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The Role of Virtual Influencer Attributes on Customer Engagement in Sri Lankan Fashion Industry: The Mediation Role of Perceived Authenticity

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of virtual influencers in the Sri Lankan fashion industry, addressing the lack of empirical evidence from emerging markets. Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, it investigates how key virtual influencer attributes—anthropomorphism, aesthetic value, and entertainment value—influence consumer engagement, with perceived authenticity acting as a mediating variable. Using a positivist and deductive quantitative approach, primary data were collected via an online questionnaire from 250 urban Sri Lankan consumers aged 18–35 who had prior exposure to virtual fashion influencers. Data were analysed using multiple regression and bootstrapped mediation analysis. The findings indicate that all three influencer attributes have significant positive effects on consumer engagement. Furthermore, perceived authenticity partially mediates these relationships, underscoring its role as a crucial psychological mechanism shaping cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement. The study extends the S–O–R framework to virtual influencers in an emerging market and provides practical guidance for fashion brands aiming to develop authentic and engaging virtual influencer strategies in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism; Aesthetic Value; Consumer Engagement; Perceived Authenticity; Virtual Influencers

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Introduction

The current global business landscape is deeply rooted in uncharted digital transformation, profoundly redefining industries, models of communication, and customer habits around the world (Brodie et al., 2011; Kim & Sundar, 2012). Such universal digitalisation has transformed the shift from traditional advertisement towards embracing new paradigms within the ever-changing digital frontiers. Of these emergent tactics, the most notable would be the leveraging of influencer marketing, seizing on the power of people to create genuine connections between consumers and brands (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In a digital environment, activating high-strength customer engagement (CE) has been on the priority lists of organisations looking to establish brand loyalty, influence purchases, and make sustainable commercial profitability (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Customer engagement is a multifaceted construct encompassing various exposures of consumers to brand communications beyond exposure per se. It comprises cognitive engagement, as supported by active attention and information processing, and by the interaction among brands and consumers' mental engagement with brand content; affective engagement, as indicated by attachment feelings and positive affect towards emotional attachment to brands; and behavioural engagement, as indicated by overt behaviours such as liking, commenting, posting, actively searching for brand information, and following on social media (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Lou & Yuan, 2019)

The nation is experiencing a fierce digital adoption wave, reflected in ever-rising internet penetration levels and widespread utilisation of mobile phones, that has anchored social media in position as the communications, information acquisition, and increasingly, business hub (Wijerathna & Wijesundara, 2022). Empirical research confirms that social media marketing certainly improves Sri Lankan consumers' buying behaviour in the apparel sector (Francis et al., 2024). Although influencer marketing is a relatively underdeveloped but very fast-growing sector in the country, it is being seen more and more as an important strategic requirement for local and international brands that would like to create effective consumer experiences (Samaradiwakara, 2023; Wijerathna & Wijesundara, 2022). Sri Lankan consumers, particularly urban Generation Z youth well versed with technology, heavily rely on people who possess apparent fashion awareness when making informed purchasing decisions and are inclined to adopt examples (Samaradiwakara, 2023; Wijerathna & Wijesundara, 2022).

Existing research into influencer marketing in Sri Lanka has been dedicated to celebrity endorsement via humans and micro-influencers, testing their traditional attributes of influencing consumer behaviour (Samaradiwakara, 2023; Wijerathna & Wijesundara, 2022). Still, the function, efficacy, and nuance of consumer reactions to virtual influencers, a facet of a qualitatively distinct form of endorser with no physical presence and lived experience, is overexplored in this particular context (Francis et al., 2024). There is available technology for high-end digital aids in a culture that is highly devoted to authenticity, verifiable expertise, and impartial judgments by opinion leaders (Samaradiwakara, 2023; Wijerathna & Wijesundara, 2022). While global studies have extensively examined the impact of human influencers on consumer engagement, there is a noticeable lack of research on virtual influencers, particularly within the Sri Lankan fashion industry. Prior research on influencer

