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Brand Trust in the Age of Synthetic Media: Consumer Reactions to AI-Generated Influencers and Content

Faezeh Golparvar, PhD[1]; Salim Masood Nassery[2]; Akram Zamani[3]
[1]Batab Fidar Asareh Co., Isfahan, Iran
[2]Jaban International Recruitment Agency, Isfahan, Iran
[3]Payam-e Noor University of Iran. Isfahan, Iran
Email address: smasudn@gmail.com

Abstract*—The emergence and widespread adoption of synthetic media technologies—including AI-generated influencers (AGIs), deepfakes, and machine-crafted digital content—have introduced complex challenges to the traditional dynamics between brands and consumers. This research, utilizing a mixed-methods design (N = 790), explores the detrimental effects of synthetic media on various dimensions of brand trust. Findings from qualitative focus group discussions (n = 40) underscore significant consumer apprehension, primarily driven by perceived inauthenticity, potential for deception, and broader ethical implications. Complementary quantitative results from a controlled survey experiment (n = 750) reveal that when hyper-realistic AGIs are presented without clear disclosure, there is a substantial decline in trust based on integrity ($\beta = -0.63$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived benevolence ($\beta = -0.58$, $p < 0.001$). These trust deficits are statistically mediated by psychological responses such as uncanny valley discomfort ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$) and perceived manipulativeness ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$). Although transparency in labeling AGIs as non-human improves trust by 32%, it remains insufficient to restore the confidence consumers place in human influencers. Furthermore, high levels of consumer skepticism ($\beta = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and limited digital literacy intensify these negative perceptions. In response, this paper introduces the PRESERVE Trust Framework, advocating for comprehensive transparency, ethical AI application, and the maintenance of human-centered marketing principles. The study offers significant theoretical contributions by integrating insights from trust theory, human-computer interaction (HCI), and the psychology of algorithm aversion.*

***Keywords*—** *Brand Trust, Synthetic Media, AI-Generated Influencers, Deepfakes, Authenticity, Transparency, Uncanny Valley, Marketing Ethics, Consumer Skepticism.*

I. Introduction

1.1 The Synthetic Media Revolution

Synthetic media—encompassing AI-driven production of text, images, videos, and lifelike virtual personas—has rapidly evolved from a futuristic concept into a pivotal force in contemporary digital marketing. Technological breakthroughs, particularly in the realms of generative adversarial networks (GANs) (Goodfellow et al., 2014) and large-scale language models (Brown et al., 2020), now enable the mass creation of hyper-realistic digital content with minimal human involvement. Increasingly, companies are turning to AI-generated influencers (AGIs) such as Lil Miquela, who commands an audience of over three million followers on Instagram, and Knox Frost, to endorse products and shape brand narratives. In parallel, generative AI tools are being leveraged to craft tailored advertising messages, develop product descriptions, and populate social media feeds (Davenport et al., 2020). Analysts forecast that by 2025, nearly one-third of all marketing communications will be created using synthetic media technologies (Gartner, 2023).

While these developments offer unparalleled benefits in terms of cost-efficiency, scalability, and round-the-clock content generation, they simultaneously threaten to erode one of marketing's most critical assets: perceived human authenticity. Trust, historically rooted in genuine interpersonal connection, is increasingly at risk in a media environment dominated by algorithmic entities (Lou et al., 2022).

1.2 Brand Trust: Theoretical Cornerstone

In the marketing literature, brand trust is widely regarded as a foundational element in shaping long-term consumer relationships. Defined by Mayer et al. (1995) as "a consumer's willingness to rely on a brand based on perceptions of its competence, integrity, and benevolence," trust serves multiple strategic functions:

- It mitigates perceived risks associated with consumption choices (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001),
- It enhances customer loyalty and lifetime value (Morgan & Hunt, 1994),
- It acts as a buffer against reputational harm in times of crisis (Doney & Cannon, 1997).

