

Exploring the Role of Homophily and Anthropomorphism in Building Trust and Following Intentions for Fashion AI Influencers: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

This conceptual study examines the influence of fashion AI influencers on consumers' following intentions, specifically investigating how homophily and anthropomorphism drive consumer trust and consequently impact the intention to follow these influencers. The study presents a conceptual framework grounded on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, which identifies homophily and anthropomorphism as significant stimuli that influence customer trust. The theory posits that both homophily and anthropomorphism have a significant influence on consumers' inclination to follow AI influencers in the fashion industry, as well as on consumer trust. The study also posits that consumer trust strengthens their intention to follow AI influencers. This research contributes to the existing literature on influencer marketing and consumer behaviour in the burgeoning discipline of AI marketing. It provides valuable insights for stakeholders such as fashion brands and marketers on how to strategically create AI influencers that effectively interact with consumers. Limitations have been acknowledged and recommendations for future research have been proposed.

Keywords: Fashion AI Influencers, Homophily, Anthropomorphism, Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory, Consumer Trust, Following Intention.

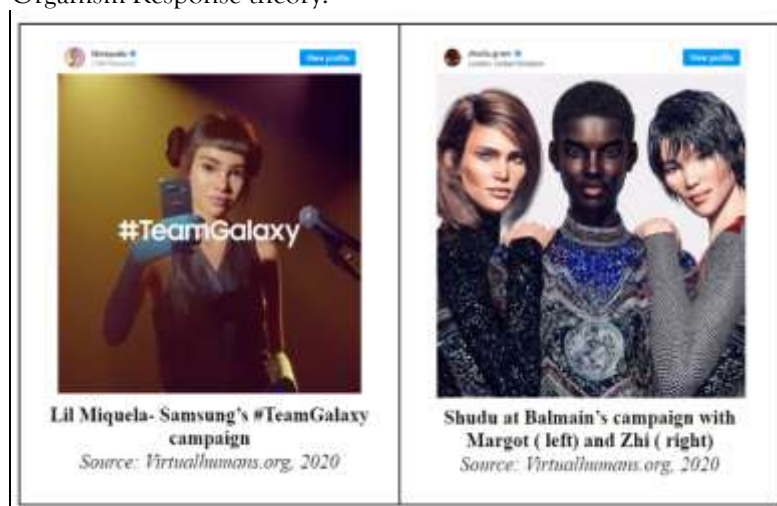
INTRODUCTION:

Artificial intelligence (AI) is revolutionising the way customers interact with businesses and how companies establish, develop, and control interactive marketing connections (Mustak et al., 2021). This transformation has occurred simultaneously with an enhanced capacity of companies to translate customer data into automated and customised user experiences (Manser Payne et al., 2021). AI influencers have become increasingly popular in the growth of influencer marketing. AI influencers are virtual fictitious entities developed with the aid of computer-generated imagery and are designed to humanoid qualities, attributes, and traits, all of which are regulated by software (Toyib & Paramita, 2024). The pivotal role of AI influencers on the fashion industry is steadily increasing due to their accurate replication of human characteristics and their active presence on social media platforms (Shin & Lee, 2023). For example, Forbes showcased several AI influencers by organising virtual online fashion shows at Fashion Week in Shanghai, Moscow, and Helsinki. These presentations showcased compelling projections for the future evolution of fashion in next generations (Rabimov, 2020). Furthermore, AI fashion influencers have the ability to transform their appearances, styles, and surroundings instantly with a simple click, rather than being static digital mannequins. The AI models are specifically created to demonstrate fashion collections in many innovative ways and provide businesses with the capability to quickly adjust, refine, and personalise appearances. Many

fashion firms have utilised the advantages of AI fashion influencers. Levi's, for example, has developed customised artificial intelligence models to enhance representation in terms of body size, skin colour, and age. The company collaborated with LaLaLand.ai, a digital firm specialising in creating tailored AI models for fashion clients, to conceptualise this avatar (Demopoulos, 2023).