marketing has largely centered on human influencers, emphasising factors such as attractiveness, credibility, and authenticity in shaping consumer behaviour (Brodie et al., 2011; Kim & Sundar, 2012). Although recent studies have begun to explore virtual influencers (VIs), they have primarily focused on global or Western markets, offering limited insights into emerging contexts (Goyal & Bhardwaj, 2025). However, little is known about how attributes like anthropomorphism, aesthetic appeal, and entertainment value of VIs influence consumer perceptions and behavioural intentions in emerging economies. This gap is particularly relevant to Sri Lanka, where digital adoption in the fashion industry is growing rapidly, yet consumers remain cautious about authenticity and trust in virtual environments. Addressing this gap extends the S-O-R framework to a new cultural and technological setting, contributing both to academic literature and providing practical guidance for Sri Lankan fashion brands aiming to leverage VIs effectively. This gap is significant as the growing presence of virtual influencers presents new opportunities and challenges for brands in shaping consumer perceptions and engagement in the local context. The entirely virtual platform of VIs necessarily limits how much they can offer tangible product experiences or share "real-world" information, potentially contrary to local consumers' desires for genuine endorsements (Seo & Jin, 2023). However, although prior studies acknowledge the importance of authenticity and trust in influencer marketing, limited empirical research has examined the psychological mechanism through which virtual influencer attributes translate into consumer engagement, particularly in emerging markets such as Sri Lanka. Recent studies suggest that consumers' perceived authenticity of influencers functions as a critical internal evaluation that shapes their responses to influencer content (Lee & Eastin, 2021). In the context of virtual influencers, where the absence of physical human presence may heighten skepticism, perceived authenticity becomes especially salient in determining whether consumers cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally engage with brand content (Usai et al., 2021). Although emerging evidence indicates that perceived authenticity can mediate the relationship between influencer attributes and consumer outcomes (Zniva et al., 2023), this mechanism remains largely unexplored within the Sri Lankan fashion industry. Consequently, this study extends prior research by incorporating perceived authenticity as a mediating variable, offering a deeper explanation of how virtual influencer characteristics influence consumer engagement through internal psychological processing, consistent with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework.

Despite the growing adoption of virtual influencers in global fashion marketing, there is limited empirical evidence on their effectiveness within the Sri Lankan fashion industry. Existing influencer marketing research in Sri Lanka has predominantly focused on human influencers, offering little insight into how virtual influencer attributes such as anthropomorphism, aesthetic value, and entertainment value influence consumer engagement. Moreover, the psychological mechanism through which these attributes shape engagement, particularly the role of perceived authenticity, remains largely unexplored in this emerging market context. This lack of context-specific understanding creates uncertainty for fashion brands seeking to leverage virtual influencers effectively, highlighting the need to examine how virtual influencer characteristics influence consumer engagement through perceived authenticity in Sri Lanka.

To address this specific gap, the following research objectives are considered,

RO1: To examine the influence of virtual influencer attributes on customer engagement with fashion brands in the Sri Lankan fashion industry.

RO2: To investigate the mediating impact of perceived authenticity between the virtual influencer attributes and customer engagement with virtual influencer content in the Lankan fashion industry.

Literature Review

Virtual Influencers in Digital Marketing

Virtual influencers (VIs) are digital characters designed to mimic human behaviour, managed by brands, designers, or content creators (Dondapati, 2025; Mouritzen et al., 2024). These VIs frequently promote fashion products on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok through carefully curated visuals and narratives (Varghese, 2025; Yang, 2025). Prominent examples, such as Lil Miquela and Shudu Gram, illustrate that audiences can form connections with these virtual personas similar to those developed with human influencers (Goyal & Bhardwaj, 2025; Nasr et al., 2025; Seyedzadeh, 2024).