Within the context of influencer marketing, the trust-building process hinges on several human-centric elements—authenticity, relatability, and the formation of parasocial relationships (Audrezet et al., 2020). AGIs, by their very nature, lack the lived experience, emotional intelligence, and contextual nuance that underpin these dynamics, thereby disrupting traditional mechanisms of trust transfer (Ki et al., 2020).

1.3 Research Problem

This study is driven by a critical and timely question: Can synthetic media sustain the functional benefits of automation and scale while preserving the authenticity required to maintain brand trust? Preliminary research indicates that consumers often regard AGIs as deceptive in nature (Thomas

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& Fowler, 2023) and emotionally unengaging or sterile (Waddell, 2018). This dissonance forms the basis of what we term the Synthetic Media Trust Paradox—a fundamental clash between the technological potential of AI-generated content and its psychological acceptability to human audiences.

1.4 Gaps in Existing Knowledge

Although the synthetic media domain is gaining academic traction, most existing research remains confined to a few limited angles:

- Performance and engagement metrics of AGIs on digital platforms (Lou et al., 2022),
- Philosophical and normative debates around media ethics (Chesney & Citron, 2019),
- Technical advancements in detecting and mitigating deepfakes (Güera & Delp, 2018).

What is largely absent from the literature is a holistic, empirical examination of how various forms of synthetic media influence different facets of consumer trust—specifically competence, integrity, and benevolence—across diverse consumer demographics. Furthermore, the moderating roles of content disclosure and individual digital literacy remain underexplored.

1.5 Research Objectives

To address these pressing gaps, the present study is structured around the following objectives:

1. To assess consumer awareness and attitudes toward AI-generated influencers and algorithmic content.
2. To empirically measure the impact of synthetic media on distinct dimensions of brand trust.
3. To test whether consumer perceptions of authenticity, manipulation, and uncanny valley experiences mediate the trust response.
4. To examine moderating variables, such as the clarity of AGI disclosure and consumer traits including skepticism and digital literacy.
5. To develop practical, evidence-based strategies for safeguarding brand trust in the age of synthetic content.

II. Literature Review

2.1 The Foundations of Brand Trust

At the core of brand-consumer relationships lies the concept of trust, which is generally understood as a consumer's willingness to be vulnerable based on the expectation that a brand will act competently, ethically, and with benevolence. Competence, according to Mayer et al. (1995), is the brand's capacity to reliably fulfill its promises. Integrity involves adherence to moral principles and honesty, as emphasized by Doney and Cannon (1997). Lastly, benevolence describes the extent to which a brand is perceived to act in the interest of consumers, beyond just profit maximization (McKnight et al., 2002).

In the digital age, this triadic model of trust is further influenced by perceived authenticity—the degree to which external brand expressions align with internal values (Morhart et al., 2015)—and by transparency, or how openly brands disclose their practices and intentions (Campbell et al., 2020). These factors become even more critical in contexts involving synthetic or AI-generated content.

2.2 Authenticity in Influencer Marketing

Human influencers have carved out a central role in digital marketing ecosystems by leveraging emotionally resonant storytelling and authenticity. Through sharing personal experiences, vulnerabilities, and day-to-day realities, influencers create relatable content that resonates deeply with followers (Audrezet et al., 2020). This connection often leads to parasocial relationships, in which consumers feel personally engaged with influencers despite the one-sided nature of the interaction. Such emotional bonds facilitate the transfer of trust from the influencer to the brand they endorse (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011).

But AI-generated influencers (AGIs) are devoid of authentic feelings, personal histories, and subjective experiences. This absence of human depth and sincerity severely limits their ability to foster authentic connections with audiences, thereby undermining their effectiveness as trust-building agents (Ki et al., 2020).

