

Synthetic Authenticity: A Study of Audience Trust, Credibility and Emotional Engagement With AI-Generated Influencer Content Among Gen Z

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Abstract

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence has transformed the contemporary media environment by enabling the creation of highly realistic digital personalities, virtual influencers and AI-generated social media content. Influencer communication, traditionally associated with human personality, interpersonal connection and perceived authenticity, is increasingly being mediated through artificially generated identities. This emerging phenomenon raises questions about whether audiences can develop trust and emotional connections with influencers whose identities and content are produced or significantly enhanced through artificial intelligence. The present study examines the relationship between perceived authenticity, credibility, trust and emotional engagement with AI-generated influencer content among Generation Z audiences. The study adopts a quantitative research design and proposes a structured survey of Gen Z social media users who regularly consume influencer content. The conceptual framework draws upon Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework. The study focuses on perceived authenticity as a central construct and examines its relationship with audience trust, perceived credibility and emotional engagement. Existing research indicates that virtual influencers can develop credibility and parasocial relationships despite their artificial nature, while recent scholarship also suggests that authenticity may operate in multiple dimensions for artificial influencers. The study seeks to contribute to Mass Media and Communication research by examining how Gen Z negotiates the apparent contradiction between something being technologically artificial and simultaneously perceived as authentic, relatable and emotionally engaging. The findings may provide insights into changing notions of authenticity, mediated relationships and audience behaviour in an increasingly AI-mediated communication environment.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, AI-generated content, virtual influencers, synthetic authenticity, Gen Z, audience trust, credibility, emotional engagement, social media, influencer communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed the relationship between media producers, communicators and audiences. Traditional media communication generally positioned audiences as receivers of professionally produced messages, whereas digital platforms have created an environment in which users can simultaneously consume, produce, share and respond to media content. Influencer culture represents one

of the most significant developments within this environment. Influencers communicate with audiences through personal narratives, lifestyle content, recommendations, opinions and everyday experiences, often creating the perception of intimacy and interpersonal connection. The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI), however, is introducing a new category of media communicator: the AI-generated or virtual influencer. Unlike conventional influencers, these digital personalities may not possess a conventional human existence. Their appearance, voice, personality, photographs, videos and communication may be generated, manipulated or enhanced through artificial intelligence and other digital technologies. Virtual influencers have already become an important area of academic research. Previous studies have examined their authenticity, credibility, parasocial relationships, attractiveness, anthropomorphism and persuasive potential. Research has found that audiences may simultaneously recognise virtual influencers as artificial while accepting them as meaningful social-media personalities. Lou et al. describe this phenomenon through the idea of virtual influencers being perceived as “authentically fake.” This apparent contradiction creates an important communication phenomenon that may be described as **synthetic authenticity**. Synthetic authenticity refers, in this study, to the perception that artificially constructed media personalities or content can nevertheless appear genuine, relatable, consistent or emotionally meaningful to audiences. Recent research provides evidence that artificial influencers can generate trust and parasocial relationships. A 2026 study of Generation Z consumers found that human-likeness, authenticity, interactivity and informativeness can contribute to trust in virtual influencers, while trust and parasocial relationships can influence behavioural intentions. Another recent study found that parasocial relationship intensity can develop over time for both human and virtual influencers. At the same time, authenticity remains complicated. Recent research suggests that consumers can perceive virtual influencers as credible even when they recognise their artificiality. Credibility may therefore compensate for some perceived authenticity deficits. These developments are particularly relevant to **Generation Z**, a demographic deeply integrated into social media and digital communication. Gen Z audiences encounter AI-generated images, videos, virtual personalities and algorithmically mediated content as part of their everyday media environment. Therefore, this study examines how Gen Z audiences perceive AI-generated influencer content and whether perceived authenticity is associated with trust, credibility and emotional engagement. The study is situated within Mass Media and Communication because AI-generated influencers represent not simply a technological innovation but a transformation in the nature of the media communicator, mediated relationship and audience response.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to examine how Generation Z audiences perceive the authenticity of AI-generated influencer content in contemporary social media environments. The study seeks to understand whether audiences perceive artificially generated influencers as genuine, relatable and trustworthy despite their technologically constructed identities. It further aims to examine the relationship between perceived authenticity and audience trust, with particular attention to whether the perception of authenticity influences the extent to which Gen Z audiences are willing to trust AI-generated influencers and their content. The study also seeks to investigate the relationship between perceived authenticity and the perceived credibility of AI-generated influencers by examining whether audiences consider such influencers to be reliable, knowledgeable and believable sources of information and recommendations. Furthermore, the study aims to examine the relationship between AI-generated influencer content and

