



Virtual Influencers and Audience Trust in Social Media Communication: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: Virtual influencers powered by CGI and AI are increasingly adopted in social-media marketing, yet audience trust toward them remains fragmented in existing scholarship. This paper conducts a systematic literature review following PRISMA guidelines, selecting 18 peer-reviewed articles published between 2016-2026 to identify factors shaping audience trust in virtual-influencer communication. Findings demonstrate that perceived authenticity, perceived credibility, anthropomorphism and disclosure jointly influence audience trust. Conflicting empirical results exist regarding anthropomorphism's effects, and disclosure generates mixed trust outcomes depending on contexts and consumer preferences. Several research gaps are identified, including limited cross-platform, cross-age-group comparisons and insufficient non-marketing-oriented studies. Future research should explore trust under diverse contexts and consumer groups for more comprehensive understandings.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media marketing, especially over the last two decades, has been accompanied by the increased use of social media influencers by brands and marketing agencies worldwide (Vrontis et al., 2021; Conti et al., 2022). Influencers are individuals who possess a large following on social media (Vrontis et al., 2021). While human influencers are the most common type of influencers used by brands today, the rapid development of technologies such as computer-generated imagery and artificial intelligence (AI) has introduced a new category of influencer, commonly referred to as the virtual influencer (Byun & Ahn, 2023; Galang & Gomez, 2025).

1.1 Virtual Influencers on Social Media

A virtual influencer (VI) is a computer-generated, fictional character that is used for marketing-related purposes, especially social media marketing (Conti et al., 2022; Lou et al., 2023). Most VIs today are created through computer-generated imagery (CGI), motion capture, and artificial intelligence (AI), which enable them to perform roles often associated with human influencers (Byun & Ahn, 2023; Looi & Kahlor, 2024). For instance, a virtual influencer can act like a model, a social media personality, or a brand endorser, which explains why they are sometimes referred to as virtual persona, virtual model, or AI-powered influencer (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024; Galang & Gomez, 2025). VIs have been around for around a decade now, with the last five years particularly experiencing a tremendous rise in their use by brands globally. Many virtual

influencers, especially those used by global brands, have amassed millions of followers on social media (Lou et al., 2023). For example, Lu do Magalu is Brazil's most powerful virtual influencer, possessing over 47 million followers and recognized as the official virtual brand ambassador for retail giant Magazine Luiza (Wang & Chun, 2026). Another popular VI is Lil Miquela, a virtual singer and social media personality with over five million total followers on social media (Wang & Chun, 2026). The rise of VIs over the last few years has attracted the attention of academic researchers, with many seeking to provide an enhanced understanding of their usage, benefits, limitations, as well as future trends (Byun & Ahn, 2023).

Generally, research on this topic indicates that the rise of VIs has created new opportunities as well as new challenges in digital marketing and social media communication. On the one hand, virtual influencers can provide brands with the same benefits as human influencers, such as increased brand awareness, enhanced customer trust, and increased sales (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024). Additionally, studies reveal that a key factor driving the adoption of VIs in favor of human influencers is the level of control of the character's appearance, personality, reputation, messages, and schedule (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024; Audrezet et al., 2025). Because brands have total control over their virtual influencers, there is no risk of damaged reputation caused by an influencer behaving badly or sharing content that is not aligned with the brand (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024). Hence, VIs have the potential to help brands overcome the hurdles they usually face when using human influencers on social media, which explains why some researchers argue that VIs are gradually replacing human influencers (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024).

However, on the other hand, VIs have several challenges and limitations that brands need to understand, such as the lack of authentic emotional connection and difficulty building trust (Audrezet et al., 2025; Tian et al., 2025). Moreover, the rise of virtual influencers has triggered some ethical concerns, for instance, virtual influencers have been criticized for reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards and unattainable body shapes (Robinson, 2020; Kusumarani et al., 2025). Therefore, as advances in CGI and AI technologies continue to transform and "improve" virtual influencers, there is a need for researchers to continuously explore this topic to provide up-to-date insights into the adoption of virtual influencers and their implications.

1.2 Audience Trust in Virtual Influencer Communication

In the existing literature on virtual influencers, audience trust emerges as a crucial factor shaping the outcome of virtual influencer marketing (Byun & Ahn, 2023; Khalfallah & Keller, 2025). In this context, audience trust refers to the confidence and belief that consumers place in a virtual influencer that is being used by a brand or organization (Feng et al., 2024; Qu & Baek, 2024). Audience trust is particularly important because influencer communication relies heavily on perceived credibility, authenticity and relational connection with followers (Lou et al., 2023; Khalfallah & Keller, 2025).