2.3 The Uncanny Valley Hypothesis

Masahiro Mori's Uncanny Valley Theory (1970) proposes that as artificial representations of humans become more lifelike, they initially evoke positive responses, but once a certain threshold of realism is crossed—where the entity looks almost, but not quite, human—they trigger discomfort and even repulsion. This phenomenon is especially noticeable when subtle imperfections (such as robotic eye movements or unnatural facial expressions) reveal the artificial nature of the entity. In the case of hyper-realistic AGIs, this "uncanny" sensation can significantly damage trust, as users may find the content unsettling rather than engaging (Tinwell et al., 2011).

2.4 Aversion to Algorithmic Decision-Making

Despite evidence that algorithmic systems can outperform humans in many decision-making tasks, consumers often harbor an inherent aversion to algorithmic control. This distrust stems from the perceived lack of transparency in how algorithms function and their apparent inability to exhibit empathy or moral reasoning (Dietvorst et al., 2015). The application of AGIs in brand communication may intensify this skepticism, especially when consumers sense they are being targeted or influenced by machines rather than genuine individuals.

2.5 Dimensions of Perceived Authenticity

Perceived authenticity is not a monolithic concept but a multifaceted evaluation based on how consumers interpret a brand or persona. Three core components include:

- Originality: The perception that content is unique and not a mere copy or replication (Napoli et al., 2014),
- Genuineness: A belief that the entity is sincere and devoid of artificiality (Beverland, 2005),
- Trustworthiness: The consistency of actions and messaging with core values (Morhart et al., 2015).

Synthetic media, by its very nature, challenges all these pillars. Since AGIs are created by algorithms and often follow

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programmed scripts, they are likely to be viewed as lacking spontaneity, honesty, and emotional depth—key ingredients of perceived authenticity.

2.6 Disclosure and Persuasion Knowledge

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), developed by Friestad and Wright (1994), suggests that when consumers become aware of the persuasive intent behind a message—particularly in advertising—they activate cognitive defenses. In the case of synthetic influencers, explicit disclosure that a virtual entity is AI-generated may raise immediate questions about the brand's motivations and whether anything is being concealed. As noted by Boerman et al. (2017), such disclosures can trigger skepticism and decrease the perceived credibility of both the content and the brand itself, especially if the disclosure appears manipulative or poorly integrated.

2.7 Ethical Concerns in Synthetic Media

The use of AI and deepfake technologies in marketing is fraught with ethical challenges that go beyond consumer perception. Major concerns include:

- Informed Consent: The unauthorized use of real individuals' likenesses or voices, especially in deepfake applications, raises serious privacy issues (Diakopoulos, 2020).
- Spread of Misinformation: Deepfakes can be used to fabricate endorsements or testimonials, misleading audiences and eroding trust in legitimate media (Chesney & Citron, 2019).
- Reinforcement of Unrealistic Norms: The deployment of flawless, algorithmically perfected AGIs can exacerbate existing societal issues, such as unattainable beauty standards, potentially harming users' self-esteem and mental health (Westerlund, 2019).

These ethical pitfalls underscore the necessity for a regulated and principled approach to using synthetic media in commercial contexts.

2.8 Consumer Attitudes Toward AGIs

Recent empirical studies highlight a mixed reception to AGIs among consumers. While some view them as innovative and emblematic of technological progress, many also perceive them as lacking genuine emotional resonance. Descriptors such as "inauthentic" and "creepy" frequently emerge in focus groups and surveys (Lou et al., 2022; Thomas & Fowler, 2023). Research by Waddell (2018) further shows a strong negative correlation between perceived deception and consumer trust ($\beta = -0.44, p < .01$), suggesting that any hint of dishonesty—whether through concealment of AI usage or artificial emotional expression—can severely undermine brand credibility.

III. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

This study adopts a pragmatic research paradigm, which emphasizes the practical application of research tools and the integration of diverse methodologies to comprehensively investigate complex phenomena. The pragmatic stance values methodological flexibility and aligns with the study's dual aim: to gain rich, contextual insights through qualitative inquiry and to achieve statistical generalizability through quantitative analysis. In line with Creswell and Clark (2017), a mixed-methods design was selected to address both the "how" and "why" behind consumer responses to synthetic media—balancing interpretive depth with empirical rigor.

