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Reassessing the Marketing Value of Virtual Influencers: Consumer Impact, Strategic Effectiveness, and Ethical Implications

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Abstract-- Artificial intelligence is changing how brands communicate online by introducing virtual influencers—digitally created characters that appear on social media. These figures are completely made by computers and are carefully controlled by brands or marketing teams. Even though they are becoming more common, there isn't much research on how they affect people's behavior or raise ethical issues. This study looks at how virtual influencers influence consumer interaction, build trust, and affect buying decisions. It also checks if ethical concerns hurt the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. Data was gathered from 200 regular social media users and analyzed using SPSS with methods like reliability checks, correlation, and multiple regression. The results show that trust is the main factor that leads to buying, but doubts about ethics lower trust. While virtual influencers can be very engaging, their success largely depends on being open and seeming real. This study gives new ideas about using AI in branding and suggests ways to use them responsibly.

Keywords — AI influencers, brand communication, consumer trust, digital marketing innovation, ethical advertising, purchase behavior,

I. INTRODUCTION

Technology is changing marketing in a big way, and one big change is the rise of virtual influencers. These are AI-created digital characters that have social media profiles and work with brands to promote products. They look and act like real people, but they're entirely made by computers.

Companies are starting to like virtual influencers because they're easy to control, they don't have personal issues, and they can be made to fit a brand's image exactly. But since they're not real, there are worries about how genuine they seem, whether they're being honest, and if they might be tricking people into buying things.

Even though more and more brands are using virtual influencers, there isn't much real research on how effective they are or what ethical problems they might cause. This study looks at how people feel about virtual influencers and what ethical issues come up from using them.

II. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

A. Digital Influencer Marketing in Transition

Influencer marketing used to depend on real people being trustworthy and relatable. Over time, social media personalities became the main influencers, replacing traditional celebrities. Now, virtual influencers are changing things again by using AI to create personas that are more controlled and consistent.

B. Trust as a Determinant of Consumer Response

Trust is important for how consumers react online. People are more likely to buy from someone they think is knowledgeable and honest. With virtual influencers, trust might be harder to build because people know they're not real.

C. Ethical Sensitivity in AI-Based Advertising

Using AI in ads brings up new ethical issues like whether the influencer's identity is clear, if the images are unrealistic, and if the messaging is subtle enough to manipulate. If people are confused about these things, they might not trust the ad and the brand.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study aimed to:

- Understand how much people interact with virtual influencers.
- Find out how trust affects the decision to buy.
- Discover how ethical concerns influence trust and behavior.
- Check how effective virtual influencers are in marketing.

IV. HYPOTHESES FORMULATION

Based on the theory, the study proposed these ideas:

H1: People who engage with virtual influencers are more likely to buy something.

H2: Trust in virtual influencers makes people more likely to buy.

H3: Ethical concerns lower trust.

H4: Ethical concerns reduce the chance of buying.

H5: Engagement helps build trust.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The study used a quantitative approach to find out how different factors are connected.

B. Sample Characteristics

Data was collected from 200 people aged 18 to 35 who were active on social media and knew about influencer marketing. The sample was chosen based on convenience.

C. Measurement Scale

A questionnaire with a 5-point scale was used.

It had 16 questions covering four areas:

- Engagement
- Trust
- Purchase Intention
- Ethical Concerns

VI. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The data was analyzed using SPSS software.

The methods included checking if the results were reliable, describing the data, testing for relationships between variables, and making models to predict the outcomes.

A. Reliability Assessment

The reliability scores for all areas were above 0.70, showing that the measurements were consistent and trustworthy.

Construct	Alpha Value
Engagement	0.81
Trust	0.78
Purchase Intention	0.84
Ethical Concerns	0.76

B. Descriptive Overview

Engagement had the highest average score ($M = 4.02$), showing that people are really engaged with virtual influencer content. Ethical concerns were also high ($M = 3.88$), showing some doubts. Trust ($M = 3.21$) and purchase intention ($M = 3.45$) were in the middle range.

C. Correlation Findings

Pearson's correlation showed:

- Trust and purchase intention had a strong positive link ($r = 0.62$).
- Engagement and purchase intention had a moderate positive link ($r = 0.48$).
- Ethical concerns and trust had a significant negative link ($r = -0.55$).

All these links were statistically significant at $p < .01$.

D. Regression Results

A multiple regression analysis was done with purchase intention as the main outcome.

Model Summary:

$$R^2 = 0.52$$

This means 52% of the change in purchase intention is explained by engagement, trust, and ethical concerns.

- Trust ($\beta = 0.45, p < .001$)
- Engagement ($\beta = 0.28, p < .01$)
- Ethical Concerns ($\beta = -0.31, p < .001$)

Trust was the biggest factor affecting the purchase intention.

VII. DISCUSSION

The results show that while virtual influencers are good at getting attention, ethical issues can greatly reduce trust, which makes the marketing less effective. The findings suggest that just being new or trendy isn't enough to convince people. Consumers are now more focused on honesty and authenticity in online communication. Campaigns that don't clearly explain they use AI might make the brand seem less trustworthy.

VIII. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study offers some useful ideas for managers:

- Being clear about using AI in creating virtual influencers can help build trust.



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- Ethical practices should be part of any promotional activities.
- Using both human and virtual influencers together may help build trust.
- Having rules or policies for AI-based advertising can make consumers feel more confident.

IX. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study has some limitations because it used a non-probability sampling method and followed a cross-sectional design. For future research, using experimental methods or comparing across different cultures could be helpful. Using advanced methods like Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) might help confirm cause-and-effect relationships more clearly.

X. CONCLUSION

Virtual influencers are a new and technology-driven part of influencer marketing.

They can generate a lot of engagement, but trust is important in deciding whether people will make a purchase. How people view the ethics of these influencers greatly affects their response, showing that being honest in AI-based brand messaging is really important. As digital marketing uses more artificial intelligence, being ethically responsible will be important for long-term success.

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