

The Authenticity Crisis: A Systematic Review of Trust Erosion in Human vs. AI Influencers

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Keywords :	Abstract
influencer marketing, social media influencers, AI influencer, social media marketing,, digital marketing	The rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence into social media has disrupted the digital marketing environment, creating an authenticity crisis that affects both human and AI influencers as audiences struggle to distinguish genuine engagement from manufactured content. This study aims to synthesize the drivers of trust erosion and compare the perception of authenticity between Human and AI influencers, ultimately proposing a framework for their coexistence within contemporary marketing practice. Utilizing a Systematic Literature Review following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, this research analyzed a final dataset of 31 articles sourced from the Scopus database and published between 2020 and 2026. The findings reveal a dual trust challenge: human influencers lose credibility through hyper-commercialization and deceptive engagement metrics, while AI influencers face scepticism due to the uncanny valley effect and the hidden motives of their creators. Consequently, the concept of authenticity is bifurcating; human influencers are expected to demonstrate emotional authenticity through real and unscripted moments, whereas AI influencers are valued for functional authenticity, characterized by consistency, reliability, and rationality in the information they provide. These findings suggest that authenticity should no longer be treated as a single, universal standard but rather as a construct that varies according to influencer type. Marketers must therefore adapt to this new environment by ensuring full transparency regarding sponsorships and AI usage, and by strategically deploying each influencer type for distinct purposes: human influencers to build deep emotional connections with audiences, and AI influencers to achieve broad reach and disseminate product information efficiently and consistently at scale.

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of generative AI and computer-generated imagery has fundamentally transformed the social media landscape, particularly altering the operations of social media influencers. This technological evolution has given rise to AI influencers, or virtual influencers, which are digital avatars created and maintained by AI experts to mimic the everyday lives and interactions of real people, thereby engaging with followers (Ameen et al., 2023; Jhawar et al., 2023).

Initially, human influencers were highly trusted because they were perceived as authentic, relatable, and independent consumers whose opinions were not influenced by corporate advertisers. However, as the social media influencer industry has grown, the practice of endorsing products has become normalized, shifting audience perception. This has led to influencer fatigue and declining trust, as many consumers now view human influencers as inauthentic and financially motivated due to the saturation of paid sponsorships and highly curated content (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021; Le & Aydin, 2022).

In their early iterations, AI influencers were easily identifiable due to imperfections such as inconsistent frames or anatomical anomalies. However, recent improvements in generative

AI, machine learning, and CGI have enabled the creation of AI influencers with extreme realism, featuring perfect rendering of human-like physical features, facial expressions, and natural movements (Diwanji, 2025; Lim & Lee, 2023). This development has blurred the lines between the authentic and the synthetic, making some virtual influencers so realistically similar to humans that consumers mistake them for real beings (Diwanji, 2025; Choudhry et al., 2022).

This hyper-reality is making people increasingly wary of social media influencers, as it becomes difficult to differentiate between AI and human creators. The inability to distinguish reality from fantasy often leads to increased discomfort and scepticism toward consumed content (Bennett et al., 2026). While a small portion of the population can spot the differences, the majority remain unable to reliably discern whether an influencer is human or AI-generated (Lim & Lee, 2023).

As this shift towards integrating human and AI influencers intensifies, this systematic literature review aims to address three research questions: RQ1: What are the main drivers of declining trust in human social media influencers? RQ2: How does consumer perception of authenticity differ between human influencers and AI influencers? RQ3: What adaptation strategies are proposed in the literature for human influencers to coexist with AI influencers?

This study contributes to the field by synthesizing the fragmented research on human and AI influencers into a coherent framework. By organizing existing literature, this review highlights a critical research gap and proposes a new theoretical framework for understanding authenticity in the contemporary digital world. Furthermore, this research offers a practical roadmap for marketers, influencers, and content creators, providing guidance on building trust while navigating the increasingly blurred lines of the digital marketing ecosystem.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Systematic Literature Review

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is an objective, standardized research method designed to assemble, arrange, and assess existing literature within a specific domain (Paul et al., 2023). In contrast to traditional literature reviews, which may be subjective, an SLR employs explicit, reproducible, and systematic methods to identify, select, and appraise relevant research. The synthesis, which compiles past research that fits specific eligibility criteria, seeks to uncover a comprehensive understanding of a topic, rather than a fragmented perspective (Purssell & McCrae, 2024; Booth et al., 2021).

