

Authenticity, Trust, and Emotional Connection toward AI versus Human Influencers among Adults Aged 40 Years and Above

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Abstract

Background: Artificial intelligence (AI)–generated influencers increasingly mimic human identity and communication, yet their relational reception among adults aged 40 years and above remains understudied. **Aim:** To compare authenticity, trust, and emotional connection toward AI and human influencers and examine digital literacy, gender, and relationships among these evaluations. **Methods:** A cross-sectional, within-participant survey enrolled 100 adults aged 40–78 years (51 women, 49 men) by convenience sampling. Respondents evaluated both influencer types using researcher-developed five-item composites. Analyses included paired-samples t-tests, Pearson correlations, a participant-clustered regression, gender comparisons, and a one-sided midpoint test. **Results:** Human influencers scored higher in authenticity (3.480 vs. 2.864), trust (3.416 vs. 2.686), and emotional connection (3.228 vs. 2.636); all paired p values were < .001. Authenticity correlated positively with trust (human $r = .493$; AI $r = .687$), and trust with emotional connection (human $r = .585$; AI $r = .676$). The joint regression model explained 60.9% of observed emotional-connection variance, although influencer type was nonsignificant after adjustment. Digital literacy was associated with AI acceptance, not H4 perception outcomes. AI emotional connection was below the neutral midpoint; gender hypotheses were unsupported. **Conclusion:** Human influencers received stronger relational evaluations, whereas authenticity and trust were important correlates across influencer types. Convenience sampling and limitations of some scales warrant caution.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence Influencers, Human Influencers, Perceived Authenticity, Trust, Emotional Connection, Digital Literacy, Older Adults

1. Introduction

Digitally constructed influencers now circulate alongside human creators on social-media platforms. Their crafted appearances, narratives, and emotional expressions can elicit responses previously associated with human communicators, yet the extent to which viewers regard these personas as authentic, credible, or emotionally relatable remains contested. The issue has psychological relevance because mediated familiarity and trust can influence how people interpret online relationships. This study focuses on adults aged 40 years and above, a group comparatively underrepresented in research dominated by younger consumer samples.

2. Related Research Work

Source credibility research proposes that judgments about a communicator affect how information is eval-

uated [1]. Parasocial interaction offers a complementary perspective: audiences may experience a sense of interpersonal contact with a media figure despite the absence of a reciprocal relationship [2]. In contemporary social media, such perceptions can be reinforced through repeated exposure and self-disclosure, although self-reported emotional closeness is not equivalent to a clinically meaningful attachment.

Authenticity is a particularly complex attribute for virtual influencers. Audrezet et al. (2020) [3] described how human influencers negotiate authenticity under commercial pressures. In contrast, Koles et al. (2024) [4] showed that virtual influencers can manifest different forms of authenticity, including consistency with an idealized character, even when there is no real-life biography. Treating all virtual identities as necessarily inauthentic therefore oversimplifies audience evaluations.

Direct comparisons indicate that both influencer identity and the communication context matter. Dondapati and Dehury (2024) [5] experimentally compared human and virtual influencers among young adults and reported roles for homophily, parasocial relations, and authenticity in purchase-related responses. Kim and Wang (2024) [6] found that perceptions of authenticity and source credibility depended on whether an influencer was human, human-like virtual, or anime-like virtual and on message context. Comparative platform analyses similarly document differing responses to human and virtual personas [7]. These studies motivate comparison but do not establish that their findings generalize to people aged 40 years or more.

Mechanistic models add nuance. Lim and Lee (2023) [8] showed that origin disclosure and the emotional tone of narratives influenced perceived humanness and parasocial responses. Liu and Wang (2025) [9], surveying 826 Instagram users, linked virtual-influencer human likeness to parasocial relations through trustworthiness and wishful identification, with perceived autonomy as a moderator. In an Indian sample of 377 respondents, Goel and Garg (2025) [10] linked perceived authenticity and trust dimensions to engagement with virtual influencers. The present study does not test those mediation pathways; rather, it examines a narrower set of operational perceptions in a specified age group.

