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AI-Generated Influencers and Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Trust and Attitude in HEIs in Southern Philippines

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ABSTRACT

The rise of AI-created influencers has significantly altered the landscape of digital marketing, but there is a limited body of empirical research on how such virtual influencers affect consumer behavior, especially in high-involvement situations. This study investigated the influence of perceived authenticity, parasocial interaction, and perceived anthropomorphism of AI-created influencers on purchase intention, with attitude and trust as mediating factors. Using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the study involved 473 higher education students in the Philippines. The findings show that all three factors of AI-created influencers significantly and directly influence purchase intention. Moreover, the findings of the mediating analyses suggest that trust, and not attitude, is the primary explanatory variable. That is, trust partially mediated the influence of perceived authenticity and parasocial interaction on purchase intention, but attitude did not significantly mediate any of the tested relationships. The results indicate that persuasion in AI-influencer communication is primarily based on cognitive, rather than affective, processes. Furthermore, the study extends the literature on AI influencer communication to a new and developing economy and a higher education context, and it may also offer important and practical implications for any organization planning to use AI influencers in their digital communication campaigns.

Keywords: AI-generated Influencers, Parasocial Interaction, Perceived Authenticity, Trust, Purchase Intention
JEL Classifications: M31, O33, D83

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing has seen a dynamic change of application of artificial intelligence (AI) in the field of communication has intensified (Davenport et al, 2020; Saura et al., 2021). Today, organizations increasingly rely on the application of AI technologies to improve consumer interactions through digital channels (Huang and Rust, 2021; An and Ngo, 2025). One of the notable advancements in the field of digital marketing is the application of AI-generated influencers, which have come to define the new frontier of promoting goods through the internet (Thomas and Fowler, 2021). Today, these AI influencers have come to dominate the application of social media as a tool of promoting goods to the public, just like human influencers.

Previous studies on influencer marketing have established that influencer marketing is greatly influenced by psychological and relational dimensions rather than human nature (Schouten et al., 2020; Labrecque, 2014). For example, perceived influencer authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015), parasocial interaction (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020), and human likenesses (Jin et al., 2019) were found to influence consumer response and trust development. However, the existing body of knowledge on influencer marketing has been largely human-centric, and there is an existing knowledge gap on how influencer marketing is likely to be impacted when the influencer is an artificial rather than a human construct (Thomas and Fowler, 2021). This is an existing knowledge gap in digital marketing.

From a theoretical perspective, the rise of the concept of AI-generated influencers also challenges the conventional perspective on the power of persuasion, as well as the consumer. From one viewpoint, the presence of order is guaranteed through the use of the technology, yet the artificial information that is presented also creates a sense of doubt or uncertainty. On the other hand, the ability of AI designers to create an influencer with human-like traits might also instigate a similar kind of psychological response, as observed in the behavior of consumers towards human influencers. This implies a need to explore the psychological factors involved in the behavior of consumers, as a means of understanding their intention.

The present study was implemented under the context of an evolving digital economy in the Philippines that is characterized by an engaged population in their usage of social media sites and their exposure to an AI-mediated content as a marketing strategy among young consumers in the Philippines (Cleofas et al., 2022; Habito et al., 2022). Previous studies on the topic of AI-generated influencers have been conducted primarily within the context of developed economies in the world, in which the nature of digital trust dynamics, consumer skepticism, and technology usage patterns would likely vary from those in emerging markets in the region. Investigating the relationships in the context of young adult consumers within the country would offer the potential to validate the efficacy of previously established influencer-based persuasion mechanisms in an understudied context in the digital marketing and AI-influencer marketing literature.

In light of these gaps, the present study examines the effects of characteristics of influencers created by AI, such as the perceived authenticity, parasocial interaction, and perceived anthropomorphism, on purchase intention, with special reference to the mediating effects of attitude and trust. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on marketing with the aid of AI by shedding light on the psychological mechanisms through which influencers created by AI shape consumer intention. The study provides implications for theory and practice for organizations and learning institutions interested in the use of influencers created by AI for digital marketing strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. AI-Generated Influencers in Digital Marketing

AI-generated influencers refer to the artificial entities created through the application of AI technologies and other computational applications. They have been created in a manner that enables their interaction with other digital influencers in a human-like manner (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2019; Thomas and Fowler, 2021). When compared to human influencers acting on behalf of the brands in the digital environment, the application of AI-generated influencers provides the brands with a sense of control while simultaneously eliminating the risks associated with the brands (De Cicco et al., 2024). This has enabled the emergence of AI-generated influencers in digital marketing campaigns, especially in the context of the social media environment in which the application of algorithms has already been established. Previous studies have suggested that an influencer's performance is dependent more on perceived credibility and interaction contained in the communication process than their human qualities (Schouten et al., 2020; Labrecque, 2014).