1.3 Literature Gap

Although the literature on VI marketing and communication is expanding rapidly, research on audience trust is still highly fragmented, as researchers are yet to synthesize the literature on trust in VI communication. Previous systematic literature reviews mainly focus on the theoretical frameworks used in prior studies (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023), the distinctions between VIs and human influencers (Byun & Ahn, 2023), as well as the authenticity, transparency, and ethics of VI marketing (Khalfallah & Keller, 2025). While these reviews help in enhancing our understanding of VIs and their role in social media marketing and communication, they provide little insight into the main factors influencing audience trust in VI communication.

1.4 Research Aim and Question

On that account, this research employs a systematic literature review to examine the factors influencing audience trust in virtual influencers within social media communication. The research is guided by the following question:

- How does existing literature explain the factors that shape audience trust in virtual influencers on social media?

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The developed research question is suitable for a systematic literature review (SLR), defined as a structured and rigorous method that helps researchers to identify, evaluate, and synthesize existing research on a specific topic (Lame, 2019; Xiao & Watson, 2019). This chapter discusses the search strategy used, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the quality assessment of the included articles. Performing a SLR in this research facilitated a deeper understanding of the factors shaping audience trust in VI communication, while also helping to identify gaps for future research.

2.1 Search Strategy

The search was performed online and I used the PEO (Population, Exposure, Outcome) framework to develop the search string used in this research (see Figure 1). The PEO framework helped in identifying the main keywords to use and the different combinations that would produce relevant search results. I included Boolean operators when conducting the search, such as 'AND' and 'OR' to combine different keywords in the search. Using this strategy, I performed the search through databases such as ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, Emerald, and Google Scholar.

Table 1: Keywords Used in the Search

PEO Element	Keywords
Population	Consumers, online consumers, digital consumers, online audiences, digital audiences.
Exposure	Virtual influencers, virtual persona, virtual model, AI influencer, virtual personality, virtual influencer marketing.
Outcome	Trust, audience trust, consumer trust, brand trust, trustworthiness.

Source: (Author, 2026)

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 2 was used to ensure that the selected articles were relevant to the research topic. I only included peer-reviewed articles because of their high quality and credibility. Additionally, I included articles published over the last 10 years to promote academic rigor and provide up-to-date insights about trust in VI communication.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

