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IMPACT OF INFLUENCER'S AUTHENTICITY AND CREDIBILITY ON PURCHASE INTENTION: CASE OF VIRTUAL VS. HUMAN INFLUENCER

Yiyuan YING ⬤ ✉, Diana SUNGAILAITĖ, Vytautas DIKČIUS

Marketing Department, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

Abstract. This study investigates the influence of influencers' authenticity and credibility on purchase intention, with a focus on the differences between virtual influencers and human influencers. Using a 2×2 factorial design experiment, the research explores the mediating role of influencer authenticity in the relationship between influencer credibility dimensions (trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness), message credibility and consumers' purchase intentions under the framework of the Information Adoption Model. It further examines the moderating role of the interaction of influencer types (virtual vs. human influencer) and message frame valence (positive vs. negative). The findings reveal that influencers' perceived trustworthiness and attractiveness are positively associated with the authenticity and purchase intention, whereas expertise does not have a significant impact. Influencer authenticity consistently predicts purchase intention for both virtual and human influencers, regardless of message valence. In contrast, message credibility does not have an impact on purchase intention for virtual influencers delivering negative-framed messages, but it remains a significant antecedent in the other three conditions.

1. Introduction

Influencer marketing has emerged as a highly effective and strategically valuable promotional instrument over the past several years (Shao, 2024; Ye et al., 2021). The increasing companies' interest in this marketing tool is clearly reflected in global market growth projections – the value of the worldwide influencer marketing industry is anticipated to expand from USD 20 billion in 2024 to approximately USD 71 billion by 2032 (Fortune Business Insights, 2025) or even to USD 122 billion by 2030 (Mordor Intelligence, 2025). Influencer marketing has also secured a prominent position within academic research discourse (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Developments in artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) have enabled the emergence of a novel category of digital agents, commonly referred to as virtual influencers (Li et al., 2023). Constructed using advanced AI algorithms, virtual influencers (VI) possess the potential to mitigate several inherent limitations and challenges associated with human influencers (HI) (Zhou et al., 2024). Demonstrating a notable capacity, these synthetic entities orchestrate distinctive and ostensibly authentic experiences to secure audience engagement and shape consumer perceptions. Recent empirical findings indicate that approximately 80% of consumers are aware of VI, more than half actively follow at least one, and nearly one-third have made purchasing decisions influenced by their endorsements (The Influencer Marketing Factory, 2024). The significant commercial potential of VI, recognised by businesses across various industries, is driving rapid market growth (Nissen et al., 2025). The VI market size is expected to reach 45.9 billion USD (Grand View Research, 2025) by 2030.

The potential of VI has sparked academic interest, leading to the emergence of numerous studies. Some studies were published before 2022, but a rapid growth occurred in 2022 and continued through 2023 and 2024 (Pujadas-Gómez et al., 2025). Previous studies have primarily focused on comparing human and virtual influencers (Deng et al., 2024; Belanche et al., 2024), yielding contradictory results. Some studies evaluated individuals' reactions toward various characteristics of VI like attractiveness (Kim & Park, 2023), credibility (Li et al., 2023), or expertise (Gerlich, 2023), parasocial relationships (Akhtar et al., 2024; Stein et al., 2024), or anthropomorphism (Cornelius et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2023).

Authenticity is an important characteristic for the research of social media influencers (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2021; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022). However, previous studies have noted that followers tend to evaluate VI as less authentic than humans (Choudhry et al., 2022; Lou et al., 2023), as they often lack transparency in openly communicating their commercial interests (Audrezet et al., 2020; Choudhry et al., 2022). Therefore, authenticity could be an important factor that shapes consumer behaviour for VI (Lee et al., 2025). Our research aims to evaluate the mediating role of perceived authenticity in the relationship between influencer credibility dimensions (trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness), message credibility, and purchase intention, by adapting the Information Adoption Model. Moreover, previous studies have compared the effectiveness of HI and VI without considering the role of message factors, thereby creating a research gap in understanding how the interaction between influencer type and message valence impacts influencer marketing effectiveness. The current study manipulates two messages (positive vs. negative framed) and the types of influencers (VI vs. HI). Using a factorial design experiment, this article analyses the impact of influencer's credibility dimensions, influencer's authenticity, and message credibility on purchase intention, depending on the types of influencer and message frame valence.

