

Social Media Influencers and Artificial Intelligence: Opportunities and Challenges

Will it be Boom or Doom for Social Media Influencers?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines social media influencers' (SMIs) perceptions of the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in advancing their relationships with followers, and their views of the opportunities/dangers of AI in assuring their authenticity. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study explores how SMIs' (a) perceive AI as a tool to help SMI activities and (b) perceive AI as a positive/negative effect on relationships with followers. Data was collected through 17 semi-structured interviews with Canadian SMIs in various fields. This study shows that AI is perceived to offer significant opportunities for SMIs including improved data analytics, enhanced connectedness, and strengthening SMIs' relationships with their followers. However, SMIs are concerned about the dangers of AI, including loss of expressing ones' true self and loss of honesty with their followers. Collectively, participants indicated concerns about their authenticity when AI is used. Additionally, this study reveals practical implications for SMIs by providing insights into opportunities and challenges being faced in the context of AI.

1. Introduction

Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are "ordinary Internet users" with "large followings" and have the ability to "monetize their following" (Abidin 2015, para.3). The past few years have had huge increases in influencer marketing activity, with market size worldwide more than doubling between 2019 and 2023, increasing from US\$6.5 billion to US\$21.1 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2023b). Social media influencers have become reliable sources of product recommendations for their followers. Suci (2019) reported that nearly 45% of respondents trust influencers' recommendations, and 50% have bought a product based on their suggestions. Jin et al. (2021) indicated that a strong SMIs-followers relationship can improve perceived trustworthiness, leading to increased purchase intention and enhanced marketing effectiveness (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Recognizing the benefits of influencer marketing, brands are increasingly investing in this marketing method and partnering with SMIs to promote their products and services. Specifically, brands in the US spent US\$3.9 billion on

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influencer marketing in 2021, which is anticipated to increase to more than US\$7 billion in 2024 (Statista, 2023a).

The rapid growth of influencer marketing is evidenced by the ever greater numbers of social media platforms and enormity of social media usage (Santora, 2023). By 2025 there were industry estimates of upwards of 127 million influencers worldwide, with as many as thirty percent generating a full time income from their activities (StoryBox, 2024). Meanwhile, DataReportal (n.d.) reports that there are “5.31 billion social media users around the world at the start of April 2025, equating to 64.7 percent of the total global population”; this number is projected to increase to 6.05 billion by 2028 (Statista, 2024c). Marketers have always leveraged technology advancements to drive change (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022) and artificial intelligence (AI) has become a major enabling force in social media marketing, helping SMIs make decisions creating stickiness for influencers. AI is revolutionary tool assisting marketers in tailoring content strategies based on data-driven insights generated through algorithmic analysis (Haleem et al., 2022). Indrawan et al.(2024, p.22) discuss the profound impact of technologies, particularly AI, on social media, with these “usher(ing) in a new era of data-driven decision-making, hyper-personalization, and efficiency.”

AI is currently richly embedded in a wide range of marketing activities, ranging from obtaining customers’ insights (Haleem et al., 2022; Huang & Rust, 2021; Lee & Kim, 2024; Zulaikha et al., 2020), to enhancing customers’ experience (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022; Haleem et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2019; Verma et al., 2021) and creating marketing content (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022; Haleem et al., 2022; Nair & Gupta, 2021), among others. Marketers across most industries are now leveraging AI in productivity gaining ways. For instance, firms in the beauty and fashion industries such as Estée Lauder and H&M use AI across business processes, including customer engagement, making content generation more efficient, and in aiding creativity and productivity (Filipsson, 2025; McDowell, 2023a,b). The potential for AI to impact marketing activities seems boundless.

Even with so much potential for AI to replace activities done by humans, “firms generally are using AI to augment their human employees’ capabilities” rather than to replace humans” (Davenport et al., 2020, p.27). This is especially the case for customer-interfacing activities, where marketers realize they need to use AI with care, as customers often view AI negatively due to its lack of empathy and absence of feelings (Davenport et al., 2020). This further includes concerns about the authenticity of marketing activities and the potential for algorithmic biases. For instance, the emergence of chatbots and virtual agents might enhance customer management but also lead customers to encounter a less authentic experience (Moustakas et al., 2020, Neururer et al., 2018; Wuenderlich & Paluch, 2017).

