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Human vs AI Influencers: An Empirical Analysis of Consumer Behaviour

Deepika[1], Akanksha Upadhyaya[2]
[1]dept. of Information Technology, Jagan Institute of Management Studies (JIMS), Sector- 5, Rohini, Delhi, India, deepikagahlan@gmail.com
[2]dept. of Information Technology, Jagan Institute of Management Studies (JIMS), Sector- 5, Rohini, Delhi, India, dr.akankshaupadhyaya@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

With the evolving landscape of digital marketing, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has made a significant impact, especially in the area of influencer marketing. In addition to real influencers, virtual influencers created by AI are also becoming a popular tool for brands to market products, communicate with audiences, and influence consumer perception on social media. But there has been comparatively little research on comparing the consumer's response to AI-generated and human influencers using a common behavioral framework. The current research work examines how perceived authenticity, trust, attractiveness, consumer engagement, and familiarity with AI affect consumer purchase intentions and brand perception when it comes to AI and human influencers. This study used an empirical survey method with a stimulus approach that was carried out with a structured questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale. The survey was conducted with 268 active social media users who know about the use of influencer-generated content on platforms like Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. The data was analysed using statistical techniques such as Cronbach's alpha, descriptive statistics, Independent Sample t-test, One Way ANOVA and Multiple regression analysis. A proposed framework was suggested by authors in this work that highlighted the alignment of AI-enabled marketing ecosystems with sustainability-oriented digital transformation and relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The results suggest that the trust, consumer engagement and perceived authenticity have a significant impact on purchase intention for the products promoted by the influencer. Comparative analysis also shows that human influencers are more likely to create content that is perceived as authentic and trustworthy than AI influencers. But, the familiarity of AI positively influences the engagement of consumers with AI influencers. The study adds to the body of research on AI-influenced marketing by offering comparative insights into consumer response to AI and human influencers. The results could help marketers, advertisers and digital strategists craft efficient influencer marketing strategies to meet the rapidly changing world of AI-driven social media.

Keywords: *AI Influencers, Human Influencers, Consumer Behaviours, Purchase Intent, Consumer Engagement, Influencer Marketing, Perceived Authenticity, Social Media Marketing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The quick development of AI and digital communication technology has actually revolutionized the realm of social media marketing and consumer engagement. Nowadays, influencer marketing has become one of the most popular and powerful digital marketing tactics, allowing brands to reach consumers directly and personally via social media influencers and content creators. Traditional human influencers have impacted consumer attitudes, purchase decisions, and brand perception by the use of trust, authenticity, and emotional connection to their followers. But lately, the field of digital endorsement has added a new breed of influencers known as AI influencers or virtual influencers, which leverage AI technology.In recent times, however, the landscape of digital endorsements has expanded with a new type of influencers known as AI influencers or virtual influencers, which harness AI technology.

AI influencers are virtual characters created by artificial intelligence, machine learning, computer graphics, and sophisticated animation techniques, that can simulate human behavior and interact and communicate with people on social media platforms. The brands are taking advantage of this

virtual world and making it a go-to place for product endorsement, promotion, and consumer engagement because it is so scalable, controllable, and always "online." A few recent studies have shown that AI influencers can generate a large following and sway consumer sentiment like human influencers do in certain areas of the digital marketing landscape [1, 2]. This has led to a growing interest in studying consumer reactions to AI-generated influencer content in both the academic and industrial fields, as AI becomes a more common tool in marketing campaigns.With the rise in the use of AI in marketing strategies, there has been significant research focus on consumer reactions to AI-generated influencer content in both academia and industry.

Previous research has focused on the benefits of AI-powered marketing systems for improving personalization, recommender systems, and customer engagement on online platforms [3-5]. Likewise, virtual influencers have shown their potential to develop unique brand experiences and enhance digital communication strategies [2]. According to Gerlich [1] virtual influencers have a strong impact on consumer behaviour and social media attitudes, again specifically with younger target groups that are very active on digital platforms. Similarly, Muniz et al. [6] found that the disclosure of whether an influencer is real or AI-generated can have a direct impact on brand trust and consumer perceptions. These findings indicate that people are increasingly aware of the existence of AI-powered digital personalities and their persuasive power in online settings.

