptions of Authenticity using descriptive statistics. The results indicate that participants perceive human influencers (M = 5.07, SD = 0.92) as more authentic than AI influencers (M = 3.69, SD = 1.15). The standard error of the mean was smaller for human influencers (SE = 0.09) compared to AI influencers (SE = 0.12), suggesting more consistency in participants' ratings for human influencers.

Table 5 Descriptive statistics: Authenticity Hypothesis 2

Influencer Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Human Influencer	99	5.0714	0.92046	0.09251
AI Influencer	100	3.6864	1.15398	0.11540

The independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean perceived authenticity scores for human and AI influencers. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was significant ($F = 5.953$, $p = .016$), indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated. Therefore, the adjusted t-test values under "Equal variances not assumed" were used to interpret the results. The t-test showed a significant difference in perceived authenticity scores between human and AI influencers, $t(188.49) = 9.36$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed). The mean difference was 1.39 (SE = 0.15), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 1.09 to 1.68, indicating that participants perceived human influencers as significantly more authentic than AI influencers. Effect size analyses demonstrated a large difference between the groups, with Cohen's $d = 1.04$. This value suggests that the difference in perceived authenticity between human and AI influencers is substantial, with human influencers being rated as generally more authentic. The

findings provide strong support for H2, confirming that AI influencers are perceived as significantly less authentic than human influencers.

Table 6 T-Test Results Hypothesis 2

Variable	Levene's Test (p)	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differen ce	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Equal variances assumed	9.354	197	<.001	1.38500	0.14807	1.09300	1.67700
Equal variances not assumed	9.364	188.491	<.001	1.38500	0.14790	1.09325	1.67675

H3 was tested by using an independent samples t-test to compare the means of PSI for followers of human influencers versus AI influencers. The descriptive statistics reveal that for human influencers, the mean PSI score was 3.42 (SD = 1.28) and for AI influencers, the mean PSI score was 2.85 (SD = 1.25). These values suggest that parasocial interactions tend to be higher for followers of human influencers compared to AI influencers.

Table 7 Descriptive statistics: PSI Hypothesis 3

InfluencerType	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Human Influencer	99	3.42	1.28	0.13
AI Influencer	100	2.85	1.25	0.13

The result of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was $F = 0.039$, $p = 0.843$, indicating that the assumption of equal variances is not violated. Therefore, the t-test results under the "Equal variances assumed" row are interpreted. The results of the t-test showed that the difference in PSI between followers of human influencers and AI influencers is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), with followers of human influencers reporting significantly stronger parasocial interactions compared to AI influencers.

Table 8 T-Test Results Hypothesis 3

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
0.039	0.843	3.19	197	0.002

These findings support hypothesis H3, that parasocial interactions are weaker with AI influencers compared to human influencers. The significant difference, coupled with the large effect size, highlights the importance of human qualities in fostering parasocial relationships in the fashion industry.

4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

4.2.1 Introduction to Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative study was conducted to provide a deeper understanding of the findings of the quantitative study. The quantitative study helped understanding how the constructs source credibility, parasocial interactions, and authenticity are perceived differently by consumers when facing human vs AI influencers. However, the survey did not capture the elements of trust and purchase intention which we identified in the literature review and are important to understand the impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior. The results of the interviews allow a better understanding of the factors considered in the quantitative study namely by providing insights into emotional and psychological factors underlying respondents' opinions about AI and human influencers.

4.2.2 Interview Findings

The results of the interviews' analysis are structured according to recurring patterns identified in the participants' responses, reflecting key aspects of perceptions of influencer marketing. Although a fully systematic thematic analysis was not conducted, the approach used aimed to identify common themes and group them into meaningful categories to enable a structured comparison of perspectives. The core themes that follow were derived from the repeated mentions and sentiments expressed by respondents. This method ensures a coherent presentation of the results and captures both similarities and differences in interviewees' experiences.

Interviewees expressed a lack of trust in Lil Miquela due to her AI nature and the lack of perceived real-life experiences. Some participants expressed the opinion that Lil Miquela's behavior and appearance seems to be "curated" and "too perfect." Because human influencers frequently share real or flawed moments, like life struggles or behind-the-scenes content, this perfection created a barrier to trust. *Example:* One participant noted that Miquela's "perfect and unchanging appearance" made her feel more like a polished advertisement than an authentic individual. Participants were skeptical of the intentions behind Miquela's content. Many of them felt that her posts were scripted and driven by brand strategies rather than personal experiences or preferences. For *example*, one participant remarked that knowing that her content was AI-produced made it harder to trust her recommendations because she lacked a personal perspective on the products. Moreover, while some interviewees found aspects of Miquela's activism (e.g., posts about sustainability or social issues) authentic, others viewed these efforts as brand-driven rather than genuine. *Example:* A participant said, "It's nice that she mentions sustainability, but it feels more like a marketing tool than a personal value."

Emotional Engagement and Parasocial Relationships

Building emotional connections with Lil Miquela proved to be difficult for participants due to her AI identity and limited engagement. Almost all participants mentioned that Miquela's lack of frequent posts in the two weeks of following her, as well as her minimal engagement, for example not replying to comments of her followers, hindered emotional connections. *Example:* One participant noted, "If she posted more often and shared a narrative, like a storyline, it would feel more personal and engaging." Contrasting to human influencers, who often share personal stories during the day and engage directly with followers, Miquela's interactions were described as impersonal and distant. This lack of "realness" made it difficult for the participants to form parasocial bonds. *Example:* A participant said, "I feel connected to ChatGPT because it interacts with me directly, but Miquela doesn't do that, so she feels distant." Despite these barriers, some interviewees showed openness to connecting with Miquela if she increased her activity and embraced a more interactive and consistent online presence.

AI Nature

The perceptions of Miquela as an AI identity were mixed, with both positive and negative opinions. Many participants found Miquela's AI identity innovative, acknowledging her potential to bring creativity into the fashion industry. However, participants struggled to align Miquela's AI identity with the expectations of authenticity and relatability that are central to

influencer marketing. Her lack of real-life experiences was a repeated barrier to trust. *Example:* a participant said, “She should lean into her AI identity instead of pretending to be human - it would make her more relatable in her own way.”

Purchase Intention

Miquela’s ability to influence purchase decisions was limited by a lack of perceived credibility and personal experience with the products that she recommends. For example, most participants were hesitant to trust Miquela’s product recommendations, because her AI nature meant she could not physically test or experience the items. They expressed a preference for human influencers who could provide real-life validation of products. *Example:* One participant stated, “I wouldn’t trust her judgment on quality because she can’t try the products herself.” Still, some participants noted that Miquela’s curated aesthetic could influence their interest in visually appealing products, such as clothing or accessories. *Example:* A participant mentioned, “If the product aligns with my style and looks great visually, I might consider buying it, but I wouldn’t rely only on her recommendation.” The participants suggested that collaborations with human influencers or transparency about the rationale behind her recommendations could enhance trust and credibility.

The Role of AI Influencers in the Fashion Industry

Participants viewed AI influencers as complementary to human influencers, with some strengths and some limitations. They believed AI influencers like Miquela could complement human influencers by focusing on innovative aspects of fashion, such as virtual styling, sustainability activism or trend prediction. *Example:* A participant suggested that Miquela could “experiment with fashion concepts that aren’t yet available in the real world.” There was a consensus that AI influencers cannot replace human influencers, as humans create emotional and relatable connections. Participants highlighted the importance of combining the strengths of both human and AI Influencers to create a balanced approach. *Example:* One participant remarked, “AI influencers can’t replicate the relatability of human experiences, but they can bring something new.”

Relatability and Engagement: Participant Recommendations

Participants provided some recommendations for improving Miquela’s relatability. Most of the participants suggested to post more frequently and consistently to build a sense of presence and connection. They also said that Miquela should highlight her AI nature to differentiate herself

rather than attempting to mimic human influencers. Moreover, some participants recommended partnering with human influencers to validate her recommendations and provide a balance of perspectives. Furthermore, there was the opinion that tools like polls, Q&A sessions, or direct replies would support two-way communication with followers and help building a deeper connection. Creating a fictional storyline would help to make her presence more engaging.

