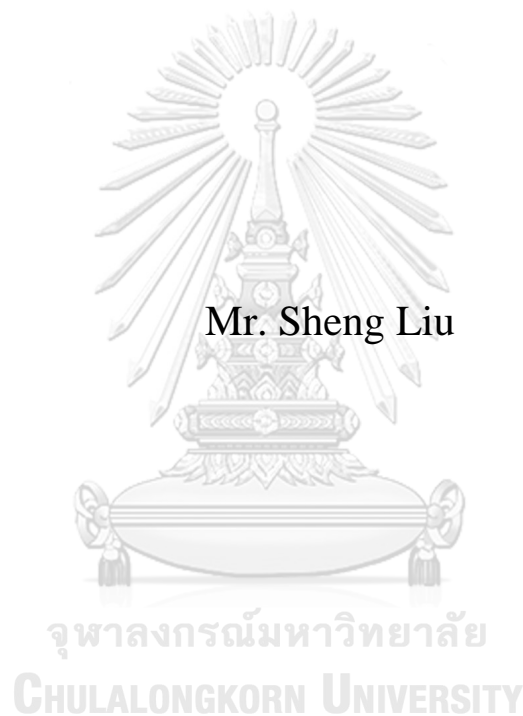


THE INFLUENCE OF HUMAN-LIKE VIRTUAL
INFLUENCERS ON INTENTION TO PURCHASE BEAUTY
PRODUCTS AMONG CHINESE FEMALE GEN Z



Mr. Sheng Liu

An Independent Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Communication Arts) in Strategic
Communication Management
FACULTY OF COMMUNICATION ARTS
Chulalongkorn University
Academic Year 2022
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อิทธิพลของผู้มีอิทธิพลเสมือนที่มีลักษณะคล้ายมนุษย์ต่อความตั้งใจในการซื้อผลิตภัณฑ์ความงาม
ในกลุ่มหญิงชาวจีนเจนเอเรชั่นซ



สารนิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาโทสาขาสถาปัตยกรรมศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต
สาขาวิชาการจัดการการสื่อสารเชิงกลยุทธ์ ไม่สังกัดภาควิชา/เทียบเท่า
คณะนิเทศศาสตร์ จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย
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Independent Study Title THE INFLUENCE OF HUMAN-LIKE
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FEMALE GEN Z

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เจิ้ง หลิว : อิทธิพลของผู้มีอิทธิพลเสมือนที่มีลักษณะคล้ายมนุษย์ต่อความตั้งใจในการซื้อผลิตภัณฑ์ความงามในกลุ่มหญิงชาวจีนเจนเอเรชั่นซ. (THE INFLUENCE OF HUMAN-LIKE VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS ON INTENTION TO PURCHASE BEAUTY PRODUCTS AMONG CHINESE FEMALE GEN Z) อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก : รศ. ดร. สมิตีร์ บุญชุติมา

วัตถุประสงค์ของงานวิจัยนี้ได้รวมการสำรวจความไว้วางใจของผู้บริโภคความน่าเชื่อถือในแบรนด์และความดึงดูดในการซื้อผ่านผู้มีอิทธิพลทางความคิดเสมือนจริงที่เหมือนมนุษย์อีกทั้งตรวจสอบอิทธิพลของผู้มีอิทธิพลทางความคิดเสมือนจริงที่เหมือนมนุษย์ที่มีต่อความไว้วางใจของผู้บริโภค ความน่าเชื่อถือในแบรนด์และความดึงดูดในการซื้อบนพื้นฐานของการวิจัยเชิงประจักษ์เฉพาะอย่างยิ่งโดยการปรับโมเดลSMIVจากผู้ตอบแบบสอบถามทั้งหมด260คนซึ่งเป็นคนจีนผู้หญิงGenZช่วงอายุระหว่าง18-25ปีที่ได้ทำการตอบแบบสอบถามออนไลน์เรียบร้อยผลลัพธ์ที่แสดงให้เห็นค่าข้อมูลของผู้มีอิทธิพลทางความคิดเสมือนจริงที่เหมือนมนุษย์ ($\beta = 0.196$ $p < .001$) และค่าความบันเทิง ($\beta = 0.181$ $p < .001$) ความน่าเชื่อถือ ($\beta = 0.142$ $p < .01$) ความคล้ายคลึงกัน ($\beta = 0.115$ $p < .05$) และความน่าดึงดูดใจ($\beta = 0.292$ $p < .001$) ต่อผู้ชมที่ให้ความสนใจในโพสต์ของแบรนด์เป็นอย่างมาก ซึ่งจะนำไปสู่แรงดึงดูดในการซื้อ ($\beta = 0.198$, $p < .01$)

จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย
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สาขาวิชา การจัดการการสื่อสารเชิงกลยุทธ์ ลายมือชื่อนิสิต

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6488005228 : MAJOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION
MANAGEMENT

KEYWORD: SMIV, HUMAN-LIKE VIRTUAL INFLUENCER, GEN
Z, PURCHASE INTENTION

The objectives of this research include exploring consumers' perceived trust, brand awareness, and purchase intention via human-like virtual influencers; and examining the influence of human-like virtual influencers on consumers' perceived trust, brand awareness, and purchase intention based on the empirical research, especially by adapting the SMIV model. A total of 260 Chinese female Gen Z respondents between the ages of 18 and 25 were eligible to complete an online questionnaire survey. The results depicted that human-like virtual influencers' informative value ($\beta = 0.196$ $p < .001$) and entertainment value ($\beta = 0.181$ $p < .001$), trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.142$ $p < .01$), similarity ($\beta = 0.115$ $p < .05$), and attractiveness ($\beta = 0.292$ $p < .001$) to the audiences strongly influence their trust in branded posts, which further influence purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.198$, $p < .01$).



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Field of Study:	Strategic Communication Management	Student's Signature
Academic Year:	2022	Advisor's Signature

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude towards my family. My parents and my wife thank you all for your love and patience in staying with me. With your encouragement, I was able to strike the right balance between work and study and complete this research.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my thesis adviser, Dr. Smith Boonchutima, for his constant support, patience, and inspiration, as well as for generously sharing his knowledge from the beginning to the end of my academic project. In addition, I'd want to thank Dr. Worawan Ongkrutraksa for always being so kind, thoughtful, and helpful. Your insightful comments have directed me in the right direction. I would also like to thank Dr. ShawHong SER for taking the time to study my paper and provide helpful feedback.

Finally, I'd like to express my gratitude to my classmates. I'm so glad I finally got to meet everyone in this program because of the friendships we've formed and the support we've given each other; these are the best memories that accompanied me through the journey.

Sheng Liu

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Significance of the Study

Over the past few of years, advertisers and academics have embraced influencer marketing as a successful practice for many brands to interact with consumers (Tafesse&Wood,2021). Recent technology improvements have led to the emergence of "virtual influencers". These digital avatars are computer-generated influencers with human-like features as well as characteristics. In fact, this virtual influencer market in China has been growing fast, last year alone, the value of business driven by virtual influencers was 90 million in China, reported by iiMedia, and is predicted to reach 1.5 billion yuan by 2023. The fast-expanding market scale resulted in virtual influencers becoming one of the major marketing factors that could not be ignored.

At the same time, China is the leading country in the ecommerce sales globally, and it brings enormous internet users and buyers. Chinese female consumers are powerful buying forces and as more Gen Z people enter the workforce, these post-95s are willing to spend more on upscale luxury beauty brands. Wrote by Yao (2021), there are over 50 million GEN Z females, 37.5% of post-95 women spend more than 3,000 RMB (US\$465) a year on cosmetics, with 16.5% spending more than 5,000 RMB (US\$775). Prior research indicates that marketers have committed funds to online marketing, utilizing social media and online influencer popularity to drive product interest and increase sales. Noticeable, virtual influencers have become a fascinating trend for commercial promotion on social media.

The top Chinese human-like virtual influencers, Ling, and Ayayi, are followed by huge number of young social media users on social media. They have collaborated with

famous brands such as Lancôme, Estee Lauder, and Guerlain. Their success is seen as one of the reasons why influencer marketers and brands are getting ready to target female Gen Z in China, especially through virtual influencer marketing.

The popularity of influencer marketing has altered how businesses communicate with customers today. Recent statistics indicate that marketers want to increase influencer marketing spending in the near future. Influencer marketing's exponential rise has prompted more companies to join the bandwagon. In the research on influencer marketing, it has been shown that the credibility of the source of the influencer is an important thing to think about. Further, Lou and Yuan (2019) created a theoretical model called "social media influencer value" (SMIV) that aimed to explain influencer advertising value and influencers' credibility that influence consumer reactions, trust in virtual influencer-generated posts, and purchase intention. The main factors identified in the SMIV model are advertising content value, influencer credibility, perceived trust, brand awareness, and purchase intentions.

Influencers on social media typically have knowledge in particular fields, such as healthy living, travel, gastronomy, lifestyle, beauty, and fashion. Consequently, influencer-generated branded posts are regarded as having more organic, real, and direct touch with potential consumers than brand-generated advertisements. (Talavera, 2015). A recent Twitter survey revealed that customers may have the same amount of trust in social media influencers as they do in their friends. (Swant & Marty, 2016). Trust is an important factor in consumer decision making when it comes to buying high- and low-involvement products, and previous researchers have found that if people perceive a higher level of trust, they are more likely to purchase. Brand awareness is crucial to consumers' buying decisions and can serve as a heuristic signal or decision

making. With their large numbers of users, most of the businesses are ready to integrate social media into their marketing activities to boost brand recognition within the specified set of audience.