emotional engagement among Gen Z audiences. It seeks to understand whether audiences can develop emotional interest, attachment, identification or a sense of connection with influencers whom they recognise as being artificially created. The study also aims to explore the relationship between perceived credibility and audience trust and to determine whether greater perceived credibility contributes to stronger trust in AI-generated influencers. In addition, the study seeks to examine whether trust and perceived authenticity are associated with increased emotional engagement with AI-generated influencer content. Finally, the study aims to understand whether awareness of the artificial nature of an influencer affects audience perceptions of authenticity, credibility and emotional connection, thereby contributing to the broader academic discussion surrounding authenticity, audience behaviour and human–AI communication in contemporary digital media.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the present study is developed around the relationship between AI-generated influencer content, perceived authenticity, perceived credibility, audience trust and emotional engagement. The framework assumes that exposure to AI-generated influencer content can influence how audiences evaluate the authenticity and credibility of the influencer, which may subsequently shape their level of trust and emotional engagement. Perceived authenticity is positioned as a central construct because the study seeks to examine how audiences reconcile the artificial nature of the influencer with their perception of genuineness, relatability and sincerity. In this context, synthetic authenticity refers to the perception that an artificially constructed media personality or digitally generated content can nevertheless appear genuine, relatable, consistent or emotionally meaningful to audiences. Perceived credibility represents the extent to which audiences consider an AI-generated influencer to be reliable, knowledgeable, trustworthy and believable. Audience trust refers to the willingness of individuals to accept the influencer and its communication as dependable and sufficiently reliable. Emotional engagement refers to the degree of emotional involvement audiences experience while consuming AI-generated influencer content, including feelings of interest, enjoyment, identification, curiosity, attachment and perceived connection. The framework therefore proposes that perceived authenticity may influence perceived credibility and audience trust, while credibility and trust may contribute to emotional engagement. At the same time, these relationships may be influenced by the audience's awareness of the artificial nature of the influencer.

The conceptual framework is supported by Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework. Source Credibility Theory provides a basis for examining how perceptions of trustworthiness, expertise and reliability influence audience responses to a communicator. Parasocial Interaction Theory is relevant because audiences may develop perceived interpersonal or emotional relationships with media personalities even when those personalities are digitally constructed. The Stimulus-Organism-Response framework provides an overarching structure in which AI-generated influencer content functions as the stimulus, perceptions of authenticity, credibility and trust represent psychological responses within the audience, and emotional engagement represents a subsequent behavioural or affective response.

4. Literature Review

The emergence of artificial intelligence in social media has introduced significant changes in the way

audiences encounter, interpret and interact with media personalities. Traditional influencer communication has generally been associated with identifiable human personalities who construct their online identities through personal experiences, opinions, lifestyles and interactions with followers. The development of virtual and AI-generated influencers challenges this conventional model by allowing digitally constructed personalities to perform many of the communicative functions traditionally associated with human influencers. These developments have generated growing academic interest in questions of authenticity, credibility, trust, emotional engagement, parasocial interaction and audience perception. A recent systematic review of 73 peer-reviewed studies published between 2016 and 2024 demonstrates that virtual-influencer research has expanded considerably, particularly around engagement, trust, authenticity, ethical challenges and comparisons between virtual and human influencers.

Virtual Influencers and the Transformation of Digital Communication

Virtual influencers can be understood as digitally constructed social-media personalities that are designed to resemble or perform the role of human influencers. Their increasing visibility represents a shift from communication by human media personalities towards communication mediated by artificial and computational identities. The significance of this development extends beyond advertising because virtual influencers participate in the construction of narratives, identities, social relationships and audience communities. Earlier studies generally focused on whether audiences would accept virtual influencers as substitutes for human influencers. Research comparing human and virtual influencers has frequently reported that virtual influencers may initially be perceived as less authentic, less trustworthy and less credible than human influencers. However, more recent studies indicate that these differences are not necessarily fixed. Audience responses depend on characteristics such as realism, human-likeness, interactivity, attractiveness, similarity and the manner in which the virtual influencer communicates. A 2024 study comparing human and virtual influencers found that perceived authenticity can moderate the relationship between influencer type and audience responses, suggesting that authenticity remains particularly important when audiences evaluate artificially constructed personalities. This development suggests that the communication value of a virtual influencer cannot be determined solely by its artificial origin. Instead, audiences appear to evaluate virtual personalities through a combination of social, psychological and communicative cues. Consequently, the distinction between human and artificial influencers is becoming increasingly complex and requires further investigation from a Mass Media and Communication perspective.