The findings show that while Lil Miquela has potential as an innovative and visually inspiring AI influencer, there are significant barriers to building trust, emotional engagement and purchase intent. These barriers mainly come from her AI identity, her limited activity and her lack of relatability. However, participants identified clear opportunities for improvement, suggesting that by using her unique strengths and overcoming her limitations, Miquela and other AI Influencers could play a significant role in the fashion industry alongside human influencers.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpretation of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The results of this study provide a deep understanding of how AI and human influencers on Instagram are perceived by consumers. These findings highlight important differences between the two types of influencers, offering insights into the mechanisms underlying consumer trust, engagement, and purchase intentions

The quantitative analysis showed that human influencers performed better in all three dimensions of source credibility: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. This finding aligns with previous literature emphasizing that consumers tend to associate credibility with real-life experiences and relatable human qualities (Baudier et al., 2023).

The interview data reinforced this perspective, with participants often highlighting that the perceived expertise of human influencers comes from their personal use and understanding of products, which significantly influences trust. Several interviewees also noted that the imperfections of human influencers, such as occasional mistakes or unscripted content, made them appear more likable and authentic, further enhancing their credibility. Even though the AI influencer was rated highly in terms of attractiveness, which could be due to their crafted, visually appealing appearance, they showed lower trustworthiness and expertise due to their artificial and non-human nature meaning AI influencers still pose a challenge to credibility. The perceived authenticity of AI influencers was another significant challenge. Both the quantitative and qualitative studies results demonstrated that human influencers were perceived as significantly more authentic than their AI counterparts. Participants associated authenticity with genuine, unscripted content and the ability to relate to influencers on a personal level. Authenticity was a repeated topic in the interviews and explains the survey results in more depth. Participants expressed skepticism about the ability of AI influencers to be authentic, often citing the curated and controlled nature of their content. While some appreciated the creativity and novelty of AI influencers, others felt that their lack of personal narratives made it difficult to trust their recommendations. In contrast, participants credited human influencers for their ability to share relatable content and authentic life experiences, especially in their daily stories, reinforcing trust and credibility. The study also showed that AI influencers tend to build significantly weaker parasocial interactions (PSI) compared to human influencers. In the interviews, respondents often described human influencers as relatable and emotionally accessible, which helped develop parasocial bonds. This aligns with previous research by

Sokolova and Kefi (2020), which found that PSI contributes to stronger consumer trust and purchase intentions. Moreover, the findings of our study suggest that AI influencers struggle to replicate the emotional connection established by human influencers. AI influencers were perceived as less appealing on a personal level, and participants noted that the lack of relatable experiences made it difficult to build a meaningful relationship with them, ultimately reducing consumers' trust in their recommendations.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This dissertation complements the findings of Lee et al. (2024) by adding depth to the understanding of parasocial interactions, which were less investigated in their study. For example, Lee et al. noted that virtual influencers tend to form weaker parasocial bonds due to their artificial nature but did not examine the psychological mechanisms behind this phenomenon. In contrast, our study integrates qualitative findings from interviews in which participants described human influencers as “approachable” and “like friends” due to their personal stories and interactive engagement that fostered trust and bonding.

This study adds to the theoretical understanding of influencer marketing, especially in distinguishing between AI and human influencers in terms of trust, authenticity and parasocial interaction. The results provide information that expands on extant theories and frameworks by focusing on concepts like parasocial interactions, authenticity, and source reliability.

Our findings confirm the relevance of the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) for explaining consumer perceptions of opinion leaders. This model assumes that credibility consists of three dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. The results of our study show that human influencers outperform AI influencers in terms of expertise and trustworthiness, while AI influencers outperform in attractiveness, which could be explained by their digitally flawless looks. These findings are consistent with those of Baudier et al. (2023), who emphasize that while AI influencers can use their perfection in visual appeal, they struggle with the lack of real-world experience and emotional connection needed to build trust and perceived expertise. This suggests that visual appeal alone is insufficient for fostering trust and engagement in influencer marketing. Moreover, these findings expand upon the work of Baudier et al. (2023), who suggested that perceived humanity can increase the trustworthiness of AI influencers, by emphasizing the role of relatability in trust-building in the context of fashion marketing through storytelling, spontaneity, and emotional engagement. This adds further insight to the Source Credibility Model by suggesting that perceived authenticity may

function as an underlying driver of trustworthiness and expertise and this may be different when applied to AI or human influencers in the fashion industry.

It is recognized that authenticity is a key component of trust in influencer marketing (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The results of this study highlight the difficulties AI influencers have when communicating authenticity. This is supported by Feng et al. (2023), who argue that consumers view AI influencers as less authentic because of their lack of emotional spontaneity and real-life experiences. The qualitative interviews demonstrated that authenticity is closely linked to storytelling, spontaneity, and personal engagement - elements that AI influencers currently struggle to replicate. This contributes to the broader discussion on digital marketing, emphasizing that perceived authenticity is not just about how real an influencer looks but how emotionally engaging and relatable they are to their audience.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the ongoing discussion of parasocial interactions in influencer marketing. The concept of parasocial interactions, which was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), is essential to understanding the relationships between consumers and influencers. This study confirms the findings of Sokolova and Kefi (2020), who showed that stronger PSIs lead to increased trust and higher consumer engagement. The results show that human influencers build deeper PSIs because of their ability to share personal stories and engage directly with their followers. For AI influencers, the study points out a gap in their ability to generate PSI. While Mrad et al. (2022) suggest that anthropomorphic traits can enhance the authenticity and trustworthiness of AI influencers, this study shows that these traits alone are not enough to match the engagement that human influencers achieve due to the emotional depth of human relationships. PSI appears to be driven by continuous, meaningful engagement and shared personal experiences - elements that AI influencers currently struggle to provide. Our results suggest that the lack of emotional spontaneity and relatable experiences limits the extent to which AI influencers can generate feelings of trust and connection in the fashion industry, even in visual and interactive contexts like Instagram.

This study also adds to the theoretical understanding of influencer marketing in the fashion industry, in which aesthetics play a central role (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). While previous research has focused primarily on the general dynamics of influencer marketing (Lou & Yuan, 2019), this study emphasizes the unique challenges and opportunities associated with the use of AI influencers in a fashion context. The findings show that authenticity and trust are especially important in this context, where consumers rely on influencers to provide genuine

recommendations and believable representations of fashion products. Finally, this study challenges the assumption that technological advancements alone can fully compensate for the lack of perceived authenticity. Even as AI influencers improve in realism, they still struggle to replicate the trust and emotional connection that human influencers establish. This insight adds to the theoretical discussion on digital marketing by highlighting the ongoing importance of human relationships, even in an increasingly digitized marketplace.

5.3 Practical Implications

This study offers important practical insights for marketers considering AI influencers for their campaigns, especially in the fashion industry. The findings underscore the critical factors of source credibility, authenticity and parasocial interactions in shaping consumer trust and engagement, offering actionable guidance for optimizing influencer marketing strategies.

While AI influencers present advantages such as controlled messaging, visually appealing content, and consistency in brand representation, their lack of authenticity and emotional connection remains a significant limitation. Our study's findings showed that human influencers consistently scored higher in expertise and trustworthiness, while AI influencers stand out for their visual appeal due to their carefully curated digital personas. Marketers should use these differences to shape their campaigns. When a campaign requires a strong sense of trust and expert advice, such as in fashion marketing, human influencers are ideal. They can share personal experiences that demonstrate how products fit into their everyday lives, which builds credibility. In contrast, AI influencers are best suited for concept-driven campaigns that focus on striking visuals or aim to reach tech-savvy audiences who appreciate innovation and aesthetics. Their flawless, engaging content works well in high-fashion editorials, futuristic product displays, or digital fashion collections. Aligning influencer selection with campaign objectives allows brands to optimize impact and consumer engagement.

Building authenticity is essential for consumer trust, and our study confirmed that human influencers are much stronger in this area than AI influencers. Human influencers naturally create authenticity by sharing personal stories, behind-the-scenes content, and unscripted moments that their audience finds credible and relatable. For example, a fashion brand could collaborate with a human influencer to document real-life experiences with a new collection, emphasizing honesty and everyday wearability. While AI influencers cannot mimic the real-life experiences of their human counterparts, they can still build a connection through transparency and engagement strategies. Being upfront about their digital nature rather than

attempting to imitate human influencers can help reduce consumer skepticism, as noted by Wills (2019). As some interviewees in our study suggested, embracing their AI identity might improve consumer perceptions by setting realistic expectations. Additionally, AI influencers can build authenticity by maintaining consistent engagement, such as responding to comments and integrating interactive features like Q&A sessions. By mirroring the active posting frequency of human influencers, they could create a closer connection with followers. These strategies make sure that both human and AI influencers enhance trust in different ways, making them valuable in distinct but complementary roles in influencer marketing.