Despite the fact that several studies have researched the impacts of social influencers on consumers' purchase intent, little study has yet examined the emergence of virtual influencers and examined the impact of influencer marketing on various product categories (Kunkel et al., 2019). In Lou and Yuan's (2019) study, has mainly analyzed influencer marketing on the perspectives of low involvement product and they suggested the future study could examine the different type of involvement products. Furthermore, while there has been some recent research on virtual influencers, most of it has compared the effects of anthropomorphism types ranging from human-like to animated (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021), and very little research has focused directly on Chinese human-like virtual influencers for promoting high-involvement beauty products. In order to investigate the phenomenon, this study introduced and adapted the SMIV model for evaluation.

1.2 Research Objective

1. To explore consumers' perceived trust, brand awareness and their purchase intention via human-like virtual influencers.
2. To examine the influence of human-like virtual influencers on consumers' perceived trust, brand awareness, and intention to purchase.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1: What are consumers' perceived trust, brand awareness and their purchase intention via human-like virtual influencers.

RQ2: What is the influence of human-like virtual influencers towards consumers' perceived trust, brand awareness (a) and intention to purchase(b).

1.4 Research Hypotheses

H1: Human-like virtual influencers' (a) informativeness value and (b) entertainment value will positively influence consumers' perceived trust in branded content.

H2: Human-like virtual influencers' credibility components expertise (a), trustworthiness (b), attractiveness(c), and similarity (d) will positively influence consumers' trust in branded content.

H3: Human-like virtual influencer-generated content's informativeness value and entertainment value will positively influence consumers' awareness of advertised brand.

H4: Human-like virtual influencers' credibility, including expertise (a), trustworthiness (b), attractiveness (c), and similarity (d) will positively influence consumers' awareness of advertised brand.

H5: Human-like virtual Influencers' informativeness value and entertainment value will positively influence consumers' purchase intentions.

H6: Human-like virtual Influencer credibility, including (a) perceived expertise, (b) trustworthiness, (c) attractiveness, and (d) similarity, will positively influence consumers' purchase intentions.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This research uses an online survey technique. Population is Chinese social media users, and the qualified samples are female Gen Z with an age range of 18–25, and the sample size will be 260. The online questionnaire was sent on multiply social media

platforms, for example, Weibo, Weixin, and Xiaohongshu. And the survey was conducted from Oct. 2022 to Nov. 2022.

1.6 Operational Definition

Human-like virtual influencers are digital characters which are generated by computer graphics, in other words, computer generated images (CGI) are more and more human-like and virtual influencers are increasingly capable of simulating human content.

SMIV stands for social media influencer value, and it was created by Lou and Yuan (2019). Factors in the model are advertising value, influencer credibility, perceived trust, brand awareness, and purchase intention.

Advertising value is a person's opinion of how useful or important advertising is to them. It has two parts: informative value and entertainment value.

Influencer credibility plays significant role in determining the effectiveness of influencer endorsements (Munnukka et al., 2016), and it consist of four constructs, trustworthiness, expertise, similarity, and attractiveness.

Perceived trust is described as a willingness to reply on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence. In other words, the consumers' perceived trust in influencers' branded posts.

Brand awareness denotes if people are familiar with a brand and can recall or recognize it.

Purchase intentions defines an individual's purposeful intention to make a particular purchase.

Gen Z refers to the generation that was born between 1997-2012.

Beauty products are skincare, *cosmetics*, and fragrance.

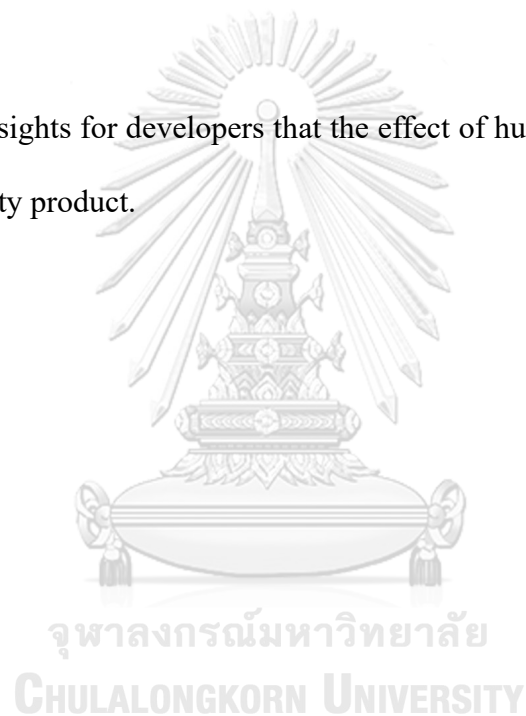
WXJ is an online survey tool that is widely used in China for academic research purposes.

1.7 Benefits of the study

1. Contributes to current literature in the area of influencer marketing by extending the scope to examine effectiveness on human-like virtual influencer.

2. Provides insights for marketing practitioners from beauty industry to collaborate with human-like virtual influencers to create the intention of purchase among consumers.

3. Provides insights for developers that the effect of human-like virtual influencer in promoting beauty product.



CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

To be able to explore consumers' perceived trust and their purchase intention via human-like virtual influencers' branded post, the literature reviews relevant theories. It will first turn to what virtual influencer marketing is, and later explain SMIV model and how it will be adapted. lastly, the chapter concludes with the conceptual framework of this study as well as the hypotheses.

1. Influencer marketing
2. Source credibility
3. SMIV model

2.1 Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing is the practice of identifying, studying, engaging, and supporting the individuals who create higher customer dialogues about brands, goods, and services. Influencers are also referred to as "endorsers" by McCracken (1989), who describes them as "any individual who enjoys public fame and who uses this reputation on behalf of a consumer product by appearing with it in an advertisement." Online influencers around the globe represent companies by creating brand-related content on their own personal social media handles or blogs. These influencers have become powerful forces that impact consumers' purchasing decisions based on their opinions and expertise. Based on a recent survey on social media trends, 94% of marketers who have utilized influencer marketing strategies found them effective (Ahmad, 2018). According to a survey by Klear, spending on influencer marketing is predicted to double from \$5 billion in 2018 to \$10 billion in 2022. Online media influencers influence purchase intentions, perceived credibility, knowledge,

trustworthiness, or relationships with followers (Moustakas et al., 2020 & Holiencinova, 2018). Although the majority of the literature has focused on the positive effects of the phenomenon, (De Veirman et al., 2017) examined the necessity of establishing a strong relationship with the correct influencer from both the companies' and the influencers' perspectives. The result shows, first, the selected influencer will have an impact on the brand and, consequently, the consumer association. Second, the communication from the influencer must be relevant to the followers, and a match must exist between the company and the influencer. Since the importance of this match between brand and influencer has increased over time, it is necessary to analyze the factors that affect the credibility of influencers utilized in marketing. On the other hand, because influencer marketing practices are based on real influencers, there is very little research on the aspects from human-like virtual influencers that affects consumer.

2.2 Humanlike virtual influencer as a source

Companies aim to leverage virtual influencers in their marketing campaigns to capitalize on their followers. However, given that virtual influencers are not real, Kádeková & Holiencinova (2018) questioned if virtual influencers are legitimate and credible enough to be seen as brand ambassadors comparable to social media influencers. Most virtual influencers are believed to be comparable to humans in terms of physical appearance, personality, and conduct (Moustakas et al., 2020). Virtual avatars with improved human resemblances affect people's purchase decisions and perceived interpersonal trust (Webster, 1968). The researchers, (Seymour et al., 2020) discovered that a highly humanized virtual character was seen as more believable and similar than a cartoon virtual character. Even if virtual influencers do

not exist in "real" life, Robinson (2020) shown that virtual influencers are viewed as legitimate and "real" as social media influencers, since their activities and engagement rates influence people's purchasing behavior and brand preferences. Another group of researchers (Moustakas et al.,2020) conducted semi-structured interviews with six digital media specialists to investigate the potential, obstacles, and critical factors of virtual influencers. They analyze the pros and cons of human-like versus cartoonish characters, emphasizing the significance of storyline in attracting followers' attention. However, when virtual influencers grow too human-looking, they run the risk of losing rapport with people. This is because individuals may get concerned about the great similarity between the AI's appearance and their own. Despite the fact that virtual influencers are increasingly contracted to endorse products and brands to their followers, there are limited empirical studies exploring factors that affect their marketing effectiveness.