2. Literature analysis and hypothesis

2.1. Information adoption model and purchase intention

The Information Adoption Model (IAM) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the mechanisms by which consumers evaluate and accept content on social media, subsequently translating this acceptance into commercial behavior (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). IAM defines a sequence of cognitive processing, which relies on two distinct informational routes: the central route (focused on message content) and the peripheral route (focused on source characteristics) (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Crucially, the model highlights that for any influence, whether stemming from the quality of the message or the source of the message, to be successful, it must first shape consumers' belief that the information is valuable (Sussman & Siegal, 2003).

Argument quality operates through the IAM's central processing route, meaning that consumers are persuaded primarily by the objective strength and intrinsic value of the content (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Empirical research consistently confirms that information quality is a powerful predictor, positively affecting purchase intention (Gökerik, 2024; Roldan-Gallego et al., 2023; Jamil & Qayyum, 2022). A study by Shamim and Islam (2022) reinforces the focus on rational content, finding that information value is the primary cognitive factor in establishing consumer trust in the influencer's message. Gökerik's (2024) study further highlights information quality as a dominant predictor of

information usefulness, suggesting that consumers primarily rely on cognitive assessment, prioritizing information accuracy, relevance, and comprehensiveness before adopting the content and proceeding to form a purchase intention (Gökerik, 2024). Due to that, we hypothesize:

H1: Message credibility has a positive impact on purchase intention.

2.2. Influencer's authenticity

Authenticity gains importance in influencer marketing within the social media environment; however, the meaning of authenticity can differ significantly across various research areas (Kapitan et al., 2022). Some authors have stated that the concept is the outcome of a verification process of truth or fact (Newman & Dahr, 2014). Furthermore, Koles et al. (2024) identified three types of authenticity—true-to-ideal (TTI), true-to-fact (TTF), and true-to-self (TTS) in a virtual influencer context. We will apply the definition of influencer authenticity presented by Moulard et al. (2015) and Lindmoser et al. (2022, p. 143), as the extent to which consumers perceive a social media influencer as behaving in accordance with his/her true self. Such a perception of authenticity supposes that the influencer must have certain characteristics to verify them. Lee and Eastin (2021) post that consumers assess influencer authenticity based on sincerity, truthfulness, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. Some of these characteristics (sincerity, truthfulness, expertise) form the influencer's credibility (Ohanian, 1990), which suggests that the credibility should act as an antecedent of authenticity.

Previous studies have shown that perceived authenticity enhances perception of trust, emotional attachment, and drives purchase behaviour (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022). Authenticity, based on intrinsic motivation or sincerity in promoting products, is closely related to a brand's trust and purchase intention, especially at the beginning of a relationship (Kim & Kim, 2021). Lee et al. (2022) state that authenticity is the strongest determinant of trust in influencer-sponsored content, which in turn affects purchase behaviour, underscoring the importance of authenticity in shaping consumers' attitudes towards sponsored content. Cabeza-Ramírez et al. (2022) argue that authenticity is a key factor that affects purchase intention both directly and indirectly. However, people's trust in influencers' messages is declining due to financial motives and a lack of transparency in sponsorship (Gerlich, 2025). According to some authors (Audrezet et al., 2020; Thota et al., 2025), improperly disclosed commercial partnerships can undermine the perceived authenticity of influencers. Therefore, perceptions of authenticity become a mediating variable through which the social media influencers encourage consumers to consider recommended products, while this mechanism wasn't important for celebrities (Kapitan et al., 2022).

The authenticity of VI, unlike HI, is driven by engaging narratives rather than real experiences. Respondents occasionally perceive this form of authenticity as more genuine

than that of HI (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021). Although Liu and Lee (2024) find that authenticity mediates the relationship between influencer type and purchase intention, participants perceived VI as less authentic than HI. The findings of Lou et al. (2023) highlight the challenge of VI: even human-like VI is perceived as "authentically fake," which limits its persuasive power. Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021) argue that human-like VI receive fewer positive reactions than HI and more animated VI, although human-like VI create more emotionally expressive and personalised content. This suggests that excessive realism can lead to the "uncanny valley" effect and reduce authenticity (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021). Therefore, we expect that:

H2: Influencer's authenticity has a positive impact on purchase intention.