Parasocial interactions play an important role in creating consumer engagement and the study confirms that human influencers develop stronger connections with their audience. Direct engagement, such as replying to comments, hosting live sessions and sharing follower-generated content, strengthens trust and brand loyalty. Although AI influencers may not evoke the same emotional bonds, they can still engage audiences through interactive storytelling and visually striking campaigns. For AI influencers to be more effective, brands should focus on using immersive visuals, gamification, and augmented reality (AR) features to create engaging experiences. By using these digital strengths, AI influencers can capture attention and drive engagement even without traditional human-like emotional connections.

In the fashion industry, where visual appeal and emotional connection are key, the findings suggest tailored strategies for different influencer types. Human influencers should remain the foundation for campaigns that emphasize trust and relatability. Their strength lies in modeling products in everyday situations, making them ideal for promoting wearable fashion and lifestyle collections. AI influencers are better suited for campaigns that highlight innovation, exclusivity and digital-forward fashion. They can be particularly effective in virtual fashion presentations, NFT fashion collaborations, or futuristic high-end collections that appeal to tech-driven audiences. By integrating AI influencers into niche or experimental campaigns, brands can capitalize on their novelty while relying on human influencers for their ability to establish emotional connections.

A hybrid strategy can help brands maximize the benefits of both influencer types. Short-term brand awareness campaigns can use AI influencers to generate buzz through visually captivating content, AI-generated fashion try-ons, or futuristic product showcases. Long-term engagement and loyalty-building should rely on human influencers to provide in-depth product reviews, testimonials, and interactive engagement that foster consumer trust. For example, a

fashion brand launching a new collection could use an AI influencer to create eye-catching promotional visuals, followed by human influencers to document real-life styling experiences and deepen consumer trust. By using both influencer types strategically, brands can create more impactful, well-rounded marketing campaigns.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provides valuable insights into the role of AI and human influencers in fashion marketing, it has several limitations that must be acknowledged. These limitations provide important context for interpreting the results and highlight areas for future research.

The first limitation is that the study sample consisted primarily of younger Instagram users who are already familiar with influencer culture. This demographic bias may limit the generalizability of the results, as older individuals or those less engaged with social media may perceive AI and human influencers differently. In addition, participants were largely from a single cultural context, which may have influenced their perceptions of authenticity, trust and emotional connection. Cultural differences in the evaluation of influencer credibility and parasocial relationships should be further investigated in different geographical settings.

Secondly, a key component of the source credibility model is attractiveness, which is subjective by nature. The human influencers selected in this study displayed Asian characteristics, which may not resonate equally with all participants depending on their cultural background and personal preferences. Conversely, the AI influencer was designed with minimal anthropomorphic features, potentially reducing comparability and affecting attractiveness scores. This imbalance in physical and cultural attributes between AI and human influencers may have led to biases, particularly in participants' evaluation of source credibility and parasocial interactions. Future research should investigate how specific characteristics, such as anthropomorphic traits, language interactions or cultural cues, influence trust, authenticity and parasocial relationships. For example, comparing a highly anthropomorphic AI influencer with localized traits to a more generic AI influencer could provide valuable insights into audience engagement.

Furthermore, the study was conducted in the highly visual and aesthetic context of fashion marketing on Instagram. While this provides valuable insights into the dynamics of influencers in the fashion industry, the results may not be fully transferable to other industries where other

factors influence consumer behavior. In industries such as technology, healthcare or finance, where functionality and expertise may be more important, consumers may evaluate AI and human influencers differently. Future research could investigate how perceptions of influencers vary across different industries and platforms.

Another limitation of this study's methodology was that participants were exposed to pre-selected and curated influencer content rather than given the opportunity to interact organically with influencers. This controlled environment cannot fully capture the nuanced and evolving dynamics of interactions between influencers and followers in real-world scenarios. In practice, continuous engagement, real-time communication and long-term exposure can significantly influence consumer perceptions. Future studies could use longitudinal designs or real-time engagement tracking to better capture these dynamics.

Finally, the AI influencer used in this study was designed with minimal anthropomorphic features and generic aesthetics. This may have influenced participants' ability to identify with her and impacted perceived authenticity and trustworthiness. Future research could investigate the impact of different AI design elements such as varying degrees of anthropomorphism, voice interaction or real-time adaptive engagement on consumer perceptions. Studying AI influencers with different cultural identities and more advanced interaction capabilities could provide deeper insight into their effectiveness.

Despite the study's findings, some scholars argue that AI influencers might not need authenticity in the same way human influencers do. Instead, their effectiveness may lie in their ability to maintain consistency and control over branding, reducing the risks associated with human influencers (Thomas & Fowler, 2021). Additionally, AI influencer technology is still evolving. Future advancements in AI-driven emotional intelligence and real-time interaction capabilities may enable AI influencers to develop stronger connections with their audiences. As AI becomes more sophisticated, it is possible that consumer perceptions of authenticity and trust will shift, necessitating further investigation.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This study investigated the differences between AI and human influencers on Instagram, specifically in terms of trust, perceived authenticity, parasocial interactions and their influence on purchase intentions in the fashion industry. By using a mixed methods approach that combined quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from in-depth interviews, this research provided a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of AI influencers compared to their human counterparts.

The results confirm that human influencers are clearly superior to AI influencers in the three dimensions of source credibility: Expertise, Trustworthiness and Attractiveness. Consumers perceive human influencers as more authentic, primarily due to their ability to share personal experiences and engage with real-life narratives. The results also show that parasocial interactions are significantly stronger with human influencers, confirming previous research linking emotional connection to trust and purchase intent. These findings highlight the challenge for AI influencers to build meaningful connections with their audiences, despite their ability to create visually engaging content.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributed to the growing research in influencer marketing by validating and extending key concepts such as source credibility and authenticity in the context of AI influencers. It emphasized the importance of relatability and real-world experience in digital influencing and showed that the technological sophistication of AI influencers alone is not enough to replicate the trust-building capabilities of human influencers.

Regarding practical implications, our findings provided significant insights for fashion brands and marketers. While AI influencers offer benefits such as control, brand alignment and innovative engagement strategies, they are not yet a replacement for human influencers when it comes to building trust and authenticity in the fashion industry. Marketers should consider a hybrid approach.

In conclusion, while AI influencers are an intriguing innovation in influencer marketing, human influencers remain the dominant force in fostering trust, authenticity and consumer engagement. Brands should strategically integrate AI influencers alongside human influencers, rather than trying to replace them entirely. As AI continues to evolve, its role in digital marketing is likely to increase, but the fundamental human elements of trust and emotional connection will continue to be critical in shaping consumer behavior in the fashion industry.