Despite the growing use of AI in marketing activities and an ever-rising body of research on AI, there is scant research on SMIs’ perceptions of the role of AI in advancing relationships with followers. Indeed, while existing literature has explored various applications of AI in marketing and the opportunities and challenges it brings to the field (e.g., Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022; De Bruyn et al., 2020; Haleem et al., 2022; Kapitan et al., 2022; Verma et al., 2021), no prior research has examined how SMIs view AI in terms of its usefulness for their influencing activities or whether SMIs incorporate AI in generating marketing content and advancing relationships with followers. Additionally, while authenticity is established as being important to SMIs (e.g., Kapitan et al. 2022; Reade 2021) and that AI has the potential for deleterious effects on consumer perceptions of authenticity (e.g., Avdeeff, 2019; Neururer et al., 2018; Wuenderlich & Paluch, 2017), our knowledge about how SMIs view the impacts of AI on *their ability to be perceived as authentic by followers remains limited*. Specifically, this research has two purposes. First, to investigate SMIs’ perceptions of the usefulness of AI

in advancing relationships with followers. Second, to learn whether SMIs feel that using AI adversely affects SMI' authenticity.

Throughout the discussion, we rely on source credibility theory. Tanwar et al's (2024, p,187) SMI literature review (n=183) report that the "most used theories (are) theory of planned behavior, self-presentation theory, social exchange and relationship management theory, public relations theory and self-congruence theory." Additionally, the authors note that some studies have borrowed and adapted theories including parasocial interaction theory and social identity theory, while summarizing the "most used models (as being) Persuasion Knowledge Model (and) Source Credibility Model". Han & Balabanis (2024) meta-analysis (n=53) looked at SMI factors impacting followers' attitude and behavior responses. As they report (p 420), "the comprehensive meta-analysis underscored that credibility, trustworthiness, and perceived expertise of social media influencers emerged as the principal factors influencing attitudinal outcomes." The authors also assessed the explanatory performance of several theories including Similarity-Attraction Theory (Byrne, 1971), Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953), Congruity theory (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955), and two process models, with the authors concluding that "the Source Credibility Theory offers the most robust and cogent explanatory framework for understanding these outcomes." As this shows, source credibility theory can effectively explain various phenomena related to SMIs and their relationships with followers.

Through findings from 17 semi-structured interviews, this research contributes in three important ways: (1) expanding current understandings of influencer marketing by exploring SMIs perceptions of the applications of AI and how they embrace AI technology to advance their relationships with followers, (2) enhancing existing literature on SMIs' authenticity by identifying two additional dimensions of authenticity, and (3) adding insights related to how SMIs feel about the effects of using AI for content creation and other purposes. This contribution relates to perceptions SMIs have about potential consequences of AI, revealing concerns SMIs have related to the potential for misleading and deceptive content, risks to their authenticity, and even harm to followers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers represent opinion leaders made possible through social media platforms (Belanche et al., 2021). Consistent with numerous definitions, Hung et al. (2022, p.486) describe SMIs as "... individuals taking advantage of social media platforms to share their expertise, opinions, and feelings online. Their popularity is made possible by advances in media technology that enable them to access millions of viewers at very low costs". Relationships between SMIs and followers tend to be one-sided, with followers developing a bond toward SMIs through repeated exposures. This relationship form is termed "Parasocial relationships" (PSR), originally introduced by Horton & Wohl in 1956, a phenomenon common toward celebrities, have shifted to non-celebrities through social media (Aw & Chuah, 2021), with "viewers feel(ing) that they know and understand the persona in the same intimate way they know and understand flesh and blood friends" (Perse & Rubin 1989, p.60). Leite & Baptista (2022, p.3) refer to PSR as "media users' sense of closeness and intimacy with the persona as though they were real friends", suggestive of a long-lasting relationship that can extend beyond social media interactions, resembling real social ones.

Even though social media platforms enable two-way interaction through posting and replying to messages and comments, the relationship between SMIs and followers is more imaginary than real, much akin to PSR within the realm of traditional celebrities (Sokolova & Kefi,

2020). Research on SMIs-followers parasocial relationships largely focuses on identifying the antecedents of this relationship (Ashraf et al., 2023; Aw & Chuah, 2021; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sakib et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Su et al., 2021; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Key antecedents mentioned in previous literature include SMIs' *attractiveness*, *likability*, *similarity*, *expertise*, *trustworthiness*, *authenticity* and *credibility*. Specifically, Sakib et al. (2020) indicated that SMIs' *credibility* (measured by trustworthiness, expertise and goodwill features) and *physical attractiveness* positively impact SMIs-parasocial relationships. Yuan & Lou (2020) further assert that SMIs' *similarity* (measured by mutual characteristics and common interest) and *physical attractiveness* are positively related to parasocial relationships between SMIs and followers. Aw & Chuah (2021) further suggest that SMIs' content that is visually attractive presents a sense of prestige, and conveys expertise has positive impacts on SMIs-followers parasocial relationships.

Noted earlier, two meta-analyses (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Tanwar et al., 2024) reveal that source credibility theory has good explanatory power for understanding *SMI – to – follower* relationships and still another meta-analysis (n=101) by Spörl-Wang et al. (2025) reveal that credibility is one of four SMI' variables most often associated with positive outcomes, with attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness being the others. Given that expertise and trustworthiness are components of credibility, and that credibility significantly shapes attitude toward the SMI (Ooi et al., 2023), source credibility is a pivotal construct for explaining how SMIs influence their followers.

