

From Celebrity Endorsement to Influencer Marketing: Rethinking Endorser Typology in the Social Media Era

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Abstract

With the development of social media platforms and AI (artificial intelligence) technology, the forms of brand endorsement are expanding beyond traditional celebrity endorsements to include human and virtual influencers. Existing research has addressed celebrity endorsements, influencer marketing, and virtual influencer marketing separately. However, the conceptual boundaries between these three types of endorsers remain unclear, and there is a particular lack of systematic explanations regarding the mechanisms of authenticity for different endorsers. Drawing on relevant literature, this paper re-examines the types of endorsers in the social media era through a conceptual study. Focusing on four dimensions—sources of influence, audience relationships, foundations of authenticity, and control structures—it constructs an integrated classification framework encompassing traditional celebrities, human influencers, and virtual influencers. The study argues that the persuasive power of different endorsers does not stem from a single mechanism of authenticity; traditional celebrities rely primarily on symbolic authenticity; human influencers on relational authenticity; and virtual influencers may establish constructed authenticity through stable personas, narrative consistency, visual coherence, and alignment with brand values. This paper further argues that the rise of virtual influencers challenges the traditional assumption that authenticity must be grounded in real human identity and life experience. Consequently, this paper provides a foundational theoretical framework for understanding the evolving practices of endorsement marketing in the AI era and lays the groundwork for future empirical research on authenticity, credibility, and consumer responses.

Keywords

celebrity endorsement, influencer marketing, virtual influencers, authenticity, endorser typology

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of social media platforms, influencer marketing has become an important strategy for brand communication. Traditionally, marketing research has examined endorsement mainly through the celebrity endorsement framework [1]. Early studies emphasized the persuasive effects of celebrity endorsers through mechanisms such as source credibility [2,3] and the meaning transfer model [4]. However, the emergence of social media influencers has introduced new forms of brand endorsement that differ from those of traditional celebrities in terms of sources of influence and audience relationships [5,6]. Social media

influencers increasingly collaborate with brands to promote products and services, becoming central actors in digital marketing communication [6]. The global influencer marketing market value was estimated to exceed 32 billion U.S. dollars in 2025 [7], and it has gradually become the core of brand digital marketing. Additionally, technological advancements have given rise to a new form of influencer marketing, namely virtual influencer marketing [8,9].

However, there is a blurred boundary between the definitions of celebrity, influencer, and even virtual influencer in academic studies. While some researchers conceptualize influencers as a distinct category of endorsers, others consider influencer marketing as a digital extension of traditional celebrity endorsement. This divergence reflects a lack of conceptual clarity regarding different types of endorsers and how they should be broadly defined. This ambiguity is not only a matter of definition but also has important theoretical implications. When different types of endorsers are conflated or inconsistently classified, it is more difficult to compare findings across studies and develop coherent theoretical explanations. Building on this conceptual ambiguity, this study seeks to examine whether social media influencers should be understood as a new category of endorsers or as a digital extension of traditional celebrity endorsement. Rather than treating these perspectives as mutually exclusive, the study aims to clarify the conceptual relationship between influencer and celebrity endorsements and identify the key dimensions that differentiate them. To address this issue, this research develops a conceptual typology of brand endorsers in the social media context, incorporating celebrities, influencers, and virtual influencers into a more systematic framework. Furthermore, it proposes that perceived authenticity plays a central role in explaining how different types of endorsers influence consumer responses.

2. Theoretical Background

Traditional studies on brand endorsement have largely been grounded in celebrity endorsement theory, which explains how endorsers influence consumers' attitudes and behaviors [1]. Early research suggests that the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement can be explained through mechanisms such as source credibility and attractiveness, as well as the transfer of symbolic meanings from celebrities to brands. In particular, the meaning transfer model posits that celebrities carry culturally embedded meanings that can be transferred to products and subsequently internalized by consumers through consumption [4]. These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding how endorsers function as persuasive agents in marketing communication.