In this research, the SLR method serves as the theoretical framework that shapes how past studies on human and AI influencers are identified, selected, and appraised to construct new knowledge. As Paul et al. (2023) and Booth et al. (2021) explain, by logically organizing past research findings, an SLR facilitates the reconstruction of fragmented bodies of literature, enabling theoretical advancement and theory generation. Additionally, it lays a strong foundation by mapping conceptual boundaries, developing models, and highlighting gaps that require future research.

The strength of an SLR also lies in its ability to minimize error and bias systematically, allowing for reliable conclusions to be drawn (Purssell & McCrae, 2024). Moreover, it increases research clarity, validity, and auditability by providing a guide for how evidence is identified and interpreted. Since SLR researchers synthesize large datasets, the approach can avoid research duplication, reduce waste, and provide robust evidence ready for application in

practice and policy (Booth et al., 2021). According to Booth et al. (2021), the applications of SLR are highly versatile and can be applied to map the research landscape, identify theoretical landmarks, and find gaps in existing research.

Table 1. Scope and Research Questions

Scopes	Questions
Trust erosion and consumer skepticism	RQ1: What are the main drivers of declining trust in human social media influencers?
Comparative authenticity and AI disruption	RQ2: How does consumer perception of authenticity differ between human influencers and AI influencers?
Strategic future adaptation	RQ3: What adaptation strategies are proposed in the literature for human influencers to coexist with AI influencers?

Source: Authors' formulation (2026)

METHOD

This research employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as its main theoretical and methodological framework to synthesize information on trust erosion in human and AI influencers within social media settings. The structural logic of this research, which includes collecting, screening, and analyzing all sources relevant to the research questions, is processed using the SLR method. To maintain transparency and replicability, the theoretical structure of this research follows the PRISMA 2020 model (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses).

The review began with a comprehensive search in the Scopus database for the publication period from January 2020 to March 2026. The search strategy was developed based on terms and concepts found in previous studies, such as "social media influencer," "content creator," and "artificial intelligence," using Boolean operators AND and OR to ensure the inclusion and precision of the retrieved results. A combination of keywords was used to get the best result related to human and AI influencers, and the search was limited to English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles. The focus was on studies discussing consumer trust, source credibility, perceived authenticity, or consumer scepticism related to social media influencers, both human and AI. Following the search, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, and the PRISMA flow was followed to yield a dataset that directly addresses human and AI influencers within the domains of marketing, advertising, consumer behavior, brand management, or digital sociology.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Scopus database was used for the initial search process which used a combination of keywords to get the best result related to human and AI influencers. The search strategy was developed based on terms and concepts found in previous studies such as "social media influencer," "content creator," and "artificial intelligence." Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to ensure the inclusion and precision of the retrieved results. The search was limited to English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2026, focusing on studies that discuss consumer trust, source credibility, perceived authenticity, or consumer skepticism related to social media influencers both to human or AI influencers. The detailed information about search string and applied filters are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Search Strategy used in Elsevier Scopus

Database	Search Strategy	Notes
Scopus	("Social Media Influencer" OR "Content Creator")	Field: Title-Abstract-Keywords.