References

- Arsenyan, J., & Mirowska, A. (2021). Almost human? A comparative case study on the social media presence of virtual influencers. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 155, 102694. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2021.102694>
- Baudier, P., De Boissieu, E., & Duchemin, M.-H. (2023). Source Credibility and Emotions generated by Robot and Human Influencers: The perception of luxury brand representatives. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 187, 122255. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2022.122255>
- Belanche, D., Flavián, M., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2020). Followers' reactions to influencers' Instagram posts. *Spanish Journal of Marketing - ESIC*, 24(1), 37–54. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SJME-11-2019-0100>
- Bizjak Zabukovec, B., & Faganel, A. (2024). The Issue of Scales for Measuring Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationship between Followers and Influencers on Social Media. *Sustainability*, 16(17), 7782. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16177782>
- Boerman, S. C. (2020). The effects of the standardized instagram disclosure for micro- and meso-influencers. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 103, 199–207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.09.015>
- Campbell, C., Sands, S., Ferraro, C., Tsao, H.-Y. (Jody), & Mavrommatis, A. (2020). From data to action: How marketers can leverage AI. *Business Horizons*, 63(2), 227–243. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2019.12.002>
- Choudhry, A., Han, J., Xu, X., & Huang, Y. (2022). “I Felt a Little Crazy Following a ‘Doll’”: Investigating Real Influence of Virtual Influencers on Their Followers. *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.*, 6(GROUP), 43:1-43:28. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3492862>

- Davenport, T., Guha, A., Grewal, D., & Bressgott, T. (2020). How artificial intelligence will change the future of marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 48(1), 24–42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-019-00696-0>
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035>
- Dijkmans, C., Kerkhof, P., Buyukcan-Tetik, A., & Beukeboom, C. J. (2015). Online Conversation and Corporate Reputation: A Two-Wave Longitudinal Study on the Effects of Exposure to the Social Media Activities of a Highly Interactive Company: Online Conversation And Corporate Reputation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 20(6), 632–648. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12132>
- Dixon, S. J. (2024, May 22). *Instagram users worldwide 2025*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183585/instagram-number-of-global-users/>
- Djafarova, E., & Bowes, T. (2021a). ‘Instagram made Me buy it’: Generation Z impulse purchases in fashion industry. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 59, 102345. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102345>
- Djafarova, E., & Bowes, T. (2021b). ‘Instagram made Me buy it’: Generation Z impulse purchases in fashion industry. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 59, 102345. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102345>
- Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities’ Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 68, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.009>

- Dodds, W., Monroe, K., & Grewal, D. (1991). Effects of Price, Brand, and Store Information on Buyers' Product Evaluations. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3172866>
- Feng, Y., Chen, H., & Xie, Q. (2023). AI Influencers in Advertising: The Role of AI Influencer-Related Attributes in Shaping Consumer Attitudes, Consumer Trust, and Perceived Influencer-Product Fit. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2023.2284355>
- Giffin, K. (1967). The contribution of studies of source credibility to a theory of interpersonal trust in the communication process. *Psychological Bulletin*, 68(2), 104–120. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0024833>
- Gomes, M. A., Marques, S., & Dias, Á. (2022). The impact of digital influencers' characteristics on purchase intention of fashion products. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 13(3), 187–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2022.2039263>
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes*, 19, 215–229.
- Hovland, C. I., Janis, I. L., & Kelley, H. H. (1953). *Communication and Persuasion: Psychological Studies of Opinion Change*. ResearchGate. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-09923-7_5
- Joseph, W. B. (1982). The Credibility of Physically Attractive Communicators: A Review. *Journal of Advertising*, 11(3), 15–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1982.10672807>
- Kietzmann, J., Paschen, J., & Treen, E. (2018). Artificial Intelligence in Advertising: How Marketers Can Leverage Artificial Intelligence Along the Consumer Journey. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 58, 263–267. <https://doi.org/10.2501/JAR-2018-035>

- Kim, H. (2022). Keeping up with influencers: Exploring the impact of social presence and parasocial interactions on Instagram. *International Journal of Advertising*, 41(3), 414–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1886477>
- Kleinman, Z. (2019, August 24). *Instagram influencers: Have we stopped believing?* <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-49450655>
- Lee, E., Lee, J.-A., Moon, J. H., & Sung, Y. (2015). Pictures Speak Louder than Words: Motivations for Using Instagram. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, 18, 552–556. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2015.0157>
- Lee, J. A., Sudarshan, S., Sussman, K. L., Bright, L. F., & Eastin, M. S. (2015). Why are consumers following social media influencers on Instagram? Exploration of consumers' motives for following influencers and the role of materialism. *International Journal of Advertising*, 41(1), 78–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1964226>
- Löffler, D., Schmidt, N., & Tscharn, R. (2018). Multimodal Expression of Artificial Emotion in Social Robots Using Color, Motion and Sound. *Proceedings of the 2018 ACM/IEEE International Conference on Human-Robot Interaction*, 334–343. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3171221.3171261>
- Lou, C., Kiew, S. T. J., Chen, T., Lee, T. Y. M., Ong, J. E. C., & Phua, Z. (2023). Authentically Fake? How Consumers Respond to the Influence of Virtual Influencers. *Journal of Advertising*, 52(4), 540–557. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2022.2149641>
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>
- Mazzarolo, A., Mainardes, E., & Innocencio, F. (2021). Antecedents and consequents of user satisfaction on Instagram. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-08-2020-0370>

- McGinnies, E., & Ward, C. D. (1980). Better liked than right: Trustworthiness and expertise as factors in credibility. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 6(3), 467–472.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/014616728063023>
- Mishra, S., & Ashfaq, D. R. (2023). *Influencer Impact: Examining the Effect of Influencers on Consumer Behavior and Purchase*. 1(1).
- Mori, M., MacDorman, K., & Kageki, N. (2012). The Uncanny Valley [From the Field]. *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine*, 19(2), 98–100.
<https://doi.org/10.1109/MRA.2012.2192811>
- Moustakas, E., Lamba, N., Mahmoud, D., & Ranganathan, C. (2020). Blurring lines between fiction and reality: Perspectives of experts on marketing effectiveness of virtual influencers. *2020 International Conference on Cyber Security and Protection of Digital Services (Cyber Security)*, 1–6.
<https://doi.org/10.1109/CyberSecurity49315.2020.9138861>
- Mrad, M., Ramadan, Z., & Nasr, L. I. (2022). Computer-generated influencers: The rise of digital personalities. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 40(5), 589–603.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-12-2021-0423>
- Ohanian, R. (1990). Construction and Validation of a Scale to Measure Celebrity Endorsers' Perceived Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness. *Journal of Advertising*, 19(3), 39–52.
- Rakoczy, M., Bouzeghoub, A., Gańczarski, A., & Wegrzyn-Wolska, K. (2018). *In the Search of Quality Influence on a Small Scale – Micro-influencers Discovery: Confederated International Conferences: CoopIS, C&TC, and ODBASE 2018, Valletta, Malta, October 22-26, 2018, Proceedings, Part II* (pp. 138–153). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02671-4_8

- Riedl, J., & Luckwald, L. von. (2019). Effects of Influencer Marketing on Instagram. *Open Science Publications*.
- Sands, S., Campbell, C. L., Plangger, K., & Ferraro, C. (2022). Unreal influence: Leveraging AI in influencer marketing. *European Journal of Marketing*, 56(6), 1721–1747. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-12-2019-0949>
- Sheldon, P., & Bryant, K. (2016). Instagram: Motives for its use and relationship to narcissism and contextual age. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 58, 89–97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.059>
- Silva, M., Delfino, L., Cerqueira, K., & de Oliveira Campos, P. (2022). Avatar marketing: A study on the engagement and authenticity of virtual influencers on Instagram. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-022-00966-w>
- Singh, P., Sharma, B. K., Arora, L., & Bhatt, V. (2023). Measuring social media impact on Impulse Buying Behavior. *Cogent Business & Management*, 10(3), 2262371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2023.2262371>
- Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2020). Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 53, 101742. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.01.011>
- Statista. (2024). *Influencer-Marketing: Ausgaben von Unternehmen weltweit bis 2024*. Retrieved October 14, 2024, from <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1325021/umfrage/ausgaben-von-unternehmen-fuer-influencer-marketing-weltweit/>
- Su, B.-C., Wu, L.-W., Chang, Y.-Y.-C., & Hong, R.-H. (2021). Influencers on Social Media as References: Understanding the Importance of Parasocial Relationships. *Sustainability*, 13(19), 10919. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131910919>

- Thomas, V. L., & Fowler, K. (2021a). Close Encounters of the AI Kind: Use of AI Influencers As Brand Endorsers. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(1), 11–25.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2020.1810595>
- Thomas, V. L., & Fowler, K. (2021b). Close Encounters of the AI Kind: Use of AI Influencers As Brand Endorsers. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(1), 11–25.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2020.1810595>
- Torregrosa Puig, M., Sánchez-Blanco, C., Sanmiguel, P., & Pérez, J. (2023). *Instagram: Digital Behavior in Luxury Fashion Brands* (pp. 14–26). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38541-4_2
- Wilke, B. (2023). *Are you being influenced?*
- Wills, K. (2019, March 7). *Meet Lil Miquela: The AI influencer taking over Instagram*. The Standard. <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/lil-miquela-ai-influencer-instagram-a4084566.html>
- Yan, F., Iliyasu, A. M., & Hirota, K. (2021). Emotion space modelling for social robots. *Engineering Applications of Artificial Intelligence*, 100, 104178.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.engappai.2021.104178>
- Yan, J., Xia, S., Jiang, A., & Lin, Z. (2024). The effect of different types of virtual influencers on consumers' emotional attachment. *Journal of Business Research*, 177, 114646.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114646>
- Yu, C.-E., Xie, S. Y., & Wen, J. (2020). Coloring the destination: The role of color psychology on Instagram. *Tourism Management*, 80, 104110.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2020.104110>
- Yu, J., Dickinger, A., So, K. K. F., & Egger, R. (2024). Artificial intelligence-generated virtual influencer: Examining the effects of emotional display on user engagement. *Journal of*