H3: Influencer's authenticity has a positive impact on the message credibility.

2.3. Dimensions of Influencer's credibility

Operating through the peripheral route, source credibility becomes highly influential when consumers are either unable or unwilling to dedicate deep cognitive effort to evaluate the message's content (Jamil & Qayyum, 2022). A highly credible source enhances the perceived usefulness of the information, serving as a mental shortcut that simplifies the required effort for decision-making (Gökerik, 2024).

Trustworthiness, defined as consumers' belief that an influencer's claims are honest and reliable, is one of the core dimensions of credibility proposed by Ohanian (1990). Trustworthiness is also reflected in an influencer's transparency about identity and mission, consistent and niche-aligned messaging, and continuous engagement with followers, all of which convey sincerity and reliability (Wellman, 2024). Sardar et al. (2024) demonstrate that trustworthiness enhances consumer engagement, which in turn mediates its impact on purchase intention. The findings become more nuanced in the context of VI. Chaihanchanchai et al. (2024) report that perceived trustworthiness of VI did not directly influence purchase intention, which the authors suggest may be due to VI's perceived lack of authenticity. Other studies (Kim & Kim, 2021; Wang & Weng, 2024) reported a strong relationship between the source trustworthiness and authenticity. Therefore, we expect that:

H4: Influencer's perceived trustworthiness has a positive impact on influencer authenticity.

Expertise, as defined by Ohanian (1990), reflects the endorser's professionalism, experience, or specialised skill and reflects another dimension of credibility. Research suggests that competence and authenticity are important in shaping trust-based relationships and influencing purchase intention (Kim & Kim, 2021). Li and Peng (2021) found that expertise positively affected consumer satisfaction, advertising trust, and perceived connection with the brand, ultimately increasing purchase intention. Extending these insights, Foroughi et al. (2024) demonstrate that perceived expertise strengthens followers' evaluation of brand value. Supporting the relevance of expertise in shaping behavioural outcomes, Venciute et al. (2023) show that it can directly impact purchase intention. For VI, Kong and Fang (2024) find that expertise positively shapes product attitudes, establishing it as the second strongest predictor among the source credibility dimensions. Finally, Balaban and Szambolics (2022) and Roth-Cohen et al. (2025) argue that expertise has an impact on purchase intention indirectly, through the authenticity of the influencer. Therefore, we expect that:

H5: Influencer's perceived expertise has a positive impact on influencer authenticity.

Attractiveness, as the third dimension of credibility, encompasses an endorser's visual and interpersonal appeal (Ohanian, 1990), as well as the curated, visually pleasing presentation of an influencer's feed (Wellman, 2024). Attractiveness positively influences both brand engagement in self-concept and brand expected value, primarily because followers view attractive influencers as role models, hoping to imitate their lifestyle (Foroughi et al., 2024). Yuan and Lou (2020) find that perceived attractiveness strengthens parasocial relationships and that parasocial relationships mediate the effect of attractiveness on product interest. Attractiveness is further identified as a necessary condition for purchase intention, signifying that a certain level of appeal is required regardless of content informativeness or influencer expertise (Foroughi et al., 2024). By contrast, several recent studies find no significant direct effect of influencer attractiveness on purchase intention (Sardar et al., 2024; Kim & Kim, 2021; Venciute et al., 2023). Evidence from VI complicates this pattern. Da Silva Oliveira and Chimenti (2021) note that VI attractiveness extends beyond conventional beauty to algorithmically enhanced, idealised appearances, while also warning that graphical enhancement alone is insufficient without an engaging narrative.

Furthermore, anthropomorphism enables VI to create emotional connections similar to those of HI (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021), as perceived human-likeness plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards VI and indirectly contributes to the formation of favourable reactions to advertising (Um, 2023). Finally, Kong and Fang (2024) show that attractiveness exerts a stronger influence on consumer product attitudes than expertise or trustworthiness, and its effect is particularly pronounced for hedonic products. Pöyry et al. (2021) argue that both the perceived authenticity and attractiveness of the influencer are positively related; however, only authenticity affects purchase intentions. Kuo and Le (2025) state that influencer attractiveness can attract more followers, which in turn can raise the authenticity of the influencer. Based on that, we expect that:

H6: Influencer's perceived attractiveness has a positive impact on influencer authenticity.