From a theoretical perspective, an AI influencer would be considered an agent that is capable of influencing cognition and affective responses to an extent similar to that of human influencers (Nass & Moon, 2000). This would be based on research in the field of digital marketing and human-computer interactions that have found that artificial agents have the ability to foster trust and favorable evaluations based on their ability to communicate coherently and interact consistently with their users (Epley et al., 2007; Ho and MacDorman, 2010). With an increasing number of individuals interacting with artificial systems such as recommenders, chatbots, and virtual assistants, the difference between human and artificial communicators would become less salient to their audiences, especially to the younger generation who have grown up with such systems (Luger & Sellen, 2016).

Within higher education institutions (HEIs), digital technologies are seen to play a critical role in constructing the perceptions that students have of academic programs and services offered, and even in constructing brand perceptions (Kwak, 2015). Moreover, it was established that students are often exposed to AI-generated influencer marketing and are socialized to interact with AI-mediated communication (Westerman et al., 2014). Therefore, AI-generated influencers are seen to emerge as a viable and effective communication medium in higher education (Go and Sundar, 2019; Sundar, 2020). Nevertheless, the degree to which the effects of AI-generated influencers on the purchase intentions of students are mediated by psychological processes such as authenticity perception, relational interaction, and human likeness still needs to be better understood and therefore requires further study.

2.2. Perceived Authenticity (PAu) and Purchase Intention (PI)

Perceived authenticity refers to the level at which the influencer is seen to be genuine, sincere, and truthful in passing information (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). In the existing body of research on influencer marketing, authenticity has been recognized as a major driver in the persuasiveness of the information communicated to the audience, with people having a higher tendency to consume information communicated through an authentic source (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Authenticity acts as a cognitive shortcut for people to consume information communicated to them, especially in an environment characterized by information overload (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000). Even in environments characterized by the use of artificial intelligence in marketing, authenticity can exist (Waytz and Cacioppo, 2007).

Findings from empirical studies revealed that the behavioral outcomes of authenticity are mainly driven by psychological factors as opposed to direct persuasion. For one, authentic influencers are seen to create a greater sense of trust since the audience perceives the influencer as reliable and honest (Audrezet et al., 2020). Moreover, authenticity is seen to create positive evaluative outcomes that affect attitudes towards the influencer as well as the information they are presenting (Lee and Chung, 2025). Such cognitive and affective factors combine to create a

reduced risk perception and an increased willingness to engage with the information presented (Ki et al., 2020).

Moreover, in higher education institutions where students face high-involvement situations and high-stakes decisions, the concept of authenticity appears to be highly relevant to them. This is due to the fact that students will be more willing to process and act upon information that is presented to them by sources that appear authentic and credible to them (De Araujo et al., 2025). With this concept in mind, this study presents the following hypothesis:

H_1: Perceived authenticity of AI influencers positively influences purchase intention.

2.3. Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Purchase Intention (PI)

The concept of of Parasocial Interaction represents the one-sided psychological relationship that people strive to build with their mediated exposure to public personalities (Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011; Dibble et al., 2016). Parasocial interaction has been identified as a key influencer in the establishment of relationships in digital media environments (Farivar et al., 2021).

Through repeated interaction with content created by an influencer, users may develop a sense of familiarity and closeness of emotion and social connectedness despite a lack of interaction (Lee and Watkins, 2016; Zhang and Mac, 2023). According to parasocial interaction theory, repeated interaction with an individual or content is adequate to generate perceived relational bonds despite a lack of interpersonal interaction (Kanwar and Huang, 2022).

Empirical studies on influencer marketing, parasocial interaction has been found to increase the effectiveness of persuasion by positively affecting the cognitive as well as the affective dimension of the persuasion process. Parasocial interaction frequency helps build trust through increased perceptions of the influencer's reliability and predictability, as well as a positive affective response, which results in a more positive attitude, as suggested by So and Nabi (2013). Therefore, parasocial interaction serves as a relational driver that aids in the acceptance of a message, thus increasing the probability of intention-based behavior, as proposed in the study by Penttinen et al. (2022).