However, the evolution of social media has transformed the nature of endorsement. Different from traditional celebrities, social media influencers engage in continuous and interactive communication with their audiences [5], shifting the focus from symbolic status to interpersonal dynamics. Under this context, authenticity has become the central construct for understanding the effectiveness of influencers. Generally, authenticity refers to the extent to which an endorser is perceived as genuine, sincere, and consistent in their self-presentation [10,11]. Prior research suggests that perceived authenticity plays a critical role in shaping consumer trust, engagement, and behavioral intentions. Therefore, authenticity provides a useful theoretical lens for examining how different types of endorsers operate in digital environments and for explaining potential differences among celebrities, influencers, and virtual influencers. Based on the above theoretical limitations, this paper combines the differences in endorsers' types and the authenticity mechanism to construct an integrated framework for digital endorsement.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Celebrity and Influencer Endorsement

The boundary between celebrity endorsement and influencer endorsement has become increasingly ambiguous in the literature. A celebrity was treated as an individual famous for accomplishments outside the endorsed product [12]. According to McCracken's explanation of celebrity endorsement, celebrities are figures with public recognition, usually from the movie and television industries, as well as athletes, politicians, businessmen, artists, and military personnel [4]. More concisely, celebrities are successful in their respective professional fields, are widely recognized by the public, have numerous followers, and are used to media attention [13]. The influence that celebrities exert on the public stems from their fame, public recognition, and

the symbolic meaning they represent. In traditional celebrity endorsement studies, three main mechanisms operate: source credibility [2], source attractiveness [14], and meaning transfer [4]. The source credibility model contends that expertness and trustworthiness will influence the effectiveness of celebrities in advertisements [2,3]. Similarly, the source attractiveness model includes familiarity, likeability, and similarity, which typically suggest that influence derives mainly from physical appeal, personality, or social standing [14]. Furthermore, the meaning transfer model posits that the influence stems from the cultural meanings associated with the celebrity (e.g., status, lifestyle, or coolness) that are transferred to an endorsed product [4].

Influencers differ from traditional celebrities in several respects. Rather than deriving their influence primarily from mass-media fame, influencers are generally understood as content-driven social media personalities who build influence through the regular production of valuable content and sustained interaction with followers. First and foremost, social media influencers are content creators who are experts in a specific area and have cultivated a sizable, captive following by regularly creating market value for brands through social media [6]. Similarly, other researchers describe influencers as individuals who have built a considerable social network of followers and are often regarded as trusted tastemakers within niches [15]. It indicates that the status of influencers is not based solely on public recognition, but also on audience engagement, niche expertise, and the ability to shape the preferences of followers through continuing communication. Taken together, these definitions suggest that influencers are characterized by content creation, ongoing interaction with followers, niche expertise, and a high degree of relational proximity and perceived similarity, distinguishing them from traditional celebrities whose influence is primarily rooted in public recognition and symbolic status. In line with this view, scholars also conceptualize social media influencers as human brands whose persuasive power is shaped by persona-driven qualities, content curation abilities, and followers' emotional attachment [16].

As influencers gain increasing fame and attention through regular content creation, they are gradually becoming more celebrity-like. Social media influencers can be conceptualized as a new type of independent party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media platforms [5]. Meanwhile, given the widespread use of social media and its positive impact on marketing campaigns, celebrities also engage in content creation across different platforms, thereby reducing their perceived distance from audiences. As the two categories become increasingly similar, the boundary between celebrities and influencers has gradually blurred. As a result, distinguishing between them can no longer rely solely on surface-level criteria such as the source of fame or observable content practices, but instead requires a more nuanced understanding of how influence is constructed, communicated, and perceived by audiences. Among the dimensions that appear particularly important in distinguishing these endorser types, authenticity has emerged as a central explanatory mechanism in research.

3.2 Authenticity in Influencer Marketing

In general, authenticity is understood as the perception held by consumers or evaluators that a particular object, entity, or behavior is genuine, sincere, natural, and credible. Specifically, authenticity refers to the perceived genuineness, reality, sincerity, and truthfulness of an object or entity, and it is assessed not by objective criteria but by evaluators' subjective judgments [17,18]. Additionally, in the marketing field, the key to authenticity lies not merely in whether the object itself is genuine, but in how consumers form their perceptions of authenticity and sincerity [19]. Therefore, the previous literature has conceptualized authenticity as a socially constructed understanding, that is, the perceived essence of the observed entity, rather than an intrinsic property of the object itself [20].