Emotional connection is also likely to vary with the kind of virtual persona. Yan et al. (2024) [11] distinguished mimic-human, animated-human, and non-human figures, illustrating why “AI influencer” is not a single uniform stimulus. Because the present questionnaire compares general influencer categories rather than standardized visual exemplars, its results concern participants’ own category interpretations. They should not be read as experimental estimates of the effect of a particular avatar or degree of realism.

2.1. Research Questions and Aims

The main questions were whether Human versus AI influencer ratings differ in authenticity, trust, and emotional connection; whether digital literacy correlates with AI evaluations; whether authenticity and trust relate to emotional connection; whether AI emotional connection exceeds the neutral midpoint; and whether gender predicts overall evaluations or moderates the Human–AI emotional gap. Exploratory questions examined AI acceptance, counselling-related perceptions, and open-ended explanations.

2.2. Theoretical Integration and Rationale

Source Credibility Theory and parasocial perspectives address related but distinct evaluative processes. Credibility concerns whether messages and communicators are regarded as reliable, whereas parasocial perspectives focus on perceived familiarity and interpersonal closeness. The present framework brings these dimensions together without assuming that trust must develop before emotional connection. In a one-time survey, reciprocal or common-cause explanations remain possible. This distinction is especially

important for virtual influencers, whose perceived personality can be maintained consistently through content design even in the absence of biographical experiences [1, 2, 4].

Technology-acceptance perspectives introduce a different psychological domain. A respondent may readily use digital services and still report limited trust in an AI-created social figure, while another respondent may engage emotionally with a virtual personality despite modest digital confidence. The distinction between willingness to engage with technology and interpersonal evaluations helps motivate separate measures of digital literacy, AI acceptance, authenticity, trust, and emotion. The analysis therefore avoids treating technological acceptance as a proxy for perceived intimacy [12].

Existing experimental studies have manipulated influencer appearance, sponsorship context, or origin disclosure [5, 6, 8]. Those designs are informative for causal interpretation of particular stimuli, but may emphasize younger populations or specified advertising messages. This study instead focuses on self-reported judgments among adults aged at least 40 years and uses a paired survey: each participant rated both categories. The trade-off is clear. Within-participant contrasts reduce differences arising from individual response tendencies; the absence of randomized, standardized influencer stimuli prevents attribution of the observed gaps to influencer type alone.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Participants

A quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive, within-participant comparative design was implemented. Convenience sampling yielded 100 eligible adults aged 40–78 years (mean age = 53.71, SD = 9.35); 51 identified as female and 49 as male. Eligible respondents were aged at least 40 years, used social-media or digital-content platforms at least occasionally, could understand the questionnaire, and participated voluntarily. The sample comprised 35 respondents aged 40–49, 40 aged 50–59, 19 aged 60–69, and six aged 70 or more. The study did not employ population-based probability sampling.

3.2. Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Participants completed a structured questionnaire rating both human influencers and AI-generated or virtual influencers. They also supplied demographic, digital-use, preference, and open-ended responses. Voluntary informed consent was obtained from all the participants and de-identified data handling. Any journal-specific request for an institutional research-ethics approval number or approval letter should be answered using the actual institutional record; publication permission should not be conflated with ethics committee review.

3.3. Research Instruments and Scoring

The researcher-developed instrument used a five-point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Digital literacy (B1–B5) assessed familiarity and confidence with digital content. Perceived authenticity (C1–C5), trust (D1–D5), and emotional connection (E1–E5) were each rated separately for human and AI influencers, generating six comparative mean composites. AI acceptance (F1–F5) captured interest, willingness to follow, and comfort with near-human AI expressions. Negatively worded B5, C3/C5, D4, and F4/F5 items were reverse-scored using 6 minus the original response. Higher composite scores indicate higher agreement with the scored construct.

Four direct preference items (G1–G4), four exploratory counselling-perception items (H1–H4), and one open-ended item (I1) supplemented the core scales. The emotional-connection composite assesses perceived closeness and related experiences; it is not a validated measure of attachment disorder,

loneliness reduction, or therapeutic response. The separate counselling items were not treated as a clinical scale.