Retailing and Consumer Services, 76, 103560.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103560>

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Scales

I.1 Source Credibility Scale

Ohanian (1990)

Category	Positive Attribute	Negative Attribute
Attractiveness	Attractive	Unattractive
	Classy	Not Classy
	Beautiful	Ugly
	Elegant	Plain
	Sexy	Not Sexy
Trustworthiness	Dependable	Undependable
	Honest	Dishonest
	Reliable	Unreliable
	Sincere	Insincere
	Trustworthy	Untrustworthy
Expertise	Expert	Not an Expert
	Experienced	Inexperienced
	Knowledgeable	Unknowledgeable
	Qualified	Unqualified
	Skilled	Unskilled

I.2 Perceived Authenticity Scale

Moulard et al. (2015)

Construct (Cronbach Alpha, Composite Reliability, Variance Extracted ^a)	Measure ^{b,c} (Item Loading ^{d,e})
Celebrity authenticity (0.87, 0.87, 0.70)	Is genuine (0.86) Seems real to me (0.84) Is authentic (0.81)

I.3 Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Scale

Adapted version of Lee and Jang's (2013) 7-item scale as described by Kim (2022).

(1) I think I can understand what kind of person she is

(2) I feel comfortable with her, like I'm with a friend

- (3) I see her as a natural, down-to-earth person
- (4) I can relate to her
- (5) If an article about her appeared in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it
- (6) I would like to meet her in person
- (7) I feel like I've known her for a long time.

Appendix II: Survey Questionnaire

Start of Block: Introduction

Introduction Dear Participant, Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research study on social media influencers. This study is part of my Master's dissertation at Católica Lisbon, and it aims to explore how consumers perceive and interact with influencers on Instagram. **The survey will take approximately 5 - 7 minutes to complete.** Your responses are completely confidential, and your privacy is a priority. All individual data will be securely stored and only analyzed in aggregated form. I appreciate your time and contribution to my research. Sincerely, Jana Dennenmoser _____ P.S: This survey contains credits to get free survey responses at SurveySwap.io

End of Block: Introduction

Start of Block: Screening Question 1

Q1 Do you have an Instagram account?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

End of Block: Screening Question 1

Start of Block: Screening Question 2

Q2 Do you follow at least one influencer on Instagram?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

End of Block: Screening Question 2

Start of Block: Social Media Usage Questions

Q3 How often do you check Instagram?

- ☐ Rarely (1)
 - ☐ Once a week (2)
 - ☐ Several times a week (3)
 - ☐ Once a day (4)
 - ☐ Several times a day (5)
-

Q4 What is your main activity on Instagram? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Browsing posts (1)
 - ☐ Watching Stories (2)
 - ☐ Following influencers (3)
 - ☐ Engaging with brands (4)
 - ☐ Engaging with friends (5)
 - ☐ Posting personal content (6)
 - ☐ Watching Reels/Videos (7)
 - ☐ Messaging friends (8)
-

Q5 How frequently do you interact with influencer content on Instagram?

- ☐ Daily (1)
- ☐ Weekly (2)
- ☐ Monthly (3)
- ☐ Rarely (4)
- ☐ Never (5)
-

Q6 What types of influencers do you mostly follow on Instagram? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Fashion (1)
- ☐ Beauty (2)
- ☐ Fitness (3)
- ☐ Lifestyle (4)
- ☐ Technology (5)
- ☐ Travel (6)
- ☐ Food (7)
- ☐ Gaming (8)
- ☐ Other (9) _____
-

Q7 How important is it to you that an influencer seems 'authentic'?

- ☐ Not at all important (1)
- ☐ Slightly important (2)
- ☐ Moderately important (3)
- ☐ Very important (4)
- ☐ Extremely important (5)
-

Q8 In the context of Instagram, what does it mean to you for an influencer to be 'authentic'?

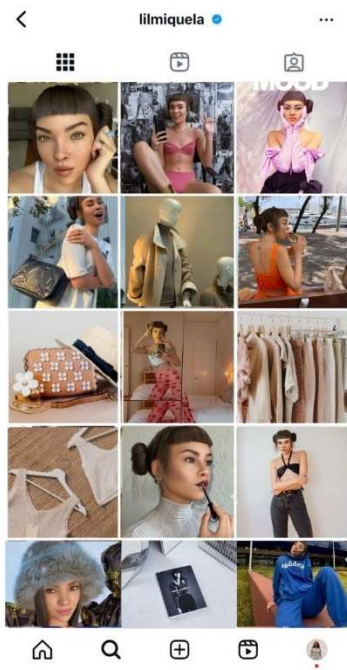
End of Block: Social Media Usage Questions

Start of Block: Stimuli Presentation Influencer (Randomly assigned to Group HI or Group AI)

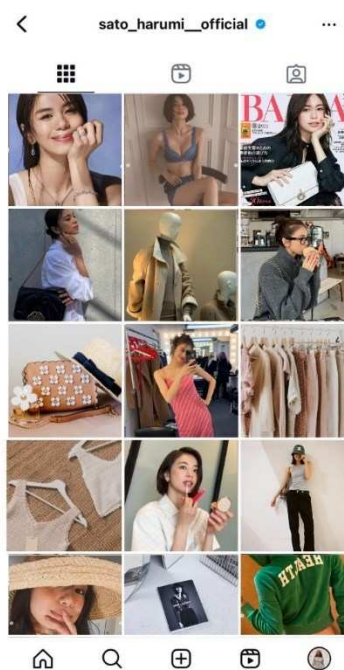
Group HI: Q9 (A-F) "Meet Sato Harumi (Instagram: @sato_harumi__official), a popular human influencer and fashion enthusiast who shares her style, brand collaborations, and lifestyle moments with a growing Instagram audience. Harumi **is known for her chic fashion choices and her engaging presence on social media, where she showcases the latest trends and products.** In the following section, you will see a selection of her Instagram posts. **Please take a moment to analyze these posts and observe how Sato Harumi engages with her followers and presents fashion items. As you explore her content, consider the personality she conveys and how authentic she appears. You will be asked questions about this next.**

Group AI: Q10 "Meet Miquela (Instagram: @lilmiquela), a prominent virtual influencer in the fashion world. Unlike traditional influencers, **Lil Miquela is a digital character designed to interact with her audience through a blend of computer-generated imagery and carefully crafted social media posts. Lil Miquela collaborates with well-known fashion brands, showcasing the latest trends and products to her followers.** In the following section, you will see some of her Instagram posts. **Please take a moment to analyze these posts and pay attention to how Lil Miquela engages with her audience and presents fashion items. Think about the impression you get of her personality and how authentic she appears as you review her content. You will be asked questions about this next.**