Customer Engagement in Digital Fashion Marketing

Customer engagement is a multifaceted concept encompassing the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural interactions consumers have with brands (Brodie et al., 2011). Within the realm of social media, this translates into tangible actions such as likes, comments, and shares, as well as sustained following, brand loyalty, and active advocacy. According to Hollebeek et al. (2014), engagement extends beyond a simple reaction to content; it represents an evolving and ongoing relationship between the consumer and the brand. Social media influencers, including their virtual counterparts, play a pivotal role in nurturing this relationship.

Anthropomorphism and Customer Engagement

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics, emotions, and intentions to non-human entities (Epley et al., 2007). In marketing, this often leads to increased emotional attachment and trustworthiness with brands or characters (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). When virtual influencers (VIs) are designed with human-like features such as expressive facial gestures, a distinct fashion sense, or personal life narratives, they can foster a sense of social presence and perceived realism (Kim & Sundar, 2012; Li & Sung, 2021)

H₁: The anthropomorphism positively affects the consumer engagement in the Sri Lankan fashion industry.

Aesthetic Value of Virtual Influencers on customer engagement

Aesthetic value refers to the perceived visual attractiveness or artistic appeal of an object, which, in the context of this discussion, applies directly to the virtual influencer and their content (Bloch, 1995). In the realm of digital marketing, particularly within the fashion industry, visuals are paramount in shaping consumer perceptions, defining brand identity, and influencing consumer responses (Pham & Avnet, 2009).

H₂: The aesthetic value positively affects the consumer engagement in the Sri Lankan fashion industry.

Entertainment Value in Virtual Influencer Content on customer engagement

Entertainment value describes how amusing, enjoyable, and emotionally stimulating the content is (Ducoffe, 1996). In the world of influencer marketing, entertainment is a major force driving engagement. It leads to positive emotional responses and encourages users to spend more time interacting with the content. Ashley and Tuten (2015) highlight that entertaining content, especially when it includes humor, compelling narratives, or novelty, helps create emotional connections with followers. For virtual influencers, their ability to craft creative storylines, join popular trends, or offer unique, personality-driven humor significantly boosts their appeal.

H₃: The entertainment value positively affects the consumer engagement in the Sri Lankan fashion industry.

Mediating role of the Perceived Authenticity

Anthropomorphism, assigning human-like characteristics to non-human entities, can enhance consumers' emotional connection and trust toward a brand or product. Research suggests that when consumers perceive a brand as more human-like, it is often considered more genuine and relatable, enhancing its authenticity in the eyes of consumers (Cho, 2025). This perceived authenticity can, in turn, strengthen engagement, as consumers are more likely to interact with brands, they consider trustworthy and real. Therefore, perceived authenticity serves as a mechanism through which anthropomorphism influences consumer engagement.

H₄: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between anthropomorphism and consumer engagement.

Entertainment value derived from fun, amusement, or enjoyable content is a well-established driver of engagement. However, research suggests that entertainment by itself may not fully sustain engagement unless consumers see the experience as credible and authentic (Cho, 2025). Studies in marketing and advertising contexts show that entertainment influences consumer engagement more strongly when it is perceived as authentic and aligned with brand identity. In these models, entertainment content fosters stronger engagement outcomes because it enhances perceived authenticity, which deepens emotional and psychological resonance with the audience.

H₅: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between entertainment value and consumer engagement.

Aesthetic value, referring to the visual or sensory appeal of a product or content, affects consumer perceptions not only of attractiveness but also of genuineness and credibility. Research on design and consumer perceptions indicates that aesthetically pleasing experiences help form positive judgments about a brand's authenticity, which then enhance engagement outcomes (Chrysochou & Grunert, 2014). Perceived authenticity, grounded in how design and sensory appeal align with consumer expectations and values, mediates the

effect of aesthetic value on engagement by strengthening emotional attachment and user interaction.