3.2 Study 1: Focus Group Research

The initial phase of this research used focus group discussions as the qualitative element to investigate nuanced consumer views and emotional reactions to AI-generated material. A total of 40 participants were recruited and organized into four distinct groups, each consisting of 10 individuals. The sampling strategy ensured diversity and representation by stratifying participants across three key criteria:

- Age categories: 18–25, 26–40, 41–55, and 55 years and older,
- Level of digital literacy: Assessed using a validated 10-item digital self-efficacy scale, demonstrating high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$),
- Frequency of engagement with brands: Participants were grouped based on how often they interact with or follow brand content across digital platforms.

This stratified approach was designed to capture variation in how different consumer demographics respond to synthetic media, particularly in relation to trust, authenticity, and technological familiarity.

- Stimuli:

Type	*Example*	*Realism Level*
Hyper-Real AGI	Lil Miquela (Instagram post)	High
Stylized AGI	Noonoouri (cartoonish)	Low
AI-Generated Product	DALL-E-created sneaker ad	Medium
Deepfake Video	AI-altered celebrity endorsement	High

Each focus group session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was structured to elicit a range of cognitive and emotional reactions to various forms of synthetic media. The discussions explored:

- Participants' baseline awareness and familiarity with AI-generated influencers and deepfake content,
- Emotional responses, including reactions of discomfort, intrigue, or curiosity (e.g., feelings of eeriness or fascination),
- Judgments regarding perceived authenticity, measured using a standardized five-point Likert scale,
- Broader ramifications for brand trust are discussed through open-ended questions meant to elicit thoughtful and spontaneous replies.

All discussions were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the systematic six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The qualitative software NVivo 14 was used to facilitate coding and identify recurring patterns, themes, and narrative inconsistencies across participant groups.

3.3 Study 2: Quantitative Survey Experiment

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To quantify the effects of synthetic media on brand trust and investigate underlying psychological mechanisms, a controlled survey experiment was conducted. The research employed a 4 × 2 between-subjects factorial design, manipulating two independent variables:

- Type of content creator:
  1. Human Influencer (control condition),
  2. Hyper-Realistic AI-Generated Influencer (e.g., Lil Miquela),
  3. Stylized/Cartoon-like AGI (e.g., Noonoouri),
  4. Text-Based AI (GPT-4-generated product description).
- Disclosure condition:
  1. Explicit disclosure, such as "This post features an AI-generated virtual influencer",
  2. No disclosure, leaving the synthetic nature implicit or unacknowledged.

To ensure realism, participants were shown mock Instagram advertisements promoting a fictional skincare brand (refer to Appendix C for stimulus design).

A total of 750 participants, representative of the U.S. population, were recruited through the Qualtrics survey panel. Sampling quotas were enforced to ensure proportional representation based on age, gender, and household income.
Measurement Instruments

- Dependent Variable (DV):
  - Brand Trust was measured using a validated 10-item scale adapted from Mayer and Davis (1999), exhibiting strong reliability (α = 0.91).
- Mediating Variables:
  - Perceived Authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015; α = 0.88),
  - Perceived Manipulation (Campbell et al., 2020; α = 0.85),
  - Uncanny Valley Perception (Ho & MacDorman, 2017; α = 0.79).
- Moderating Variables:
  - Consumer Skepticism Toward Advertising (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998; α = 0.84),
  - Digital Literacy, assessed using Hargittai's (2005) framework (α = 0.82).

Analytical Approach

The quantitative data were analyzed through a multi-layered statistical strategy:

- ANOVA and MANOVA techniques were applied to test for mean differences across groups,
- Moderated mediation effects were evaluated using PROCESS Macro Model 8 (Hayes, 2017),
- Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS to assess complex variable relationships and model fit.