2.2.1 Introducing Chinese top virtual influencers

Ling and Ayayi are two top virtual influencers in China. They each have a large number of followers on Weibo, with a number of 923,000 for the former and 665,000 for the latter. Weibo is a Chinese Twitter-like microblogging website. Ling and Ayayi have a lifelike appearance, and her facial expressions and body movements are controlled by artificial intelligence performance animation technology. Their human-like looks and oriental appeal make her an ideal partner for China-based beauty businesses, for example, Ling, she promoted content for Estee Lauder in a number of campaigns. Besides, she acknowledges that she is a robot yet expresses emotions in her posts, such as "Today is the first day in months that I've felt carefree." Ling was created by Xmov Information Technology and is located in Shanghai. The company

specializes in the creation and development of AI-driven digital assets of all sorts. They focus on developing virtual assistants for brands, governments, and business enterprises. While there has been some recent research on virtual influencers, the majority of it has compared the effects of anthropomorphism types ranging from humanized to animated (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021), and very little research has focused directly on Chinese human-like virtual influencers for promoting high-involvement beauty products. (Figure 1)



Figure 1

2.3 High and low involvement

The phenomenon of high- and low-involvement could be found in many different contexts. To name a few, it may be observed in the context of work methods, decision making, management, and products. Initially, engagement was seen as the connection between an individual's ego and a goal (Aldlaigan & Buttle, 2001). Later, scholars developed the field and concluded "Involvement is often governed by an individual's perception of an object's or activity's relevance." Involvement can take place with an object (product involvement) or an activity (process involvement). Regarding the context of products, the key to attracting and retaining existing consumers is to

include differentiating characteristics that make consumers desire to recognize and purchase the product (Radder & Huang, 2008). Prior research has indicated that high-involvement items typically have a symbolic meaning, psychological fulfillment, or image reinforcement, whereas low-involvement products are less complex and are regularly purchased by consumers. And Radder & Huang (2008) came to the conclusion that marketing strategies for high- and low-involvement items may differ in order to achieve the desired purchase intention outcome. However, their study was conducted in the early 2000s, when the use of social media (Weibo, Wechat, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter) was not as prevalent, so these channels were not covered. In a more recent study (Lee & Watkins, 2016), examining the effect of YouTube on the purchase intention of luxury products, the results suggested that consumers who had viewed influencers' promotional vlogs on YouTube had a higher purchase intent than those who had not. Since this study will look at human-like virtual influencers promotes luxury beauty brand products, those brands themselves are well-known already, the product involvement could be called strong.

2.4 Social Media Influencer Value (SMIV) model

Lou and Yuan (2019) developed the SMIV model, depicted in Figure 2 below, which was based on Munnukka et al., (2016) study in which source credibility included four variables: expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity, and continued to explore the source credibility in their study in which trustworthiness, expertise, similarity, and attractiveness were tested in relation to consumers' trust in branded content and purchase intention. In their new model, Lou and Yuan (2019) evaluated source credibility together with advertising value, which includes two

factors: informative value and entertainment value. In this study SMIV model will be further explained in the next paragraphs.

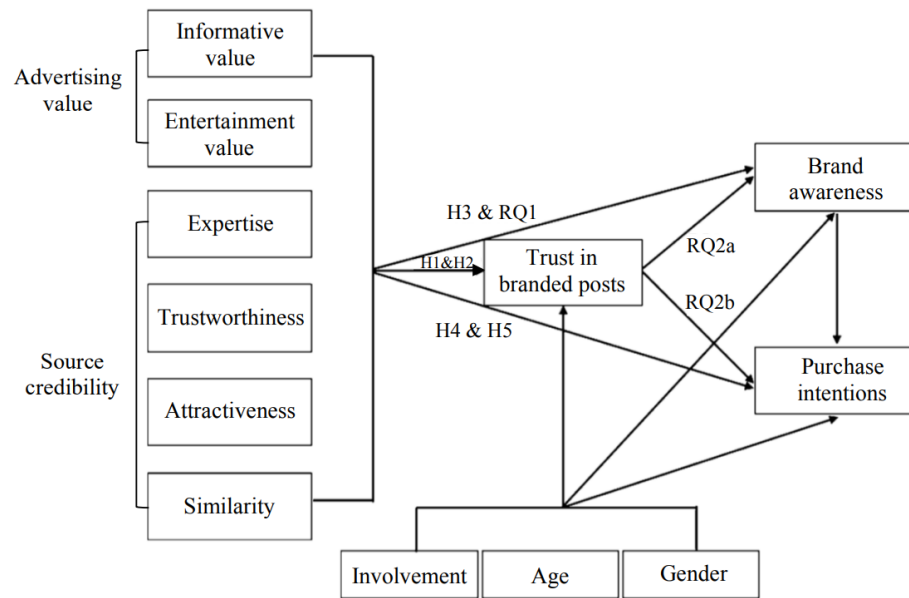


Figure 2

In their study, various hypotheses and research questions were used to test each variable. RQ were designed to test the two dimensions of advertising value and four factors of source credibility in relation to the three dependent variables (trust in influencers' branded posts, brand awareness, and purchase intention). The results indicated that, among the four source credibility criteria, attractiveness and expertise had the most impact. There was no correlation between similarity and brand awareness, and trustworthiness had a negative effect. Moreover, the researchers observed no correlation between entertainment value and the dependent variables. Informative value was the only dimension that had a positive influence with purchase intention and trust in branded posts. As indicated in the table below, none of the

advertising value were found to be associated with the variable brand awareness.

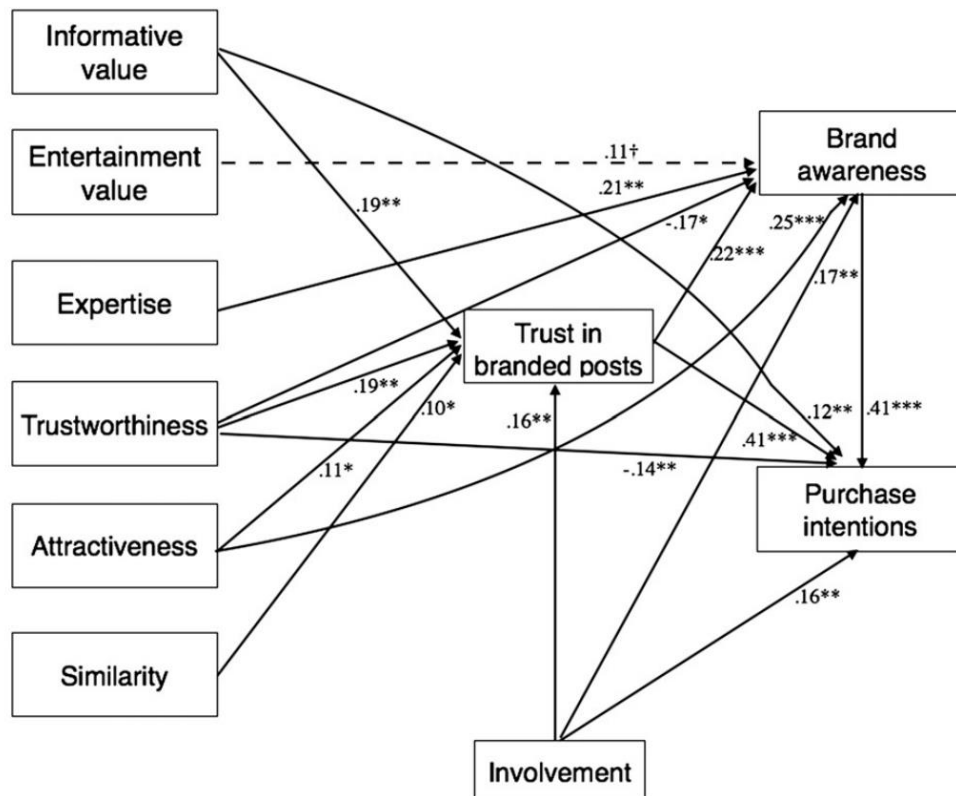


Figure 3

2.5 Factors in the adapted model

The standpoint of this study is Lou and Yuan's (2019) SMIV model. But the model has been adapted to contain advertising value, source credibility, trust in branded posts, brand awareness, and purchase intention with controlled moderators such as age, gender, and in a high-involvement product category to fit the current research context. (Figure 4)

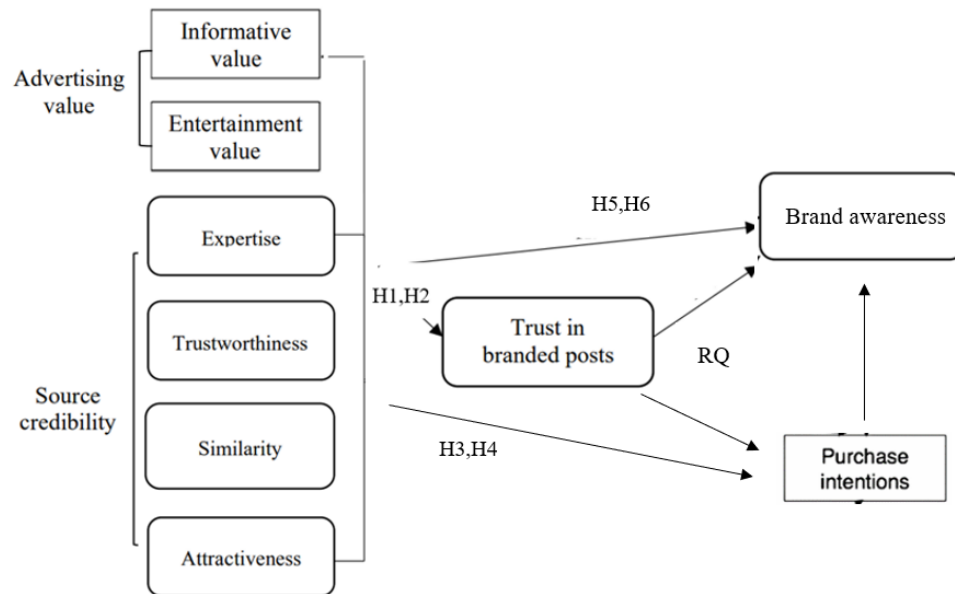


Figure 4

2.5.1 Advertising value

From a marketing standpoint, it is hypothesized that value is created and transferred during marketing operations, and that marketing products can satisfy consumers' demands. Advertising value is a "subjective assessment of advertising's relative worth or utility to consumers" The informative value of advertising refers to its capacity to convey information about other items to increase consumers' buying satisfaction (Ducoffe & Curlo, 2000). Advertising entertainment value is consistent with the assumptions of uses and gratifications research, which classifies advertising as media content and refers to advertising's potential to entertain customers (Van-Tien Dao et al., 2014) investigated the effect of social media advertising value on online purchase intentions. They established that the informativeness, amusement, and believability of advertising impacted customers' views of advertising value, hence influencing their purchase intentions. In their SMIV model study, Lou and Yuan