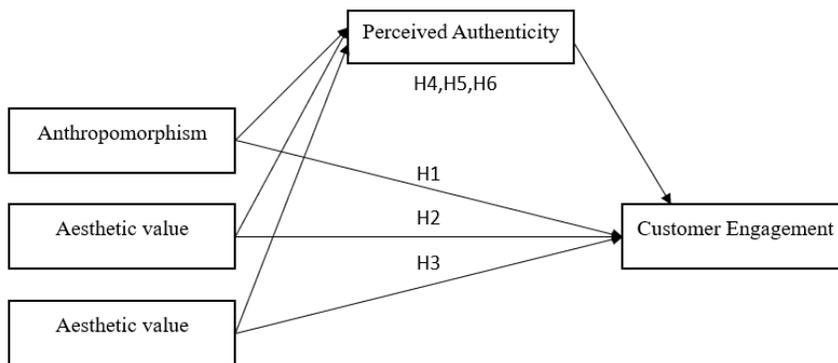
H₆: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between aesthetic value and consumer engagement

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is theoretically grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, originally proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). According to this framework, environmental stimuli (S) influence an individual's internal states or "organism" (O), which subsequently lead to a behavioural response (R). In the context of this research, the characteristics of virtual influencers serve as the stimuli (S), with anthropomorphism, aesthetic value, and entertainment value identified as the key stimulus dimensions. These stimuli are proposed to shape consumers' internal states, which are represented by cognitive and emotional responses toward the virtual influencer and the fashion content. In this study, perceived authenticity is introduced as a mediating variable within the organism stage, reflecting consumers' judgments regarding the genuineness and credibility of the virtual influencer. This perceived authenticity is expected to channel the effects of the stimuli on consumers' internal responses and, ultimately, influence their observable behavioural responses (R), operationalised through multiple dimensions of customer engagement such as likes, comments, shares, and brand loyalty. By incorporating perceived authenticity as a mediator, the study captures how consumers' recognition of genuineness enhances the impact of virtual influencer characteristics on engagement outcomes.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Methodology

This study adopts the philosophy of research under positivism (Saunders et al., 2020). A deductive quantitative approach was utilised and a cross-sectional time horizon survey approach was employed. The study focuses on urban adolescents aged 18-35 years old, as they are the most technologically engaged and fashion-conscious generation in Sri Lanka;

nevertheless, the lack of inclusion of rural and elderly demographics is acknowledged as a methodological limitation.

Due to the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame of virtual influencer followers in Sri Lanka, purposive sampling was employed as the most appropriate technique to ensure theoretical relevance and data quality. This approach enabled the selection of respondents who possessed prior exposure to virtual fashion influencers, a necessary condition for providing informed evaluations of virtual influencer attributes and perceived authenticity. Screening questions were used to confirm respondents' exposure to virtual influencers and engagement with fashion-related social media content. A total of 250 valid responses were obtained, which is consistent with sample size recommendations for regression and mediation analysis in behavioural research.

Primary data were collected via a self-completed, standardised web questionnaire, distributed via WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram platforms. Items were adopted from existing validated instruments and scored on a five-point Likert scale. Due to the absence of a comprehensive sampling framework, purposive sampling was selected as the most appropriate sampling method for this study. The sample was 250 participants who were selected via purposive sampling for salience and only those previously exposed to virtual fashion influencers were included. Screening questions were used to check compliance. SPSS was used to analyse data, beginning with descriptive statistics to detail demographic and behavioural profiles and to test hypotheses. Multiple linear regression was performed. The operationalisation table clearly presents each variable along with its respective dimensions, indicators, and measurement scales adapted from established sources. Specifically, Anthropomorphism includes five indicators, Aesthetic Value has five indicators, Entertainment Value comprises five indicators, perceived authenticity 5 indicators and Customer Engagement consist of 15 indicators across 3 dimensions Cognitive Engagement (5), Affective Engagement (5), Behavioural Engagement (5) all measured using a five-point Likert scale to ensure reliability and consistency.