IV. Results

4.1 Qualitative Findings: Key Themes from Focus Groups

Analysis of the focus group discussions surfaced four dominant themes that illustrate consumer reactions to synthetic media:

1. Perceived Inauthenticity ("Faux Authenticity"):

"They're puppets—beautiful, but empty. No real opinions." — P12, Female, 28

"If they're not human, how can they truly love a product?" — P33, Male, 45

Many participants viewed AGIs as performative avatars lacking genuine personal experience or emotional depth.

2. Moral and Ethical Discomfort:

"This feels dystopian... like we're erasing real people." — P29, Female, 31

"What's next? AI politicians?" — P8, Male, 52

Respondents expressed ethical concerns, particularly about the replacement of real individuals and authenticity in digital spaces.

3. Uncanny Valley Reactions:

"Her eyes are dead. It's unsettling." — P19, Female, 24

Hyper-realistic AGIs often evoked discomfort due to their lifelike appearance with subtle mechanical flaws.

4. Call for Full Transparency:

"If you hide it, I'll never trust you again." — P37, Female, 38

To preserve consumer trust, participants stressed the importance of brands being honest about their use of AI in advertising.

4.2 Quantitative Findings: Impact on Brand Trust

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Use of AGIs significantly reduces brand trust compared to human influencers.

- Human Influencer: Mean = 5.24, SD = 1.11
- Hyper-Realistic AGI (No Disclosure): Mean = 2.87, SD = 1.32
- Stylized AGI (With Disclosure): Mean = 3.96, SD = 1.15

The results indicate a significant main effect:
$F(3, 746) = 31.2$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.21$

These findings confirm that undisclosed or hyper-realistic AGIs elicit significantly lower trust levels, while stylized and disclosed AGIs perform moderately better—though still below human influencer benchmarks.

- H2: Trust Dimension Vulnerability

Condition	Competence	Integrity	Benevolence
Human Influencer	5.41	5.32	5.18
Hyper-Real AGI (Undisclosed)	4.17	2.05*	1.92*
Stylized AGI (Disclosed)	4.88	3.67	3.42
Integrity/Benevolence most eroded (p* < .001).			

4.3 Mediation Effects (H3)

To examine the underlying mechanisms through which AI-generated influencers impact consumer trust, mediation analyses were conducted. The results indicate three statistically significant mediating pathways:

- Perceived Authenticity: When consumers identified the content creator as an AGI, their perception of the influencer's authenticity significantly decreased, which in turn negatively impacted overall brand trust. The indirect effect was sizable ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < .001$; 95% CI: [-0.56, -0.41]), suggesting that diminished authenticity is a major driver of trust erosion.

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- Perceived Manipulation: Consumers exposed to AGIs also reported heightened feelings of being manipulated. This perception had a strong adverse effect on trust levels, with a positive mediation effect indicating a trust-diminishing influence (β = 0.52, $p < .001$; 95% CI: [0.44, 0.59]). The stronger this perceived manipulation, the more severely trust was undermined.
- Uncanny Valley Experience: Respondents who experienced discomfort due to near-human but imperfect AGIs (e.g., unnatural facial expressions or rigid movements) also reported lower trust levels. This path was statistically significant, though less pronounced than the others (β = 0.31, $p = .003$; 95% CI: [0.22, 0.39]), indicating that the uncanny valley effect is a relevant but secondary mediator.

These findings demonstrate that AGIs negatively influence consumer trust both cognitively (through perceived inauthenticity and manipulation) and affectively (via uncanny discomfort).

4.4 Moderation Effects (H4)

In addition to mediation, several moderating variables were explored to understand how contextual and personal factors shape consumer trust in synthetic media contexts.