3.4. Hypotheses and Statistical Plan

H1–H3 predicted higher Human ratings for authenticity, trust, and emotional connection. H4 predicted associations between literacy and AI perceptions; H5–H6 predicted positive authenticity–trust and trust–emotion correlations. H7 proposed a significant joint model of type, authenticity, and trust. H8 predicted AI emotion above 3. H9–H11 concerned gender differences; H12 tested gender moderation.

3.5. Variable Construction and Analytical Safeguards

Composite scores were constructed as the mean of five oriented questionnaire items per scale. Negatively worded responses were reverse-scored as six minus the original one-to-five response. This operation is essential because a higher composite should consistently represent more of its named construct. Digital literacy reverses B5; authenticity reverses C3 and C5 in each influencer condition; trust reverses D4 in each condition; AI acceptance reverses F4 and F5. Emotional-connection items were averaged without reverse scoring. For paired comparisons, the Human-minus-AI difference was calculated separately for each respondent.

The data-quality workflow assessed 100 unique identifiers, minimum age eligibility, response completeness, allowable rating values, duplicate response vectors, and agreement between recomputed and cached composites. No records were excluded for an inconvenient result, and no score was adjusted to increase statistical significance. Across the five-item scales, occasional constant response patterns were retained because uniform answers may reflect genuine agreement or disagreement rather than invalid participation. The open-text coding was descriptive, used overlapping thematic labels, and was not treated as an independently validated qualitative scale.

For interpretation, two kinds of uncertainty were distinguished. Confidence intervals quantify sampling uncertainty under statistical assumptions; they do not establish a causal effect. Multiplicity adjustment limits the chance of selectively emphasising significant findings across a group of tests. Global Holm adjustment was used for the main hypothesis-linked component tests as documented in the analysis report, whereas separate exploratory analyses were not portrayed as confirmatory evidence. The directional H8 test was interpreted according to the predicted direction, not simply according to a two-sided p value.

4. Statistical Analysis

The analysis checked identifiers, age eligibility, missingness, response ranges, reverse scoring, and composite calculations. Paired-samples t-tests evaluated H1–H3, with Shapiro–Wilk checks and Wilcoxon and sign-based sensitivity tests. Pearson correlations addressed H4–H6. H7 used a clustered regression of 200 paired condition ratings from 100 participants. H8 used a one-sided one-sample t-test against 3. Welch tests examined gender outcomes (H9–H11), and between-gender comparisons of within-participant emotion gaps tested H12.

A global Holm correction addressed 15 hypothesis-linked component tests; H8 was treated as a separate directional test. Exploratory tests had separate adjustments. Effect sizes, confidence intervals, and nonsignificant findings were reported. The observational, cross-sectional design does not establish causality.

5. Results and Findings

5.1. Data Screening and Sample Characteristics

All 100 eligible records were retained. Screening detected no missing or out-of-range responses, duplicate identifiers, or changes to original data. Seventy-six percent used social media at least almost daily; 45% most often used YouTube. Only six respondents were aged 70 years or more.

Table 1: Respondent and measurement summary

Characteristic or scale	Result
Participants; gender	N = 100; 51 female / 49 male
Age, years	M = 53.71, SD = 9.35; range 40–78
Age categories	40–49: 35%; 50–59: 40%; 60–69: 19%; 70+: 6%
Human authenticity / AI authenticity	3.480 (0.537) / 2.864 (0.550)
Human trust / AI trust	3.416 (0.506) / 2.686 (0.634)
Human emotion / AI emotion	3.228 (0.622) / 2.636 (0.669)
Digital literacy / AI acceptance	3.234 (0.695) / 2.912 (0.714)

Note. Entries for continuous scales are mean (standard deviation). Composite scores range from 1 to 5.