Since authenticity is socially constructed and perception-based, it is especially relevant to influencer marketing, as influencers actively construct it through personal storytelling, self-presentation, original content creation, and consistent interaction with followers. The persuasive power of influencers does not simply derive from their fame; rather, it depends more on whether audiences perceive them as authentic, sincere, and trustworthy communicators. More specifically, influencer authenticity is understood as the perceived transparency, genuineness, and congruence between the influencer's endorsements and personal values, rather than as promotion motivated solely by financial incentives [10,11]. Furthermore, influencers develop such perceptions of authenticity through the disclosure of personal experiences [21], the production of original content [22], direct interaction with their followers [23], and narrative strategies that help them gain trust and credibility [24].

Authenticity functions as a persuasive mechanism by shaping consumers' trust judgments regarding both the endorser and the marketing message, thereby influencing whether the message is perceived as trustworthy, credible, and worthy of behavioral response. When consumers perceive a communicator as sincere, authentic, and consistent with their created content, they are more likely to regard their recommendations as a credible source of information rather than a profit-driven advertising practice. Thus, authenticity can reduce consumers' skepticism and resistance to marketing messages and increase their receptiveness to them. According to previous research, authenticity has been shown to enhance consumers' receptivity to marketing messages [25], strengthen perceptions of quality [26], and increase purchase intentions [27].

Meanwhile, within the broader service and marketing contexts, perceived authenticity also affects the credibility of service providers [28] and shapes customer behavior [29]. Therefore, recent research further suggests that influencer authenticity is not evaluated solely through influencers' self-presentation, but also through external cues related to customer experiences and collaborating brands, which help consumers perceive whether influencers are credible and genuine communicators [30]. In this way, authenticity links influencer self-presentation to consumer trust, message acceptance, and behavioral responses. In other words, the persuasive power of influencers derives not only from the published content, but also from the authenticity of the consistency between the content, the influencer's motives, and their values. However, the emergence of virtual influencers has made this mechanism even more complex. Unlike human influencers, virtual influencers are often perceived as highly credible yet fundamentally inauthentic, thereby reversing the conventional authenticity-to-credibility relationship observed in human influencer contexts [31]. Consequently, the authenticity-credibility paradox [9] observed in virtual influencer marketing further suggests that the relationship between authenticity and credibility may not be uniform across different types of endorsers.

3.3 Virtual Influencers

The rapid development of digital technologies has led to the emergence of virtual influencers as a new type of brand endorser on social media. Researchers have described virtual influencers as metahumans with distinct human-like visual appearances and realistic characteristics, behaviors, and actions [32]. Other researchers have defined virtual influencers as artificial media influencers with human-like appearances and actions created by software and algorithms, such as CGI (Computer-generated Imagery), motion capture technologies, AI (Artificial Intelligence), and real-time rendering technologies [8,33,34,35]. Additionally, virtual influencers are distinct from traditional cartoon- or anime-like characters, as their visual finesse differs significantly and enables astonishing levels of photorealism [8]. Taken together, these definitions suggest that virtual influencers are highly realistic, technologically constructed, human-like characters that fundamentally differ from human influencers. With their growing popularity, virtual influencers are increasingly used in marketing communications, raising important questions about how consumers perceive and respond to these non-human endorsers, particularly regarding the role of authenticity in shaping such responses [9,36].

Despite their human-like appearances, virtual influencers differ fundamentally from human endorsers because they are entirely artificial constructs, which challenges the authenticity logic discussed in the previous sections. The authenticity of human influencers is typically built on real identities, personal experiences, self-presentation, and ongoing interactions, whereas virtual influencers can only simulate these authenticity cues through designed personas, scripted narratives, and controlled communication. Prior research suggests that virtual influencers can generate parasocial interactions similar to those formed with human influencers, but such interactions are highly contingent on factors such as origin disclosure and emotional expression [37]. Consequently, when evaluating virtual influencers, consumers cannot rely entirely on the authenticity cues commonly used to assess human influencers, such as personal experiences, spontaneity, and lived reality. This shift explains why virtual influencers make authenticity judgments more complicated, as their authenticity is not grounded in lived experience, but in the perceived coherence of their artificial persona and communication.