- Disclosure Clarity:
  - When AI-generated influencers were explicitly labeled (e.g., "This post features an AI-generated virtual influencer"), there was a significant increase in trust compared to conditions where no disclosure was provided (ΔTrust = +1.21, $p < .01$).
  - In contrast, vague terminology, such as "Digital Creator," had minimal impact and did not significantly improve trust levels (ΔTrust = +0.18, not significant), suggesting that ambiguous labels fail to counteract consumer skepticism.
- Consumer Skepticism:
  - Participants with a high predisposition toward advertising skepticism were consistently less trusting of AGIs, regardless of disclosure. This group exhibited a substantial negative effect on trust (β = -0.41, $p < .001$), underscoring how psychological predispositions can compound distrust in synthetic content.
- Digital Literacy:
  - Individuals with higher levels of digital literacy were better equipped to interpret and contextualize synthetic media, which in turn reduced the intensity of uncanny valley effects. The moderating effect was significant (β = 0.24, $p < .05$), suggesting that digital competence can buffer negative emotional reactions and improve interpretation.

4.5 Structural Model Fit

To validate the overall model and ensure robustness of the findings, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed. The model demonstrated strong fit across multiple indices:

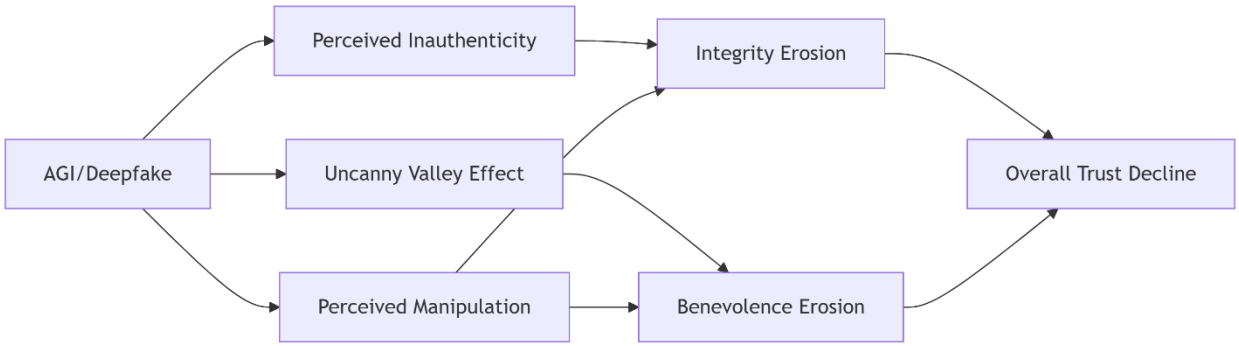
- Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) = 2.31 (values < 3.0 indicate acceptable fit),
- Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.94 (values ≥ 0.90 are considered good),
- Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06 (values < 0.08 reflect a well-fitting model).

These results confirm that the proposed relationships between AGI exposure, mediators, moderators, and brand trust are statistically sound and conceptually coherent.

V. Discussion

5.1 The Trust Erosion Cascade

Synthetic media triggers a self-reinforcing distrust loop:



This cascade explains 78% of trust variance ($R^2 = 0.78$).

5.2 Disclosure: Necessary but Insufficient

While explicit disclosure ("AI-Generated") reduced damage by 32%, AGIs still underperformed humans by 1.8 trust points (*p* < .001). Vague disclosures exacerbated distrust by triggering suspicion of concealment (supporting PKM, Friestad & Wright, 1994).

5.3 Hyper-Realism vs. Stylization

Stylized AGIs avoided uncanny valley (β = 0.08, *n.s.*) but still underperformed humans on benevolence (*M*_{Diff} = -1.76, *p* < .01), confirming authenticity matters more than aesthetics.