(2019) also examined the effect of advertising value (informative value and entertainment value). However, their findings revealed no correlation between entertainment value and brand awareness, trust in branded posts, or purchase intention. It was only showed that the information value influences consumers' purchase intentions and trust in branded posts. In light of this, this research will explore the effect of perceived informative value and entertainment value that generated by human-like virtual influencers.

2.5.2 Source credibility

The concept of source credibility has been studied for decades and is now an integral component of the literature on influencer marketing (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The credibility of a communicator or message source is a crucial component of its persuasiveness. They hypothesized that message recipients are more likely to be convinced when the source of the communication is perceived as reputable. Wheeler (2009) conducted a study in which he compared the impact of source credibility on high- and low-involvement products, his idea was examined to determine whether the source's credibility was higher under low involvement than under high involvement, but results could not be proven. Recent research examining the correlation between source credibility and involvement level in a product remains limited. Instead, the focus of the literature has been on examining source credibility in connection to brand trust and purchase intention. Lafferty et al., (2002) studies indicating that the credibility of an endorser appeared to indirectly influence consumers' sentiments toward the brand and their purchase intentions. This theory was disproved by Lim et al., (2017), who evaluated the relationship between source credibility and buying intention only depends on influencer competence and credibility. All of the above-

mentioned research, however, have examined source credibility as a variable in the hypothesis. Munnukka et al., (2016) investigated the credibility of a peer endorser based on the variables of trustworthiness, expertise, similarity, and attractiveness, as well as the advertising efficacy. Lou and Yuan (2019) continued to investigate the source credibility on SMIV model. As Lou and Yuan advise, it would be beneficial to examine the field of influencer marketing for high-involvement products and to assess the impact of influencer marketing on various types of influencers.

2.5.3 Trustworthiness

In the context of marketing effectiveness, the role of trustworthiness has had varying effects over the years. In their study, Xiao et al., (2018) discovered that trustworthiness positively affected the perceived credibility of the influencer and was the only component that was fully supported to have a positive association with both the customers' attitude toward the uploaded content and the attitude toward the brand. These findings were consistent with those of Munnukka et al., (2016), which demonstrated a substantial correlation between trustworthiness and consumers' brand attitudes. However, Lou and Yuan (2019) discovered that trustworthiness was the sole variable that negatively affected customers' purchase intentions. A finding that was not anticipated, as stated by the researchers. Lou and Yuan (2019) pointed that additional research is required to determine how this outcome may change in new area. Thus, trustworthiness will be a significant variable in this study.

2.5.4 Expertise

Consumers will assign a high level of credibility to a source based on its capacity to demonstrate expertise in a certain field. Some scholars use the phrase "authority" to

characterize competence (McCroskey, 1966), whereas others use the term "qualification" (Berlo et al., 1969). This part of competence, according to these researchers, must represent a specific level of professionalism and "the extent to which a communicator is considered as a source of valid statements." In addition to trustworthiness, expertise has been a crucial component of source credibility. Lou and Yuan (2019) discovered that the expertise of an influencer favorably impacted brand recognition and had an indirect effect on purchasing intention. Expertise may be an important factor to think about for high-involvement products because, as the name suggests, these products require more participation from the consumer, which may increase the demand for expertise.

2.5.5 Similarity

The term similarity has been defined as "perceived similarity of the source to the recipient" (Munnukka et al., 2016). The researchers evaluated the effect of similarity on consumers' views of advertisements and explored a positive association between these two factors. In conjunction with credibility, similarity was the most influential of all the examined factors. However, Xiao et al. (2018) studied similarity, as it indicates the similarity between the influencer and the consumer and found that similarity (homophily) was not as relevant as trustworthiness when consumers judged the credibility of online advertisements, although they noted that the results could be different if other items were tested. In contrast, Lou and Yuan (2019) identified that similarity had an indirect effect on purchase intention since it positively influenced both brand awareness and trust in influencer-generated branded posts. Although the results of previous research are not entirely consistent, it is widely believed that the more the similarity between the audience and the endorser, the better the credibility of

the endorser and the larger the effectiveness of the advertisement (Munnuka et al., 2016). In the study of Xiao et al (2018), they argued for varied outcomes on similarity based on the tested product; hence, similarity will be a significant element in this study.

2.5.6 Attractiveness

The source attractiveness of an influencer is based on the notion that the effect of an influencer's message is proportional to the degree to which others want to be like the influencer or see themselves in the influencer (Cohen & Golden, 1972).

Attractiveness represents charisma towards their audience, such as the capacity to captivate them. As Joseph (1987) wrote, sources that are visually appealing are more likely to capture attention than those that are not. Ohanian (1990) noted this in his conclusion, which served as the basis for the hint that beauty should be included as one of the characteristics comprising the phenomena of source credibility. However, a few studies demonstrate that attractiveness may have little or no effect on the message's credibility or buying behavior. Even though Lou and Yuan (2019) detected a positive relationship between attractiveness and influencer marketing, their study was done on influencer marketing in general, not a specific industry or product category. Therefore, test the effect of this construct is required.

2.5.7 Perceived trust

Regarding marketing and trade, Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman (1993) defined trust as "the desire to rely on a confidant trading partner." Trust is crucial for both high- and low-involvement items, and research indicates that if consumers sense a higher level of trust, they are more inclined to purchase (Corbitt et al., 2003). In

their research, customers' trust in online product evaluations and proposed that message argument quality. In terms of influencer marketing, and based on these findings, the researcher hypothesize that

H1: Human-like virtual influencers' advertising value (a) informative and (b)entertainment will positively influence consumers' perceived trust in branded posts.

Humans use either systematic processing or heuristic processing to process information. A source's credibility can influence persuasion either by serving as a peripheral cue when the chance of elaboration is low or by biasing argument processing when the likelihood of elaboration is high. As introduced above, extensive research has already proven the influence of source credibility on persuasion. However, this study aims to examine these empirical links in a digital setting. Hypothesis was:

H2: Human-like virtual influencers' credibility components (a) expertise, (b) trustworthiness, (c) attractiveness, and (d) similarity will positively influence consumers' trust in branded posts.

2.5.8 Brand awareness

Brand awareness indicates whether people are familiar with a typical brand and can create brand recall or recognize it (Keller, 2008). When making purchase decisions, customers are more likely to include brands in their consideration set if they are familiar with those brands (MacDonald and Sharp, 2000). Brand recognition plays a significant role in customers' buying decisions (Barreda et al., 2015) and can serve as a heuristic cue or decision-making shortcut (Hoyer and Brown, 1990). Huang

and Sarigoll (2012) found a positive correlation between brand awareness and brand market performance for consumer-packaged goods with minimal levels of involvement. SNSs have a large number of users, which has aroused the interest of many brands seeking to boost brand awareness among their target consumers by utilizing SNSs (Langaro et al., 2018). This is consistent with the findings of (Dehghani et al., 2016), who evaluated the effects of YouTube advertising value on young customers. But the results from (Lou and Yuan, 2019) indicated no relationship between the dimension advertising value and brand awareness. Therefore, it is important to examine these two constructs of advertising value of human-like virtual influencer on brand awareness:

H3: Human-like virtual influencers' advertising value (a) informative and (b) entertainment will positively influence consumers' awareness of advertised brand.

Regarding the significance of source credibility on consumers, past research indicates that source credibility impacts the effect of advertising on consumers, as assessed by their views of commercials and companies. Trustworthiness, expertise, resemblance, and attractiveness, the four elements of source credibility examined by Lou and Yuan (2019), had a significant impact on consumers' brand awareness. Therefore, we predict that virtual influencer credibility would affect consumers' brand awareness:

H4: Human-like virtual influencers' credibility, including (a) expertise, (b) trustworthiness, (c) attractiveness, and (d) similarity will positively influence consumers' awareness of advertised brand.