5.2. Reliability of Research Measures

Cronbach's alpha was .755 for digital literacy, .743 for AI trust, .748 for human emotional connection, .783 for AI emotional connection, and .776 for AI acceptance. Three composites fell below the conventional preliminary .70 benchmark: human authenticity ($\alpha = .601$), AI authenticity ($\alpha = .681$), and human trust ($\alpha = .624$). These values warrant caution in interpreting construct-level effects and comparing measured constructs across influencer type. Internal consistency alone does not establish content validity, measurement invariance, or causal equivalence.

5.3. Human Versus AI Comparisons: H1-H3

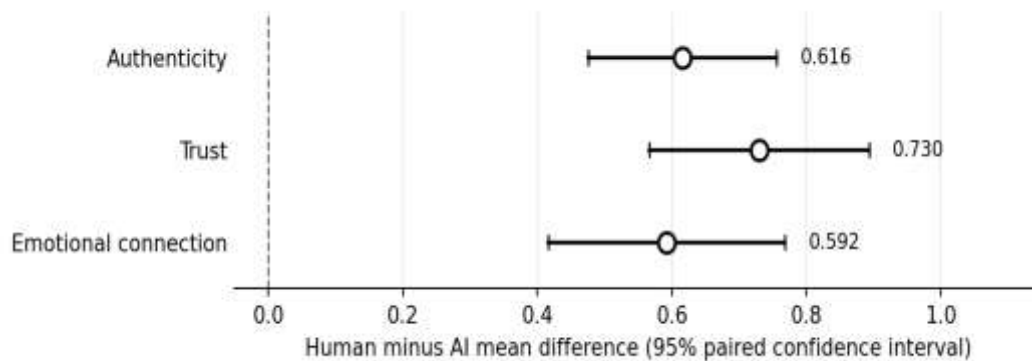
All primary paired comparisons favored human influencers. Mean perceived authenticity was 3.480 for humans versus 2.864 for AI, mean trust was 3.416 versus 2.686, and mean emotional connection was 3.228 versus 2.636. The mean differences ranged from 0.592 to 0.730 points on the five-point scale; all remained significant after the planned Holm correction. The paired standardized effects were sizeable in this sample (Cohen's $d_z = .669-.888$).

Table 2: Paired-samples comparisons between Human and AI influencer ratings (N = 100)

Outcome	Human M	AI M	Difference [95% CI]	t(99)	d _z
Authenticity	3.480	2.864	0.616 [0.476, 0.756]	8.747	.875
Trust	3.416	2.686	0.730 [0.567, 0.893]	8.880	.888
Emotional connection	3.228	2.636	0.592 [0.416, 0.768]	6.687	.669

Note. All paired tests two-sided, $p < .001$; each remained significant after Holm adjustment. Positive differences favor human influencers. dz = mean paired difference / SD of within-person differences.

Figure 1: Human-minus-AI mean differences with 95% paired confidence intervals. Open circles indicate point estimates.



The differences were supported by supplementary rank-based and sign-based procedures. Normality checks for paired differences did not reject approximate normality at the .05 level (Shapiro–Wilk $p = .142$, .285, and .512, respectively). The strongest raw mean difference occurred for trust; nevertheless, cross-construct magnitudes should not be interpreted as directly comparable psychological units without stronger measurement validation.

These estimates measure reported judgments toward the two influencer categories. They do not demonstrate that biological humanity itself causes trust or emotional closeness, because the stimuli were not randomized and prior influencer familiarity was not experimentally held constant.

5.4. Correlation Findings: H4-H6

Digital literacy showed no significant Pearson correlation with AI authenticity ($r = -.026$, $p = .799$), AI trust ($r = .048$, $p = .633$), or AI emotional connection ($r = .045$, $p = .656$). Thus H4 was not supported. This does not contradict the separately observed exploratory literacy–AI acceptance correlation ($r = .382$, $p < .001$): willingness to engage with a technology is not equivalent to perceiving an influencer as credible or relationally warm.