Trust, authenticity, credibility, anthropomorphism and connection to the emotional remain very relevant concerns, even in the rise of AI influencers. Humans have the ability to show real-life experiences and interactions which makes them more relatable, authentic, and emotionally trustworthy [7, 8]. By contrast, AI influencers typically are assessed through technological novelty, visual appeal, innovation and perceived intelligence [9]. Lee and Ham [10] posited that consumers interact with AI content from influencers differently than with human influencers, especially in judging the influencer's level of expertise and persuasion mechanisms. Likewise, there was a significant difference observed between virtual and human influencers by Böhndel et al. [11] regarding consumer perception and engagement. In recent studies, anthropomorphic traits and human likeness were also shown to have a significant impact on consumer trust and relationship building when interacting with AI influencers [12, 13].

Another key factor to consider when investigating influencer marketing is how the combination of perceived authenticity, trust, attractiveness and engagement come together to positively impact brand perception and purchase intention. Previous studies have found that trust and credibility are amongst the most powerful indicators of the effectiveness of influencers [7, 8, 14]. Jayasingh et al. [14] discovered that consumer engagement and purchase intent are significantly influenced by the credibility of AI-based influencers, and Liu and Zheng [7] highlighted the persuasive influence of influencer credibility on augmenting brand perception and online purchasing behaviour. Garg and Bakshi [8] also showed that parasocial interaction and trust have a positive effect on consumer purchase intention in the context of influencer marketing. Moreover, Zhang et al. [15, 16] proposed that using AI influencers or human influencers in strategic ways can enhance consumer trust, empathy, and marketing outcomes such as content persuasion based on the specific marketing goal and target audience.

While there is a large body of research around influencer marketing, there is limited existing research that has investigated human versus AI influencers. There is little empirical research directly comparing the consumer behavioural reactions to both AI-generated and human influencers in a single analytical framework. Furthermore, most studies have focused on one or two constructs at a time, such as trust and attractiveness or purchase intention, without attempting to study the interaction of four constructs: authenticity, engagement, AI familiarity, and brand perception. This presents a major research void when it comes to understanding the relative effectiveness of AI-driven and human influencers in

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driving consumer behavior on social media platforms.

To address this need, the present study makes an empirical comparative analysis of AI-generated and human influencers, investigating perceived authenticity, trust, attractiveness, consumer engagement and familiarity with AI, and the resulting purchase intentions and brand perception. The research specifically investigates the active social media users who have been exposed to influencer marketing content on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The study's findings will help to understand how AI-powered digital personalities are influencing modern consumer behavior and social media marketing strategies. The results of this study could aid marketers, digital advertisers, and brand planners in creating better influencer selection strategies within the ever-changing AI-powered marketing landscape.

2. RELATED WORK

Table 1 presents a comparative presentation of previous studies by highlighting the variables used, supporting theories, findings, limitations, and their relevance to the present work on AI and human influencer's impact on consumer purchase intention.

Table 1. Summary of Literature Review

Authors & Year	Variables Used	Supported Theory	Pros.	Cons.	Relevance to Present Study
Jayasingh et al. (2025) [14]	Credibility, Consumer Engagement, Purchase Intention	Source Credibility Theory (SCT)	Strong empirical analysis using regression and SEM; focused on AI influencer effectiveness	Only AI influencers considered; no comparison with human influencers	Present study extends comparison between AI and human influencers
Liu & Zheng (2024) [7]	Authenticity, Homophily, Parasocial Interaction, Purchase Intention	Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)	Strong theoretical foundation and behavioral modeling	Focused only on human influencers	Present study integrates AI influencer dimension
Garg & Bakshi (2024) [8]	Trust, Credibility, Parasocial Interaction, Purchase Intention	Source Credibility Theory	Strong focus on influencer trust and consumer psychology	Limited to beauty vloggers and human creators	Present study compares human credibility with AI-generated influencers
Song et al. (2024) [17]	Self-image Congruity, Purchase Intention, Product-Endorser Fit	Congruity Theory	Direct comparison of AI vs human endorsers	Focused more on endorsement fit than engagement behavior	Present study additionally measures trust, authenticity, and engagement
AK TR (2025) [18]	Credibility, Informativeness, Entertainment Value, Human-likeness, Purchase Intention	Source Credibility Theory	Strong regression-based empirical framework	Small sample size; only AI influencers studied	Present study introduces comparative analysis with human influencers
Becaro-Lapiz et al. (2026) [19]	Authenticity, Anthropomorphism, Trust, Attitude, Purchase Intention	PLS-SEM Framework	Advanced mediation analysis and large sample size	Limited to higher education context	Present study broadens demographic scope and adds engagement analysis
Adaba et al. (2025) [20]	Trust, Social Influence, Purchase Behavior	Consumer Behavior Framework	Strong survey-based empirical design	Did not include AI influencer context	Present study incorporates AI-generated influencer comparison