Validity and Reliability

All criteria for validity and reliability were satisfactorily met. Factor loading values for each of the four indicators consistently surpassed the threshold of 0.7. Cronbach's alpha values for all significant variables exceeded the standard threshold of 0.7, thereby confirming the reliability of all variables in the questionnaire. Furthermore, each of the KMO values and AVE values exceeded 0.5, and all significance values for Bartlett's Test were below 0.05. The square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each variable also surpassed the corresponding inter-construct correlations, providing additional confirmation of construct validity.

Results

Demographic information like gender, age, occupation status, and monthly income of the respondent is collected to add value to the final research outcomes. Frequency analysis is conducted for every demographic variable of the current research i.e. gender, age,

occupational status, and monthly income. There are 148 male respondents from the total no of respondents (300), whereas there are 152 female respondents. A larger group of the respondents (268) fall in the 18 – 29years age group whereas it accounts for 89.33 %. More respondents, 185 are working respondents since 68.8%. Most of the respondents have a monthly income of Rs. 41,000 to Rs.60,001 and there are 95 in number.

H₁: The anthropomorphism positively affects the consumer engagement in the Sri Lankan fashion industry.

As depicted in the Table 1, the direct effects represent the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable without considering the mediating variable. For **anthropomorphism** (A), the direct effect is particularly strong ($\beta = 0.704$, $p < 0.001$), and the majority of the total effect. This indicates that the II has a strong and direct impact on the customer engagement (CE). This finding suggests that a higher degree of informational integration leads to a significant increase in CE. The β coefficient of 0.704 indicates that for every unit increase in A, the CE increases by 70.4% of a standard deviation, highlighting a robust direct relationship.

Model : 4

Y : CE

X : A

M : PA

Sample

Size: 250

Table 1

Direct Effect of II on PWOM

Direct effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI	c'_cs
0.704	0.034	20.520	0.000	0.636	0.771	0.814
Completely standardised indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
PA	0.109	0.027	0.059	0.164		
<i>Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output: 95.0000</i>						
<i>Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals: 5000</i>						

H₂: The aesthetic value positively affects the consumer engagement in the Sri Lankan fashion industry.

The results indicate that aesthetic value has a strong and significant positive effect on consumer engagement ($\beta = 0.739$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H₂. The confidence interval does not include zero, confirming the robustness of this relationship. Additionally, the indirect effect of aesthetic value on consumer engagement through perceived authenticity is significant ($\beta = 0.167$; 95% CI [0.114, 0.230]). This suggests that perceived authenticity partially mediates

the relationship, indicating that aesthetic value enhances consumer engagement both directly and indirectly by strengthening perceptions of authenticity in the Sri Lankan fashion industry.

Model : 4

Y : CE

X : AV

M : PA

Sample

Size: 250

Table 2

Direct Effect of TI on PWOM

Direct effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI	c'_cs
0.739	0.040	18.440	0.000	0.660	0.818	0.742
Completely standardized indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
PA	0.167	0.029	0.114	0.230		

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output: 95.0000
Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals: 5000

H₃: The entertainment value positively affects the consumer engagement in the Sri Lankan fashion industry.

The results of Model 4 show that entertainment value has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on consumer engagement ($\beta = 0.387$, $SE = 0.055$, $t = 7.078$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H₃. The 95% confidence interval (LLCI = 0.279, ULCI = 0.494) does not include zero, confirming the reliability of this effect. Furthermore, the indirect effect of entertainment value on consumer engagement through perceived authenticity is also significant (indirect effect = 0.444; 95% CI [0.371, 0.517]). Since zero is not contained within the confidence interval, perceived authenticity is confirmed as a significant mediator. Overall, these findings indicate that perceived authenticity partially mediates the relationship between entertainment value and consumer engagement, suggesting that entertaining fashion content enhances engagement both directly and indirectly by strengthening consumers' perceptions of authenticity in the Sri Lankan fashion industry.