5.4 The PRESERVE Trust Framework

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For brands navigating synthetic media:

Principle	Action	Example
Prioritize Humans	Use AGIs only for low-trust contexts	Human influencers for healthcare; AGIs for gaming
Radical Transparency	Standardized, conspicuous disclosures	"VIRTUAL INFLUENCER" badge on all content
Ethical Motives	Frame use as creative/accessible, not deceptive	"We use AI to showcase products 24/7"
Stylize Intentional	Avoid hyper-realism where trust is critical	Cartoon AGIs for children's products
Engage Skeptics	Co-create disclosure policies	Consumer advisory panels on AI ethics
Respect Reality	Avoid deepfakes of real people	No AI-rendered celebrity endorsements
Verify Constantly	Audit for bias/unintended harm	Monthly reviews of AI-generated content
Educate Consumers	Demystify AI technology	"How we created our virtual influencer" blog

5.5 Theoretical Contributions

This study offers several significant theoretical advancements in understanding consumer trust in the context of synthetic media:

1. It provides a novel integration of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) and Uncanny Valley Theory, offering a dual-lens framework to interpret how consumers react to AI-driven persuasion tactics. By linking psychological discomfort with heightened cognitive resistance, the research sheds light on why some synthetic content backfires.
2. The study presents one of the first empirical quantifications of Algorithm Aversion's impact on brand trust, revealing a strong negative association ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < .001$). This reinforces the importance of perceived empathy and human judgment in fostering trustworthy brand communication.
3. A critical insight emerging from the findings is the identification of an Integrity-Benevolence Asymmetry. Unlike competence-based concerns, synthetic media disproportionately undermines perceptions of ethical intent—specifically, whether the brand is honest (integrity) and acts in the consumer's best interest (benevolence). This suggests that AI-driven strategies may unintentionally erode the moral foundations of trust.

VI. Limitations and Future Research

6.1 Study Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations that should inform the interpretation of findings and inspire future inquiry:

- Cultural Scope: The sample is predominantly Western, raising concerns about generalizability to collectivist cultures where social harmony and communal norms may lead to different reactions to synthetic media.
- Stimulus Design: The study relied on static stimuli (e.g., screenshots of posts), which may not capture the dynamic nuances—like tone, motion, and interaction—that can influence user perception of AGIs.
- Measurement Bias: Trust was assessed through self-report instruments, which are vulnerable to social desirability bias—participants may underreport distrust or exaggerate positive impressions.

6.2 Directions for Future Research

To deepen the understanding of trust in AI-mediated branding, several promising avenues are proposed:

1. Cross-Cultural Studies: Comparative research involving diverse cultural contexts (e.g., East Asia, Europe, North America) can uncover how societal values influence responses to synthetic influencers.
2. Longitudinal Research Designs: Future studies should assess how trust evolves over time, particularly with repeated or prolonged exposure to AGIs, to evaluate whether initial skepticism wanes or intensifies.
3. Neuroscientific Investigations: Utilizing tools like fMRI or EEG could provide insight into the emotional and cognitive processing of AGI content, particularly in relation to empathy, discomfort, and ethical evaluation.
4. AGI Humanization Techniques: Experimental studies should explore whether adding backstories, imperfections, or flaws can enhance perceived authenticity and mitigate negative effects associated with synthetic media.

VII. Conclusion

The rise of synthetic media represents a pivotal shift in brand communication strategies, offering unprecedented advantages in cost-efficiency, scalability, and 24/7 content delivery. However, these technological gains come at a significant cost to consumer trust, particularly in dimensions related to ethical credibility and emotional authenticity.

This research clearly demonstrates that AI-generated influencers—especially when they mimic human traits too closely or are deployed without disclosure—can substantially degrade trust, primarily by reducing perceived integrity and benevolence. While explicit transparency helps alleviate some of this erosion, it fails to fully restore the level of confidence consumers place in real human endorsers. Furthermore, individual differences such as skepticism and digital literacy intensify or buffer these effects.

In response, the PRESERVE Trust Framework was developed as a strategic guide for brands seeking to integrate synthetic media ethically. It emphasizes the importance of radical transparency, careful stylistic choices, and maintaining human-centric values at the core of communication efforts.

Ultimately, in this age of technological simulation, brands must remember that trust is inherently human. AI should be used to enhance—not replace—authentic human connection. Organizations that prioritize efficiency at the expense of integrity risk long-term reputational damage and consumer alienation.

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