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This work	Perceived Authenticity (PA), Trust (TR), Attractiveness (AT), Consumer Engagement (CE), AI Familiarity (AIF), Purchase Intention (PI), Brand Perception (BP), Social Media Usage Intensity (SUI)	Source Credibility Theory (SCT) + SOR Model, TAN , TPB etc.	Comparative analysis between AI and human influencers using stimulus-based survey design; integrates behavioral analytics and AI-driven marketing perspectives	Scope limited to social media users and fashion/lifestyle influencer context	Addresses research gap by directly comparing consumer responses toward AI-generated and human influencers

Key Research Gap Identified in previous work:

Most previous studies focused only on AI influencers OR only on human influencers. These studies mainly focused on analyzing purchase intention. They rarely conduct direct comparative behavioral analysis in their work.

Key Contribution of this paper:

- comparing AI and human influencers simultaneously
- analyzing engagement + trust + authenticity together
- using stimulus-based empirical survey methodology
- integrating behavioral analytics with AI marketing research.

To provide a conceptual understanding of consumer interaction with AI-generated and human influencers, the study proposes a Hybrid Human AI Engagement Model (HHAIEM). The framework integrates behavioral, technological, and engagement-related constructs influencing purchase intention and brand perception in AI-enabled social media ecosystems. Fig. 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework.

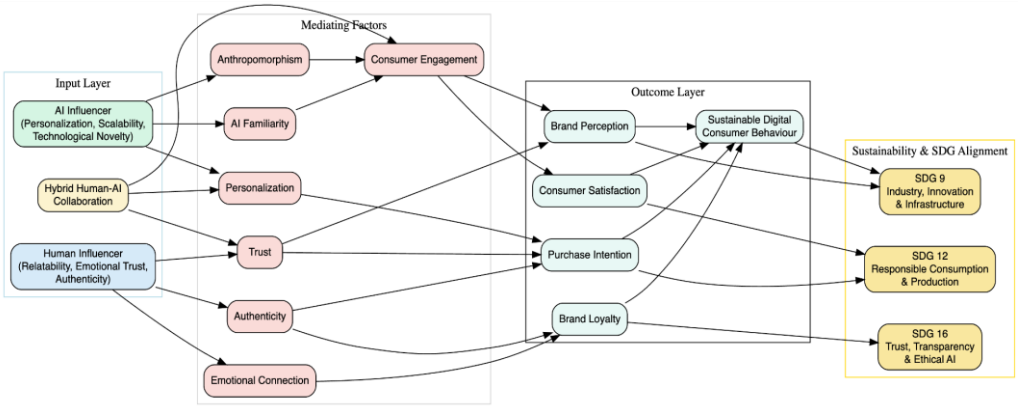

Fig. 1. Proposed Hybrid Human AI Engagement Model (HHAIEM Model)

3. DATASET DESCRIPTION

The research has been conducted on the Instagram posts (that were published publicly) of AI-generated and human influencers, in the fashion and lifestyle category. The study's target population consisted of active social media users who frequently consume content created by influencers on social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok etc. The study single-handedly prioritized those who were aware of online shopping, influencer marketing, and AI-generated digital content. The sampling method used was purposive sampling to obtain the responses of people who have encountered social media influencers before. This research will benefit all the

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following groups of people: university students, young professionals, online shoppers, and social media followers who are actively involved with online purchasing and influencer marketing-based digital content. The study highlights Gen Z and Millennial consumers, who show the highest level of interaction with content that's created by AI and influencers on social media.

Respondents must:

- Frequently use one or more social media platforms
- Follow influencers/content creators
- Know what content is related to influencer marketing and have done it before
- Have attained the age of 18 years or older.