2.5.9 Purchase intentions

Purchase intentions are described by Spears and Singh (2004) as "an individual's deliberate plan to purchase a brand." (De Magistris & Gracia, 2008) believed that purchase intentions preceded actual purchasing behavior because purchase intentions reflect the probability or likelihood that consumers will be inclined to acquire a particular product. Advertisers and scholars commonly employ purchase intentions to gauge consumers' product impressions. In particular, Dao and colleagues (2014) discovered that perceived advertising value positively influenced online purchase intentions among Vietnamese social media users. In this study, Lou and Yuan (2019) also examined the effect of advertising value on purchase intention. However, their findings revealed no correlation between entertainment value and brand awareness, trustworthiness in branded posts, and purchase intentions. Therefore, we anticipate that these two advertising value factors from virtual influencers would showed different results on consumers' purchase intentions.

H5: Human-like virtual Influencers' advertising value (a)informative and (b)entertainment will positively influence consumers' purchase intentions.

In the meantime, prior research has showed that endorser features (such as expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness) positively influence consumers' purchase intentions. Therefore, I propose that the credibility of virtual influencers will impact consumers' purchasing inclinations

H6: Human-like virtual Influencer credibility, including (a) perceived expertise, (b) trustworthiness, (c) attractiveness, and (d) similarity, will positively influence consumers' purchase intentions.

In addition, prior research has suggested that confidence in advertising, which consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components (Lewis and Weigert, 1985), might result in "willingness to act on ad-communicated information." Morgan and Hunt (1994) postulated that a trading partner's trust involves behavioral intents to rely on that partner. The SMIV model provided by Lou and Yuan (2019) expands the advertising value framework by including the roles of source credibility and consumer trust; all of these characteristics are essential to the success of influencer marketing. However, in these ever-changing practices of innovative marketing, we intend to examine whether virtual influencer-generated posts could directly affect consumers' trust and their purchase intention. Therefore, the following research question is raised:

RQ1: What are consumers' perceived trust, brand awareness and their purchase intention via human-like virtual influencers.

RQ2: What is the influence of human-like virtual influencers towards (a) consumers' perceived trust, (b) brand awareness and (c) intention to purchase. If yes, how?

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2.5.10 Moderators

Lou and Yuan (2019) used three moderators in their study. The choice of adding the moderators "involvement, age, and gender" was based on previous literature examining the role of involvement in decision making and advertising effectiveness in social media users who follow influencers' posts or updates." In this adapted model, age, involvement, and gender will be removed. As the purpose of this study is to look

at influencer marketing from a new angle, using virtual influencers as a source, and to see how it affects branded beauty products among Gen Z female consumers.



CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The data samples are collected using an online quantitative survey. This chapter covers topics such as the population, the sampling size and procedure, the research instrument, the validity and reliability, the measurement variable, data collecting, and data analysis.

3.1 Population

Respondents were Chinese female Gen Z social media users. According to Statista, there are 445.4 million female Gen Z social media users in China. The reason why they were chosen as the target demographic in this study is that they are the major audience of virtual influencers and are active on social media.

3.2 Sampling size and method

This study applied purposive sampling because it is economical, practical, and rapid. The technique that is most frequently employed when a researcher wants to examine a phenomenon or trend in relation to what is deemed usual or average for a population. The sample consisted of Chinese female Gen Z social media users, within the age gap of 18-25 years. Screening questions were used in order to ensure that respondents had interacted with social media influencers before. Since this study applied PLS-SEM estimates model, according to (Hair et al., 2017), the rule of thumb “10-times rule” is recommended and it indicates that sample size should be equal to 10 times the formative indicators used to measure constructs. Because this study consists of 26 questions, the sample size will be in the range of 260 to 300.

3.3 Research Instrument

This study used an online questionnaire in Chinese. Data will be collected using a structured questionnaire and distributed on online platforms Weibo through the WJX online survey during October 2022. This will allow respondents to take the survey on their preferred device, setting, and time. The survey will take around 15 minutes to complete.

The question is segmented into 7 sections.

1. Screening question: Three questions that examine respondents' qualifications
2. Respondent's Profile: Two questions describing basic information of respondents' preference on social media, and interaction towards Ling and Ayayi's content.
3. Virtual influencers' advertising value: 2 semantic questions
4. Source credibility variables (Trustworthiness, similarity, expertise, attractiveness):
12 Likert scale questions
5. Trust in branded post variable: 1 semantic scale question
6. Brand awareness variable: 2 Likert scale questions
7. Purchase intention variable: 2 Likert scale questions

3.3.1 Validity

The study proved the validity of the research instrument by guaranteeing the correctness of online questions on influencer marketing and purchase intent based on the research instrument. The study instruments addressed all required evaluation areas to achieve the research purpose. Accordingly, the questions were properly categorized based on the SMIV model developed by Lou and Yuan (2019).

Reliability

To guarantee that the results of the survey were internal consistent, a pilot test

$$\alpha = \frac{N \cdot \bar{c}}{\bar{v} + (N - 1) \cdot \bar{c}}$$

with 30 respondents was conducted to assess the questionnaire's effectiveness and adherence to the research objective. Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs must exceed 0.70, as determined by reliability studies. This indicates that the study's measuring instruments are accurate.

N = the number of items.

\bar{c} = average covariance between item-pairs.

\bar{v} = average variance

Table 1 Cronbach's Alpha of Measurement Scales

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Advertising value	4	
Informativeness value	2	0.837
Entertainment value	2	0.786
Source credibility	8	
Trustworthiness	2	0.813
Expertise	2	0.857
Similarity	2	0.734
Attractiveness	2	0.831
Trust in branded post	4	0.896
Brand awareness	2	0.930
Purchase intention	2	0.922

3.4 Variable Measurement

The questionnaire contains screening questions, respondent profiles, and two independent variables. These characteristics consist of advertisement value (both informative and amusement value) and source credibility (trustworthiness, expertise, similarity, attractiveness). In addition, there are three dependent variables: trust in branded posts, brand awareness, and purchase intent. The objective is to analyze and revisit each component in general, as well as to examine the interaction between these factors in terms of the influence of a virtual human-like influencer.

The first three screening questions were used to select the unqualified samples by asking the age, gender, and whether they had ever been exposed to a virtual influencer or not. The questions were multiple choice. Upon receiving a negative response, the

survey will finish immediately. After the screening questions, respondents' profiles will be scored differently according on their social media usage and amount of attention to virtual influencers and Ling. The measurement scales used to measure five variables are below: advertising value, source credibility, trust in branded post, brand awareness, and purchase intention. First, Advertising value has 2 dimensions which are informative value and entertainment value. The advertising value measurement is anchored by Voss (2003) using five 7-point bipolar semantic differential scales.

Informativeness value;

Ineffective -Effective

Not functional –Functional

Entertainment value;

Not fun–Fun

Dull–Exciting

Second, this study measured virtual influencer's credibility with items that include attractiveness, similarity, trustworthiness, and expertise based on Munnukka (2016), is measured using a three-statement, five-point Likert Scale with a range from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The higher score will indicate a positive correlation towards the research hypothesis.

1= Strongly disagree

2= Disagree

3= Neither agree nor disagree

4= Agree

5= Strongly agree

The following dependent variables are trust in branded post, brand awareness, and purchase intention. We measured the consumers' trust in branded posts using twelve 7-point semantic differential scales, and the items include:

Trust in branded posts

Unethical-----Ethical

Untrustworthy-----Trustworthy

Not convincing-----Convincing

Unreasonable-----Reasonable

The next variable is brand awareness. Brand awareness will be measured in the participants' answer sheet with five statements from Yoo et al., (2000). And the last variable is purchase intention. In this study, participants' purchase intentions is measured by using the three statements extracted from Yuan & Jang (2008). A five-point Likert scale is used for both two variables, with a range from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

1= Strongly disagree

2= Disagree

3= Neither agree nor disagree

4= Agree

5= Strongly agree

3.5 Data collection

The questionnaire is distributed on social media sites in China via the WJX online survey. Through the WJX online survey platform, all participants who responded to the four screening questions were compensated 0.5 RMB, and qualifying individuals who completed the whole survey received an extra 1 RMB. First, the interested participants answered three screening questions to determine their gender, age, and influencer status. Then, the researcher used Ling and Ayayi as the virtual influencers referent by offering an image of their beauty product branded posts. Along with the image, demographic questions are asked regarding the individual's social media experiences and habits, as well as their opinions on the social media influencers they follow. The survey required around 15 minutes to complete. (Image and questionnaire are provided in the appendix).

3.6 Data Analysis and presentation

PLS-SEM is favored for theory creation and prediction research because it maximizes the variance explained by endogenous factors while estimating model parameters. (Hair et al., 2017). Since the purpose of this study is to explore the effects of human-like virtual influencer marketing on consumer behaviors (trust in brand post, brand awareness, and purchase intent), a PLS path modeling approach is more appropriate for data analysis in this study. The researcher applied PLS-SEM via Smart PLS to analyze the indicator from each variable and correlations in between the two independent variables (advertising value and source credibility) and the three dependent variables (trust in branded post, brand awareness, and purchase intention). Since PLS-SEM does not assume that the data is normally distributed, it relies on a nonparametric bootstrap procedure (Davison & Hinkley, 1997) to test the significance

of estimated path coefficients in PLS-SEM. To align with this, the researcher performed a bootstrapping study by using 5,000 subsamples at a 95% significance level to obtain the standard error and p value for each path coefficient.