Q9A



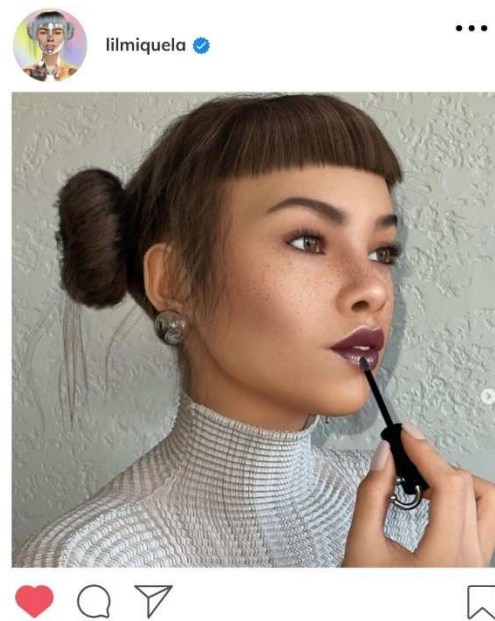
Q10A



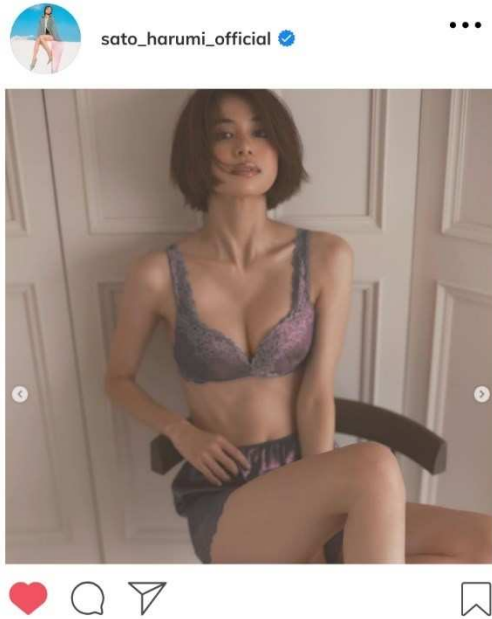
Q9B



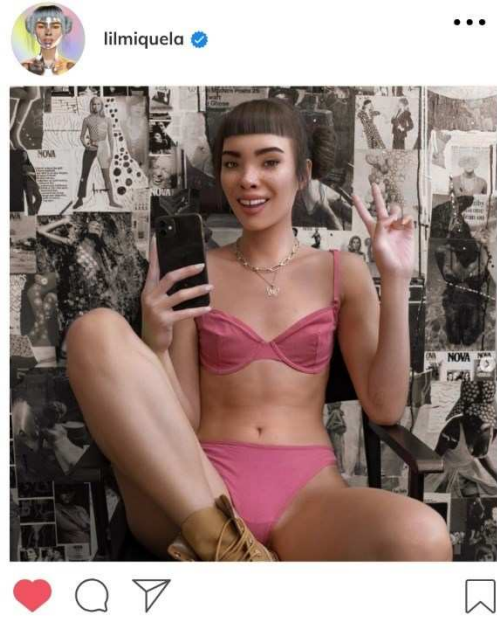
Q10B



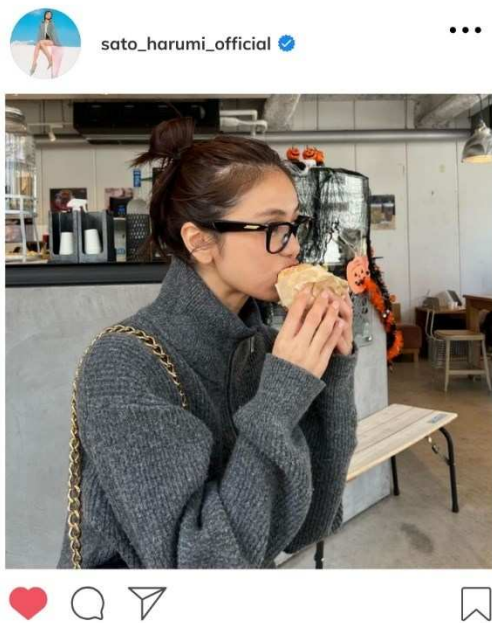
Q9C



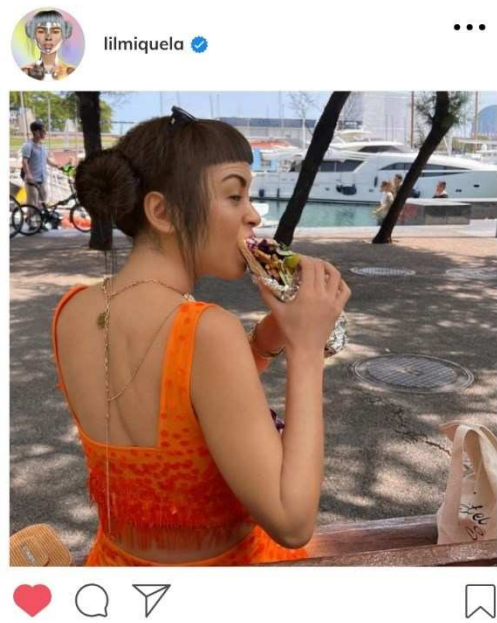
Q10C



Q9D



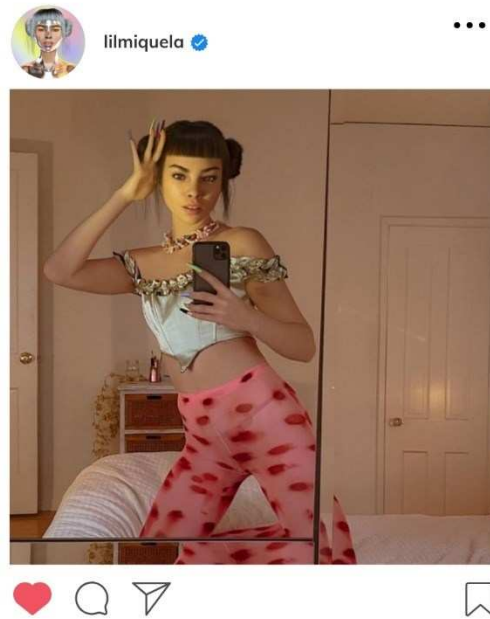
Q10D



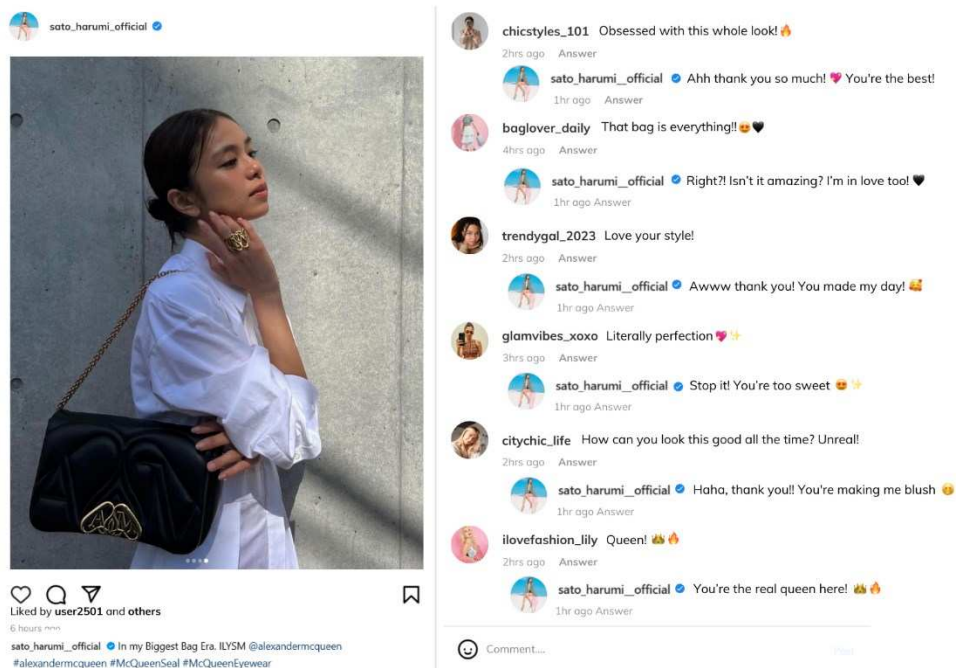
Q9E



Q10E



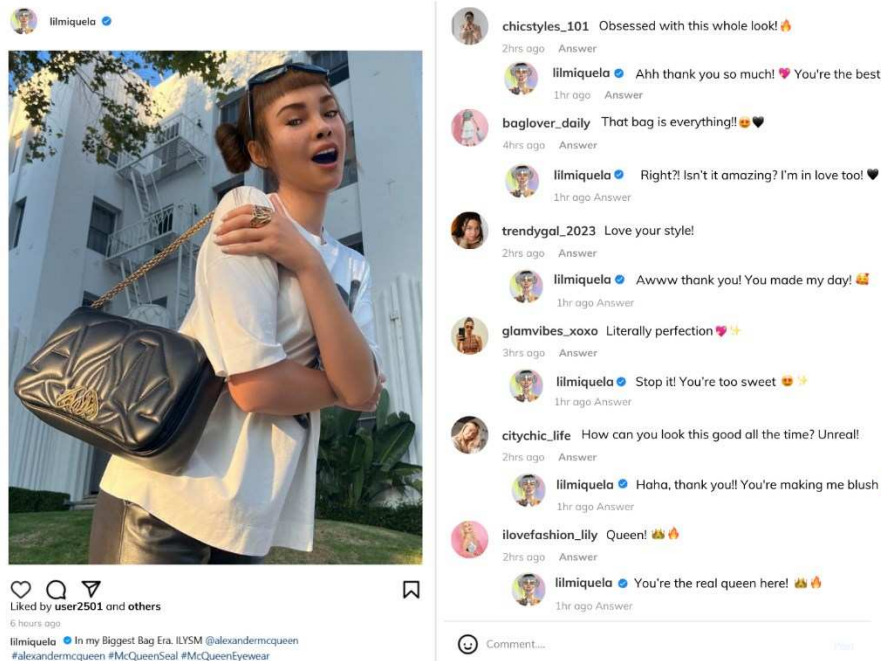
Q9F Please pay special attention to this post and the respective comments and interactions from the followers with the influencer (you may need to zoom the image to read the comments)



QHUMAN Having viewed the influencer's posts, feed, and comments, do you think you have enough info to answer questions based on your own impressions and opinions?? (question to know who had HI)

☐ Yes (1)

Q10F Please pay special attention to this post and the respective comments and interactions from the followers with the influencer (you may need to zoom the image to read the comments)



End of Block: Stimuli Presentation Influencer

Start of Block: Influencer Rating

Q11 Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

1 = Unattractive, 7 = Attractive	
1 = Not Classy, 7 = Classy	
1 = Ugly, 7 = Beautiful	
1 = Plain, 7 = Elegant	
1 = Not Sexy, 7 = Sexy	
1 = Dishonest, 7 = Honest	
1 = Unreliable, 7 = Reliable	
1 = Insincere, 7 = Sincere	
1 = Untrustworthy, 7 = Trustworthy	
1 = Not an Expert, 7 = An Expert in fashion and latest trends	
1 = Inexperienced, 7 = Experienced in her domain	
1 = Unknowledgeable, 7 = Knowledgeable about the contents that she posts	
1 = Unqualified, 7 = Qualified in the domain of fashion and latest trends	
1 = Unskilled, 7 = Skilled in her domain	

Q12 Rate each statement on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means 'Strongly Disagree' and 7 means 'Strongly Agree'.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

"This influencer seems genuine to me."	
"This influencer seems real to me."	
"This influencer seems authentic to me."	

Q13 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the influencer.

	Strongly disagree (6)	Disagree (7)	Somewhat disagree (8)	Neither agree nor disagree (9)	Somewhat agree (10)	Agree (11)	Strongly agree (12)
I think I can understand what kind of person she is. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
She makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I see her as a natural, down-to-earth person. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I can relate to her. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If there were a story about her in a newspaper or a magazine, I would read it. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would like to meet her in person. (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel as if I have known her for a long time. (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q36 Did you know this influencer before seeing them in this survey?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

End of Block: Influencer Rating

Start of Block: Final Demographic and Debriefing Section

Q14 Almost there! Just a few more questions about you. Thank you for completing the survey this far!

Q15 What is your age?

☐ Under 18 years (1)

☐ 18–25 years (2)

☐ 26–35 years (3)

☐ 36–45 years (4)

☐ 46–55 years (5)

☐ 56–65 years (6)

☐ Over 65 years (7)

Q16 What is your gender?

- ☐ Male (1)
 - ☐ Female (2)
 - ☐ Non-binary / Prefer not to say (3)
-

Q17 What is your current occupation?

- ☐ Employed full-time (1)
 - ☐ Employed part-time (2)
 - ☐ Self-employed (3)
 - ☐ Unemployed (4)
 - ☐ Student (5)
 - ☐ Apprentice (6)
 - ☐ Other (Please specify) (7)
-

Q18 Please select your highest level of education completed

- ☐ No school diploma (1)
- ☐ High school diploma / Abitur (or equivalent) (2)
- ☐ Bachelor's degree (3)