In the realm of higher education institutions, the parasocial interaction with AI-generated influencers could potentially have a strong influence, especially due to the exposure received regarding information shared by the institutions regarding their academic programs and services (Cao et al., 2020). Parasocial bonds developed by the students with the AI influencers could make them more prone to accept the information shared, thus reacting favorably towards the institutions. Following this, the present study formulates the following hypothesis:

H_2: Parasocial interaction with AI influencers positively influences purchase intention.

2.4. Perceived Anthropomorphism (PAn) and Purchase Intention (PI)

The concept of perceived anthropomorphism refers to the level at which people attribute and ascribe the qualities and attributes of humans, as well as their associated feelings and behaviors, to non-human entities or objects. In the fields of computer-human interaction and digital communication studies, the anthropomorphism construct has been proven to have a significant and enhancing effect on social presence and interaction by reducing the level of psychological distance that exists or can exist between humans and non-human entities or objects. The theory of anthropomorphism argues that the display of anthropomorphic qualities by non-human entities or objects, such as AI systems, often elicits the social and emotional response mechanisms that are associated with normal interpersonal interaction. These mechanisms are likely to elicit a response that is similar to the one that would result from the display of the same qualities and attributes by a fellow human.

In the context of influence and persuasive communication, anthropomorphic cues can create favorable evaluative judgments of artificial agents as more relatable, approachable, and socially competent. Research suggests that anthropomorphic cues can positively affect affective reactions and evaluative judgments of artificial agents, thus increasing the persuasive impact of the messages conveyed (Munnukka et al., 2022). While anthropomorphic cues are not found to force individuals into behaving in particular ways, the perceived anthropomorphism can affect individuals' intentions to behave in particular ways as the evaluative judgments of the source and the messages are favorable (Han et al., 2023).

Further, the humanization of the AI-generated influencers may have a greater impact on the intentions of the students to get involved in or buy the product or service that is affiliated with the higher education institution (Kim and Sundar, 2012). Students are likely to react better to the information presented by the humanized AI-generated influencers, as they are likely to have a positive predisposition to the information presented by the influencer (Dabiran et al., 2024). Accordingly, the hypothesis is as follows:

H_3: Perceived anthropomorphism of AI influencers positively influences purchase intention.

2.5. Mediating Role of Attitude and Trust

In the context of influence-based persuasion, the role of the influencer's attributes tends to be mediated in a non-straightforward way, as suggested in existing literature in digital marketing that consistently indicates that such influence tends to be channeled through internal psychological states that inform the audience's perception of a persuasive appeal (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Lee and Eastin, 2021). Mediating models are arguably useful in clarifying such psychological states, as they point to the process by which the perception of the persuader translates into a behavioral intention. Theories of trust in digital contexts emphasize trust as a psychological state that reduces uncertainty in technology-based interactions (Bélanger and Carter, 2008).

Attitude is an affective-evaluative mechanism representing the general judgments people form about the influencer. Positive judgments of AI influencer attribute factors such as authenticity, parasocial interaction, and anthropomorphism are likely to create favorable affective reactions and evaluative judgments. Positive

attitudes facilitate the receptivity of the message and boost the persuasive impact of influencer communication (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). AI influencer attribute factors are not direct antecedents of intentions; rather, they affect intentions through the mediation of individuals' affective reactions and evaluative judgments of the influencer. On the other hand, trust is a cognitive process that helps reduce perceived risk and uncertainty in making a decision. Trust is an important factor in a digital context because audiences often do not have a way to directly verify the credibility of information sources.

For instance, trust for AI influencers is based on behavior, sincerity, and relational interactions. When trust for an AI influencer is high, there is an increase in the propensity for the audience to accept the information provided by the influencer and to act based on the messages provided by them (Hong et al., 2024). This implies that trust is an essential mediator between the characteristics of an AI influencer and the intention to make purchases.