The Changing Meaning of Authenticity

Authenticity is one of the central concepts in contemporary influencer communication. In traditional media, authenticity has often been associated with genuineness, sincerity, originality and the perception that the communicator is presenting a relatively truthful representation of the self. Social media complicated this understanding because online identities are frequently curated, edited and strategically managed. The emergence of AI-generated influencers introduces another layer of complexity because the personality itself may be artificially constructed. Research has shown that audiences can recognise virtual influencers as artificial while simultaneously perceiving them as socially meaningful or authentic in particular ways. The idea that virtual influencers can be perceived as “authentically fake” is particularly relevant to the present study because it suggests that audiences do not necessarily consider artificiality and authenticity to be mutually exclusive. Instead, authenticity may be constructed through consistency, relatability, personality, storytelling and audience interaction. Recent research further

demonstrates that authenticity should not necessarily be treated as a single, uniform characteristic. A systematic review published in *Acta Psychologica* in 2025 identified authenticity, transparency and disclosure as important themes influencing trust and engagement with virtual influencers. The review also highlighted the importance of cultural and regulatory contexts in shaping audience responses. This suggests that the perception of authenticity may be dependent not only on whether the influencer is human but also on how openly its artificial nature is communicated and how audiences interpret its mediated identity. The present study builds upon this emerging understanding by conceptualising **synthetic authenticity** as the perception of genuineness or relatability associated with an artificially constructed influencer. Rather than asking whether AI-generated influencers are objectively authentic, the study focuses on how audiences themselves construct and interpret authenticity.

AI Disclosure and Perceived Authenticity

Transparency concerning the artificial origin of an influencer represents another important area within existing literature. The question of whether audiences should be explicitly informed that they are interacting with an AI-generated or virtual personality has implications for trust and credibility. Research by Lim and Lee examined the effects of disclosing a virtual influencer's artificial origin and found that disclosure reduced perceived humanness. However, the study also demonstrated that emotional narratives could influence parasocial interaction and credibility under different disclosure conditions. These findings are important because they suggest that disclosure does not simply produce a positive or negative audience response. Instead, audience reactions may depend upon the type of content being communicated and the emotional characteristics of the message. Similarly, recent research on virtual influencers has identified transparency and disclosure as significant ethical and communicative concerns. The 2025 systematic review by Khalfallah and Keller suggests that disclosure transparency can influence consumer trust and engagement and that cultural context may also affect how audiences respond to virtual influencers. This creates an important question for the present study: if Gen Z audiences know that an influencer is artificially generated, can they nevertheless perceive the influencer as authentic and emotionally engaging? The question is particularly relevant because younger digital audiences may have greater familiarity with AI-generated content than earlier generations.

Credibility and Trust in AI-Mediated Communication

Credibility represents another major dimension of influencer communication. Traditional Source Credibility Theory emphasises characteristics such as expertise, trustworthiness and reliability in determining how audiences evaluate a communicator. In influencer communication, credibility can affect whether audiences accept recommendations, information and opinions presented by the influencer. The application of source credibility to AI-generated influencers creates an interesting theoretical problem. A human influencer can establish expertise through personal experience, professional qualifications or demonstrated knowledge, whereas an AI-generated influencer may possess no independent lived experience. Nevertheless, audiences may still perceive such influencers as credible if their communication appears informative, consistent and convincing.

Recent research provides evidence for this possibility. A 2024 study examining social-media influencers and virtual influencers found that source credibility and authenticity played important mediating roles in advertising effectiveness. The study also found that human-like virtual influencers could perform comparably to human influencers in certain communication contexts. Research focusing specifically on Indian social-media users has also produced relevant findings. A study involving 332 Indian Instagram followers of virtual influencers found that social attractiveness, physical attractiveness and attitude

similarity influenced perceived credibility, while factors such as similarity and attractiveness were also associated with parasocial interaction. The research further found that credibility influenced willingness to follow virtual influencers' recommendations. These findings demonstrate the relevance of virtual-influencer credibility within the Indian digital-media environment.