AND ("Trust" OR "Credibility" OR "Authenticity" OR "Skepticism") AND ("Artificial Intelligence" OR "AI" OR "Virtual Influencer" OR "CGI" OR "Future")	Limited applied: English only, dates 2020-2026. Initial search 168
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Source: Process from Elsevier Scopus, March 2026

Table 3. Inclusion and Exclusion criteria table

Criteria Type	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	non-English
Publication year	between January 2020 and March 2026	older than January 2020
Thematic focus	must explicitly investigate consumer trust, source credibility, perceived authenticity, or consumer skepticism related to social media influencers (both human or AI influencers)	studies that only focus on algorithmic reach, platform economy, or legal/copyright issues of social media influencers (both human or AI influencers)
Disciplinary domain	research must be within the fields of marketing, advertising, consumer behavior, brand management, or digital sociology	studies that purely within computer science, law, political science, or general media studies without consumer behavior perspective
Methodology	must be an empirical study (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) or a peer-reviewed systematic review	conceptual papers, theoretical frameworks without data, editorials, book reviews, or case studies that lack of empirical approach
Publication type	only full-length journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters are included	white papers, dissertations, or short report/briefs

Source: Process from Elsevier Scopus, March 2026

The search in the Scopus database showed a total of 168 articles. After duplicate removal (n=0), 168 unique records remained for screening. Based on title and abstract review, 52 articles met the criteria mentioned above, while 116 were not chosen for not fulfilling the relevance criteria. After screening the full text, 21 articles were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria such as lack of conceptual focus, outdated, or absence of empirical analysis. Therefore, only 31 articles were selected as the final dataset for the synthesis stage later and 137 articles were excluded (yield rate 18.45%). This process follows the selection and evaluation applied throughout systematic review method as explained in the PRISMA flow diagram below

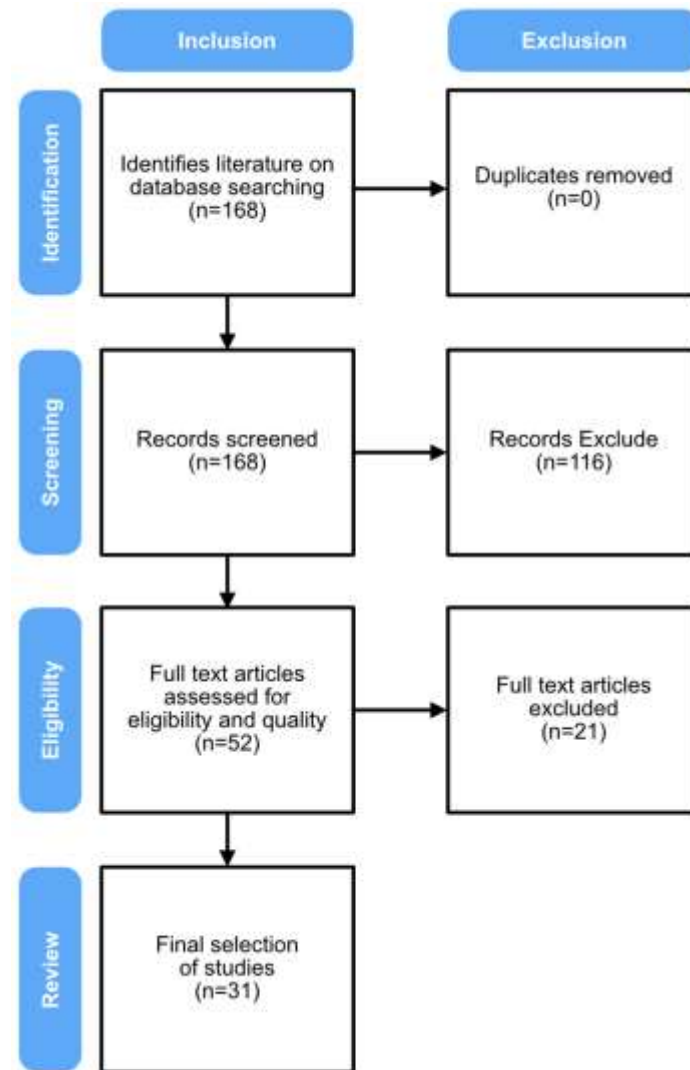


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram For Systematic Review

Source: Manual Process of Database

The systematic search in the Scopus database came with an initial search result of 168 records. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, these records were screened based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria mentioned in Table 3. After removing duplicates and reviewing the full texts of those articles, a final sample of 31 articles was selected for synthesis which is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Summary of Reviewed Journal Articles