Parasocial interaction has been shown to have a critical role in the activation of both attitudinal and trust-related mechanisms. The more an individual interacts with an AI influencer and feels closer to the relationship, the higher the level of familiarity, emotional bonding, and reliability, which in turn enhance both attitudes and trust (Wu et al., 2011). In the same vein, authenticity and anthropomorphism have been shown to activate both attitudinal and trust-related mechanisms, which in turn facilitate the audience's cognitive and emotional assessment and evaluation of AI influencers (Araujo, 2018). All these mechanisms suggest that AI characteristics have an indirect effect on purchase intention through attitudes and trust and not through direct persuasion mechanisms. Therefore, this study argues that attitudes and trust are likely to mediate the relationship between AI characteristics and purchase intention; hence, the hypotheses are:

H_4: Attitude mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity of AI influencers and purchase intention.

H_5: Trust mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity of AI influencers and purchase intention.

H_6: Attitude mediates the relationship between parasocial interaction with AI influencers and purchase intention.

H_7: Trust mediates the relationship between parasocial interaction with AI influencers and purchase intention.

H_8: Attitude mediates the relationship between perceived anthropomorphism of AI influencers and purchase intention.

H_9: Trust mediates the relationship between perceived anthropomorphism of AI influencers and purchase intention.

3. METHODOLOGY

The quantitative research design was used in this study in order to examine the relationship between the attributes of AI-generated influencers, as well as the intention to make a purchase, mediated by attitude and trust. A quantitative research methodology, in which a survey was conducted, was chosen in order to gather information from people who have been exposed to AI-generated influencers in digital marketing scenarios. The quantitative research design, in which a survey was conducted, is appropriate in order to test a theoretically derived relationship between abstract concepts, such as in structural equation modeling, as proposed by Gefen et al. (2000).

Data collection was conducted from 473 respondents who claimed to have pre-exposure to AI-generated/virtual influencers on digital platforms. The respondents were students from the university, who were considered digitally active individuals who frequently access social media platforms. A web-based online structured questionnaire was employed through the use of convenience sampling. Complete and valid answers were considered to ensure the sufficiency of the data to estimate direct as well as indirect effects.

The measurement instruments used in this study were based on existing validated measures that were adapted to the context of the study on artificial intelligence-generated influencers. For the measurement of the constructs of perceived authenticity and anthropomorphism, three items each were used based on the study by Nowak and Rauh (2005). Parasocial interaction was measured by six items based on the Parasocial Interaction Scale by Rubin et al. (1985), which included feelings of familiarity, comfort, and closeness that develop as a consequence of parasocial contact with the media character. For the measurement of trust and attitudes towards the artificial intelligence-generated influencers, three items were used based on the study by Casaló et al. (2020). For the measurement of the construct of purchase intention, two items were used based on the study by Huang et al. (2011).

The data analysis was done through the application of partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). This was done through the two-step procedure for data analysis where the evaluation of the measurement model was followed by the evaluation of the structural model. The reliability and validity of the measurement model were evaluated through the application of the structural model to test the hypothesized direct relationships as well as the mediating role of attitude and trust as indicated by Doblas et al. (2024).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Profile of the Respondents

A total of 473 valid responses were obtained for analysis. The demographic features of the participants are reported based on age and gender. For age, it was revealed that 40.17% of participants (n = 190) were in the age group of 18-20 years, while those above 20 years of age made up 39.75% of participants (n = 188). Participants under the age of 18 made up 20.08% of the total number of participants (n = 95). Regarding gender composition of participants, it was revealed that female participants made up 59.20% of all participants (n = 280), while male participants made up 40.80% of all participants (n = 193).

4.2. Construct Validity

The measurement model was first assessed in terms of internal consistency reliability and convergent validity. As indicated in Table 1, the Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.710 to 0.886, which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 as specified in Morales-García et al. (2024). Therefore, internal consistency

reliability was established in all the constructs. Likewise, the composite reliability values ranged from 0.868 to 0.921, which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 as specified in Hair et al. (2021).

With regard to convergent validity, the values were well above the minimum threshold of 0.50 and were between 0.710 and 0.921 for the AVE. This implies that the constructs were able to successfully measure variance from their respective measures. Additionally, the factor loadings were well above the minimum threshold of 0.70 and were between 0.705 and 0.915 for the measures. This implies that the measures were highly correlated to their respective constructs. However, the factor loading of the measures relating to the construct Parasocial Interaction was slightly below the minimum threshold, ranging from 0.705 to 0.737. Nonetheless, the reliability and AVE were high enough to justify the model's quality. Regarding the variance inflation factor (VIF), the minimum value was 1.304 while the maximum was 3.042, below the minimum threshold of 5.0 (Craney and Surles, 2002). This is an indication that multicollinearity was not a significant factor in the model. Overall, the findings are an indication that the measurement model was successful in providing a strong foundation to assess the structural model.