2.4. Importance of influencer's type and message valence

Previous studies have shown that the perception of HI and VI differs, as well as their impact on followers' intention to behave. These differences could be explained by the perceived agency theory, which postulates that "people perceive agency in another entity when the entity's actions may be assumed by an outside observer to be driven primarily by its internal thoughts and feelings and less by the external environment" (Trafton et al., 2024). Based on that, Vanneste and Puranam (2024) notice that trust fundamentally relies on perceived agency: while humans naturally attribute intentionality to other humans, the perceived agency of AI trust through three pathways–by enhancing the AI's perceived ability, shifting the focus of trustworthiness between the AI and its human creator, and amplifying psychological sensitivity to betrayal aversion. In the context of social influence, the perceived lack of agency in artificial agents limits their persuasive effectiveness, as agency, rather than emotional capacity, determines advice adherence (Liao et al., 2023). Finally, trust in AI develops through both cognitive and emotional dimensions: cognitive trust is shaped by reliability, transparency, and task fit, while emotional trust is influenced by anthropomorphism and social presence, which vary across physical and virtual embodiments (Glikson & Woolley, 2020). Moreover, trust in artificial agents differs significantly from trust in humans, as trust in AI is conceptualised as the human intent to rely on the system, evolving from static, cognition-based trust before interaction to dynamic trust through collaboration (Zhu et al., 2023). Previous studies showed that consumers cast doubt on VI's sensory capacity to experience, feel, and perceive (Li et al., 2023), and may not be motivated to process information provided by VI (Bakpayev et al., 2022).

In the context of persuasion-focused communication, a positive message frame emphasises the gains or positive consequences of actions or decisions, whilst a negative message frame stresses the potential losses or negative consequences (Florence et al., 2022). Positive-framed messages are more persuasive than negative valence messages when behaviours are considered safe (Edwards et al., 2001), as they align with consumers' desires for positive reinforcement and self-improvement (O'Keefe & Jasen, 2008). Negative-framed messages tend to be more effective in changing behaviours that are considered risky (Edwards et al., 2001), such as those of health professionals, but less effective with audiences who have reduced involvement and familiarity with the topic (Wansink & Pope, 2015). Since followers perceive greater comfort and confidence with VI for cognitive-oriented content than emotion-oriented content (De Cicco et al., 2024), the negative-framed messages can induce fear and evoke greater message processing (Slater et al., 2002). The absence of a physical form in VI makes it difficult to believe that virtual agents can experience emotions such as worry and fear, as evidenced by their changing behaviour. Consumers are not always motivated to process VI's messages carefully (De Cicco et al., 2024). Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H7: The strength of influencer authenticity's impact on purchase intention differs depending on the type of influencer (VI vs HI) and message frame (Positive vs Negative).

H8: The strength of message credibility's impact on purchase intention differs depending on the type of influencer (VI vs HI) and message frame (Positive vs Negative).

Figure 1 describes the hypotheses in the conceptual research model.

3. Research methodology

To test the hypotheses, a 2×2 factorial design experiment was conducted by manipulating the type of influencer (VI vs. HI) and message frame (positive vs. negative). First, the stimulus featured the same created photo of a young, European-looking male influencer for both virtual and human influencers. The manipulation of influencer type was achieved through a textual introduction describing the influencer either as "a 25-year-old robot who lives in London" (VI condition) or as a "25-year-old talented British guitarist and vocalist" (HI condition). The influencers were described as macro-influencers, having 3.5 million to 5 million followers on various social media platforms and having collaborations with brands in both conditions. After receiving a picture of the influencer with a text introduction indicating whether they were a VI or a HI, participants were asked to evaluate the influencer's trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and authenticity.