Moreover, the realism and anthropomorphism of virtual influencers have a complex impact on consumer perception [33,36]. On the one hand, highly realistic and human-like appearances may enhance virtual influencers' social presence and credibility, making consumers more likely to perceive them as influential communicators [33,36,31]. On the other hand, a higher degree of realism may also raise consumers' expectations of virtual influencers' human-like traits, including sincerity, emotional depth, and real-life experience [9,31]. When consumers realize that these human-like characteristics are artificial, perceived authenticity may be diminished. By contrast, virtual influencers with lower realism may experience a weaker

authenticity penalty, as they do not strongly evoke consumers' expectations of real human traits. Drawing on uncanny valley theory [38], this tension can be explained by the mismatch between virtual influencers' human appearances and their artificial origins. A higher degree of realism may increase social presence and credibility, but it may also raise consumers' higher expectations of sincerity, emotional depth, and real life-experience. When consumers become aware that these human-like qualities are artificially designed, perceived authenticity and emotional connection may decrease [37]. Thus, anthropomorphic realism may have a dual effect in virtual influencer marketing: it may enhance credibility while simultaneously undermining perceived authenticity when artificiality becomes salient [9,31].

Existing research has shown that virtual influencers create a tension between credibility and authenticity, as they may appear credible yet still be perceived as fundamentally inauthentic [9,31,39]. Previous research suggests that credibility can function as a psychological repair mechanism that offsets authenticity deficits and enables persuasion in virtual influencer contexts. Building on this paradox, this study suggests that virtual influencers may cultivate a form of constructed authenticity through a stable persona, consistent storytelling, coherent visual style, and perceived congruence among the values expressed by the virtual influencer, the brand, and the product. In this sense, the authenticity of virtual influencers does not derive from lived experience, but from the perceived consistency of their designed persona, narrative presentation, and brand-related communication. These characteristics suggest that virtual influencers not only extend the boundaries of influencer marketing but also prompt researchers to reconsider whether authenticity necessarily relies on a real human identity. Thus, virtual influencers provide an important theoretical entry point for constructing an integrated typology of endorsers that encompasses celebrities, human influencers, and virtual influencers.

3.4 Research Gap

Firstly, though existing literature has separately discussed celebrity endorsement, human influencer marketing, and virtual influencer marketing, these studies remain relatively scattered and have not yet fully explained how different types of endorsers gain persuasive power through various forms of authenticity. Classical celebrity endorsement literature defines celebrities primarily in terms of public recognition, symbolic status, and cultural meaning transfer [12,4,3]. While influencer marketing research emphasizes content creation, follower interaction, niche expertise, and relational proximity [5,15,6,16]. As celebrities increasingly engage with social media, including content production, and influencers become more celebrity-like, the criteria for distinguishing between celebrities and influencers are becoming less stable.

Secondly, prior studies have developed rich insights into celebrity endorsement, influencer marketing, and virtual influencer marketing. However, these streams of research have largely developed individually. Celebrity endorsement has mainly focused on credibility, attractiveness, and meaning transfer; influencer marketing has emphasized authentic interaction and relational influence, while studies of virtual influencer marketing have examined artificiality, anthropomorphism, and the authenticity-credibility paradox. This fragmentation limits the development of a consistent understanding of how different endorser types operate in contemporary digitally driven marketing environments.

Thirdly, even though authenticity has been recognized as a central mechanism in influencer marketing, the existing literature has not sufficiently theorized how authenticity operates across different types of endorsers. Human influencers often derive authenticity from self-disclosure, personal storytelling, and continuous interactions with followers. By contrast, celebrities rely more on symbolic authenticity and public image consistency, while virtual influencers challenge both logics because they lack real human identity and lived experience. Virtual influencers still appear credible and persuasive through a stable persona, coherent storytelling, visual consistency, and brand value congruence. Recent research similarly suggests that virtual influencers may overcome authenticity challenges when credibility functions as a compensatory mechanism for authenticity deficits [39]. Therefore, the issue is that virtual influencers reveal the need to explain how authenticity can be constructed and perceived without a real human identity. The current literature thus lacks a systematic clarification of how authenticity differs across celebrities, human influencers, and virtual influencers.