Discriminant validity was also checked through the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations, as depicted in Table 2. All the HTMT measures were below the threshold value of 0.90, which confirms the discriminant validity of the constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). The maximum HTMT value was obtained by the constructs of parasocial interaction and trust (0.828), which is again below the threshold value, indicating that the two constructs are discriminately valid despite their high association.

Overall, it can be confirmed that each construct measures a different facet of the proposed model and that there are no concerns of construct redundancy or multicollinearity. Hence, it can be stated that the proposed measurement model reflects an acceptable level of discriminant validity and that it is appropriate to proceed to subsequent analyses of the proposed model and potential mediating roles of each construct.

Table 1: Internal consistency and convergent validity

Construct	Factor	VIF	Loading	AVE	*a*	CR
Perceived authenticity of AI influencers (PAu)	PAu1	2.127	0.845	0.882	0.805	0.882
	PAu2	1.797	0.868			
	PAu3	1.588	0.822			
Perceived anthropomorphism of AI influencers (PAn)	PAn1	2.051	0.865	0.905	0.842	0.905
	PAn2	2.015	0.877			
	PA3	1.941	0.872			
Parasocial interaction with AI influencers (PI)	PI1	1.525	0.735	0.868	0.817	0.868
	PI2	1.717	0.745			
	PI3	1.304	0.705			
	PI4	1.867	0.776			
	PI5	2.358	0.826			
	PI6	1.504	0.737			
Trust on AI influencers (T)	T1	2.361	0.897	0.906	0.844	0.906
	T2	2.115	0.869			
	T3	1.798	0.853			
Attitude towards AI influencers (A)	Att1	2.324	0.843	0.921	0.886	0.921
	Att2	3.042	0.905			
	Att3	2.644	0.891			
	Att4	1.876	0.811			
Purchase intention (PInt)	PInt1	1.434	0.915	0.871	0.710	0.871
	PInt2	1.434	0.840			

4.3. Path Analysis

Table 3 and Figure 1 show the results of hypothesis testing for both direct and indirect effects that were obtained through PLS-SEM analysis. Concerning the direct relationships between variables, the study found that perceived authenticity had a statistically significant and positive effect on students' purchase intention ($\beta = 0.115$, $P = 0.005$), supporting H_1. Parasocial interaction was also found to have a statistically significant and positive effect on students' purchase intention ($\beta = 0.168$, $P = 0.002$), supporting H_2. Lastly, perceived anthropomorphism was found to have a statistically significant and positive effect on students' purchase intention ($\beta = 0.093$, $P = 0.044$), supporting H_3. This reveals that characteristics of an influencer created by an AI have an impact on students' purchase intention.

In terms of mediation of attitude, there were no statistically significant indirect effects. In particular, the indirect effects of perceived authenticity on purchase intention through attitude were not significant ($\beta = 0.008$, $P = 0.370$), the indirect effect of parasocial interaction on purchase intention through attitude was not significant ($\beta = 0.027$, $P = 0.255$), and the indirect effect of perceived anthropomorphism on purchase intention through attitude was not significant ($\beta = 0.008$, $P = 0.379$). Thus, H_4, H_6, and H_8 were not supported.

By contrast, trust acts as an important mediating factor for certain relations. The indirect impact of the perceived authenticity on the purchase intention through trust was found to be significant ($\beta = 0.045$, $P = 0.025$), thereby supporting H_5. Moreover, parasocial interaction was found to produce a robust indirect impact on the purchase intention through trust ($\beta = 0.214$, $P < 0.001$), thereby supporting H_7. However, the indirect impact of the perceived anthropomorphism on the purchase intention through trust was not significant ($\beta = 0.034$, $P = 0.099$), thereby refuting H_9.