Another Indian study involving 377 respondents examined anthropomorphic features, perceived authenticity, trust and engagement in relation to virtual influencers. The findings indicated that anthropomorphic characteristics and perceived authenticity were associated with cognitive trust. This provides an important foundation for the present study because it suggests that audiences may develop trust towards virtual personalities through perceptions of human-like characteristics and authenticity.

Human-Likeness, Anthropomorphism and Audience Response

One of the recurring findings in virtual-influencer research concerns the importance of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism refers to the attribution of human characteristics, intentions, emotions or qualities to non-human entities. In the context of virtual influencers, anthropomorphism can involve physical appearance, language, personality, emotional expression and interactive behaviour. Research published in the *Journal of Business Research* examined how anthropomorphism influences parasocial relationships with virtual influencers. Using data from 826 Instagram users, the study found that trustworthiness and wishful identification mediated relationships between anthropomorphic characteristics and parasocial relationships, while autonomy moderated some of these effects. This finding is significant because it indicates that audiences may respond to virtual influencers through social and psychological mechanisms normally associated with human interaction. The more human-like an AI-generated influencer appears or behaves, the greater the possibility that audiences will apply interpersonal expectations to that entity. However, excessive realism can also create discomfort. Research on virtual influencers has examined the role of perceived creepiness and the uncanny valley, suggesting that highly realistic but imperfectly human representations may generate negative audience responses. Thus, human-likeness does not automatically produce positive responses. The relationship between realism and audience engagement appears to be more complex and may depend on how audiences interpret the artificial personality.

Parasocial Interaction and Emotional Engagement

Influencer communication increasingly operates through perceived interpersonal relationships. Followers may feel that they know an influencer personally even though the relationship is primarily mediated and generally non-reciprocal. Parasocial Interaction Theory provides a useful theoretical foundation for understanding this phenomenon. The concept becomes particularly interesting when applied to AI-generated influencers. Since virtual influencers can communicate through posts, captions, videos and interactive features, audiences may experience familiarity and emotional attachment even when they know that the personality is digitally constructed. Research has demonstrated that parasocial relationships can contribute to audience responses towards virtual influencers. Recent research involving Generation Z found that authenticity, human-likeness, interactivity and informativeness contributed to trust, while trust and parasocial relationships were associated with subsequent consumer responses. The study used data from 458 Vietnamese Gen Z consumers and applied the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework. The findings are relevant to the present research because they demonstrate that Gen Z audiences can engage with virtual influencers through both cognitive and affective mechanisms. However, the existing study primarily examines these relationships in relation to purchase intention. The

present study instead seeks to focus more directly on emotional engagement as a communication phenomenon.

Emotional Narratives and Artificial Influencers

The emotional dimension of influencer communication deserves particular attention because social media personalities frequently construct relationships with audiences through emotional storytelling. Posts about personal struggles, achievements, relationships, daily experiences and aspirations can encourage identification and attachment. Research examining origin disclosure and emotional narratives found that emotional content could influence parasocial interaction with virtual influencers and, through this mechanism, influence perceptions of credibility. This suggests that emotional storytelling may partially compensate for the absence of a conventional human identity. This finding is important for the present research because it indicates that emotional engagement may not depend entirely upon the audience believing that an influencer is human. Instead, emotional communication itself may contribute to the perception of social presence and relationship. Therefore, the present study treats emotional engagement as an important outcome rather than focusing exclusively on behavioural intentions such as purchasing or following recommendations.

Trust, Authenticity and Engagement

Existing literature increasingly suggests that authenticity and trust are interconnected dimensions of virtual-influencer communication. When audiences perceive an influencer as authentic, they may be more willing to accept its communication and develop an ongoing relationship with it. Conversely, perceptions of artificiality, manipulation or deception may reduce trust. The 2025 systematic literature review by Khalfallah and Keller identifies trust as a central mechanism connecting authenticity, transparency and engagement in virtual-influencer communication. The authors also highlight the importance of ethical concerns, disclosure and cultural context. Recent research further suggests that trust can operate alongside parasocial relationships rather than independently of them. The 2026 study of Gen Z consumers found that trust and parasocial relationships jointly contributed to consumer responses to virtual influencers, while human-likeness, authenticity, interactivity and informativeness contributed to trust formation. These findings support the present study's conceptualisation of trust as an important connecting mechanism between perceptions of the influencer and subsequent emotional engagement.