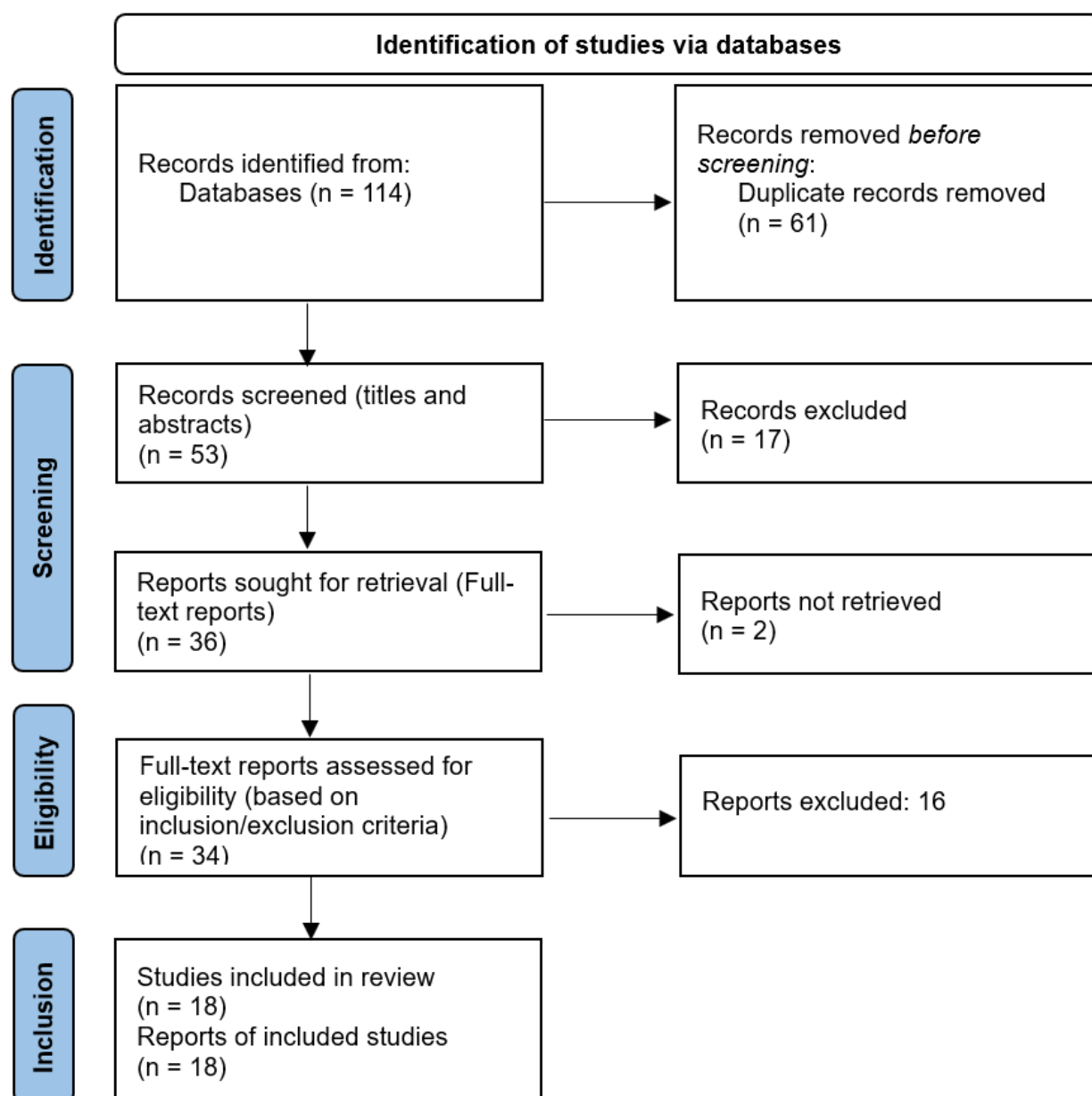
Inclusion criteria	An article was included when it was found to be: • Focusing on the topic of VIs and trust. • Published in peer-reviewed journals. • Published between 2016 and 2026. • Published in English. • Available as full text.
Exclusion criteria	Articles were excluded when they were: • Not relevant to the research question. • Outside the timeframe. • Not published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Source: (Author, 2026)

2.3 Search Procedure and PRISMA Flow

I adhered to the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure the search process was conducted transparently and accurately. Figure 1 shows the PRISMA flow diagram for this research.

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram



Source: (Author, 2026). Adapted from Page et al. (2021)

As revealed in Figure 1, I identified 114 articles and after removing the duplicates, 53 articles remained. After screening the titles and abstracts, I was left with 36 articles, which I obtained the full-text reports and then excluded 16 articles. Finally, I was left with 18 articles, which were included in the research.

2.4 Quality Assessment

JBİ's critical appraisal tools were used to assess the quality of the articles, with these tools mainly focusing on aspects like the relevance and trustworthiness of the results (Porritt et al., 2014). As recommended by Delavari et al. (2023), the quality of an article was evaluated based on several factors, such as the journal rating, the number of citations, as well as the robustness of the research. In terms of the robustness, key aspects evaluated included the clarity of the research aim and objectives, and the methodological strength.

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Audience Trust in Virtual Influencer Communication

Audience trust in VI communication is mainly defined as an audience's willingness to accept a VI as a reliable and credible source of information or recommendation. Crucially, the literature indicates that trust is different from credibility or authenticity, which are instead key factors shaping trust in the context of VI communication (Lou et al., 2023; Gammarano & Arruda Filho, 2025; Lee et al., 2025; Yi et al., 2025; Yoo et al., 2025). While a human influencer can be perceived as trustworthy partly because audiences believe that the influencer has genuinely experienced the situations they communicate, a VI cannot possess such experiences in the same way (Kim & Wang, 2024; Lee et al., 2025). However, studies reveal that consumers can still perceive VIs as authentic and trustworthy, particularly if the VI's story is consistent (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2025). Lee et al. (2025) found that VIs can sometimes be perceived to be more authentic than human influencers, while Allal-Chérif et al. (2024) revealed that a VI's story matters more than their appearance in terms of building trust.