Table 2: Discriminant validity Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio

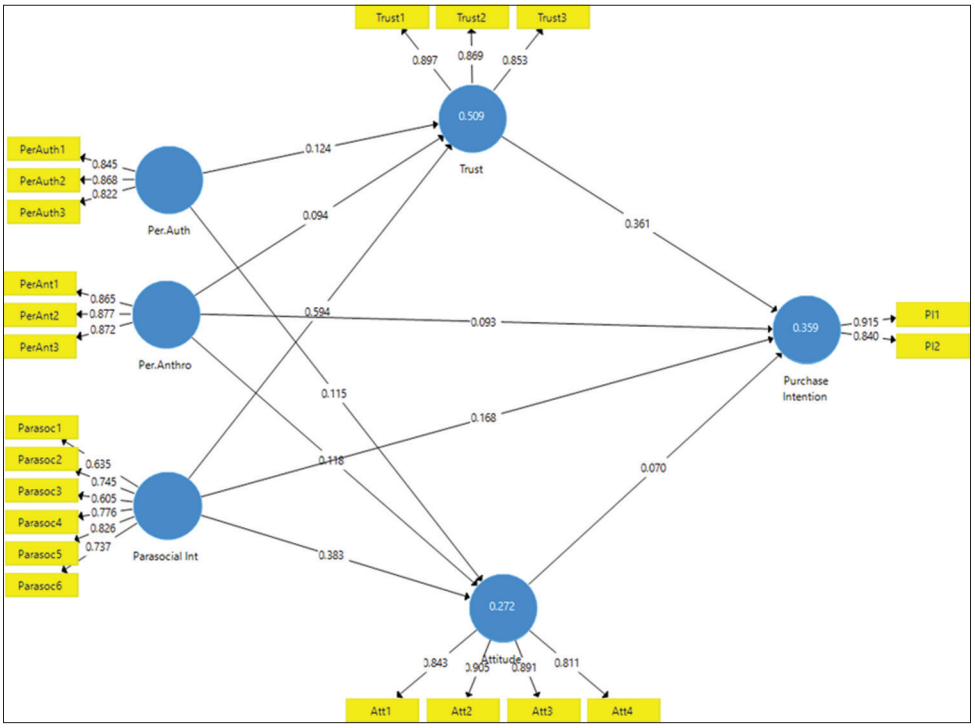
Construct	A	PI	PAn	PAu	PInt	T
Attitude (A)						
Parasocial interaction (PI)	0.567					
Perceived anthropomorphism (PAn)	0.457	0.773				
Perceived authenticity (PAu)	0.31	0.419	0.323			
Purchase intention (PInt)	0.517	0.665	0.527	0.607		
Trust (T)	0.697	0.828	0.609	0.426	0.718	

Table 3: Summary of hypothesis testing results for direct and indirect effects

Path	H	β	SD	t	P	Decision
Direct effects						
Perceived authenticity→Purchase intention	H_1	0.115	0.041	2.821	0.005	Accepted
Parasocial interaction→Purchase intention	H_2	0.168	0.053	3.141	0.002	Accepted
Perceived anthropomorphism→Purchase intention	H_3	0.093	0.046	2.022	0.044	Accepted
Indirect effects (mediation via attitude)						
Perceived authenticity→Attitude→Purchase intention	H_4	0.008	0.009	0.897	0.370	Rejected
Parasocial interaction→Attitude→Purchase intention	H_6	0.027	0.024	1.141	0.255	Rejected
Perceived anthropomorphism→Attitude→Purchase intention	H_8	0.008	0.009	0.881	0.379	Rejected
Indirect effects (mediation via trust)						
Perceived authenticity→Trust→Purchase intention	H_5	0.045	0.020	2.250	0.025	Accepted
Parasocial interaction→Trust→Purchase intention	H_7	0.214	0.038	5.665	<0.001	Accepted
Perceived anthropomorphism→Trust→Purchase intention	H_9	0.034	0.021	1.652	0.099	Rejected

β: Standardized path coefficient, SD: Standard deviation. Significance was assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. Paths with $P<0.05$ were considered statistically significant

Figure 1: Structure model assessment



Overall, the results demonstrate the dominance of the role of trust-based mediation in the proposed model. Although the direct and indirect effects of perceived authenticity and parasocial interaction on purchase intention through the medium of trust have emerged, the presence of direct and indirect effects also demonstrates the role of partial mediation in these relationships. By contrast, the absence of direct and indirect effects demonstrates the absence of the role of attitude as a mediator of the relationships investigated. Finally, the relationship between perceived anthropomorphism and purchase intention is best classified as a direct-only effect, as neither attitude nor trust have emerged as mediators of the relationship. Overall, the results suggest that students' purchase intention is influenced by cognitive evaluations of trust, as opposed to affective or attitudinal evaluations.

