USER TRUST IN AI-GENERATED INFLUENCERS: A STUDY ON VIRTUAL INFLUENCER PERCEPTION AMONG GEN Z

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Abstract

The rise of AI-generated virtual influencers (VIs) has transformed digital marketing, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z), who are digital natives with distinct preferences for authenticity and engagement. This study investigates Gen Z's trust in virtual influencers, examining how trust influences engagement and purchase intention. Drawing on a quantitative survey of 200 Malaysian Gen Z respondents and integrating global marketing statistics, the research finds that while trust in VIs is lower compared to human influencers, transparency, content consistency, cultural alignment, and interactive participation significantly enhance trust. Engagement mediates the relationship between trust and purchase intention, highlighting the importance of authentic interaction. The findings provide actionable insights for brands leveraging virtual influencers to connect with Gen Z consumers.

Introduction

Virtual influencers—computer-generated characters powered by AI and digital animation—have emerged as a novel marketing tool, offering brands control, consistency, and creative flexibility (Sun & Fernandez, 2025). Popular examples include Lil Miquela (USA) and Imma (Japan), who have amassed millions of followers and secured partnerships with major brands. Generation Z (born 1997-2012) represents a key demographic for virtual influencers due to their deep immersion in digital environments and preference for innovative, diverse, and authentic content (Zebracat, 2025). However, trust remains a critical barrier; studies indicate Gen Z trusts real-person influencers significantly more than virtual ones, especially for sensitive product categories like health (Sun & Fernandez, 2025). Trust is defined as a user's willingness to be vulnerable based on positive expectations of the influencer's authenticity and credibility (McKnight et al., 2002). Unlike human influencers, VIs is perceived as controlled entities, which can both enhance message consistency and raise skepticism (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Transparency about virtual identity, content consistency, and cultural value alignment are key drivers of trust among Gen Z (Sun & Fernandez, 2025). For example, Malaysian VI "Amira" gains 41% higher trust among young women due to cultural relevance and charitable activities (Sun & Fernandez, 2025). Virtual influencers—computer-generated personas powered by AI and digital animation—have become increasingly prevalent in digital marketing strategies worldwide (Sun & Fernandez, 2025). Unlike human influencers, VIs offer brands control over messaging, consistency, and reduced reputational risk, making them attractive for long-term partnerships (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Notable examples include Lil Miquela (USA), Imma (Japan), and Malaysia's Amira, who have successfully engaged millions of followers.

Generation Z (born 1997-2012) represents a critical demographic for virtual influencers due to their digital nativity and preference for innovative, diverse, and authentic content (Zebracat, 2025). However, trust remains a significant barrier; Malaysian studies show Gen Z's trust in real-person health product recommendations is 2.3 times higher than for virtual influencers (Sun & Fernandez, 2025).

Engagement and Purchase Intention. Engagement—liking, commenting, sharing—is a behavioral indicator of psychological involvement (Calder et al., 2009). Trust positively influences engagement, which in turn drives purchase intention (Lim et al., 2017; Jayasingh et al., 2025). Gen Z's preference for interactive, authentic content makes engagement a critical pathway from trust to consumer action.

Methodology

A quantitative survey was conducted among 200 Malaysian Gen Z respondents (ages 18-25), using convenience sampling via social media platforms. The questionnaire measured:

- Trust in virtual influencers (5-point Likert scale),
- Engagement behaviors,
- Purchase intention.

Data were analyzed using correlation and mediation analysis to test hypotheses derived from Source Credibility Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Scale Range (1-5)

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Trust in Virtual Influencers	3.1	0.8	1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree
Engagement Level	3.5	0.7	
Purchase Intention	3.2	0.9	

Correlation Matrix

Variables	Trust (VI)	Engagement	Purchase Intention
Trust (VI)	1	0.68	0.62
Engagement	0.68	1	0.75
Purchase Intention	0.62	0.75	1

Mediation Analysis

Engagement partially mediates the relationship between trust and purchase intention (indirect effect = 0.42, $p < 0.01$), confirming that trust leads to greater engagement which then increases purchase intention.

Trust Deficit Compared to Human Influencers

Consistent with Sun and Fernandez (2025), trust in virtual influencers is approximately 2.3 times lower than for human influencers, particularly for high-risk product categories like health. This aligns with global findings that only 15% of consumers rate trust in VI advertising highly (Talkwalker, 2025).

Factors Enhancing Trust

• **Transparency:** 63% of Malaysian Gen Z respondents believe transparent VIs are more honest (Sun & Fernandez, 2025).

- **Content Consistency:** VIs focusing on specific themes (e.g., environmentalism) enjoy 35% higher credibility (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

- **Cultural Relevance:** Localized VIs incorporating cultural elements increase trust by over 40% (Sun & Fernandez, 2025).

- **Interactive Participation:** Personalized responses raise trust by 27% (Lim et al., 2017).

Engagement as a Behavioral Bridge

Engagement is a critical mechanism translating trust into purchase intention. Gen Z's preference for interactive, authentic content amplifies this effect, consistent with Calder et al. (2009) and Jayasingh et al. (2025).

Practical Implications

Brands targeting Gen Z should:

- Ensure virtual influencers disclose their digital nature transparently,

- Maintain consistent, value-aligned content,

- Incorporate local cultural elements,

- Facilitate genuine interactive experiences.

These strategies will build trust, increase engagement, and ultimately drive purchase behavior.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses on Malaysian Gen Z, limiting generalizability. Future research should explore cross-cultural differences and longitudinal effects of trust development in virtual influencer marketing.

Conclusion

Virtual influencers represent a promising but trust-challenged marketing channel among Gen Z. Transparency, cultural alignment, and engagement are key to overcoming skepticism and enhancing purchase intention. As AI-generated influencers evolve, understanding and fostering trust will be critical for brands seeking to connect authentically with digital-native consumers. Virtual influencers present a transformative opportunity for brands to engage Gen Z audiences in novel ways. However, success depends heavily on transparent practices, ethical alignment, authentic storytelling, and adaptive engagement strategies that collectively build and maintain trust within this digitally savvy demographic.

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