3.2 Influence of Perceived Authenticity and Credibility on Audience Trust

In research examining trust in VI marketing and communication, perceived authenticity and credibility emerge as key concepts that have been examined in close relation to trust (Lou et al., 2023; Gammarano & Arruda Filho, 2025; Lee et al., 2025; Yi et al., 2025; Yoo et al., 2025). In the context of VI communication, perceived authenticity refers to the extent to which consumers believe that a VI is genuine, sincere, and true to their values (Khalfallah & Keller, 2025). Meanwhile, perceived credibility refers to the degree to which consumers believe that a VI possesses relevant knowledge, skill, or expertise in a particular field (Kim & Wang, 2024). Correspondingly, perceived credibility is the extent to which a VI can be trusted by consumers to produce an objective, honest opinion (Yoo et al., 2025). Hence, both perceived authenticity and credibility are subjective judgements made by a consumer, with these two factors found to be crucial for building audience trust and influencing the effectiveness of VI marketing (Kim & Wang, 2024).

Perceived authenticity is an interesting topic in the context of VI communication because at first glance, VIs may seem to be incompatible with authenticity due to the fact that their identities, appearances, and narratives are artificially constructed (Liu & Lee, 2024). However, researchers on this topic have mainly focused on the communication aspect of authenticity, which involves assessments of whether the VI's communication and messages appear sincere, consistent, and believable (Kim & Wang, 2024; Lee et al., 2025; Yi et al., 2025). This type of authenticity has been found to be directly linked to audience trust, whereby the higher the consumers' level of perceived authenticity, the greater the trust they have in VIs (Lou et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2025; Yi et al., 2025; Yin et al., 2026). For instance, Gammarano & Arruda Filho (2025) reveal that perceived authenticity combines with trust to influence engagement and drive purchase intention. In this regard, the relationship between perceived authenticity and trust helps in explaining why VIs in contemporary social media platforms are able to attract sizeable audiences despite their artificial nature.

3.3 Influence of Anthropomorphism on Audience Trust

A key debate in this regard is whether trust is built by making VIs "more human" in terms of their actions, appearance, emotional responses, and other aspects. This debate has attracted the interest of researchers mainly because technological advancements are increasingly enabling brands to create VIs that have a higher degree of human-likeness. On this topic, the existing literature highlights anthropomorphism as a key attribute of VIs, and a crucial factor influencing audience trust (Feng et al., 2024; Goel & Garg, 2025; Yin et al., 2026). Anthropomorphism is defined as the act of giving human traits and emotions to non-human things, in this case VIs (Magtibay et al., 2025; Yin et al., 2026).

Although the literature highlights a clear relationship between anthropomorphism and trust, the reviewed articles provide conflicting findings regarding the specific manner in which perceived human-likeness impacts audience trust. On the one hand, studies indicate that perceived human-likeness can have a positive influence on trust, implying that making VIs “more human” can enable brands to build audience trust (Kim et al., 2025). For example, Feng et al. (2024) used a mixed-methods study and revealed that anthropomorphism has a positive influence on audience trust and acceptance of VIs as brand/product endorsers. Correspondingly, Goel & Garg (2025) conducted their survey research in the Indian context and found that both physical and cognitive anthropomorphic features influence perceived authenticity along with trust. These findings are supported by a recent study focusing on British Gen Z consumers, where Magtibay et al. (2025) found that anthropomorphism in VIs does not negatively affect trust.

On the contrary, there are researchers who argue that becoming “more human” actually erodes trust rather than building it (Qu & Baek, 2024). For example, Qu & Baek (2024) stress the need to let VIs remain virtual in order to build trust. These contradictory findings can be viewed as an indication that the relationship between anthropomorphism and trust is mediated and moderated by other factors, which can change how a VI’s human traits and behaviors affect audience trust (Magtibay et al., 2025). Common mediators and moderators include disclosure and perceived authenticity, which have also been found to have a direct influence on trust (Kim & Wang, 2024; Kim et al., 2025).

For example, the mediating role of disclosure is highlighted by Kim et al. (2025), who recently examined how trust in human-like VIs compares to trust in anime-like VIs across different states of sponsorship disclosure. Their findings revealed that human-like VIs are associated with greater trust and higher engagement, but only when sponsorship is not disclosed. When disclosure of sponsorship was present, these researchers observed no significant difference in the trust levels between human-like VIs and anime-like VIs (Kim et al., 2025). These findings in particular provide an interesting insight into how audience trust is shaped by both human-likeness and disclosure, as it suggests that brands that wish to use human-like VIs should avoid disclosing sponsorships and brand partnerships. The influence of disclosure is discussed in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

Anthropomorphism has also been associated with social presence, which has been found to influence audience trust in VI communication (Magtibay et al., 2025; Yin et al., 2026). For example, Magtibay et al. (2025) found that social presence and information quality have a positive effect on trust among British Gen Z consumers. The role of social presence is also discussed in a recent study by Yin et al. (2026), who revealed that social presence has a significant impact on perceived authenticity and trust. In their study, Yin et al. (2026) further revealed that social presence mediates the relationship between anthropomorphic behavior and perceived authenticity. Relatedly, Yoo et al. (2025) revealed that textual social cues have a direct influence on perceived credibility and trust, with these findings encouraging brands and marketers to incorporate textual social cues, such as emojis, voice tone, facial expression, and body language, into a VI’s profile to help build trust.