The second manipulation involved the influencer's product post, which was framed to emphasise either the
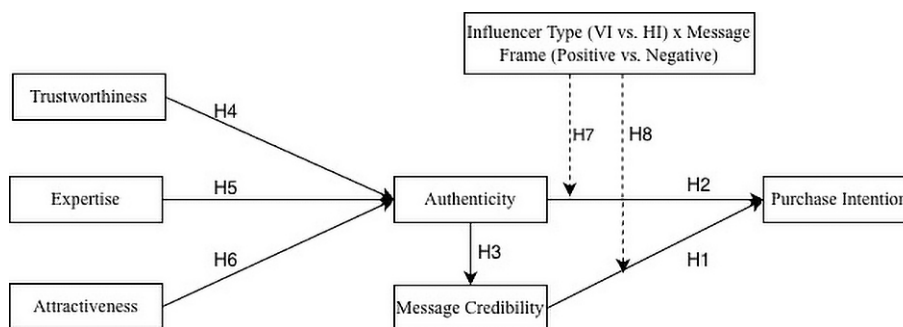

Figure 1. Conceptual research model

4

positive outcomes of using the product or the negative consequences of missing out on it. After viewing a picture of the post, either with a positive or negative message, participants were asked to evaluate the message's credibility and their purchase intention.

Participants were Lithuanian social media users with a proficiency in English, which matched the influencer's British portrayal and the survey's English language. From an initial 348 responses, 67 responses were excluded because of incomplete questionnaires, responses completed in less than three minutes, and those showing no variance. The final sample for data analysis included 281 respondents (113 men, 168 women) with an average age of 40.6 (11.9) years, ranging from 18 to 76. The predominant age cohort was 30 to 49-year-olds (59.1%). The gender and age distributions between the four groups are balanced, $\chi^2(3, N = 281) = 3.59$, p = 0.309, $\chi^2(9, N = 281) = 14.52$, $p = 0.105$. More than 56% of respondents perceive themselves as having an average income or slightly higher than average income (see Table 1).

The scales employed by other scholars in the field of influencer marketing were adapted in the study. Four items from Ohanian (1990) were adapted to measure trustwor-thiness. Expertise and attractiveness were measured using two five-item scales adapted from Peetz (2012). Authenticity was measured by three items from Zniva et al. (2023). Three items from Xu (2014) and three items from Gupta et al. (2023) were adapted to measure message credibility and purchase intention, respectively. The respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "strongly disagree" and 7 represented "strongly agree".

We used SPSS software for the data analysis. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was employed in this study using principal component analysis as the extraction method and with a Promax rotation. The analysis was conducted on the 23 statements included in the questionnaire. The suitability of the data for factor analysis was confirmed by a significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, $\chi^2 (253) = 5250.61$, $p < 0.001$, and a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of 0.932, greatly exceeding the recommended threshold.

The analysis yielded a six-factor solution (see Table 2). Five items were loaded onto the first factor—influencer's expertise (0.792–0.903). Five items were loaded onto the second factor—influencer's attractiveness (0.657–0.950). Three items were loaded onto the third factor—purchase

Table 1. The demographic data of the respondents in both samples

Gender	Frequency	Percentage	Incomes	Frequency	Percentage
Male	113	40.2	Much lower than the country's average	12	4.3
Female	168	59.8	Lower than the country's average	26	9.3
			Slightly lower than the country's average	34	12.1
Age			On the country's average	94	33.5
18–29	51	18.1	Slightly higher than the country's average	64	22.8
30–39	98	34.9	Higher than the country's average	39	13.9
40–49	68	24.2			
50+	64	22.8			

Table 2. Measurement scales used in the research and their reliability

	Expertise	Attracti-veness	Purchase Intention	Trustwor-thiness	Message Credibility	Authen-ticy	h^2
Tr. This influencer is honest				0.881			0.823
Tr. This influencer is reliable				0.747			0.782
Tr. This influencer is sincere				0.872			0.832
Tr. This influencer is trustworthy				0.864			0.800
E. This influencer has a good understanding of his field	0.792						0.736
E. This influencer is an expert in his field	0.854						0.794
E. This influencer is knowledgeable in his field	0.903						0.810
E. This influencer is qualified in his field	0.872						0.791
E. This influencer has experience in his field	0.817						0.749
Attr. This influencer is elegant		0.657					0.669
Attr. This influencer is attractive		0.870					0.806
Attr. This influencer is good-looking		0.950					0.797
Attr. This influencer is charming		0.865					0.839
Attr. This influencer is nice		0.893					0.776

