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Social Media Engagement and the Rise of Virtual Influencers: A Study focuses on customers' perception, relatability, and brand affiliation.

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Paper ID: ICEBTM-25-1121

Abstract - **This research paper examines how consumers perceive virtual influencers and to what extent these perceptions influence customers' perceptions, brand recognition, and relatability, ultimately leading to increased engagement. As hyper-realistic and computer-generated roles emerge as the newest trends in social media branding, the psychological and emotional effects they have on consumers' perceptions and relatability continue to be a subject of limited research. This study identifies the characteristics of virtual influencers, including relatability, credibility, emotional resonance, and brand value compatibility, to evaluate their impact on shaping consumers' engagement with social media advertising. This study will employe a quantitative research approach, a structured questionnaire, to collect primary data regarding customers' engagement with virtual influencers on three parameters. We expect this study to find a correlation between social media engagement and customers' perceptions, relatability, and brand loyalty. Although virtual influencers can optimize brand narratives, they often lack the emotional intensity necessary to establish trust and foster long-term consumer engagement. However, when these virtual images align with brand values and exhibit perceived authenticity, they can also foster positive consumer-brand relationships through familiarity, credibility, and the element of relatability. Furthermore, apart from addressing gaps in existing research, such as considering relativity as an emergent dimension, this research also responds to the call of advertisers to consider these factors simultaneously while formulating AI-based marketing strategies. Additionally, further research can be conducted into additional influences and evolving technologies that continue to reshape how people engage with brands online.**

Keywords: **Virtual-Influencers, Consumer-perception, Brand-affiliation, Relatability, Engagement**

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has changed not just where people find brands, but also who or what can influence them. In recent years, digital studios and companies have created virtual influencers carefully designed, computer-generated characters that feature on platforms alongside real creators. These avatars offer creative control, round-the-clock availability, and the ability to scale campaigns. However, they also raise important questions about authenticity, emotional connection, and consumer trust. Early successes in marketing demonstrate real potential, but research on how everyday users perceive and interact with these virtual figures remains limited.

This paper brings together current research to explore how three related factors, relatability, credibility, and alignment with brand values, influence social media engagement with virtual influencers. Instead of presenting new survey findings, the study reviews and combines recent empirical evidence from SSRN-hosted working papers and other scholarly research to provide a clearer picture of existing knowledge and discussions. By examining this new technology in a less-explored regional context, the paper aims to clarify when virtual influencers enhance consumer-brand relationships and where they do not. The rest of the paper explains the method used for the literature review, presents combined findings, discusses their implications for marketers and regulators, and suggests areas for future research.

II. BACKGROUND / PROBLEM

The fast and rapid growth of social media has seen to transform the consumer brand relationships, and creating a marketplace where consumers engagement which is built on relatability and trust. The shifting environment of virtual influencers AI driven and computer-generated characters has emerged as a new marketing tools. Unlike any other in person influencers these digital platforms are raising questions about the authenticity, credibility and emotional connections. Likewise, for other brands they are offering a consistency and creative storytelling at scale, but their artificial nature is imposing a risk of alienating audiences who value the authenticity of influencers and brands. Whereas the global campaigns are already deploying virtual influencers and empirical research on their impact remains relatively limited, mainly in the emerging markets like Bangladesh. Overall, understanding how consumers perceive these digital figures is very crucial for businesses seeking to foster the brand loyalty and maximize engagement in the digital economy.

III. GAP & OBJECTIVES

The research gaps that have been identified was that in previous studies on marketing influencers have widely focused on human influencers, which have seen to leave a gap into understanding how consumers are engaging with virtually imposters. Whereas some other are acknowledging their potential and very little is known

ISBN 978-984-35-5270-9 *https://icebtm.iub.edu.bd*

about whether the virtual influences are able to and can establish trust, emotional resonance and long lasting brand relationships. The study addresses that gap by investigating the three key dimensions which are relatability, credibility, and brand alignment as their role in shaping consumers engagement. The objective is to evaluate whether these factors can actually generate the meaningful consumers brand connections and identify how businesses can leverage the virtual influencers in their digital marketing strategy.