Table 3: Principal correlation estimates by influencer type

Relationship	Human r [95% CI]	AI r [95% CI]
Authenticity with trust (H5)	.493 [.329, .629]	.687 [.567, .778]
Trust with emotional connection (H6)	.585 [.438, .701]	.676 [.553, .770]

Note. All four correlations $p < .001$ and remain statistically significant after global Holm adjustment.

These are within-type correlations; their difference was not formally tested.

For both influencer types, higher authenticity scores coincided with higher trust scores (H5), and trust coincided with emotional connection (H6). The numerically higher AI coefficients should not be described as definitively stronger effects because no formal dependent-correlation comparison was established and the scales differ in internal consistency.

5.5. Joint Regression Model: H7

A participant-clustered linear regression combining the two rating conditions was statistically significant, robust $F(3, 99) = 122.252$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .609$. When perceived authenticity and trust were included together with influencer type, authenticity ($B = .519$, 95% CI [.393, .645], $p < .001$) and trust ($B = .420$, 95% CI [.292, .548], $p < .001$) remained positive independent correlates of emotional connection. The Human-versus-AI coefficient was not significant ($B = -.035$, 95% CI [-.205, .136], $p = .687$).

Accordingly, H7 received support at the joint-model level but not for an independent adjusted association of every model term. The contrast between this result and the unadjusted H3 finding is not contradictory: H3 concerns the overall difference, whereas H7 addresses whether influencer type is associated with emotion after accounting statistically for authenticity and trust. These results do not identify a causal mediation pathway.

5.6. AI Emotional Connection Relative to Neutral: H8

AI emotional connection averaged 2.636 ($SD = .669$), with a 95% confidence interval of [2.503, 2.769]. Against the neutral midpoint of 3, the difference was $-.364$; $t(99) = -5.443$. The one-sided p value for the hypothesized mean greater than 3 was approximately .99999981. The sample mean and confidence interval were below rather than above the midpoint, so H8 was not supported. Twenty-four respondents were above 3, 12 equaled 3, and 64 were below 3. This group-level conclusion does not deny the possibility of meaningful AI-related emotion for individual respondents.

5.7. Gender Comparisons and Moderation: H9-H12

Gender comparisons found no adjusted evidence for the hypothesized outcomes. Female overall emotional connection ($M = 2.853$) was numerically below the male mean ($M = 3.014$), in the opposite direction to H9 (Welch $p = .0869$). AI acceptance was nearly equal for female and male participants (2.914 vs. 2.910; $p = .980$), and overall trust was 3.031 versus 3.071 ($p = .620$). Gender also did not significantly moderate the Human–AI emotion gap: the average difference was .576 for women and .608 for men, with a contrast of $-.032$ ($p = .859$). No significant result should be converted into evidence that genders are identical or that the moderation effect is precisely zero.

Table 4: Primary gender and midpoint test results

Hypothesis / outcome	Statistic	Interpretation
H8: AI emotion > 3	$t(99) = -5.443$; one-sided $p \approx 1$	Not supported; mean below 3
H9: female > male overall emotion	Difference = $-.161$; $p = .0869$	Not supported
H10: male > female AI acceptance	Female – male = $.004$; $p = .980$	Not supported
H11: overall gender trust difference	Female – male = $-.040$; $p = .620$	Not supported
H12: gender $\times$ influencer type	Gap contrast = $-.032$; $p = .859$	Not supported

Note. Gender p values are unadjusted here; the report's global Holm correction does not change decisions.

5.8. Exploratory Questionnaire Findings

Counselling-related items showed mean agreement of 4.00 for preferring a real person when feeling low, 3.78 for concern about AI emotional dependence, and 2.92 for whether AI characters could provide

genuine comfort. These items describe attitudes only, not observed counselling outcomes. Descriptive coding of 100 open-ended responses highlighted preference for human interaction (51 codes), context-dependent judgments (36), lived experience (35), trust/accountability (30), and emotional closeness (28). Codes overlapped and were assigned by a single analyst; they should not be interpreted as independently verified clinical or thematic frequencies.