Model : 4

Y : CE

X : EV

M : PA

Sample

Size: 250

Table 3

Direct Effect of RI on PWOM

Direct effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI	c'_cs
0.387	0.055	7.078	0.000	0.279	0.494	0.340
Completely standardized indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
PA	0.444	0.037	0.371	0.517		
<i>Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output: 95.0000</i>						
<i>Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:5000</i>						

Table 4

Total and Indirect Effects of II on PWOM

Total effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI	c_cs
0.798	0.018	44.580	0.000	0.763	0.833	0.922
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
PA	0.094	0.023	0.051	0.144		
Completely standardized indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
PA	0.109	0.027	0.059	0.164		
<i>Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output:95.0000</i>						
<i>Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:5000</i>						

The results of Model 4 provide empirical support for H₈, which proposes that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between anthropomorphism and consumer engagement. The total effect of anthropomorphism on consumer engagement is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.798$, $SE = 0.018$, $t = 44.580$, $p < 0.001$), with the 95% confidence interval (LLCI = 0.763, ULCI = 0.833) excluding zero. This indicates a strong overall influence of anthropomorphism on consumer engagement. Furthermore, the indirect effect of anthropomorphism on consumer engagement through perceived authenticity is significant (indirect effect = 0.094; 95% CI [0.051, 0.144]). The completely standardised indirect effect ($\beta = 0.109$; 95% CI [0.059, 0.164]) further confirms the robustness of the mediation effect. Since the confidence intervals do not include zero, perceived authenticity is established as a significant mediator. Overall, the findings indicate that perceived authenticity partially mediates the relationship between anthropomorphism and consumer engagement, suggesting that anthropomorphic features enhance engagement both directly and indirectly by strengthening consumers' perceptions of authenticity.

H₅: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between entertainment value and consumer engagement.

The results of Model 4 provide strong support for H₉, which proposes that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between entertainment value and consumer engagement. The total effect of entertainment value on consumer engagement is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.906$, $SE = 0.022$, $t = 40.772$, $p < 0.001$), with the 95% confidence interval (LLCI = 0.862, ULCI = 0.949) excluding zero, indicating a strong overall relationship. In addition, the indirect effect of entertainment value on consumer engagement through perceived authenticity is statistically significant (indirect effect = 0.166; 95% CI [0.114, 0.227]). The completely standardised indirect effect ($\beta = 0.167$; 95% CI [0.114, 0.230]) further confirms the robustness of the mediation effect. Since zero is not contained within the confidence intervals, perceived authenticity is confirmed as a significant mediator. Overall, these findings indicate that perceived authenticity partially mediates the relationship between entertainment value and consumer engagement, suggesting that entertainment-oriented fashion content enhances engagement both directly and indirectly by strengthening consumers' perceptions of authenticity.

Model : 4
 Y : CE
 X : EV
 M : PA

Sample
 Size: 250

Table 5

Total and Indirect Effects of TI on PWOM

Total effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	c_cs
0.906	0.022	40.772	0.000	0.862	0.949	0.909
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
PA	0.166	0.029	0.114	0.227		
Completely standardized indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
PA	0.167	0.029	0.114	0.230		

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output: 95.0000
Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals: 5000

H₆: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between aesthetic value and consumer engagement

The results of Model 4 provide empirical support for H₁₀, which proposes that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between aesthetic value and consumer engagement. The total effect of aesthetic value on consumer engagement is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.891$, $SE = 0.038$, $t = 23.548$, $p < 0.001$), with the 95% confidence interval (LLCI = 0.817, ULCI = 0.966) excluding zero, indicating a strong overall relationship. Furthermore,

the indirect effect of aesthetic value on consumer engagement through perceived authenticity is statistically significant (indirect effect = 0.504; 95% CI [0.428, 0.579]). The completely standardised indirect effect ($\beta = 0.444$; 95% CI [0.371, 0.517]) further confirms the robustness of the mediation effect. Since the confidence intervals do not include zero, perceived authenticity is confirmed as a significant mediator. Overall, these findings indicate that perceived authenticity partially mediates the relationship between aesthetic value and consumer engagement, suggesting that aesthetically appealing fashion content enhances consumer engagement both directly and indirectly by strengthening perceptions of authenticity in the Sri Lankan fashion industry.