4. Discussion

The literature review above reveals a central conceptual tension in contemporary endorsement research. On the one hand, social media influencers share certain features with traditional celebrities, such as public visibility, audience attention, and commercial endorsement functions. On the other hand, their persuasive power is increasingly rooted in relational, interactive, and authenticity-based mechanisms that differ from the symbolic mechanisms emphasized in traditional celebrity endorsement research. The emergence of virtual influencers further intensifies this conceptual tension by introducing non-human endorsers that can simulate social presence and credibility while lacking lived experience. In a word, the difference between celebrities, human influencers and virtual influencers should not be distinguished by ‘whether they are famous’ or ‘whether they are active on social media’. To address this conceptual ambiguity, this study develops an integrated typology that distinguishes celebrities, human influencers, and virtual influencers according to their source of influence, audience relationship, authenticity basis, and control structure. Table 1 shows the endorser typology.

Table 1: Endorser Typology

Dimension	Celebrities	Human Influencers	Virtual Influencers
Source of Influence	Public recognition; Symbolic status	Content creation; Follower interaction; Niche expertise	Technology novelty; Designed persona; Visual realism
Audience Relationship	Distant admiration	Relational proximity; Perceived similarity	Simulated parasocial interaction
Authenticity Basis	Symbolic authenticity	Relational authenticity	Constructed authenticity
Control Structure	Partly managed by media and brand campaigns	Self-managed but commercially embedded	Highly controlled by creators or brands

Authenticity serves as a differentiated persuasive mechanism across different types of endorsers. The authenticity of celebrities is primarily symbolic, arising from consistency among public image, cultural significance, status, and brand significance. The authenticity of human influencers is relational authenticity, which is mainly perceived through self-disclosure, personal storytelling, ongoing interaction, and perceived similarity. The authenticity of virtual influencers is generally constructed based on a stable persona, visual coherence, consistent storytelling, and value congruence between brands and endorsers.

Accordingly, this paper proposes four propositions. First, compared with human influencers, traditional celebrities are more likely to generate endorsement effectiveness through symbolic authenticity derived from public recognition, cultural meaning, and image-brand congruence. Second, compared with traditional celebrities, human influencers are more likely to generate perceived authenticity through relational proximity, personal storytelling, and continuous interaction with followers. Third, virtual influencers are less likely to generate lived authenticity than human influencers, but they may cultivate constructed authenticity through stable persona design, coherent visual style, consistent storytelling, and perceived value congruence. Finally, the relationship between authenticity and credibility differs across endorser types: authenticity is more closely tied to relational trust for human influencers, symbolic consistency for celebrities, and constructed coherence for virtual influencers.

5. Conclusion

This paper contributes to endorsement literature by clarifying the conceptual boundaries among celebrities, human influencers, and virtual influencers. Rather than treating influencer marketing as either a simple extension of celebrity endorsement or an entirely separate phenomenon, this study proposes an integrated typology based on source of influence, audience relationship, authenticity basis, and control structure. Therefore, it provides a systematic framework for understanding how different types of endorsers acquire persuasive power in contemporary digital marketing environments.

The main contribution of this paper lies in its conceptual clarification of authenticity across different types of endorsers. Specifically, it distinguishes among symbolic, relational, and constructed authenticity, thereby providing a more nuanced explanation of how endorsers acquire persuasive power in contemporary digital marketing environments. By integrating celebrities, human influencers, and virtual influencers into a systematic analytic framework, this paper contributes to endorsement literature, influencer marketing research,

and emerging studies on AI-driven digital endorsers. More importantly, it provides a foundational theoretical framework for understanding the dynamically evolving field of endorsement marketing in the AI era. As AI, CGI, and algorithmic content production continue to reshape brand communication, the question of how authenticity is constructed, perceived, and translated into consumer responses will become increasingly important.

However, this paper also has several limitations. First, as a conceptual study, it does not empirically test the proposed typology or the relationships among authenticity, credibility, and consumer responses. Second, the framework focuses mainly on the conceptual distinctions among endorser types and does not fully examine how platform characteristics, product categories, cultural contexts, or consumer characteristics may influence authenticity perceptions. Third, virtual influencer marketing is still rapidly evolving, and consumers' perceptions of artificial endorsers may change as AI technologies become more familiar and socially accepted. Future research can build on this framework in several directions. Empirical studies may test whether symbolic, relational, and constructed authenticity lead to different levels of credibility, trust, brand attitude, and purchase intention. In addition, future research may explore how disclosure of artificial origin, degree of anthropomorphism, narrative consistency, and brand–endorser congruence influence the effectiveness of virtual influencers. These future research directions would help further refine the theoretical framework proposed in this paper and deepen our understanding of endorsement marketing in the AI-driven digital environment.

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