Prada, a prominent fashion brand, employed an AI model called Candy to reintroduce the Prada Candy perfume as part of their ReThink Reality advertising campaign. The virtual muse engages with the scent in many forms of content (Hiort, 2021). The AI model Shudu has appeared in *Vogue* and *Women's Wear Daily*, served as the face of advertising campaigns for Balmain and Ellesse, and made her debut on the red carpet at the 2019 BAFTA film awards wearing a custom-made gown by Swarovski (Semic, 2019). Samsung enlisted Lil Miquela, a virtual influencer, singer, and activist, to flawlessly represent their worldwide #TeamGalaxy campaign with the motto "Do What You Can't". Balmain, the renowned French luxury fashion label, introduced a campaign in the autumn of 2018 featuring three virtual models. Two of the models, Margot and Zhi, have an exclusive contract with the Balmain brand, whilst the third model, Shudu Gramme, operates independently and is widely recognised as The World's First Digital Supermodel. The use of virtual models in the Balmain campaign elicited a diverse array of responses from customers and media. The majority of individuals were captivated by the craftsmanship displayed in the creation of an exceptionally lifelike virtual human adorned in fashionable attire, but a minority expressed strong opposition to the idea of humans being replaced or left unemployed by these novel virtual beings (Christopher, 2020). Despite their popularity and enhanced penetration into the fashion world, there is a paucity of research focused on how AI fashion influencers could influence the consumers and gain their trust, and how this trust could result in the consumers' intention to follow them. This study intends to conceptually bridge this gap using the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory.



Theoretical Lens of the Study:

According to Sepehri et al. (2022), the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory proposes that the environment is comprised of a variety of stimuli that cause changes in the internal state (organism) of an individual, which in turn influence the individual's behavioural reaction. Stimuli are the different factors that are responsible for eliciting organismic responses in individuals (Chang & Thorson, 2004). The processing of stimuli by an organism results in the generation of certain perceptions and evaluations, which may be classified as either cognitive or emotional perspectives (Gamage & Ashill, 2023). Responses are the outcome of organismic reactions to stimuli, which may be defined as the individual's behaviours of approaching or avoiding the stimuli (Donovan & John, 1982).

Homophily:

Homophily is the sense of connection that arises from having comparable social qualities, such as shared values, interests, and memories, with the people we interact with (Chu & Kim, 2011). Regarding influencers, the connection between an influencer and their followers is established on the basis of the resemblance between the influencer and the followers (Kim & Kim, 2022). According to Alboqami (2023), a strong degree of homophily results in a greater level of admiration and trust for AI influencers. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that fashion AI influencers whose orientations are similar to those of their followers will be able to create a loyal audience. This relationship can create a greater sense of trust and emulation, as the followers will consider the fashion AI influencer as more genuine and real. Furthermore, homophily has a beneficial impact on the followers' inclination to accept and adhere to the messages endorsed by AI influencers (Toyib & Paramita, 2024). The impression of homophily can inspire customers to develop favourable attitudes and behavioural intentions on social media platforms (Bu et al., 2022). Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1- Homophily has a significant positive influence on consumers' intention to follow fashion AI influencers.

H3- Homophily has a significant positive influence on consumers' trust towards fashion AI influencers.

Anthropomorphism:

The significance of anthropomorphism, which refers to the attribution of human characteristics or qualities, is widely acknowledged in recent AI influencer marketing literature (Thomas & Fowler, 2021). Anthropomorphism can evoke various reactions from audiences or users, which can be either favourable or unfavourable (Dabiran et al., 2024). Research suggests that imbuing non-human entities such as AI influencers with humanlike characteristics encourages user engagement, elicits user reactions comparable to those observed in human-to-human interactions, and strengthens emotional connections (Blut et al., 2021). According to Golossenko et al. (2020), anthropomorphising brands with human characteristics makes them more approachable to customers. Attributing human-like features to AI influencers increases customers' perception of relatability. This relatability generates a sense of trust and credibility among customers, who see AI influencers as more accessible and trustworthy endorsers (Muniz et al., 2024). In an industry like fashion and lifestyle, it is a prerequisite for AI influencers to possess human attributes to make their content more relatable and trustworthy. Anthropomorphism affects how individuals react to many cues, such as intention and word-of-mouth recommendations (Konya-Baumbach et al., 2023). Anthropomorphism can lead to the development of trust, emotional connection, and favourable behavioural reactions towards things (Wan & Chen, 2021). This, in turn, might impact customers' inclination to follow AI fashion influencers. Thus, the following hypotheses are posited.

H2- Anthropomorphism has a significant positive influence on consumers' intention to follow fashion AI influencers.

H4- Anthropomorphism has a significant positive influence on consumers' trust towards fashion AI influencers.