End of Table 2

	Expertise	Attracti-veness	Purchase Intention	Trustwor-thiness	Message Credibility	Authen-ticy	h^2
Auth. This influencer is genuine						0.835	0.785
Auth. This influencer is real to me						0.683	0.797
Auth. This influencer is authentic						0.845	0.734
Mcred. The message presented by this influencer's post is credible					0.784		0.731
Mcred. The message presented by this influencer's post is believable					0.920		0.772
Mcred. The message presented by this influencer's post is trustworthy					0.770		0.741
PI. I will probably choose the recommended restaurant/SSD hard drive			0.913				0.870
PI. I intend to choose the recommended restaurant/SSD hard drive			0.922				0.896
PI. It's possible that I will choose the recommended restaurant/SSD hard drive			0.915				0.850
Reliability	0.921	0.921	0.929	0.920	0.824	0.853	
AVE	0.720	0.727	0.840	0.710	0.685	0.626	
The extraction method was principal component analysis with a promax rotation. h^2 = communality coefficient							

intention (0.913–0.922). Four items were loaded onto the fourth factor—influencer's trustworthiness (0.747–0.881). Three statements were loaded onto the fifth factor—message credibility (0.784–0.920). The last factor included three statements to measure influencer's authenticity (0.683–0.845). All items demonstrated strong communalities, ranging from 0.731 to 0.896, surpassing the satisfactory threshold (Hair et al., 2019). All constructs exhibited strong internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's α coefficients ranging from 0.824 to 0.929 (Taber, 2018). Both convergent validity and discriminant validity were satisfied: AVE for each construct ranged from 0.626 to 0.840, above the 0.5 threshold (Hair et al., 2019). The highest HTMT is 0.841, below the 0.9 threshold (Gold et al., 2001).

4. Results

4.1. Impact of predictors on purchase intention and message credibility

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the impact of influencer's trustworthiness, expertise, at-

tractiveness, authenticity, and the post's message credibility on purchase intention. Table 3 shows that the model was statistically significant, $F(5) = 34.186$, $p < 0.001$, and explained 38.3% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.383$). Analysis of the individual predictors revealed that authenticity (β = 0.427, $p < 0.001$) and message credibility (β = 0.347, p < 0.001) were the only significant predictors, which indicates that the perception of an influencer's authenticity and the message credibility of the influencer's social media post are positively related to purchase intention. Therefore, H1 and H2 were accepted. Other influencer characteristics—trustworthiness (β = 0.23, $p = 0.784$), expertise (β = –0.101, $p = 0.152$), and attractiveness (β = –0.035, $p = 0.575$)—did not demonstrate a statistically significant relationship with purchase intention, which shows influencer's credibility does not have a direct impact on purchase intention.

Another multiple regression analysis was performed to test how influencer characteristics predict the perceived message credibility. The model was statistically significant, $F(4) = 30.673$, $p < 0.001$, accounting for 30.8% of the vari-

Table 3. Impact of Influencer characteristics and message credibility on purchase intention and message credibility

	Impact on purchase intention				Impact on message credibility			
	B	β	t	Sig.	B	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1		3.132	0.002	1.824		7.094	<0.001
Trustworthiness	0.024	0.023	0.275	0.784	0.04	0.046	0.516	0.606
Expertise	–0.117	–0.101	–1.437	0.152	0.067	0.069	0.934	0.351
Attractiveness	–0.04	–0.035	–0.561	0.575	0.142	0.151	2.287	0.023
Authentisity	0.452	0.427	5.481	<0.001	0.318	0.362	4.563	<0.001
Message Credibility	0.419	0.347	6.094	<0.001				
R^2 = 0.383, $F(5)$ = 34.186, $p < 0.001$					R^2 = 0.308, $F(4)$ = 30.673, $p < 0.001$			

ance in message credibility (R^2 = 0.308). The model observed authenticity (β = 0.362, $p < 0.001$) as the strongest significant positive predictor. It shows that an influencer's authenticity positively impacts audiences' perception of the message's credibility, which allows us to accept H3. Attractiveness (β = 0.151, p = 0.023) also emerged as the other significant positive predictor, which shows that if an influencer is perceived as more attractive, audiences perceive his or her message as more credible. Conversely, trustworthiness (β = 0.046, p = 0.606) and expertise (β = 0.069, p = 0.351) were not found to be significant antecedents of message credibility.