- ☐ Master's degree (4)
- ☐ Doctorate or Professional degree (5)
- ☐ Vocational/Technical certification (e.g., Ausbildung) (6)
- ☐ Other (7)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (8)
-

country In which country do you currently live in?

▼ Afghanistan (1) ... Zimbabwe (1357)

End of Block: Final Demographic and Debriefing Section

Appendix III: Descriptive Statistics

***Note on SPSS Output Presentation:**

For space efficiency and in adherence to the 30-page limit, I have consolidated data from multiple SPSS tables into a single handwritten table where possible. This approach ensures that key descriptive statistics are presented while maintaining clarity.

To facilitate transparency, I have included the necessary **descriptive tables** below, allowing for a direct comparison with the survey coding and enabling verification of the reported means. If additional SPSS output is required for further validation, I am happy to provide it upon request.

Sample Characteristics

Variable	Categories	N	%
Gender	Female	125	62.8%
	Male	72	36.2%
	Prefer not to say	2	1.0%
Age (Mean, SD)	26.5 years (SD=5.2)		
Education	Bachelor's degree	99	50%
	Master's degree	70	35%
	Other	30	15%
Occupation	Student	80	40%
	Full-time employment	60	30%
	Other	60	30%

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
What is your age?	199	1	7	2.61	.993
What is your gender?	199	1	3	1.73	.487
What is your current occupation? - Selected Choice	199	1	7	3.25	1.919
Please select your highest level of education completed	199	2	7	3.16	.966
Valid N (listwise)	199				

III.2 Instagram Usage Patterns

Variable	Categories	N	%
Instagram Frequency	Several times a day	164	82.4%
	Once a day	16	8.0%
	Several times a week	11	5.5%
	Once a week	5	2.5%

Interaction with Influencers	Rarely	3	1.5%
	Daily	79	39.7%
	Weekly	58	29.1%
	Monthly	17	8.5%
	Rarely	31	15.6%
Importance of Authenticity	Never	14	7.0%
	Not at all important	5	2.5%
	Slightly important	12	6.0%
	Moderately important	31	15.6%
	Very important	90	45.2%
	Extremely important	61	30.7%

III.3 Influencer Exposure & Prior Knowledge

Variable	Categories	N	%
Influencer Type Seen	Human Influencer	99	50%
	AI Influencer	100	50%
Prior Knowledge	Knew Human Influencer	2	1.0%
	Knew AI Influencer	18	9.0%

Did you know this influencer before seeing them in this survey?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	20	10.1	10.1	10.1
	No	179	89.9	89.9	100.0
	Total	199	100.0	100.0	

LII. 4 Instagram Activities

Activity	N	% of Cases
Watching Stories	158	79.4%
Watching Reels/Videos	139	69.8%
Browsing Posts	135	67.8%
Engaging with Friends	118	59.3%
Messaging Friends	96	48.2%
Following Influencers	62	31.2%
Posting Personal Content	45	22.6%
Engaging with Brands	28	14.1%

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
What is your main activity on Instagram? (Select all that apply) Browsing posts	199	0	1	.68	.468
What is your main activity on Instagram? (Select all that apply) Watching Stories	199	0	1	.79	.405
What is your main activity on Instagram? (Select all that apply) Following influencers	199	0	1	.31	.464
What is your main activity on Instagram? (Select all that apply) Engaging with brands	199	0	1	.14	.349
What is your main activity on Instagram? (Select all that apply) Engaging with friends	199	0	1	.59	.493
What is your main activity on Instagram? (Select all that apply) Posting personal content	199	0	1	.23	.419
What is your main activity on Instagram? (Select all that apply) Watching Reels/Videos	199	0	1	.70	.460
What is your main activity on Instagram? (Select all that apply) Messaging friends	199	0	1	.48	.501
Valid N (listwise)	199				

LII-5 Influencer Types Followed

Influencer Type	N	% of Cases
Lifestyle	124	62.3%
Fashion	99	49.7%
Food	95	47.7%
Fitness	93	46.7%
Beauty	86	43.2%
Travel	83	41.7%