The demographic analysis as shown in Table 2 shows that the respondents were mostly in the age group of 23-27 years old, which is 44.0% and 18-22 years old, which is 35.8%. Of the respondents, 53.0% were male and 45.1% were female. The majority of participants were either postgraduate students/graduates (49.3%) or students (54.5%) and students were the largest occupational group. Instagram was revealed as the most popular social media platform (48.1%) and the majority of people said they spend 1-5 hours a day on social media platforms. What's more, nearly three-quarters of the respondents (73.9%) were familiar with AI-generated influencers, a testament to the increasing exposure to AI-driven digital marketing strategies.

Table 2. Demographic Profile

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)
Gender	Male	142
	Female	121
	Prefer not to say	5
Age Group	18–22 years	96
	23–27 years	118
	28–32 years	38
	Above 32 years	16
Educational Qualification	Undergraduate	104
	Postgraduate	132
	Doctoral/Research Scholar	18
	Others	14
Occupation	Student	146
	Private Employee	74
	Self-Employed/Business	28
	Government Employee	12
	Others	8
Preferred Social Media Platform	Instagram	129
	YouTube	71
	Facebook	24
	X/Twitter	19
	Snapchat	15
	Others	10
Daily Social Media Usage	Less than 1 hour	22
	1–3 hours	109
	3–5 hours	94
	More than 5 hours	43
Awareness of AI Influencers	Yes	198
	No	70

Table 3 presents the variables along with their corresponding measurement items designed using a 5-point Likert scale. The table also highlights the theoretical and conceptual models used to map each construct included in the research framework.

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Table 3. Variables and Theoretical Mapping

Variable Type	Variable	Survey Questions (5-Point Likert Scale)	Theory/Model Mapping
Independent Variable	Influencer Type (AI vs Human)	Respondents were exposed to AI-generated and human influencer profiles before answering survey questions.	Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) Model [20]
	PA	1. The influencer appears genuine.2. The influencer's content feels natural.3. The influencer seems trustworthy and realistic.4. The influencer reflects a believable personality.	Source Credibility Theory (SCT) [21]
	TR	1. I trust the recommendations provided by this influencer.2. The influencer appears credible.3. I believe the information shared is reliable.4. I feel confident about products endorsed by this influencer.	Trust Theory / SCT [22]
	AT	1. The influencer is visually appealing.2. The influencer's presentation style is attractive.3. The influencer creates engaging content.4. I find the influencer interesting to follow.	Source Attractiveness Model (STM) [23]
	AIF	1. I am aware of AI-generated influencers.2. I can identify AI-generated digital content.3. I frequently encounter AI-based content online.4. I understand how AI influencers operate.	Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) [24]
Dependent Variable	CE	1. I would like/comment/share this influencer's content.2. I would follow this influencer on social media.3. I actively engage with influencer content online.4. This influencer captures my attention effectively.	Engagement Theory / SOR Model [25]
	PI	1. I would consider purchasing products promoted by this influencer.2. This influencer affects my buying decisions.3. I am likely to try products recommended by this influencer.4. I would trust product endorsements from this influencer.	Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [26]
	BP	1. The influencer improves my perception of the brand.2. Brands associated with this influencer appear more innovative.3. I develop positive impressions about brands promoted by this influencer.4. Influencer marketing affects my brand preferences.	Brand Equity Theory (BET) [27]
Moderating Variable	SUI	1. I spend considerable time on social media daily.2. Social media influences my purchasing behavior.3. I frequently interact with influencer content.4. I rely on social media for product information.	Uses and Gratifications Theory [28]

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 STATISTICAL ANALYSIS:

Cronbach's Alpha is used to measure the internal consistency and reliability of questionnaire items present in Table 4.

Table 4. Reliability Analysis of Study Constructs

Construct and Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability Status
PA, 4	0.842	Good
TR, 4	0.856	Good
AT, 4	0.811	Good
AIF, 4	0.792	Acceptable
CE, 4	0.874	Good
PI, 4	0.861	Good
BP, 4	0.828	Good
Overall, 28	0.903	Excellent

The reliability analysis indicates that all constructs achieved Cronbach's Alpha values above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, confirming satisfactory internal consistency among the measurement items.

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The overall instrument demonstrated excellent reliability with an alpha value of 0.903.