4.2. Impact of influencer's credibility on authenticity

The overall regression model is statistically significant, $F(3)$ = 139.947, $p < 0.001$, and explained a substantial portion of the variance in perceived authenticity factors (R^2 = 0.602). Trustworthiness (β = 0.499, $p < 0.001$) and attractiveness (β = 0.273, $p < 0.001$) were significant antecedents of perceived authenticity, which allows us to accept H4 and H6. The results indicated a positive but marginally non-significant relationship between expertise and authenticity (β = 0.107, p = 0.057). Therefore, H5 was rejected. It implied that expertise may function as a mild contributor but is overshadowed by the dominant effects of trustworthiness and attractiveness (see Table 4).

Table 4. Impact of influencer credibility on perceived authenticity of influencer

	B	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.089		0.402	0.688
Trustworthiness	0.494	0.499	8.313	<0.001
Expertise	0.117	0.107	1.913	0.057
Attractiveness	0.292	0.273	5.773	<0.001
R^2 = 0.602, $F(3)$ = 139.947, $p < 0.001$				

4.3. The effect of the interaction of influencer types and message valence

Table 5 presents four separate regression analyses, one for each combination of the two moderators, organized into

four groups: VI with a negative message, VI with a positive message, HI with a negative message, and HI with a positive message. The model showed the least explanatory power was for the VI with a negative message (R^2 = 0.226). The model explained the largest proportion of variance in purchase intention for the HI with a positive message (R^2 = 0.508).

Authenticity was a dominant driver for the VI, particularly when conveying a negative message, whereas message credibility was a more influential factor for the HI. Authenticity is a consistently significant antecedent across all conditions (β = 0.379, p = 0.001, VI and negative; β = 0.462, p = 0.001, VI and positive; β = 0.24, p = 0.45, HI and negative; β = 0.343, p = 0.002, HI and positive). Therefore, H7 was rejected. The effect of message credibility was non-significant for the VI delivering a negative-framed message (β = 0.183, p = 0.108). Message credibility became a significant and increasingly powerful predictor across the three other conditions (β = 0.298, p = 0.014, VI and positive; β = 0.382, p = 0.002, HI and negative; β = 0.457, $p < 0.001$, HI and positive), peaking for the HI with a positive message. Therefore, we accept H8.

5. Conclusions

Over the past few years, the popularity of influencers on social media has increased, making influencer marketing an important element of a company's marketing tactics. Additionally, rapid development in artificial intelligence and virtual reality has raised attitudes towards virtual influencers. This research aimed to advance influencer marketing theory by examining the credibility and authenticity of influencers.

Previous studies on VI have applied theories such as Social Identity Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, Planned Behaviour Theory, and Attachment Theory (Pushparaj & Kushwaha, 2023). However, some authors have pointed out the limited application of consumer behaviour models, specifically the Information Adoption Model (Aldlimi et al., 2025). The current study adopted the Information Adoption Model. The study results demonstrated the suitability of the model in both human and VI contexts. As the theory suggests, the credibility of the message had a direct impact on behavioural intentions.

Table 5. Impact of authenticity and message credibility on purchase intention, depending on the type of influencer and message valence

	VI and Negative				VI and Positive				HI and Negative				HI and Positive			
	B	β	t	Sig.	B	β	t	Sig.	B	β	t	Sig.	B	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.686		3.209	0.002	0.744		1.602	0.114	0.457		0.668	0.506	0.028		0.053	0.958
Authenticity	0.362	0.379	3.371	0.001	0.437	0.462	3.897	0.001	0.318	0.240	2.04	0.045	0.401	0.343	3.208	0.002
Message Credibility	0.188	0.183	1.628	0.108	0.366	0.298	2.512	0.014	0.521	0.382	3.239	0.002	0.554	0.457	4.274	<0.001
R^2 = 0.226, $F(2)$ = 10.23, $p < 0.001$				R^2 = 0.486, $F(2)$ = 31.211, $p < 0.001$				R^2 = 0.296, $F(2)$ = 14.278, $p < 0.001$				R^2 = 0.508, $F(2)$ = 33.525, $p < 0.001$			