4.4. Theoretical Implications

Several theoretical implications arise from the findings of the study in relation to the developing literature on AI-generated influencers and persuasion in the digital environment. To start with, the findings of the study expand the current theory of influencer marketing in the sense that the core mechanisms of influencer marketing are found to be applicable in the context of AI-generated marketing, albeit in varying degrees of salience. The existing body of research in the topic of influencer marketing has established authenticity, credibility, and trust as drivers of behavioral intentions (Audrezet et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2020; Ki et al., 2020). The present study's results reveal that, in the context of AI-generated social media influencers, the most dominant driver of behavioral intentions was found to be trust, with attitude failing to emerge as a significant mediator. This finding refines existing models of influencer marketing in that it shows that AI-generated social media marketing potentially relies more on cognitive evaluations of credibility and credibility-related variables than on affective attitude formation, in accordance with emerging streams in AI and marketing decision-making (Davenport et al., 2020; Huang and Rust, 2021).

Second, the study makes an important contribution to the development of the field of parasocial interaction by showing its applicability in the area of AI-generated and virtual influencers. Although the construct of parasocial interaction has been extensively researched in human and influencer-related digital environments (Labrecque, 2014; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Farivar et al., 2021), the significant direct and trust-mediated findings of the present study support the argument that parasocial interaction can be established with non-human social agents. Support for this argument is also provided by the results of the latest empirical studies, which have shown the ability of virtual, as well as AI, influencers to evoke the level of relational involvement as well as credibility similar to the one evoked by human influencers, depending on the presence of appropriate social presence cues (Thomas and Fowler, 2021; Lim and Lee, 2023; De Cicco et al., 2024).

Third, the findings add to the anthropomorphism theory in the human-computer interaction literature by revealing its persuasive capability in the setting of an AI influencer. Previous studies have supported the anthropomorphism theory by suggesting that anthropomorphic factors improve the social presence and interactivity of artificial agents (Epley et al., 2007; Nowak and Rauh, 2005; Go and Sundar, 2019). In the current research, the direct effect of anthropomorphism on purchase intention was confirmed, while the indirect effects through the mediating variables of attitudes and trust were not significant. These results contribute to the anthropomorphism body of knowledge by revealing the capability of anthropomorphism to function as a heuristic factor leading to direct effects, as opposed to functioning as a relational factor leading to direct effects in the context of an AI influencer (Araujo, 2018; Munnukka et al., 2022).

Fourth, the study contributes to the theoretical literature on trust in the context of digital and AI-mediated environments by reaffirming the importance of trust as the key mitigant of uncertainty in relation to artificial sources of information. Previous studies in the literature established the importance of trust in the context of information uncertainty and technological uncertainty in digital environments (Bélanger and Carter, 2008; Wu et al., 2011). This study's consistent mediating effect of trust in relation to perceived authenticity and parasocial interaction reinforces the notion of trust as the primary cognitive doorway through which AI-based influencers derive persuasive legitimacy. This notion of the importance of trust in the context of AI-based influencers resonates with the current marketing and AI literature in its recognition of the importance of factors such as reliability and integrity as primary determinants of AI-based systems' acceptance (Davenport et al., 2020; An and Ngo, 2025).

Finally, by placing it in the context of higher education in the Philippines, it extends the scope of external validity of studies of AI influencer marketing in other emerging digital economies. Much of the extant empirical studies of persuasion in an AI context have centered on developed economies that have established and highly developed digital infrastructures. The findings suggest that persuasion based upon trust remains salient in an emerging economy context and thereby extend the robustness of trust-based models across different contexts while also reinforcing the relatively limited importance of attitude formation as a driver of behavior (Cleofas et al., 2022; Crompton and Burke, 2023).

4.5. Practical Implications

The findings of the study hold various implications for organizations as well as higher education institutions interested in the implementation of AI-generated influencers in the context of digital communication/marketing campaigns. At the outset, the dominance of trust-based mediation suggests the importance of credibility, dependability, and information quality in the context of AI influencers over emotional engagement and attitude-based interaction. This is particularly true in light of the significant importance of trust in the context of users' evaluation and adoption of technology-based information in the face of uncertainty and perceived risks (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007; Wu et al., 2011; Bélanger and Carter, 2008). In terms of AI influencers and influencer communication and marketing campaigns, these findings support previous research on the importance of credibility and trust-based judgments in influencing persuasion and behavioral intentions, as discussed by Schouten et al. 2020; Casaló et al., 2020).