Human Influencers versus AI-Generated Influencers

Comparative research between human and virtual influencers has produced mixed findings. Some studies suggest that human influencers continue to possess advantages in terms of authenticity, trustworthiness and parasocial connection. Other studies indicate that virtual influencers can achieve comparable or even stronger responses under particular circumstances. A 2024 study examining human, human-like virtual and anime-like virtual influencers found that human-like virtual influencers could demonstrate comparable effectiveness to human influencers in certain contexts, particularly when the communication was non-commercial. However, the advantage diminished when commercial motives became more prominent. Similarly, research comparing human-like and anime-like virtual influencers found differences in trustworthiness, engagement and behavioural responses depending on influencer type and sponsorship disclosure. These findings demonstrate that there is no single universal audience response to artificial influencers. Instead, responses are shaped by the interaction between influencer characteristics, communication context, disclosure and audience expectations.

Cultural Context and the Indian Media Environment

The cultural context of AI-generated influencer communication represents another area requiring greater attention. Much of the early research on influencer marketing and virtual influencers has emerged from Western markets, although research from Asian and other emerging markets is expanding. The Indian context is particularly significant because India has a large and rapidly developing social-media ecosystem and a young digitally engaged population. Recent Indian research has examined virtual influencers in relation to credibility, anthropomorphism, authenticity and parasocial interaction. Studies involving Indian respondents have demonstrated that characteristics such as attractiveness, similarity and authenticity can influence trust, credibility and engagement. However, there remains scope for examining these variables collectively among Indian Gen Z audiences, particularly from a Mass Media and Communication perspective rather than exclusively through advertising or consumer-behaviour outcomes.

Ethical and Transparency Dimensions

The development of AI-generated influencers also raises questions concerning transparency and ethical communication. Audiences may not always be able to distinguish between human-created, AI-assisted and fully AI-generated content. This creates potential concerns surrounding disclosure, manipulation, commercial persuasion and the boundaries between authentic expression and technologically manufactured identity. The recent systematic literature on virtual influencers identifies transparency, authenticity, disclosure and ethical responsibility as recurring concerns. It also notes that cultural and regulatory differences can affect audience perceptions and trust. The issue of transparency is particularly relevant to the present study because the disclosure of an influencer's artificial origin may alter how audiences evaluate its authenticity and credibility. Rather than assuming that disclosure necessarily produces negative responses, the study proposes to investigate whether awareness of AI generation changes audience perceptions and emotional responses.

Generation Z as a Distinct Audience

Generation Z provides a particularly relevant population for studying synthetic authenticity because its members have developed within a highly visual, interactive and algorithmically mediated communication environment. Their everyday exposure to social media means that influencer communication, short-form video, AI-generated images and digitally constructed identities can become part of ordinary media consumption. Recent research specifically examining Gen Z and virtual influencers demonstrates that this audience can respond to AI-generated personalities through both cognitive and emotional pathways. Human-likeness, authenticity, interactivity and informativeness were found to contribute to trust, while trust and parasocial relationships contributed to subsequent consumer responses. Nevertheless, there is an important distinction between studying Gen Z as **consumers** and studying Gen Z as **media audiences**. Much existing research examines purchase intention, brand attitudes or recommendation acceptance. The present study seeks to place greater emphasis on audience interpretation, perceived authenticity, credibility, trust and emotional engagement.

5. Methodology

The present study will employ a quantitative research design to examine audience perceptions of AI-generated influencer content among Generation Z. A quantitative approach is considered appropriate because the study aims to measure relationships among perceived authenticity, perceived credibility, audience trust and emotional engagement through systematically collected numerical data. The study

will adopt a descriptive and correlational research approach, with the descriptive component focusing on identifying patterns in audience perceptions and the correlational component examining the relationships between the principal variables.

The population of the study will consist of Generation Z social media users who regularly consume influencer content. For the purpose of this research, Generation Z may be operationally defined as individuals born approximately between 1997 and 2012. Depending on the ethical and institutional requirements of the research, the actual survey may focus on adult participants within the Gen Z population. The proposed study may employ a sample of approximately 300 to 400 respondents. Purposive sampling may be used to ensure that participants have experience using social media, regularly encounter influencer content and possess at least some awareness of AI-generated or virtual influencers.

Primary data will be collected through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire will obtain demographic information and information regarding participants' social-media usage and exposure to AI-generated influencer content. It will then measure the major constructs of the study, namely perceived authenticity, perceived credibility, audience trust and emotional engagement. Participants may be asked to respond to statements using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Statements relating to perceived authenticity may examine whether participants consider AI-generated influencers genuine, relatable, transparent, consistent and sincere. Items measuring credibility and trust may examine perceptions of reliability, expertise, believability and confidence in the influencer's communication. Emotional engagement may be measured through indicators such as interest, enjoyment, identification, curiosity, emotional attachment and perceived connection.