Technology	29	14.6%
Gaming	33	16.6%
Other	34	17.1%

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
What types of influencers do you mostly follow on Instagram? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice Fashion	199	0	1	.50	.501
What types of influencers do you mostly follow on Instagram? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice Beauty	199	0	1	.43	.497
What types of influencers do you mostly follow on Instagram? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice Fitness	199	0	1	.47	.500
What types of influencers do you mostly follow on Instagram? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice Lifestyle	199	0	1	.62	.486
What types of influencers do you mostly follow on Instagram? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice Technology	199	0	1	.15	.354
What types of influencers do you mostly follow on Instagram? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice Travel	199	0	1	.42	.494
What types of influencers do you mostly follow on Instagram? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice Food	199	0	1	.48	.501
What types of influencers do you mostly follow on Instagram? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice Gaming	199	0	1	.17	.373
What types of influencers do you mostly follow on Instagram? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice Other	199	0	1	.17	.377
Valid N (listwise)	199				

Appendix IV: Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha & Item Statistics)

IV.1 Cronbach's Alpha for Each Scale

Attractiveness

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.906	5

Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Unattractive, 7 = Attractive	17.9799	29.757	.822	.873
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Not Classy, 7 = Classy	18.0854	30.281	.741	.890
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Ugly, 7 = Beautiful	17.5829	29.891	.831	.872
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Plain, 7 = Elegant	18.2161	30.049	.758	.887
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Not Sexy, 7 = Sexy	18.8291	30.637	.680	.904

Trustworthiness

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.942	4

Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Dishonest, 7 = Honest	11.3568	20.231	.859	.925
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Unreliable, 7 = Reliable	11.4824	19.998	.882	.918
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Insincere, 7 = Sincere	11.3869	20.945	.825	.935
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Untrustworthy, 7 = Trustworthy	11.5427	19.977	.879	.918

Expertise

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.930	5

Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Not an Expert, 7 = An Expert in fashion and latest trends	18.9497	36.503	.811	.915
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Inexperienced, 7 = Experienced in her domain	18.5578	37.480	.819	.913
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Unknowledgeable, 7 = Knowledgeable about the contents that she posts	18.5427	37.734	.820	.913
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Unqualified, 7 = Qualified in the domain of fashion and latest trends	18.6985	36.202	.846	.908
Please rate how you perceive the influencer in the post you just viewed. - 1 = Unskilled, 7 = Skilled in her domain	18.5578	38.106	.779	.920

Perceived Authenticity

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.941	3

Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Rate each statement on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means 'Strongly Disagree' and 7 means 'Strongly Agree'. - "This influencer seems genuine to me."	7.2312	13.552	.851	.935
Rate each statement on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means 'Strongly Disagree' and 7 means 'Strongly Agree'. - "This influencer seems real to me."	7.4673	11.988	.879	.914
Rate each statement on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means 'Strongly Disagree' and 7 means 'Strongly Agree'. - "This influencer seems authentic to me."	7.3317	12.182	.907	.890

PSI

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.892	7

Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the influencer. - I think I can understand what kind of person she is.	17.99	66.929	.470	.901
Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the influencer. - She makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend.	18.78	59.729	.758	.867
Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the influencer. - I see her as a natural, down-to-earth person.	18.63	58.799	.771	.865
Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the influencer. - I can relate to her.	18.95	60.013	.763	.867
Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the influencer. - If there were a story about her in a newspaper or a magazine, I would read it.	18.66	61.285	.610	.887
Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the influencer. - I would like to meet her in person.	18.94	60.103	.737	.870
Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the influencer. - I feel as if I have known her for a long time.	19.70	63.543	.745	.871

Appendix V: Interview Script & Findings

V.1 Interview Guide

Section 1: Introduction and Participant Context

Objective: To set the context and understand participants' background in relation to social media usage and influencer engagement.

1. Can you describe your typical interaction with fashion-related content on Instagram?
Rationale: Understand participant engagement with fashion influencers, which provides context for their responses.
 2. How do you usually decide to follow a fashion influencer?
Rationale: Identifies criteria for influencer credibility and attraction.
 3. What are your initial impressions of Michaela (the AI influencer)?
Rationale: Collects first impressions that influence trust and perceived authenticity.
-

Section 2: Perceived Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Objective: Explore how trust and authenticity are formed or hindered by AI influencers.

4. What aspects of Michaela's content feel authentic to you? What feels less authentic?
Rationale: Pinpoints factors contributing to authenticity perceptions.
 5. If you learned that Michaela's content is entirely curated by AI, how does that affect your trust in her recommendations?
Rationale: Assesses the role of AI transparency in trust.
 6. How does Michaela's appearance and behavior compare to human influencers in terms of building trust?
Rationale: Evaluates whether visual or behavioral traits impact trust differently for AI vs. human influencers.
-

Section 3: Parasocial Interactions and Emotional Engagement

Objective: Investigate how participants connect emotionally with Michaela compared to human influencers.

7. Do you feel connected to Michaela as a person? Why or why not?
Rationale: Explores parasocial connections, a critical factor in trust-building.
 8. Have you ever interacted with Michaela's content (e.g., likes, comments)? What motivated you to do so?
Rationale: Examines behavioral responses and emotional engagement.
 9. In what ways do you think Michaela's interactions could feel more genuine?
Rationale: Identifies gaps in emotional engagement from the participant's perspective.
-

Section 4: Purchase Intentions

Objective: Assess factors driving or hindering the likelihood of purchasing based on Michaela's recommendations.

10. Would you consider buying a fashion item recommended by Michaela? Why or why not?

Rationale: Directly addresses purchase intention and its underlying motivators.

11. What would make you more inclined to trust Michaela's product recommendations?

Rationale: Identifies actionable factors influencing purchase intentions.

12. How does the fact that Michaela is an AI influencer affect your willingness to purchase compared to a human influencer?

Rationale: Uncovers perceived differences between AI and human influencers in shaping purchase decisions.

Section 5: Improvements and Future Engagement

Objective: Gain insights into participant expectations for AI influencers.

13. What specific changes would make Michaela feel more trustworthy or relatable?

Rationale: Collects constructive feedback for improving AI influencer strategies.

14. In your opinion, what role should AI influencers play in the fashion industry?

Rationale: Explores broader perceptions of AI influencers' potential and limitations.

15. Would you prefer following Michaela or a human influencer for fashion advice? Why?

Rationale: Gauges overall preference and the reasoning behind it.

Conclusion

- Ask if there's anything else they'd like to add about their experience with Michaela or AI influencers in general.
- Thank the participant for their time and insights.

V.2 Summary of Findings

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Sub-Themes</i>	<i>Representative Quotes (summarized)</i>
<i>Trustworthiness</i>	Lack of human imperfections	"Her appearance is too perfect—it doesn't feel real or relatable."
	Scripted and brand-driven content	"Knowing her content is AI-driven makes her recommendations feel like advertisements rather than genuine advice."

<i>Emotional Engagement</i>	Attempts at authenticity	"I liked when she talked about sustainability, but it felt more like a marketing tool than a personal value."
	Limited activity and interaction	"If she posted more often and replied to comments, it would help build a connection."
	Barriers to parasocial interactions	"I feel connected to ChatGPT because it interacts with me directly, but Miquela doesn't, so she feels distant."
	Potential for connection	"If she posted regularly and shared more of her life, it would help followers feel connected."
<i>Purchase Intention</i>	Skepticism toward AI recommendations	"I wouldn't trust her judgment on quality because she can't try the products herself."
	Influence on visual-based products	"If the product aligns with my style and looks great visually, I might consider it."
	Suggestions for improving credibility	"Collaborations with human influencers could validate her recommendations."
<i>AI in Fashion</i>	Complementary role to human influencers	"AI influencers could experiment with fashion concepts that aren't yet available in the real world."
	Limitations in replacing humans	"They can't replicate the relatability of human experiences."
<i>Recommendations</i>	Increased posting and activity	"She doesn't post enough to build a narrative or presence."
	Embracing AI identity	"She should lean into her AI identity instead of pretending to be human."
	More interaction and transparency	"Replying to comments or creating a storyline that followers can get invested in would make her feel more genuine."