Model : 4
 Y : CE
 X : AV
 M : PA
 Sample
 Size: 250

Table 61

Total and Indirect Effect of RI on PWOM

Total effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	c_cs
0.891	0.038	23.548	0.000	0.817	0.966	0.784
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
PA	0.504	0.038	0.428	0.579		
Completely standardised indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
PA	0.444	0.037	0.371	0.517		
<i>Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output: 95.0000</i>						
<i>Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:5000</i>						

Summary of the Hypothesis

Table 7

Summary of the Hypothesis

Hypothesis	Relationship	Effect Type	Coefficient (β)	p-value	CI (95%)	Mediation Impact	Results
H ₁	A → CE	Direct	0.704	<0.001	-	-	Accepted
H ₂	AV → CE	Direct	0.739	<0.001	-	-	Accepted

H₃	EV → CE	Direct	0.387	<0.001	-	-	Accepted
H₄	A → PA → CE	Indirect	0.094	-	[0.051, 0.144]	Partial	Accepted
H₅	AV → PA → CE	Indirect	0.166	-	[0.114, 0.227]	Partial	Accepted
H₆	EV → PA → CE	Indirect	0.504	-	[0.428, 0.579]	Partial	Accepted

Discussion

The findings confirm that anthropomorphism, aesthetic value, and entertainment value significantly and positively influence consumer engagement with virtual influencers in the Sri Lankan fashion industry. Among these, anthropomorphism exhibits a particularly strong effect, indicating that human-like virtual influencers stimulate higher cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement. This supports Kim and Sundar (2012), who argue that anthropomorphic cues encourage consumers to perceive non-human agents as social actors. In the Sri Lankan context, where interpersonal warmth is culturally valued, human-like virtual influencers foster familiarity and trust, leading to stronger engagement behaviours. Aesthetic value also plays a significant role in enhancing consumer engagement, particularly through emotional attachment and behavioural responses. Consistent with Pham and Avnet (2009), visually appealing virtual influencers generate stronger affective reactions, resulting in higher levels of interaction such as liking, sharing, and following. The mediating role of perceived authenticity indicates that aesthetic appeal strengthens engagement not only through visual attraction but also by reinforcing perceptions of genuineness. Entertainment value was found to positively influence cognitive and behavioural engagement, as entertaining content captures attention and encourages active interaction. This finding aligns with Ashley and Tuten (2015), who highlight entertainment as a key driver of digital engagement. The significant mediation effect of perceived authenticity further suggests that entertainment-based engagement is more effective when the content is perceived as authentic. Overall, the results emphasise perceived authenticity as a critical mechanism that amplifies the impact of virtual influencer characteristics on consumer engagement in the Sri Lankan fashion industry.

Conclusion

This study concludes that anthropomorphism, aesthetic value, and entertainment value significantly enhance consumer engagement with virtual influencers in the Sri Lankan fashion industry. The findings further highlight perceived authenticity as a critical mediating mechanism, strengthening the influence of these characteristics on engagement outcomes. Virtual influencers that appear human-like, visually appealing, and entertaining are more likely to generate meaningful consumer interactions when they are perceived as genuine and credible. Overall, the study underscores the importance of designing authentic virtual influencer experiences to foster sustained consumer engagement within emerging digital fashion markets such as Sri Lanka.

Future Research Directions

Future studies can expand the sample across different age groups and rural areas to ensure generalisability. A longitudinal study is also possible to track trends in consumer engagement in the long run. Qualitative methods like interviews can also explore more nuanced findings

on how they are viewed by users. Future research might use Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to give a more thorough and rigorous examination of the interactions between factors, going beyond the direct impacts assessed by regression analysis in the current study. Examining ethical concerns, trust, and transparency regarding virtual influencer promotion, especially in culturally sensitive environments like Sri Lanka, would also be useful. Finally, comparative studies between virtual and human influencers can suggest differences in performance and popularity.

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