Descriptive statistics summarize respondent's perceptions toward AI and human influencers in Table 5. Variables included for this analysis are: Mean, Standard Deviation, Minimum and Maximum.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
PA	3.51	0.79	1	5
TR	3.42	0.82	1	5
AT	3.86	0.73	1	5
AIF	3.72	0.77	1	5
CE	3.75	0.81	1	5
PI	3.43	0.84	1	5
BP	3.79	0.76	1	5

The descriptive statistics reveal that respondents reported relatively high levels of perceived attractiveness (Mean = 3.86) and consumer engagement (Mean = 3.75) toward influencer marketing content. AI familiarity also demonstrated moderate-to-high awareness among respondents.

4.2 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The Independent Sample T-Test compares differences between two demographic groups present in Table 6 with respect to two hypothesis considerations.

- Male vs Female respondents
- AI-aware vs Non-aware respondents

Hypothesis H1: There is a significant difference in consumer engagement between male and female respondents.

Table 6. Independent Sample T-Test for Gender and Consumer Engagement

Variable	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value	Result
Consumer Engagement	Male	3.81	0.72	2.184	0.030	Significant
	Female	3.62	0.76			

The independent sample t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in consumer engagement between male and female respondents ($t = 2.184$, $p < 0.05$). Male respondents demonstrated slightly higher engagement levels compared to female respondents.

The ANOVA test compares mean differences across more than two groups present in Table 7 with respect to two hypothesis considerations.

- Age Group
- Daily Social Media Usage

Hypothesis H2: Consumer engagement significantly differs across age groups.

Table 7. One-Way ANOVA for Age Group and Consumer Engagement

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-value	p-value	Result
Between Groups	4.328	3	1.443	3.926	0.009	Significant
Within Groups	97.115	264	0.368			
Total	101.443	267				

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Results of the One-Way ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference between the age group and consumer engagement ($F = 3.926$, $p = 0.009$), suggesting that the age group is indeed a significant factor when it comes to engagement in influencer content. The younger respondents were comparatively more engaged with AI and influencers than the older age groups.

5. RESULT ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table 9 shows that PA, TR, CE and AIF were used as independent variables in the regression model as they are the most theoretically relevant and statistically significant factors influencing consumer's purchase intention for influencer-promoted products. This is a model summary (Table 10). The overall model fits the data well, accounting for 61.0% of the variance in purchase intention. "TR" was the most significant predictor of purchase intention.

Table 9. Multiple Regression Analysis

Predictor Variable	Beta Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Result
PA	0.241	3.842	0.000	Significant
TR	0.376	5.214	0.000	Significant
CE	0.312	4.683	0.000	Significant
AIF	0.118	2.021	0.044	Significant

Table 10. Model Summary

R^2	Adjusted R^2	F-value	p-value
0.610	0.602	58.327	0.000

Table 10 presents the hypothesis testing results, including the statistical techniques applied, coefficient values, significance levels, and the acceptance or rejection status of the proposed hypotheses. Graphical representation is shown in Fig. 2.

Table 10. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis Statement	Variables Involved	Statistical Test Used	β Value	P value	Result
H1: Perceived authenticity positively influences consumer engagement.	PA → CE	Multiple Regression	β = 0.241	0.000	Supported
H2: Perceived trust positively affects purchase intention.	TR → PI	Multiple Regression	β = 0.376	0.000	Supported
H3: Perceived attractiveness positively influences consumer engagement.	AT → CE	Regression	β = 0.284	0.001	Supported
H4: Consumer engagement positively influences brand perception.	CE → BP	Regression	β = 0.331	0.000	Supported
H5: Consumer engagement positively affects purchase intention.	CE → PI	Regression	β = 0.312	0.000	Supported
H6: Human influencers generate significantly higher perceived authenticity than AI-generated influencers.	Influencer Type → PA	Independent Sample T-Test	t = 2.914	0.004	Supported
H7: Human influencers generate significantly higher consumer trust compared to AI-generated influencers.	Influencer Type → TR	Independent Sample T-Test	t = 2.487	0.013	Supported
H8: Consumer engagement significantly differs between AI-generated and human influencers.	Influencer Type → CE	Independent Sample T-Test	t = 2.103	0.036	Supported
H9: AI familiarity positively influences acceptance of AI-generated influencers.	AIF → CE	Regression	β = 0.118	0.044	Supported
H10: There is a significant difference in consumer engagement between male and female respondents.	Gender → CE	Independent Sample T-Test	t = 2.184	0.030	Supported