IV. METHOD

This study employed a secondary research design that was reliant on published numbers and analysis from peer-reviewed journals, working papers, and research reports found in SSRN, Research gate and Google Scholar. Rather than relying on a survey or direct data collection, the study integrated empirical evidence from recent studies on virtual influencers, consumer attitudes, and social media activity. Source selection was informed by three criteria: [1] relatability, with a preference for those published since 2022, [2] Relevance, with attention to consumer–brand relationships and virtual influencer marketing, and [3] Credibility, with a preference for scholarly or peer-reviewed sources. Approximately ten to twelve research papers were studied, covering topics focused on relatability, credibility, authenticity, and brand affiliation. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify trends across the literature review, research methodology, key findings, and gaps, examining the influence of virtual influencers on consumers' interactions. By basing the investigation on secondary data, the research will ensure a broad perspective from numerous contexts, while acknowledging that the extent and limitations of the available literature shape its findings.

V. RESULTS / FINDINGS

The literature review analysis revealed consistent factors regarding consumer perceptions and interactions with virtual influencers. Across the multiple studies, relatability was consistently the most pronounced factor in driving consumer interactions. Audiences were more likely to follow, share or interact with a virtual influencer when those digital personas exhibited human-like characteristics such as humor, similar lifestyle, or emotional expression. A few studies have also identified brand alignment as a salient factor: when the virtual influencer is able to align its projected values with the brand's identity, consumer interactions show increased levels of engagement, such as sharing and following, as well as improved identification with the brand. While credibility was discussed as an essential factor, it proved to be less impactful than relatability and value alignment. Scholars noted that audiences typically express skepticism regarding the authenticity of virtual influencers, which could impact the trust-building process between audiences and virtual influencers. The scholars reported that younger consumers, particularly those who engage more with platforms like Instagram and TikTok, have a much more favorable attitude towards engaging with virtual personas than those in older generations. Ultimately, readers of these studies can understand that while virtual influencers cannot replace human authenticity, they can still be valuable if designed with relatable characteristics and aligned intrinsically with brands through established narratives.

VI. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS & ORIGINALITY

The findings shed light on the evolving discussions around authenticity in digital marketing. The finding that relatability and brand affiliation take precedence over credibility suggests that the importance of personal connection and value alignment is more significant than credibility when engaging and connecting with virtual influencers. This challenges traditional influencer marketing models that describe trust as the primary determinant of engagement. In practice, the findings emphasize the need to create virtual influencers rooted in cultural relevance and aligned with consumer lifestyles. For policymakers, the increasingly overlapping boundaries between artificial entities and real persons raises questions regarding transparency, advertising regulation, and consumer protection. From an originality standpoint, the study offers a configuring exploration of an emerging market context Bangladesh where little attention has been given to understanding consumer interaction with virtual influencers. By examining relatability as a separate dimension of engagement, this study adds theoretical insights to the influencer marketing literature and implications for businesses experimenting with AI fueled branding strategies.

VII. LIMITATIONS & FUTURE WORK

There are certain limitations as well based on the Social Media Engagement and the Rise of Virtual Influencers. First of all, the research findings are based largely on secondary literature and recent publications. That is, they reflect the perspectives and examples and the data identified in the texts, rather than direct, first-hand evidence. As such, some subtle variations of consumer behavior, particularly in culturally / regionally distinct situations, may have been overlooked. Second, a lot of the literature we reviewed focused on younger, urban, digital native populations, which limits the extent to which we can draw conclusions for older consumer groups or rural, non-digital consumers. Finally, all of the referenced literature relied on cross-sectional studies, and as a result, we have a limited understanding of how consumer associations with virtual influencers may develop over time. For these reasons, future research should venture into cross-cultural contexts, conduct many longitudinal studies, and consider how experience with technology,

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like more lifelike AI avatars, may adjust consumer trust, relatability, and engagement in the future.

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