Secondly, the significant direct effects and trust-related effects of parasocial interaction emphasize the importance of persistence in interaction. Various theoretical models of parasocial interaction and relationships, as well as empirical studies, suggest the importance of the formation of feelings of relationality in parasocial interaction and its ability to facilitate persuasion in the context of digital influencer marketing (Rubin et al., 1985; Dibble et al., 2016; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Consequently, higher education institutions and marketers should conceptualize AI influencers as long-term forms of digital interactions that embody characteristics such as consistency and frequency of interactions rather than transient forms of marketing tools. This conceptualization is based on the improvement of parasocial interactions and influencer credibility through long-term interactions and quality of storytelling in influencer marketing practices as noted by Farivar et al. (2021) and Lim and Lee (2023).

Third, the role of perceived authenticity as contributing to intention both directly and indirectly through the mediator of trust again reinforces the importance of clear and understandable communication by the institution's artificial intelligence influencer. In terms of the study of authenticity, it is clear that the perception of genuineness is considered to play an important role with regard to the audience's reaction to the institution's online presence, with the study of credibility suggesting the importance of avoiding inconsistencies or unsubstantial communications to maximize the perception of trustworthiness within the audience (Lee and Eastin, 2021; Morhart et al., 2015; Flanagin and Metzger, 2007). In practical terms, the institution needs to be careful to avoid overly scripted communications by the artificial intelligence influencer to maximize the perception of authenticity and associated trustworthiness.

Fourth, while perceived anthropomorphism can support persuasion, human-like design features should be treated as

enabling cues rather than the primary mechanism of influence. This was evidenced by the absence of consistent indirect effects through attitude and trust. Several previous works have shown that anthropomorphic design serve merely as heuristic cues and not sustainable factor leading to desired consumer response (Araujo, 2018; Kim and Sundar, 2012; Munnukka et al., 2022). Thus, nformational quality and credibility cannot be replaced by mere realistic visuals and conversational styles. This is especially true in contexts where institutional reliability is at the heart of the process (Nowak and Rauh, 2005; Dabiran et al., 2024).

Finally, in new digital economies like the Philippines, AI-based social media influencers can mitigate uncertainty among potential students. Trust-based communication plays a key role in the messages sent because users are not sure about the algorithms used, relying on the reliability of the messages sent (Bélanger and Carter, 2008; Dietvorst et al., 2015; Longoni et al., 2019). AI-based social media can be used as reliable sources of information among students, with the focus on trust-based communication that can help students trust the decisions made (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007; Wu et al., 2011).

5. CONCLUSION

The present study makes a theoretical contribution to the existing literature on AI-generated influencers by establishing the role of cognitive evaluations, as opposed to the role of affective appeal, as a driver of persuasive influence in AI-mediated marketing. By combining the theoretical perspectives of influencer marketing, parasocial interaction, and trust, the present study identifies the following: While AI-generated influencers may perform some tasks similar to those performed by human influencers, the underlying psychological process through which they achieve their goals is distinct. Perhaps the more intriguing implication, however, lies in the dominant role of the trust factor as a driver of the underlying psychological process. This represents a paradigm shift in the psychological process of persuasion, depending on the nature of the influencer.

In practical terms, it highlights the importance of organizations and higher education institutions to reassess their usage of AI influencers. While human-like beauty and emotion-based engagement are important factors to consider in an effective AI influencer marketing strategy, it is critical to consider other factors that make an effective AI influencer that can engage in high involvement decision-making due to their integrity and low perceived risk of education-related content.

Thus, the focus on the context of Philippine higher education helps the current paper expand the relevance of the AI influencer marketing studies to the context of emerging economies as well. Overall, the paper has shown the robustness of trust-based persuasion mechanisms in the context of emerging digital markets in which the level of engagement with social media among the target audience is very high while the level of trust in evaluating the information provided by the institution is low.

Several avenues of meaningful extensions of this study can be explored in further research. Longitudinal or experimental research can be carried out to examine the dynamics of trust in AI-generated influencers over a period of time and assess whether repeated exposure to these influencers increases or decreases their persuasiveness. Other potential underlying psychological processes that can shed more light on this phenomenon of AI-generated influencers include perceived transparency and fairness of algorithms, as well as moral considerations of AI-generated influencers from a consumer's point of view. Another potential research direction can involve cross-national/cultural or cross-institutional research to shed more light on the generalizability of this trust-mediated process in both developing and developed countries.

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