CHAPTER 4

Research Findings

This chapter looks at the findings of the research. The latent variables in the current model which are advertising value, source credibility of the human-like virtual influencers, the respondents' trust in brand post, brand awareness and purchase intention on beauty products are all measured. SmartPLS 4 was utilized for validation of measurements and structural modeling.

Since the purpose of this study is to examine specific group, the demographics moderators such as age, gender, and involvement are controlled. After the data collection, this study received 290 respondents' answer and 89.6% of them, 260 people, were qualified for this study.

4.1 Respondent's profile

Frequencies watch human-like virtual influencers online posts	n	Percentage (%)
Daily	45	17.31
Weekly	140	53.85
Monthly	64	24.62
Rarely	11	4.23
Total	260	100

Table 2 Frequencies watch human-like virtual influencers online posts

This table depicts the frequency of time spent watching human-like virtual influencer. According to the population distribution from highest to lowest, the

majority of respondents (140, or 53.85%) report daily viewing. The second, which comprises 64 (24.62%) of responders, is weekly. The third was viewed by 45 (17.31%) respondents, ranking it third. The last that is hardly viewed, which accounts for 11 (4.23%) of responses.

Years spent following human-like virtual influencers' account.	n	Percentage (%)
Less than half year	10	3.85
1 year	72	27.69
1 and half year	113	43.46
2 years	65	25
Total	260	100

Table 3 Years spent following human-like virtual influencers' account

This table illustrates the years that respondents have been following the human-like virtual influencers' account. Based on figures from top to bottom it shows the majority have been following virtual influencers' account are in between 1 year to 1 and half year. Second, 25% of followers spent 2 years on following. Only 10 respondents accounts for the smallest part of population just started to follow less than half year.

4.2 Advertising value of the human-like virtual influencer

This part asked respondents' assessment to human-like virtual influencers' advertising value that consists informative value and entertainment value. For the factors informative value and entertainment value, a bi-polar semantic differential scale was used, where the score 7 shows a strong agreement with the positive item and the score 1 shows a strong agreement with the negative item.

Advertising value questions	Mean	SD
Informative Value		
10. Informative value Effectiveness	3.8	1.30
11. Informative value Functional	3.9	1.35
Entertainment value		
12. Entertainment value Fun	3.97	1.35
13. Entertainment value Exciting	3.8	1.37

Table 4 Advertising value of human-like virtual influencers

The result shows the advertising value of human-like virtual influencers. On average, the respondents rated at 3.9 out of 7, which means they had a moderate level of agreement on source advertising value. The mean score ranks from top to bottom are questions 12 (M = 3.97, SD = 1.35), question 11 (M= 3.90, SD = 1.35), question 10 (M= 3.80, SD = 1.37) and question 13 (M= 3.80, SD = 1.30).

4.3 Source credibility of the human-like virtual influencer

This part asked respondents to evaluate human-like virtual influencer credibility that consist of trustworthiness, expertise, similarity, and attractiveness. s. A five-point Likert Scale is used to measure the level of agreement that the respondents reflect to statements.

Source credibility questions	Mean	SD
Trustworthiness		
14. Trustworthiness 1	3.48	1.01
15. Trustworthiness 2	3.60	0.98
Expertise		
16. Expertise 1	3.52	1.00
17. Expertise 2	3.57	1.01
Similarity		
18. Similarity 1	3.52	1.05
19. Similarity 2	3.50	1.03
Attractiveness		
20. Attractiveness 1	3.54	1.00
21. Attractiveness 2	3.57	1.04

Table 5 Human-like virtual influencers' source credibility

Human-like virtual influencers' source credibility received an overall mean score of 3.53 from the respondents. The means score ranks from high to low are question 15 (M = 3.60, SD = 0.98) , question 17 (M= 3.57 , SD = 1.01) , question 21 (M= 3.57 , SD = 1.04) , question 20 (M= 3.54 , SD = 1.00) ,question 18 (M= 3.52 , SD = 1.05) ,question 16 (M= 3.52 , SD = 1.00), question 16 (M= 3.50 , SD = 1.03), and question 14 (M= 3.48 , SD = 1.01)The suggest that respondents moderating agreed with human-like influencers' credibility (M= 3.53, SD = 1.01)

4.4 Trust in branded post

This part asked respondents' trust to human-like virtual influencers' generated brand post.

A bi-polar semantic differential scale was employed, with a score of 7 indicating strong agreement with the positive item and a score of 1 indicating strong agreement with the negative item.

Trust in branded post	Mean	SD
22. Ethical	3.87	1.44
23. Trustworthy	3.84	1.40
24. Convincing	3.91	1.34
25. Reasonable	3.83	1.43
Total	3.86	1.40

Table 6 Trust in branded post

The average rating of respondents for their trust in branded post was 3.86, indicating that they perceived virtual influencer branded post moderately. The items that got the highest score was convincing, with a score of 3.91, which followed by ethical and trustworthy with a score of 3.87 and 3.84. The item with the least score was reasonable, with a score of 3.83.

4.5 Brand awareness

This part asked respondents' brand awareness towards advertised brand through human-like virtual influencer. A bi-polar semantic differential scale was used, where the score 7 shows a strong agreement with the positive item and the score 1 shows a strong agreement with the negative item.

Brand awareness questions	Mean	SD
26. Brand awareness 1	4.37	0.94
27. Brand awareness 2	4.14	0.92
Total	4.25	0.93

Table 7 Brand awareness

The results in Table 7 depicted that the respondents had a moderate level of agreement to the brand awareness, as the mean score given for the participants' brand awareness was 4.25. The statement with the higher score was 'I can recognize human-like virtual influencers among branded posts.' with the score 4.37. The other statement scored 4.14 was 'Some features of luxury beauty products come to my mind quickly.'

4.6 Purchase intention

Purchase intention questions	Mean	SD
26. Purchase intention 1	3.61	1.01
27. Purchase intention 2	3.63	0.88
Total	3.85	1.15

Table 8 Purchase intention

The results in Table 8 depicted that the respondents had a moderate level of agreement to the purchase intention, as the mean score given for the participants' purchase intention was 3.85. The statement with the higher score was 'I desire to buy the product that the human-like virtual influencers have endorsed.' with the score 3.63. The other statement scored 3.84 was 'I plan to buy the product that the human-like virtual influencers have promoted.'

4.7. Assessment of the measurement model

Constructs and items	Standardized Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Attractiveness 1	0.902	0.761	0.893	0.807
Attractiveness 2	0.895			
Brand Awareness 1	0.919	0.815	0.915	0.844
Brand Awareness 2	0.918			
Entertainment value 1	0.918	0.809	0.913	0.840
Entertainment value 2	0.915			
Expertise 1	0.893	0.745	0.887	0.797
Expertise 2	0.892			
Informative value 1	0.904	0.785	0.903	0.823
Informative value 2	0.911			
Purchase Intention 1	0.885	0.754	0.890	0.802
Purchase Intention 2	0.906			
Similarity 1	0.903	0.787	0.904	0.825
Similarity 2	0.913			
Trust in branded post 1	0.861	0.884	0.920	0.742
Trust in branded post 2	0.838			
Trust in branded post 3	0.874			
Trust in branded post 4	0.872			
Trustworthiness 1	0.899	0.780	0.901	0.819
Trustworthiness 2	0.912			

Note: CR=Composite reliability, AVE=Average variance extracted

Table 9 Assessment of the measurement model

4.8. Correlations among the latent constructs

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Attractiveness	0.898								
Brand Awareness	0.794	0.919							
Entertainment value	0.783	0.779	0.916						
Expertise	0.763	0.761	0.777	0.893					
Informative value	0.796	0.771	0.792	0.767	0.907				
Purchase Intention	0.777	0.755	0.769	0.753	0.809	0.896			
Similarity	0.763	0.755	0.771	0.746	0.744	0.747	0.908		
Trust in branded post	0.850	0.803	0.823	0.783	0.828	0.815	0.793	0.861	
Trustworthiness	0.788	0.789	0.759	0.742	0.773	0.778	0.777	0.809	0.905

Note: The square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct is shown by diagonal figures.

Table 10 Correlations among the latent constructs

Table 10 showed all the items formulated a reflective measurement model. The endogenous latent variable in this model was trust in branded trust, brand awareness, and purchase intention. While the exogenous latent variables were advertising value and source credibility. Specifically, the latent variable for advertising value contained two items (informative value and entertainment value) while source credibility consisted of four items (trustworthiness, expertise, similarity, and attractiveness). Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) values for all latent constructs were more than 0.70, demonstrating a trustworthy measuring instrument and ensuring the validity of the structural model for this study. Likewise, table 11 shows correlations and convergent validity among the latent variables. According to (Fornell, 1981), Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value is suggested to be more than 0.50. As result demonstrated the square root of each construct's AVE was larger

than its correlation to other latent variables. Therefore, all the construct measurements were considered to have adequate convergent and discriminant validities. In addition, all of the latent constructs' AVE values were above 0.50, indicating that at least 50% of the variation of its items are explained by the constructs and the high correlations among them.