5.9. Robustness and Integrated Hypothesis Interpretation

The primary differences for H1-H3 were not reliant solely on parametric t-test assumptions. All three Shapiro-Wilk tests on participant-level paired differences had p values above .05 (0.142, 0.285, and 0.512), although such results do not prove exact normality. Supplementary Wilcoxon signed-rank, sign, and sign-flip analyses showed the same direction of difference. In the observed data, 76 respondents rated Human authenticity higher, 79 rated Human trust higher, and 72 rated Human emotional connection higher; ties and AI-favoring comparisons were also present. These distributions demonstrate a majority pattern rather than complete agreement across respondents.

An important distinction is the change in meaning between the H3 paired contrast and the H7 adjusted regression. H3 asks whether emotional-connection ratings differ on average between the two conditions; H7 examines whether a type coefficient remains detectable after two ratings—authenticity and trust—are included as concurrent predictors. The nonsignificant adjusted type coefficient does not cancel the statistically significant paired mean difference. It shows only that there was no separate detectable type association under the particular adjustment specification. Neither analysis estimates a mediation pathway without further design and identification assumptions.

H8 is likewise direction-specific. A sample mean below the neutral score of 3, together with a confidence interval entirely below 3, cannot support a stated prediction that the population mean exceeds 3. For H9-H12, the lack of significant gender effects should not be represented as proof of identical perceptions. At $N = 100$, and with only six participants aged 70 or older, subgroup effect estimates may be imprecise. The result is best described as insufficient evidence for the specific predicted differences and interaction in this convenience sample.

6. Discussion

The results show a consistent Human advantage in three operational dimensions of influencer perception among adults aged 40 years and above. Because all three Human–AI comparisons used paired responses from the same individuals, the estimates are not confounded by between-person scale use in the way that separate-group comparisons can be. This is an important design strength. Nonetheless, general influencer categories rather than standardised profiles were assessed, so participants may have imagined different reference figures and levels of visual realism.

The authenticity results are compatible with prior work showing that audiences rely on sincerity, disclosure, and perceptions of a communicator's identity when evaluating online figures [3, 5]. However, it would be too strong to conclude that a virtual influencer cannot be authentic. Koles et al. (2024) [4] describe multiple authenticity referents that can apply to artificial personalities. A potential practical explanation is that some older respondents weight evidence of lived experience more heavily than consistency of an invented persona; the present questionnaire did not directly measure that explanatory pathway.

Trust showed the largest Human–AI mean gap, and trust correlated positively with emotional connection for each influencer type. This aligns conceptually with source credibility accounts and recent virtual-influencer research linking perceived authenticity to trust and engagement [10]. The relatively high correlation between AI authenticity and AI trust may indicate that evaluations of artificial communicators are strongly linked at the perceptual level. Because the study used a single self-report instrument and observed all constructs at one time, shared response tendencies, item content overlap, and unmeasured familiarity could also explain part of these associations.

The H7 regression offers a more discriminating conclusion than the paired comparisons alone: when authenticity and trust ratings are included, influencer type is not an independently significant correlate of emotional connection. This does not erase the descriptive Human advantage; rather, it shows that the type coefficient provides little additional linear information under that model's covariate specification. It also does not prove mediation, since mediator and outcome temporality were not established. Subsequent experimental work could vary influencer type while measuring authenticity, credibility, and emotion with validated, invariant scales.

The H8 result cautions against portraying AI-generated influencers as already producing above-neutral average emotional connection in this sample. It is a group-level score statement, not a claim that every respondent rejects AI personalities. The absence of H4 effects alongside the exploratory relationship between literacy and AI acceptance suggests that comfort with digital tools may be more closely tied to openness to artificial content than to trust or closeness. This distinction is relevant for separating technological adoption from psychosocial evaluations, a distinction broadly compatible with technology-acceptance frameworks [12].

Finally, the nonsignificant gender contrasts and interaction provide no basis for the predicted sex-specific conclusions. The confidence intervals still permit small or moderate differences, and several subgroup analyses have limited precision at $N = 100$. The exploratory open-text material suggests that relational preference and conditional openness to AI can coexist, but it is not an independently triangulated qualitative study. Together, these patterns invite future research rather than definitive population-wide claims about older users.