No	Title	Journal Rank	Country	Methods use	Author
1	“You are a virtual influencer!”: Understanding the impact of origin disclosure and emotional narratives on parasocial relationships and virtual influencer credibility	Q1	USA, South Korea	Quantitative	Lim, R. E., & Lee, S. Y. (2023)
2	Between human and AI influencers: parasocial relationships, credibility, and social capital formation in a collectivist market: a study of TikTok	Q2	Egypt, Jordan	Quantitative	Omeish, F., Shaheen, A., Alharthi, S., & Alfaiza, A.

	users in the Middle East				(2025)
3	Consumer engagement with social media influencers: A PRISMA protocol review	Q1	Australia	Systematic literature review	Bastrygina, T., & Lim, W. M. (2023)
4	Filtering Trust: Disclosing the Role of Artificial Intelligence Decreases Trust in Technology, but Does Not Prevent Harm to Body Image After Viewing AI-Generated Content	Q1	USA	Quantitative	Bennett, B. L., et al. (2026)
5	Findings from a qualitative analysis: Social media influencers of color as trusted messengers of HPV vaccination messages	Q1	USA	Qualitative analysis	Burke-Garcia, A., et al. (2025)
6	Human or virtual: How influencer type shapes brand attitudes	Q1	Canada	Quantitative	Ozdemir, O., Kolfal, B., Messinger, P. R., & Rizvi, S. (2023)
7	I Felt a Little Crazy Following a 'Doll': Investigating Real Influence of Virtual Influencers on Their Followers	Q1	USA	Mixed Methods	Choudhry, A., Han, J., Xu, X., & Huang, Y. (2022)
8	Impact of social media influencer marketing on customer purchase intention in the fashion industry: a systematic literature review	Q2	India	Systematic literature review	George, A., Shibu, M., Joseph, E. T., & Sunny, P. (2025)
9	Influencer marketing and brand engagement	Q1	Australia	Quantitative	Wilkie, et al. (2020)
10	Love, Trust and Follow Them? The Role of Social Media Influencers on Luxury Cosmetics Brands' Purchase Intention Among Malaysian Urban Women	Q3	Malaysia	Quantitative	Abdullah, S. I. N. W., Syed Ali, S. F., & Teng, P. K. (2023)
11	Making it real on social media: exploring authenticity strategies for sport and fitness influencers	Q2	Australia, Italy	Qualitative	Massi, M., Piancatelli, C., Vocino, A., & Rojas-Méndez, J. I. (2024)
12	Mapping the influence of influencer marketing: a bibliometric analysis	Q1	India	Bibliometric analysis	Abhishek, & Srivastava, M. (2021)
13	Negotiating authenticity: experiences of student influencers on social media	Q1	UK, Lebanon	Qualitative research	Raaper, R., Hardey, M., Tiidenberg, K., & Aad, S. (2024)
14	Opinion leadership in a digital age: The rise of nano and micro-influencers	Q1	Poland, USA, India	Quantitative	Korzynski, P., Protsiuk, O., Moulard, J. G., & Jain, V. (2025)
15	Social media influencers in GCC	Q2	Bahrain, USA	Mixed Methods	Mahfoodh, H., Mahfoodh, Z., & Shubbar, S. H. (2025)
16	Source Credibility and Emotions generated by Robot and Human Influencers: the perception of luxury brand representatives	Not Specified	France	Qualitative	Baudier, P., de Boissieu, E., & Duchemin, M. (2022)