4.9 Latent variables prediction summary

	Q ² predict	R-square
Brand Awareness	0.721	0.645
Purchase Intention	0.719	0.693
Trust in branded posts	0.82	0.828

Table 11 Latent variables prediction summary

Table 11 shows Q² and R² values and it is known “goodness of fit” for the former and “goodness of prediction” to the latter. They are metrics used to explain and predict variation for PLS-SEM. The range of R² is in between 0 and 1, the higher level, the higher predictive accuracy. According to Henseler et al. (2009), an R² value above 0.67 indicates good predictive accuracy, 0.33 to 0.67 indicates a moderate effect, 0.19 to 0.33 indicates a low effect, and below 0.19 is unsatisfactory. The result showed that the R² values (0.645, 0.693, and 0.828) were able to demonstrate moderate-to-high predictive accuracy. Q² values greater than zero demonstrate the path model's predictive validity for a certain dependent construct (Hair et al. 2017). In this investigation, Q² values were above 0, indicating strong inner model predictability, best at predicting trust in branded posts (0.82).

4.10 Structural path estimates

	Path Estimate	Sample mean (M)	Standard Error	T statistics	P values
Attractiveness -> Brand Awareness	0.175	0.175	0.066	2.668	0.008
Attractiveness -> Purchase Intention	0.065	0.065	0.069	0.948	0.343
Trust in branded post -> Brand Awareness	0.292	0.292	0.050	5.800	0.000
Trust in branded post -> Purchase Intention	0.039	0.039	0.065	0.597	0.551
Entertainment value -> Brand Awareness	0.139	0.140	0.060	2.329	0.020
Entertainment value -> Purchase Intention	0.073	0.073	0.063	1.153	0.249
Trust in branded post -> Expertise -> Brand Awareness	0.181	0.180	0.054	3.358	0.001
Expertise -> Purchase Intention	0.135	0.135	0.062	2.157	0.031
Expertise -> Trust in branded post	0.096	0.097	0.055	1.767	0.077
Informative value -> Brand Awareness	0.078	0.079	0.046	1.701	0.089
Informative value -> Purchase Intention	0.093	0.094	0.065	1.424	0.154
Informative value -> Trust in branded post	0.261	0.261	0.058	4.464	0.000
Similarity -> Brand Awareness	0.196	0.194	0.051	3.838	0.000
Similarity -> Purchase Intention	0.090	0.090	0.059	1.526	0.127
Similarity -> Trust in branded post	0.071	0.072	0.059	1.211	0.226
Trust in branded post -> Brand Awareness	0.115	0.116	0.048	2.406	0.016
Trust in branded post -> Purchase Intention	0.116	0.116	0.074	1.572	0.116
Trustworthiness -> Brand Awareness	0.198	0.198	0.078	2.534	0.011
Trustworthiness -> Purchase Intention	0.210	0.208	0.063	3.309	0.001
Trustworthiness -> Trust in branded post	0.152	0.152	0.067	2.279	0.023
Trust in branded post -> Trustworthiness -> Purchase Intention	0.144	0.145	0.045	3.216	0.001

Table 12 Structural path estimates

The researcher ran a PLS-SEM algorithm to estimate the model's path coefficients. Followed by a bootstrapping analysis, specifying 5,000 sub samples and a 95% significance level, to obtain each path coefficient's standard error and p value

(Table 12). According to hypotheses 1a, 1b, 2b, 2c, and 2d, the informative and entertainment value of influencer-generated posts, as well as the credibility components trustworthiness and attractiveness of influencers, positively influence the respondents' trust in branded posts. Our finding stated that influencer posts' informative ($\beta= 0.196$, $SE= 0.051$, $t = 3.821$, $p < .001$) and entertainment value ($\beta= 0.181$, $SE= 0.055$, $t = 3.299$, $p < .001$), influencers' trustworthiness ($\beta= 0.142$, $SE= 0.046$, $t = 3.102$, $p < .01$), attractiveness ($\beta= 0.292$, $SE= 0.051$, $t = 5.732$, $p < .001$), and similarity ($\beta= 0.115$, $SE= 0.048$, $t = 2.401$, $p < .05$) all positively affected followers' trust in influencers' branded content. With the exception of 2a, all hypotheses regarding trust in post were supported.

In terms of brand awareness, the results showed that informative value ($= -0.044$, n.s.) had no effect, while entertainment value ($= 0.138$, $SE= 0.060$, $t = 2.320$, $p=.05$) did. Hypothesis 3a was rejected. Research question 1 asked about human-like virtual influencer credibility's effect on brand awareness. Our results showed that, expertise ($\beta= 0.135$, $SE= 0.063$, $t = 2.107$, $p < .05$) and attractiveness ($\beta= 0.175$, $SE= 0.066$, $t = 2.654$, $p < .01$) affected brand awareness while the rest of components has no significant effects on brand awareness. Hypotheses 4b and 4d were not supported.

Influencer advertising value and credibility, according to hypotheses 5a and 6b, positively increase purchase intentions. In support of hypothesis, data showed that advertising informative value ($\beta= 0.261$, $SE=0.058$, $t =4.083$, $p=.001$) and trustworthy ($\beta= 0.152$, $SE=0.068$, $t = 2.364$, $p=.05$). The hypotheses 5b, 6a, 6b, 6c, and 6d were all rejected.

Finally, last question asked whether followers' trust in branded posts affects brand awareness and purchase intentions. Our results partially supported with the fact

that trust in branded posts significantly influenced purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.198$, $SE = 0.078$, $t = 2.609$, $p < .01$) but had no effect on brand awareness ($\beta = 0.116$, n.s.)

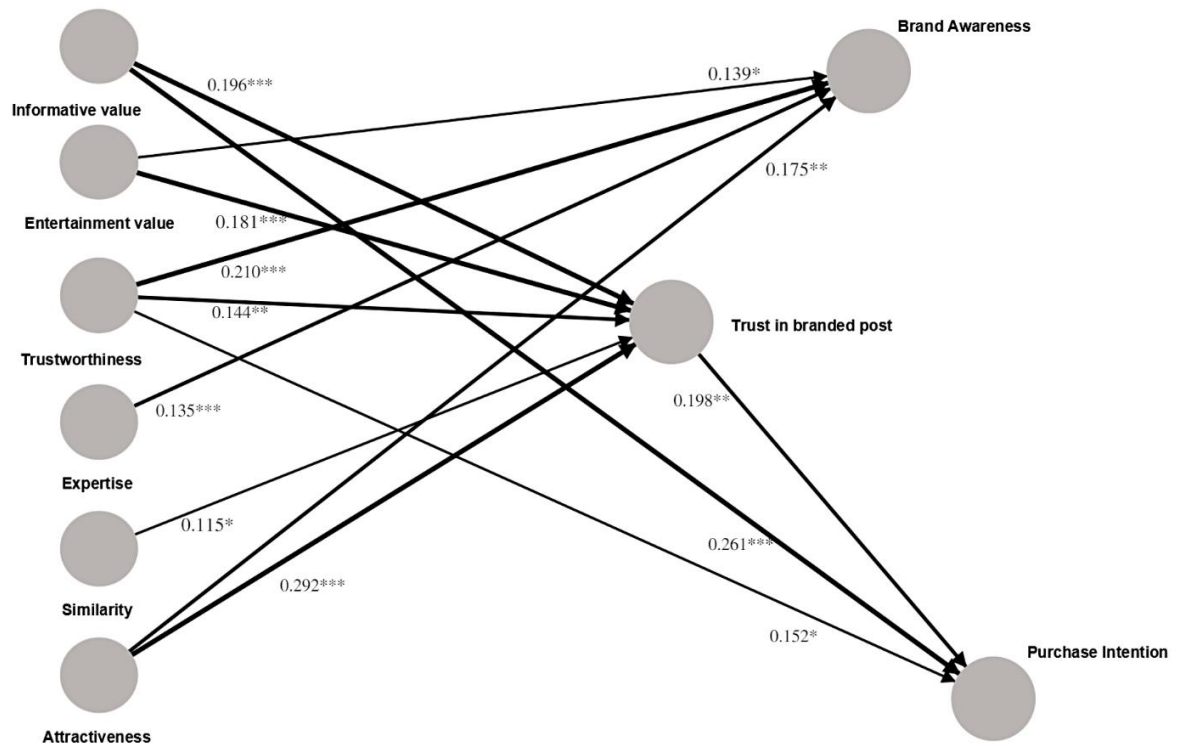


Figure 5

Partial least squares (PLS) path model. Only shows the significant paths; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

CHAPTER 5

Summary and Discussion

This chapter offers a summary, a discussion of the survey results, implications and limitations of the study, and conclusions.

5.1 Summary

This section summarizes the results of data collecting and the conclusion. The data collecting began in mid-October and lasted for one month. There was a total of 290 respondents who answered the online questionnaire, since the researcher control the moderators such as age (Gen Z) and gender (Female), 260 respondents were qualified for the study. And most of the respondents were completed through WeChat platform.

Respondent's profile data illustrated frequencies of watching human-like influencer branded post and the time span of following virtual influencers' accounts on social media. Most of the samples (53.88%) generally watching virtual influencers' post on weekly basis. At the same time, the majority (68.46%) have been following human-like influencers' social media account at least one and half year.

