

AN INVESTIGATION INTO INFLUENCERS' PERSUASIVENESS BASED ON USERS' PERCEPTION OF THE VIRTUAL IDENTITY UNDER STEREOTYPE CONTENT MODEL

Xi Chen, Sichuan International Studies University, China, Email: 80000336@sisu.edu.cn

Jiwon Lee, HELP University, Malaysia, Email: jiwon.lee@help.edu.my (presenter)

ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to study whether social media users can perceive influencers' virtual nature, users' attitude towards virtual influencers, and the persuasiveness impact of influencers on the users as a result of users' consciousness degree of influencers' virtual nature. This research will investigate social media users' consciousness of influencers, and users' evaluation of influencers from the warmth and competence dimensions in Stereotype Content Model based on three key influencer characteristics: authenticity, credibility, and expertise.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Virtual influencers, Stereotype Content Model, Persuasiveness

Introduction

With ubiquitous social media usage, 4.8 billion people, or 59.9% of the world population, are social media users (Petrosyan, 2023). Everyone has the possibility to achieve online fame through multimodal content creation, develop a follower base, and exert influence. User's audience base can be strategically manipulated through clever exploitation and affective response in an ever-complicated communication environment (Fairchild, 2007). The self-commodification under social media construct locks users into a mode of constant self-exposure and self-promotion, achieved by consistency of narratives and images (Khamis et al., 2017). Public attention becomes valuable as it's taxed in the current information and consumption environment (Brody, 2001; Davenport & Beck, 2002).

Due to surging information and diversified promotion, consumers are harder to be persuaded by brands' advertisements. As a result, a more trustworthy and genuine promotion method is needed for better persuasion impact, especially the credible message of a strong influencer has become more convincing to consumers. Meanwhile, the advent of virtual influencers may change the paradigm of influencer marketing (Thomas and Fowler, 2021).

Virtual influencers are computer-generated characters or person that exists on social media platforms and can perform humanlike functions under algorithms and software (Thomas and Fowler, 2021). Just like human influencers, virtual influencers post photos, videos, and stories on social media (Yang et al., 2023). With vast marketing expenditure on influencers, an increasing amount will be directed to virtual influencers (eMarketer, 2021) because they can be always on call (Robinson, 2020), are more cooperative, can interact with consumers precisely and effectively, and are not bounded by space or time limits (Campbell et al., 2020; Frank et al., 2023). As technology sophistication is improved, artificial intelligence can revolutionize the marketing landscape and consumer behavior (Davenport et al., 2020).

Besides, virtual influencers are exceptionally acceptable by younger social media users (Scholz, 2022), which are currently the dominant user group (Dixon, 2022). Consumers lacking critical consumption of information would have a diminishing elaborative likelihood when making purchase decisions, and tend to have low willingness to apply their literacy at their favorable influencers' recommendation (Boerman and van Reijmersdal, 2020; Sweeney et al., 2022). Therefore, when users have a positive attitude of influencers from their warm and competent self-presentation on social media, it will affect arousal of message and influencers' persuasiveness can be strengthened.

To investigate the effectiveness of virtual influencer marketing, first, this study examines what advantages consumers expect from virtual influencers. To this end, Fiske’s Stereotype Content Model will be applied to the virtual influencer’s evaluation process, and we will identify which dimension is more emphasized. Second, the evaluation process of consumers for virtual influencers is classified and analyzed. Specifically, after distinguishing between those who are conscious of virtual influencers and those who are not (e.g., awareness of virtual influencers), we intend to receive questionnaires and compare them independently. Lastly, this study aims to identify the persuasive effect of virtual influencers by examining the evaluation process of virtual influencers.

This is to derive practical implications related to the use of virtual influencers. Specifically, this research provides evidence regarding consumers’ ability in recognizing humanlike virtual influencers on social media platforms. It’s pivotal for marketers to know about consumers’ perceptions of virtual influencer’s identity, their incurred emotions, and their attitudes towards the influence brand endorsements before choosing one. Secondly, marketers and brands will know better about the efficacy of influencers’ virtual identity in influencer marketing and can decide whether to emphasize or to facilitate consumers’ recognition of the virtual identity of influencers in use.

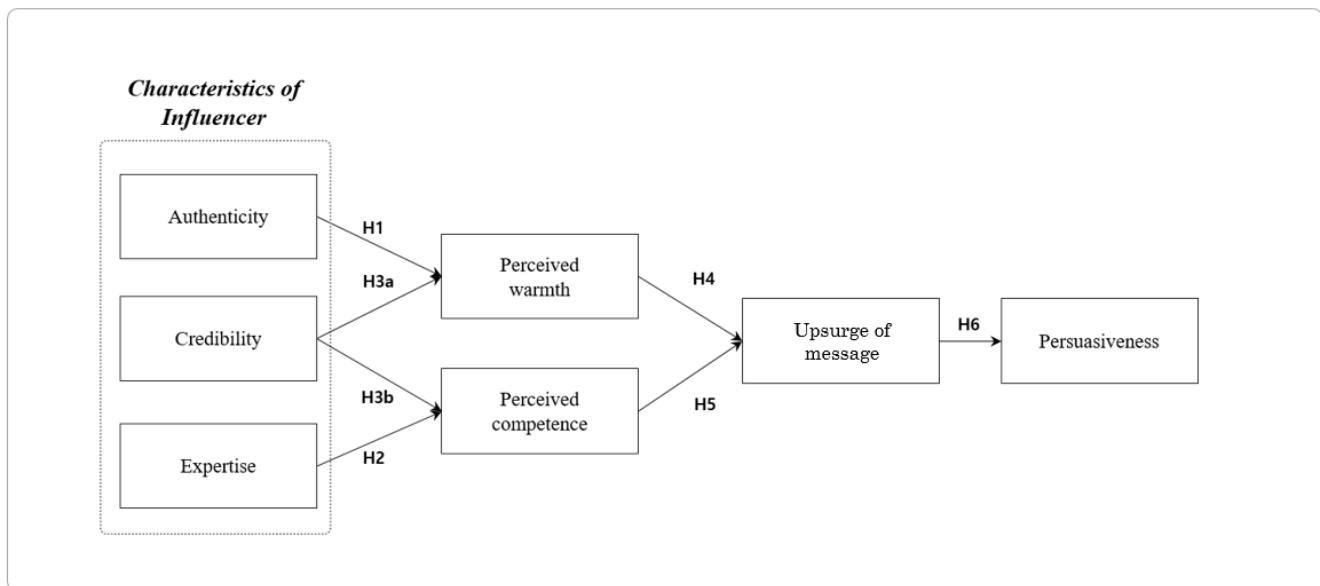


Figure 1. Research framework