The collected data will be analysed using appropriate statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation may be used to understand the general characteristics of the respondents and their responses. The reliability of the measurement scales may be assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Pearson's correlation may be used to examine relationships between perceived authenticity, credibility, trust and emotional engagement. Multiple regression analysis may be employed to determine whether perceived authenticity, credibility and trust significantly predict emotional engagement. If the sample size and measurement structure are appropriate, exploratory factor analysis or structural equation modelling may also be considered to examine the relationships between the underlying constructs.

6. Limitations of the Study

The present study may have certain limitations. Since the research focuses specifically on Generation Z, its findings may not be directly generalisable to older generations whose patterns of social-media use and perceptions of AI-generated content may differ. The study will also rely primarily on self-reported responses, which may be influenced by individual perceptions, personal experiences, social desirability and participants' existing attitudes towards artificial intelligence and social media. Since AI-generated influencer technology is developing rapidly, audience perceptions identified during the period of data collection may change as users become more familiar with synthetic media and AI-generated personalities.

The study may also be influenced by differences between social-media platforms. Audiences may respond differently to AI-generated influencer content on Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and other platforms because each platform has different communication formats, algorithms and patterns of

audience interaction. Another limitation concerns participants' ability to identify AI-generated content. Some respondents may be highly familiar with artificial intelligence, while others may have limited knowledge of how AI-generated content is produced. This difference in technological awareness may influence their perceptions of authenticity and credibility. Furthermore, if the study is conducted primarily among Indian Gen Z respondents, the findings will reflect the cultural and social context of the selected population and may not necessarily be generalisable to audiences in other countries. Finally, if the research follows a cross-sectional design, it will capture audience perceptions at a particular point in time and will therefore provide limited evidence regarding how these perceptions may develop over a longer period.

7. Research Gap

The literature demonstrates that virtual influencers are no longer a purely experimental phenomenon and have become an established area of research within digital communication, advertising and consumer behaviour. Existing studies have examined authenticity, credibility, anthropomorphism, trust, parasocial relationships, disclosure, attractiveness and engagement. Recent systematic reviews also demonstrate the rapid expansion of the field.

However, several areas remain open for further investigation. First, a considerable proportion of existing research examines virtual influencers from the perspective of **marketing effectiveness and purchase intention**, rather than examining them primarily as a changing form of media communication. Second, authenticity, credibility, trust and emotional engagement are often examined as separate or partially connected constructs rather than being brought together within a single audience-centred framework. Third, although recent research has examined Generation Z, there remains scope to examine how Gen Z audiences construct authenticity when they are consciously aware that the influencer is artificially generated. Fourth, research within the Indian context is growing, but further audience-centred investigation is required to understand how Indian Gen Z audiences interpret the relationship between artificiality and perceived authenticity.

The present study therefore proposes the concept of **synthetic authenticity** to investigate how an artificially constructed influencer can nevertheless be perceived as genuine, credible, trustworthy or emotionally meaningful. By bringing together perceived authenticity, credibility, trust and emotional engagement, the study seeks to contribute to the developing field of AI-mediated communication and provide a more audience-centred understanding of how Generation Z negotiates the boundary between the artificial and the authentic.

8. Conclusion

The emergence of AI-generated influencers represents an important transformation in contemporary Mass Media and Communication. Traditional influencer communication has generally been associated with human identity, personal experience and perceived authenticity, whereas AI-generated influencers challenge these assumptions by introducing technologically constructed personalities into the social-media environment. This development raises important questions about how audiences understand authenticity when the communicator itself may be artificially created.

The concept of synthetic authenticity provides a useful framework for examining this transformation. It suggests that authenticity in contemporary digital communication may not necessarily depend exclusively on whether a media personality is human. Instead, audiences may construct perceptions of

authenticity through factors such as consistency, relatability, transparency, communication style, credibility and emotional resonance. The recognition that an influencer is artificial therefore does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of trust or emotional engagement.

The present study proposes to examine these relationships among Generation Z audiences by focusing on perceived authenticity, credibility, trust and emotional engagement. Through a quantitative research design, the study seeks to determine whether audiences can perceive AI-generated influencers as authentic and credible and whether such perceptions are associated with greater levels of trust and emotional engagement.

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