To be able to answer the research question and understand how beauty businesses might collaborate with human-like virtual influencers in the most effective way possible, the SMIV model was modified to assess the impacts. This allowed for the research question to be answered. The findings of this study suggest that human-like influencer-generated posts' informative and entertainment value and some components, such as trustworthiness, similarity, and attractiveness, can positively affect followers' trust in influencer-generated branded posts, which in turn affects

brand awareness or purchase intentions. PLS-SEM performed both measurement validation and structural modeling. The results were able to predict the validity and reliability of model. Even though the SMIV was used in new field, some of the findings were consistent with the previous studies.

5.2 Discussion

First important finding relates to the role of advertising value in human-like virtual influencers' towards to consumer trust in branded posts. This adds to the literature on advertising value models in relation to social media marketing, which in line with Dao et al. (2014), who investigated the effect of social media advertising value on online purchase intentions. They found that the informativeness, entertainment, and believability of advertising impacted customers' views of advertising value, hence influencing their purchase intentions. But in Lou and Yuan's (2019) study only influencers' informative posts contributed to their followers' trust in branded posts and subsequently affected purchase intentions, the effect of entertainment value did not occur. Lou and Yuan (2019) explained social media users view influencers as quality-information providers and cultivate their trust or purchase considerations based on the influencer content's informative value rather than entertainment function. Based on the results of this study, researcher would like to argue that human-like virtual influencers' informative and entertainment value are both positively affects their followers' trust in influencer-branded posts. This may imply that human-like virtual influencers not only constantly disseminate informative updates to attract attention from followers, but are also frequently utilized in fields like music, sports, arts. As they can easily been present on several metaverse or virtual platforms or posting new content on their social channels to entertain with consumers.

In addition, due to their diverse character traits, which make them appear to be very entertaining. Thus, it is not surprising to see that virtual influencers' entertainment value can positively influence their audiences' trust in post.

A second important finding of this research relates to the effects of human-like virtual influencers' credibility on followers' trust in branded post, brand awareness, and purchase intention, which are partially in line with the findings of previous research (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Our findings showed that influencers' trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity positively influenced their followers' trust in branded posts. Since influencers usually high in credible and attractiveness, it is not surprising to see that perceived trustworthiness and attractiveness can affect their followers' trust in their branded content. Moreover, followers tend to follow influencers with whom they perceived similar. But influencer expertise did not have effects on followers' trust in branded post and it consistent with the claims of Lou and Yuan's (2019) study. This may be because human-like virtual influencers are new to the market and these computer-generated avatars do not have a status of expertise in the public perception. Moreover, our findings support the new idea of an association between source credibility and dependent variables. Unlike the Lou and Yuan's (2019) study, where influencer trustworthiness did not affect brand awareness and purchase intentions, author in this study discovered that human-like virtual influencers' trustworthiness positively influenced trust in branded posts, brand awareness, and purchase intentions. This may be explained as follows: Even though influencer-generated content's informative value established trust between source and followers via their posts, followers may hold doubtful opinions concerning influencers' unethical motives or misbehaviors, thus discrediting influencers when

forming consumption related actions. While, in contrast to a real human influencer, a virtual influencer is less risky in nature when it comes to branding because they are scandal free. As introduced in literature, De Veirman et al., (2017) examined the necessity of establishing a strong relationship with the correct influencer from both the companies' and the influencers' perspectives. Because the target audience was Generation Z, who are digital natives who are always looking for new experiences, human-like virtual influencers would likely be the right choice in the digital era to gain the trust of this group of people.

Last important finding of this study comes from the effects of trust in branded posts on brand awareness and purchase intention. The results in this study partially support the Lou and Yuan's (2019) finding that trust in branded posts positively affects brand awareness and purchase intention. As the figure demonstrated trust in branded post had positive effect on purchase intentions which in line with the Lou and Yuan's (2019) study but it did not affect the brand awareness. The difference may be because the beauty brands presented in the questionnaire are well known, and brand awareness is already considered high among the respondents. And it had been proven in the analysis that the high mean score showed strong agreement with the questions. Therefore, human-like virtual influencers' posts have not significantly influenced brand awareness.

5.3 Theoretical and managerial implications

The current study widens the scope of previous research on studying the effectiveness of influencer by adapting the SMIV model to a new field to explore human-like virtual influencers on trust in branded post, brand awareness, and purchase intention. It is an early study of Chinese human-like virtual influencers to

provide a complete theoretical model that has empirical support. It demonstrates the significance of considering the major communication components, such as advertising value and source credibility, when explaining the dynamic persuasion processes of inventive marketing practices. This study bridges the gap between the lack of prior research and the novelty of virtual influencer marketing. In addition, this work serves as a starting point for future empirical research on virtual influencer marketing, particularly in China.

On the other hand, it provides some useful recommendations for marketers and brands that are interested in influencer marketing, particularly in a digital context. This research contributes new insights concerning human-like virtual influencers on Chinese social media and provides brand managers in the beauty industry with tips on collaborate with human-like virtual influencers to create purchase intention. As suggested, beauty brands might place more importance on selecting the type of virtual influencers and considering whose content is well trusted among their followers in terms of advertising value (informative and entertainment) as well as some vital components of source credibility such as trustworthiness, similarity, and attractiveness. Based on the findings of this study, Chinese Gen Z female consumers' perceived trust in branded posts plays a significant role in purchase intentions. Since brands can fully control the virtual endorser, it is important for brands to build trust and manage regular posts to cater to young consumers' tastes. For example, brands should collaborate with the human-like virtual influencer to leverage trustworthiness through the virtual influencer's storytelling to obtain sufficient engagement with Gen Z. Specifically, delivering messages episodically about how well luxury beauty products can be beneficial to consumers.

It also provides insights to virtual influencer developers or agencies about the effect of how human-like virtual influencers can promote luxury beauty products. It is recommended to place value on an avatar's attractiveness and similarity, which are important factors that shape followers' perceptions and reactions. Since the target audiences are young, if a virtual influencer could closely resemble a human persona in terms of both emotional and physical characteristics, when they see human-like virtual influencers' (Ling and Ayayi) branded posts, they will enjoy the advertised contents and reflect themselves as similar ones. Moreover, brands and developers should focus on the best way to craft human-like influencers' content to have more entertainment value to retain consumers.

5.4 Limitations and recommendation

As in many other studies, the presented study has several limitations, which opens the door for further research. First, we believe that the adapted SMIV model used in this study helped us better understand how effective influencer marketing applied to virtual influencers. However, there must be other new constructs typically designed for virtual influencers that were not included in this research. For example, anthropomorphism. Second, to comprehend the phenomenon and the human-like virtual influencers' effects on a particular group, Chinese female Gen Z, the researcher has control over moderators like age, gender, and the types of virtual influencers. It is possible that online social media users of all ages could hold different opinions toward each type of virtual influencer, such as cartoon, animated, and human-like. Future research could investigate or compare the effects of various types of virtual influencers on diverse demographics. Third, the chosen product and category used in the posts were high involvement luxury beauty products. Those who

want to explore the low involvement products in the FMCG category, might have to reexamine the effects. Research in the future may also work on other companies, either ones that are already well-known or ones that are less so, in order to examine how well the SMIV model can be used to marketing conducted via virtual influencers.



APPDENDIX

SURVEY QUESTION

Part 1: Screening question

1.Are you between 18 and 25 years old?

- Yes
- No

2. Gender

- Male
- Female

3.Have you ever exposed to virtual influencer commercial post.

- Yes
- No

Part 2: Respondent's Profile

1.How often do you watch human-like virtual influencers online posts?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Rarely

2.How long have you been following human-like virtual influencers' accounts on social media?

- a) Less than half year
- b) 1 year
- c) 1 and half year
- d) 2 years

Part 3: Virtual influencer-generated content's advertising value (7 points semantic)

“Concerning this virtual influencer whom I am seeing on social media, I personally think their social media posts/updates are _____.

Informativeness value

Ineffective — — — — — Effective

Not functional — — — — — Functional

Entertainment value

Not fun — — — — — Fun

Dull — — — — — Exciting

Part4: Human-like virtual influencer sources credibility

(1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly

agree)

Trustworthiness question

Items	1	2	3	4	5
1.I consider the human-like virtual influencers trustworthy.					

2. I feel the human-like virtual influencers were earnest.					
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Expertise question

Items	1	2	3	4	5
1. I feel this human-like virtual influencers is competent to make endorsement for the product.					
2. I consider this human-like virtual influencers sufficiently experienced to make endorsement about the product.					

Similarity question

Items	1	2	3	4	5
1. I feel this human-like virtual influencers and I are a lot alike.					
2. I can easily identify with these human-like virtual influencers.					

Attractiveness question

Items	1	2	3	4	5
1. I think human-like virtual influencers are good looking					

2. I consider human-like virtual influencers are very stylish.					
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Part 5. Trust in branded post

Unethical — — — — — Ethical

Untrustworthy — — — — — Trustworthy

Not convincing — — — — — Convincing

Unreasonable — — — — — Reasonable

Part 6. Brand awareness

Items	1	2	3	4	5
1. I can recognize beauty brand among human-like virtual influencers' branded posts.					
2. Some features of luxury beauty products come to my mind quickly.					

Part.7 Intention to purchase

Items	1	2	3	4	5
1. I plan to buy the product that the human-like virtual influencers have promoted					
2. I desire to buy the product that the human-like virtual influencers have endorsed					

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