17	The creator's dilemma: Resolving tensions between authenticity and monetization in social media	Q1	Switzerland, Germany	Qualitative	Hofstetter, R., & Gollnhofer, J. F. (2024)
18	The dark side of social media influencers: A research agenda	Q1	UK	Systematic Literature review	Ekinci, Y., et al. (2024)
19	The impact of authenticity on users' willingness	Not Specified	France	Quantitative	Sokolova, K. (2026)
20	The impact of influencer marketing in the tourism industry: A digital marketing perspective	Q1	Bangladesh, Malaysia	Quantitative	Babu, M. A., et al. (2025)
21	The Influence of the Credibility of Social Media Influencers SMIs on the Consumers' Purchase Intentions: Evidence from Saudi Arabia	Q1	Saudi Arabia	Quantitative	Mabkhot, H., Md Isa, N., & Mabkhot, A. (2022)
22	The mediating role of brand credibility between social media influencers and patronage intentions	Q2	Jordan	Quantitative	Alrwashdeh, M., et al. (2022)
23	The New Landscape of Social Media Content Creation: How Influencers' Adoption of Generative AI to Generate Content Disclosure Affects Consumers' Behavioral Responses	Conference	Malaysia, China	Quantitative	Wang, S. (2025)
24	The relationships between social media influencers and their followers	Q1	Sweden	Quantitative	Mehmood, et al. (2025)
25	The Rise and Acceptance of Virtual Influencers	Q1	India	Structured literature review and case study	Jhawar, A., Kumar, P., & Varshney, S. (2023)
26	The role of emotional attachment and trust in cosmetic industry	Q2	Pakistan, Saudi Arabia	Quantitative	Zaman, K., Khan, S. N., Abbas, M., & AbdAlatti, A. (2024)
27	The role of influencers in sustainable fashion	Q2	UK	Qualitative	Aydin, K. L. (2021)
28	The role of social media influencers in tourism	Q1	UK, USA	Quantitative	Ameen, N., et al. (2024)
29	Virtual influencers and purchase intentions	Q1	Unknown	Quantitative	Diwanji, V. S. (2026)
30	Virtual influencers in Indian context	Q3	India	Quantitative	Sinha, & Srivastava (2023)
31	Virtual or human?	Q1	Russia, Italy	Quantitative	Kholkina, V., Chesnokova, E., & Zelenskaya, E. (2025)

Source: Process from final selection of study, March 2026

All literature above was analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach, which findings were categorized to answer the three research questions as follows:

RQ1: What are the main drivers of declining trust in human social media influencers?

Trust in human social media influencer is declining due to both deceptive practices and over-commercialization which makes audiences lose trust quickly, especially when they recognize artificial followers inflation, fake reviews, or heavy use of filters that create

unrealistic appearance and unattainable lifestyles (Abdullah et al., 2023; Korzynski et al., 2025; Massi et al., 2024; Zaman et al., 2024). Beside that, audiences also experience ad fatigue when influencers prioritise financial gain to endorse products and service over sharing their passion and fail to disclose the paid sponsorship or endorsing numbers of conflicting products (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021; Bastrygina & Lim, 2023; Le & Aydin, 2022; Mahfoodh et al., 2025; Sinha & Srivastava, 2023; Wilkie et al., 2022).

The trust to the influencer can be decreased significantly further when brand deals that the influencers made clash with the influencer's established identity, or when influencers spread misinformation and promote harmful products (Burke-Garcia et al., 2025; Ekinci et al., 2025; Hofstetter & Gollnhofer, 2024; Raaper et al., 2024). Moreover, failing to deliver high quality information, secretly using Generative AI without showing their motives, or lacking open communication about their intention could also cause followers to perceive that influencer as a risk, especially when the influencer lacks expertise or also works with competing brands (Alrwashdeh et al., 2022; Babu et al., 2025; Baudier et al., 2022; George et al., 2025; Mabkhot et al., 2022; Mehmood et al., 2025; Wang, 2025).

RQ2: How does consumer perception of authenticity differ between human influencers and AI influencers?

The audience perceives authenticity differently between human and AI influencers. In the eyes of the audience, human influencers authenticity is deeply related in showing their intrinsic motivation, revealing real weaknesses, and building cultural or emotional resonance using unscripted storytelling or sharing their real aspect of their lives (Babu et al., 2025; Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021; Mehmood et al., 2025; Burke-Garcia et al., 2025; Hofstetter & Gollnhofer, 2024; Le & Aydin, 2022; Massi et al., 2024; Omeish et al., 2025).