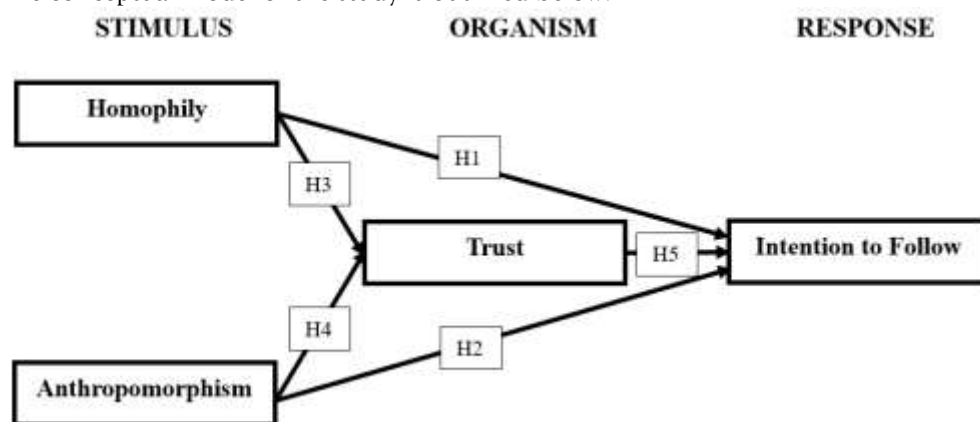
Trust towards Fashion AI Influencers and Intention to Follow:

In the context of influencer marketing, the connection between an influencer and their followers is established on the basis of the similarity between them (Kim & Kim, 2022). Followers are drawn to

influencers because they connect themselves with them (Jin et al., 2019) and in order for the audience to be influenced by the posts, the posts must be trustworthy, leading to their intention to follow the influencers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Inan et al., 2022). Trust is a deliberate and voluntary condition that exists between two people, characterised by a mutual expectation of the highest level of performance from each other, notwithstanding any uncertainty or doubt (Dunn, 2000). AI influencers are a newly emerged concept that may greatly impact society and organisations. Trust and transparency play a crucial role in this context (Hofeditz et al., 2022). Human influencers are considered more trustworthy than AI-integrated virtual influencers. However, AI influencers have the ability to generate more powerful positive responses, especially among customers who have a strong desire to stand out from the crowd (Sands et al., 2022). The role of trust is of paramount importance in the creation of a positive attitude and believability of those messages that impact the decision making of consumers within the fashion industry which is style-driven and personalised. Despite the fact that fashion influencers who are AI-enabled can try using the newest approaches for attracting audiences, it is the trust factor that remains the primary determinant of the intentions of the followers to interact with these influencers and follow them. Thus, the following hypothesis is posited.

H5- Trust towards AI influencers have a significant positive influence on consumers' intention to follow AI influencers.

The conceptual model of the study is outlined below.



Theoretical Implications:

In making the above argument, this work aims at advancing theoretical knowledge on AI influencers by applying the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory in the domain of digital marketing fashion industry. This research contributes to the literature on influencer marketing and consumer behaviour by proposing homophily and anthropomorphism as the two main stimuli affecting the levels of trust of consumers toward the AI influencers. It brings more understanding to how the elements of anthropomorphism and perceived similarity owing to perceived AI similarity between the influencer and the consumer, may build thoughts and feelings that result in ensuing behavioural tendencies like following the influencer. Moreover, this research contributes to the SOR framework by applying it to a new context and setting a foundation for employing the theory in the field of AI marketing. This integration provides an opportunity for the future studies of other stimuli that may affect consumer perception and behaviour of AI influencers, thus providing a starting point for further examinations of psychological processes occurring in digital and AI-based ecosystems.

Practical Implications:

By bringing into light the importance of homophily and anthropomorphism in building trust with consumers, this study can be useful for fashion brands, marketers, and developers of AI influencers. Consumers' trust is one of the primary drivers of their intention to follow AI influencers, and therefore, brands need to establish AI personas that are as close to their target consumers as possible so as to achieve

greater similarity and realism. It is therefore evident from the study that brands should incorporate human-like attributes to the AI based influencers to enhance the consumer's emotional bond leading to increased loyalty. Furthermore, this study adds to the limited literature available on AI influencers by developing the conceptual framework that highlights the role of trust in the effectiveness of AI-based marketing communication. While the phenomenon of AI influencers is still emerging, understanding these dynamics will be essential for businesses seeking to harness this innovative marketing tool successfully, which may result in the development of new industry standards for influencer marketing in fashion.

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