6.1. Contributions to Research and Future Directions

The study contributes a focused age-defined comparison to research on digital social presence. Many experimental investigations examine persuasion, endorsements, or purchase intentions; this study measures participants' emotional connection to an influencer category, separate from commercial behaviour. This positioning matters because favourable attitudes to a product should not be interpreted automatically as emotional comfort, psychological support, or a stable parasocial bond. The correlation findings also suggest that authenticity and trust are important co-occurring judgments in both Human and AI conditions, although the cross-sectional design cannot determine which perception comes first [5, 6, 11].

One practical implication is that responsible design and evaluation should distinguish transparency about artificial origin from credibility and relational experience. A clearly identified AI persona may still appear authentic if audiences judge its character and messaging to be coherent; conversely, a human identity alone does not guarantee reliability. The study does not test a disclosure intervention. It instead identifies a set of perceptions that future controlled research could measure before and after disclosure or repeated exposure [4, 8].

Future projects could recruit respondents using probability-based sampling, use a broader range of older participants, establish measurement invariance across influencer type and gender, and validate scale wording outside the development sample. Standardised stimuli could separate the effects of avatar realism, content theme, commercial sponsorship, and prior familiarity. Longitudinal observation would help distinguish temporary interest from enduring emotional connection. Counselling-oriented research should additionally use validated psychological outcomes rather than inferring therapeutic value from self-reported influencer ratings.

7. Implications, Limitations, and Conclusion

7.1. Research Implications

For communicators and platform designers, the findings emphasise perceived credibility, transparency, and the distinction between functional usefulness and relational reassurance. Clearly identifying a virtual creator's artificial nature, the party responsible for its content, and the commercial intent of messages may help users make informed evaluations. The present study did not experimentally test disclosure interventions, so these are implications for cautious design rather than verified effects of a particular communication policy.

For counselling psychology, apparent comfort with an AI personality should not be interpreted as evidence of psychological treatment efficacy. The preference for a real person when feeling low and concern about dependence are informative perceptions, but no clinical or longitudinal outcomes were measured. Practitioners may find it useful to ask how clients interpret AI-mediated companionship, trustworthiness, and disclosure without assuming that parasocial closeness is equivalent to reciprocal human care.

7.2. Strengths and Limitations

Strengths include a paired assessment of both influencer types, a clearly defined 40+ age criterion, completeness checks of the supplied records, multiple sensitivity analyses, and transparent effect-size reporting. Interpretation is limited by non-probability convenience sampling, self-report and social-desirability effects, lack of randomized or standardised influencer stimuli, a one-time cross-sectional design, and possible order and common-method effects. Only six participants were aged 70 or above. Three composites fell below $\alpha = .70$ (Human authenticity, AI authenticity, Human trust), and measurement invariance across type or gender was not established. Because the instrument was researcher-developed, the findings are best described as operational-score comparisons rather than definitive differences in latent psychological traits.

Open-text codes were assigned by one analyst without inter-rater reliability assessment. The counselling-related items are exploratory and non-diagnostic. The study did not preregister a protocol, and the in-sample regression R^2 should not be interpreted as out-of-sample predictive accuracy. Prospective research should use representative or stratified recruitment, a larger sample for interaction tests, validated ordinal measures, standardised stimuli, and a design capable of testing whether authenticity or trust actually mediates later emotional responses.

7.3. Conclusion

Within 100 surveyed adults aged 40 years and above, human influencers received higher mean authenticity, trust, and emotional-connection ratings than AI influencers. Authenticity and trust were associated with emotional connection across both influencer categories, whereas the adjusted influencer-type coefficient and proposed gender effects were not statistically supported. AI emotional connection was below the neutral midpoint. The findings add age-focused observational evidence to the virtual-

influencer literature but require replication with stronger measurement validation and more representative sampling.

8. Research Declarations

All participants provided voluntary informed consent to participate. No independent clinical or therapeutic outcomes were assessed.

9. References

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