On the other hand, AI influences authenticity rely more on the visual aesthetics, behavioral realism, and the mystery in their narrative to achieve the “authentically fake” status (Ameen et al., 2023; Baudier et al., 2022; Choudhry et al., 2022; Diwanji, 2025; Jhavar et al., 2023). However, AI influencers face skepticism due to the uncanny valley effect where imperfections in human resemblance or effort to mimic human emotion can create psychological discomfort for the audience as they know that AI influencers actually don't have the real-life capacity to genuinely test physical products or actually have moral integrity (Diwanji, 2025; Bennett et al., 2026; Kholkina et al., 2024; Lim & Lee, 2023; Omeish et al., 2025; Ozdemir et al., 2023).

In general, human influencers build trust through their attitude and shared community experiences, while AI influencers generate parasocial relationships through its 24/7 consistency, accessibility, and data-driven personalization that aligns with the norms, despite they actually lack real human empathy (Ameen et al., 2023; George et al., 2025; Sinha & Srivastava, 2023; Sokolova, 2025).

RQ3: What adaptation strategies are proposed in the literature for human influencers to coexist with AI influencers?

In the current condition, for human influencers to be able to coexist with AI influencers without being replaced or outperformed by them, there are some adaptation strategies for human influencers and marketers. Human influencers should emphasize their unique

capabilities to build genuine connections by moving away from heavily scripted video to raw and improvised content, live video engagement, and authentic brand co-creation that AI can't easily replicate (Babu et al., 2025; Mehmood et al., 2025; Hofstetter & Gollnhofer, 2024; Le & Aydin, 2022; Mahfoodh et al., 2025; Massi et al., 2024). At the same time, marketers can utilize AI influencers to achieve global reach, 24/7 error-free product promotions, and non-profit campaigns, while only using human influencers to deal with culturally sensitive communication or critical feedback (Ameen et al., 2023; Baudier et al., 2022; Burke-Garcia et al., 2025; Choudhry et al., 2022; Jhawar et al., 2023; Omeish et al., 2025; Ozdemir et al., 2023).

Across both human and AI influencers, mandatory transparency is very important. This can be achieved by implementing ethical guidelines, clearly tagging sponsored content, disclosing the use of Generative AI or sharing the motives behind it. All of them are important to preserve consumer trust (Bastrygina & Lim, 2023; Ekinci et al., 2025; Raaper et al., 2024; Bennett et al., 2026; Diwanji, 2025; Wang, 2025). Moreover, if a brand employs AI influencers, it should focus on visual optimization to avoid forcing AI avatars to display negative human emotions and ensure that their endorsement relies on rational and objective language to mitigate the uncanny valley effect (Lim & Lee, 2023; Sokolova, 2025; Kholkina et al., 2024; Ozdemir et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Since Artificial Intelligence is adopted at an unimaginable speed into social media and changes the digital marketing landscape, it creates a widespread authenticity crisis. This Systematic Literature Review shows that erosion of consumer trust is not a single phenomenon, but actually a dual-front challenge. In the case of human influencers, trust is decreasing because of the hyper-commercialization, deceptive metrics, and gap to the influencer's passion and identity, while trust in AI influencers are threatened by the psychological discomfort of the audience due to the uncanny valley and ethical ambiguity of the human creators. Human and AI influencers are not competing, but evolving and leading to a coexistence. Therefore, to survive in this new ecosystem, human influencers can no longer rely on highly curated and picture perfect aesthetics, rather they should approach through the raw and unscripted vulnerability and emotional aspect that AI can't do. On the other hand, AI influencers should have functional authenticity, which shows a transparent, rational, and consistent engagement while avoiding to mimic human emotions or moral judgement. If the purpose of the influencers, brands, or marketers is to regain trust, digital marketing should move toward sustainability and strict transparency, where sponsorship, AI-origin labels are disclosed. Role specialization also needs to be embraced where AI handles the data-driven reach and human drive cultural and emotional connection. This way, brands and creators can navigate the ecosystem and restore consumer trust.

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