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H11: Consumer engagement significantly differs across age groups.	Age Group → CE	One-Way ANOVA	F = 3.926	0.009	Supported
H12: Daily social media usage significantly influences purchase intention toward influencer-promoted products.	SUI → PI	One-Way ANOVA	F = 2.417	0.067	Not Supported

The results suggest that the quantity of social media usage does not necessarily translate into higher purchase intention toward influencer-promoted products. Consumers may use social media for multiple purposes such as entertainment, communication, or information consumption, without being directly influenced to make purchasing decisions. Therefore, psychological constructs such as trust, authenticity, and engagement appear to exert greater influence on consumer purchase behavior than mere usage intensity.

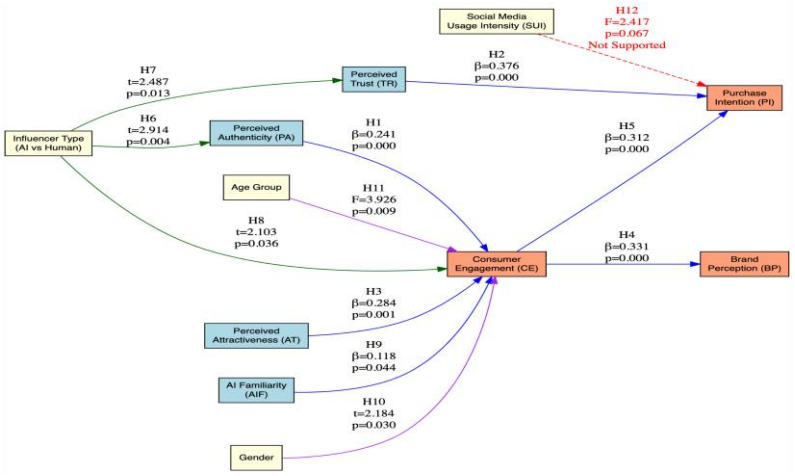

Fig. 2 Graphical representation of Hypothesis results

Sustainability and SDG implication

With the quick integration of AI into the influencer marketing landscape, there are new opportunities for sustainable and responsible digital transformation. The present study helps to better understand the influence of AI-generated content and human influencers on consumer trust, engagement, authenticity, and purchase behaviour in today's social media landscape. These results are congruent with the goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production and Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. The study considers both AI-based and human-involved influencer strategies to highlight the role of innovative and intelligent digital communication infrastructures in the modern marketing system [29-31]. In addition, the study highlights the importance of promoting responsible consumer choices and sustainable online engagement through AI-driven advertising, which must be transparent and ethical. Also, the study highlights the importance of trust, authenticity and disclosure of AI in mitigating misinformation and promoting accountability in digital environments. The Hybrid Human–AI Engagement framework is designed to strike a balance between technical functionality and human touch, fostering human-centric AI use in marketing and communication. As a result, the research helps to shape sustainable digital marketing systems that focus on the welfare of consumers, ethical use of AI, transparency, and the sustainability of AI-influenced communication systems for society.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE

This research was designed to compare the impact of AI-generated influencers with human influencers on the behavior of consumers in social media

marketing situations. The results showed that perceived authenticity, trust, and consumer engagement significantly affect the purchase intention with respect to the product promoted by the influencer. Human influencers were seen to be generating comparatively higher trust and authenticity while AI influencers were getting more accepted by digitally aware consumers who are aware of AI-generated content. The study also pointed out that there are varying rates of consumer engagement among demographic groups, notably age and gender. The study is an important addition to the literature on AI-augmented marketing as it offers the first comparative empirical study of AI and human influencers within a common behavioural framework. These insights can help marketers and digital strategists identify the right types of influencers to leverage in their targeted marketing efforts and brand communication strategies. Although it has made contributions, the study is restricted to the use of social media among the users within the context of fashion and lifestyle. Further research could investigate cross-cultural consumer behaviour, other industry sectors and larger data sets for generalisations. Other sophisticated methods like Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), sentiment analysis, and explainable AI could also be applied to gain deeper insights into consumer perception, emotional attachment, and ethical concerns regarding AI-generated influencers.

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