3.4 Influence of Disclosure on Audience Trust

Crucially, the literature differentiates between disclosure of the artificial nature of a VI and disclosure of a sponsorship or brand partnership (Muniz et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2025). While sponsorship disclosure has been associated with a negative effect on audience trust (Kim et al., 2025), there are mixed findings regarding the impact of disclosing the artificial nature of a VI on trust. On the one hand, Muniz et al. (2024) revealed that VI disclosure (of the VI’s artificial nature) has a significant negative effect on brand trust, via perceived anthropomorphism. These findings suggest that when consumers are informed that a VI is an AI-generated persona, they perceive the AI as being “less human” and thereby fail to trust the VI.

On the other hand, research indicates that explicit disclosure of the artificial nature of VIs is associated with increased trust, especially among consumers who place substantial value on transparency (Looi & Kahlor, 2024). This finding explains why some brands opt to openly disclose the artificial nature of VIs on their profiles. Additionally, this finding indicates that the impact of disclosure on trust may differ based on consumers' values and preferences.

The potential negative effect of disclosure on audience trust provides a hint as to why VI marketing has raised ethical concerns. In other words, although brands may know that disclosure is an ethical marketing practice, they may choose to avoid disclosure so as to build trust and drive purchase intent among consumers online. Therefore, further research is required in this area.

3.5 Research Gaps

This SLR highlights some key gaps in the existing literature on audience trust in VI communication. Firstly, a large portion of the literature examines trust in relation to marketing outcomes such as consumers' purchase intentions, with very few studies specifically focusing on communication. While social media marketing and communication are closely related, conducting more communication-focused studies would be useful in understanding how audience trust is built when VIs are used for purposes not directly related to marketing, such as entertainment and information sharing.

The second gap identified is the limited research comparing audience trust in VIs across different platforms. Additionally, the current literature provides a limited analysis of the factors influencing audience trust among different age groups. While a few researchers have focused on specific age groups, such as Gen Z consumers, there is a general lack of comparative studies to compare different groups of consumers. Moreover, the existing literature does not adequately address important questions about ethics, despite recent SLRs revealing that ethics and disclosure are critical concerns that need to be addressed as VI marketing becomes more and more popular (Khalfallah & Keller, 2025). The topic of ethics is particularly important because AI and other technological advancements are increasingly creating VIs that closely resemble humans, making it difficult for audiences to distinguish between VIs and human influencers (Khalfallah & Keller, 2025).

4.0 CONCLUSION

This SLR was conducted to examine the concept of audience trust within VI communication. Importantly, this review did not seek to obtain a specific answer as to whether or not consumers trust VIs on social media. Rather, the SLR examined the factors shaping audience trust in VI communication, revealing that trust is shaped by factors such as perceived authenticity, credibility, anthropomorphism, and disclosure. Generally, the existing literature on this topic challenges the assumption that the artificial nature of VIs prevents audiences from building trust. As revealed in the research, consumers can trust VIs under certain conditions, such as when their stories are consistent and also when they demonstrate human-like traits. However, the findings also indicate that audience trust in VIs is dependent on context and sensitive to factors such as disclosure and excessive realism. For example, although disclosure can help in building trust, excessive disclosure can erode audience trust. Additionally, too much realism and exaggerated human behaviour can also lower consumers' trust levels. Therefore, this SLR cautions brands and marketers using VIs, arguing that they need to consider how multiple factors interact to shape audience trust in VIs.

Based on the highlighted gaps in the existing literature, future research should focus on cross-platform studies to compare audience trust across different social media platforms. Additionally, future researchers on this topic should also consider comparative studies that compare different groups or categories of consumers. For example, comparing audience trust between Gen Z and Millennials can provide useful insights into the factors shaping trust in different age groups. Moreover, future research should examine how trust in VIs manifests not only in marketing contexts but also in informational and entertainment contexts. Conducting research on

such areas would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing audience trust in VI communication.

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