To date, most studies have used credibility as the primary characteristic of the influencer, which has a direct impact on purchase intention. However, followers tend to evaluate VI as less authentic than HI, or even the authenticity of HI declines due to financial motives and the transparency of sponsorship. This study highlighted the critical role of authenticity in shaping purchase intentions, revealing both a direct effect and an indirect effect mediated by message credibility. While the credibility dimensions—trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness—did not directly influence purchase intention, they significantly shaped the perceived authenticity of the influencer, which in turn affected behavioural outcomes. These findings underscore the centrality of authenticity in the persuasion process and clarify the mediating pathways through which source credibility operates. The original Information Adoption Model was developed in the context of forum-based online communities and researched widely in the context of electronic word of mouth (e.g., Song et al., 2021). However, the rise of social media and artificial intelligence has transformed authenticity into an essential asset for VI (Kim & Wang, 2024) and a critical mediator between influencer credibility and purchase intention. Such results open a theoretical discussion about whether the original Information Adoption Model needs to be adapted for virtual reality situations or for evaluating the usage of information sent by artificial intelligence.

The results of a regression analysis showed that trustworthiness and attractiveness were able to explain a substantial portion of the variance in perceived authenticity. Notably, the influence of expertise on perceived authenticity was suppressed by the other two credibility dimensions and was not statistically significant—a finding that may be explained by consumers' low involvement (Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018). Such results highlight the importance of credibility and underscore the need for further studies that evaluate the simultaneous inclusion of credibility and authenticity within a single survey. Additionally, previous studies have shown differences in the importance of credibility dimensions across geographical areas, suggesting the need for further research across various countries and cultures.

Furthermore, the study examined differences in established relationships based on the type of influencer (human vs. virtual) and the valence of the message frame (positive vs. negative). The results showed that authenticity was a consistently significant antecedent across all conditions. The message credibility was a powerful predictor for purchase intention across the three conditions, but the effect of message credibility was non-significant for the VI delivering a negative-framed message. This ineffectiveness may stem from a fundamental mismatch: VI lacks the sensory capabilities necessary to embody and convey fear-inducing, negative-framed messages convincingly (Li et al., 2023). Such results open a new direction for future studies, which would evaluate the ability of VI (or even artificial intelligence) to be critical and followers' reaction towards critical messages posted by VI.

Finally, the current study provides insightful practical implications for marketers. VI can be an effective endorser, and marketers should leverage perceived authenticity as a key metric for their selection and segmentation. Employing positive message framing can enhance the critical role of message credibility for VI. Therefore, it's essential to craft messages which align authentically with a VI's persona to maximise impact.

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NUOMONĖS FORMUOTOJO AUTENTIŠKUMO IR PATIKIMUMO ĮTAKA PIRKIMO KETINIMAMS: VIRTUALIŲJŲ IR ŽMOGIŠKŲJŲ NUOMONĖS FORMUOTOJŲ ATVEJIS

Santrauka. Šiame tyrime nagrinėjama nuomonės formuotojų autentiškumo ir patikimumo įtaka vartotojų pirkimo ketinimams, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant virtualiųjų ir žmogiškųjų nuomonės formuotojų skirtumams. Taikant 2×2 faktorinio dizaino eksperimentą, tiriamas nuomonės formuotojų autentiškumo tarpininkaujantis vaidmuo ryšyje tarp nuomonės formuotojų patikimumo dimensijų (patikimumo, kompetencijos ir patrauklumo), žinutės patikimumo ir vartotojų pirkimo ketinimų, remiantis informacijos įsisavinimo modeliu. Toliau nagrinėjamas nuomonės formuotojų tipų (virtualusis ir žmogiškasis) ir žinutės rėmelio valentingumo (teigiamas ir neigiamas) sąveikos moderuojantis vaidmuo. Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad nuomonės formuotojų suvokiamas patikimumas ir patrauklumas yra teigiamai susiję su autentiškumu ir pirkimo ketinimais, o kompetencija reikšmingo poveikio neturi. Nuomonės formuotojų autentiškumas nuosekliai prognozuoja pirkimo ketinimus tiek virtualiųjų, tiek žmogiškųjų nuomonės formuotojų atveju, nepriklausomai nuo žinutės valentingumo. Priešingai, žinutės patikimumas neturi įtakos pirkimo ketinimams, kai virtualieji nuomonės formuotojai pateikia neigiamai suformuluotas žinutes, tačiau kitomis trijomis sąlygomis jis išlieka reikšmingu veiksniu.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: virtualusis nuomonės formuotojas, patikimumas, autentiškumas, žinutės rėmelio valentingumas, pirkimo ketinimai, faktorinis eksperimento dizainas.