Using Lee's (2020) framework, Balaban & Szambolic (2022; p. 238) suggest that "authenticity of source concerns whether a communicator is really who he or she claims to be," and that "authenticity of the source is associated with source credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise." Balaban & Szambolic's (2022) interviews with SMIs (n = 20) found that SMIs perceive their authenticity with followers is shaped by numerous factors including their "sincerity, expertise, uniqueness, commitment to values, mediated realness, visibility, communication style, spontaneity, transparent and creative brand endorsement, commitment to followers and frequency of interaction" (p. 235). The authors conclude by asserting that SMIs "always seek to stay authentic in their interactions with followers and brands" (p. 242).

Staying authentic is vital, as consumers expect brands to be authentic (Audrezet et al., 2020; Chronis & Hampton, 2008). Authenticity is generally associated with what is genuine, true, or real (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). In influencer marketing, research indicates that SMI authenticity drives followers' engagement (Chen et al., 2023) and increases purchase intention (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Zniva et al., 2023). Over the past ten years, a number of studies reported on authenticity from consumers' perspectives (e.g., Ardley et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee & Eastin, 2021; Moulard et al., 2015; Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021; Zniva et al., 2023), with the most common indicators of SMI authenticity being trustworthiness, sincerity, expertise, and transparency.

Whereas much is known about how consumers view authenticity, only recently have researchers begun to examine authenticity from the perspectives of SMIs. Audrezet et al. (2020) examine how SMIs manage their authenticity, finding that SMIs use two authenticity management strategies: *passionate* and *transparent* authenticity. Balaban & Szambolics (2022) found that SMIs felt that their authenticity with followers had three factors: being *source authentic* (expressed by sincerity, expertise, uniqueness, realness, and commitment to own values), being *message authentic* (expressed by visibility, communication style, spontaneity, and transparency), and being *interaction authentic* (frequency, commitment to followers).

2.2 SMIs and Artificial Intelligence

John McCarthy, the founding father of AI, defined AI as “the machine behaves in a way that could be considered intelligent if it were human” (McCarthy et al., 1955). Today, AI is repeatedly expressed as having qualities of human intelligence (Huang & Rust, 2018) and that mimic human intelligence (De Bruyn et al., 2020). For marketers, AI is viewed as “the development of artificial agents that, given the information they have about consumers, competitors, and the focal company, suggest and/or take marketing actions to achieve the best marketing outcome” (Overgoor et al., 2019, p.2).

SMIs’ content and activities are key contributors to their reputation (Belanche et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the use of AI for content creation and obtaining customers’ insight is now advocated in the digital marketing industry, with Haleem et al. (2022) asserting that AI enables marketers to determine the type of content they should use to target their customers. Similarly, Brüns & Meißner (2024) note that generative AI facilitates brands in automating the whole content creation process, from analyzing customers to generating ideas to designing actual content. Today, brands increasingly adopt AI to automate their content production, with AI making the process faster and easier (Sarath et al., 2022). In addition, AI allows marketers and brands to personalize content to target their customers (Haleem et al., 2022; Nair & Gupta, 2021); content creation powered by AI has “push the limits of personalization”, allowing brands and marketers to engage their customers with the content related only to them (Nair & Gupta, 2021, p.319).

In relationship building, SMIs use customer insights to develop ways of relating to their followers better. AI can gather and analyze a large amount of data about customers, including previous interactions and purchasing habits (Haleem et al., 2022). By having in-depth insights into customers’ preferences and behaviors, marketers can adopt appropriate solutions to better approach customers (Haleem et al., 2022), tailor marketing content to individual preferences, implement effective marketing initiatives (Nair & Gupta, 2021), and innovate products and services to meet customers’ needs (Mustak et al., 2021).

2.3 SMIs and Authenticity in a World of AI

AI’s effects on consumers’ perceptions of authenticity have been found to be largely negative, with studies finding that customers encounter a less authentic experience when interacting with an AI-based service agent (Wuenderlich & Paluch 2017), communications with intelligent agents (chatbots) were perceived as lacking authenticity (Neururer et al., 2018), and that AI-generated music and AI-designed fashion products, AI-generated music/art is less authentic than that created by humans (Jago 2019), and that consumers respond less favorably to AI-designed clothing (compared to human-designed) due to being perceived as less authentic (Lee & Kim 2024). Brüns & Meißner (2024) experiments found that consumers perceive brands/influencers using AI to automate their content creation process as less authentic. Although aside from this study, little is currently known about SMIs views toward the use of AI in content creation.

Whereas authenticity has been identified as being important for SMIs to foster (Audrezet et al., 2020; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022), at present we have scant knowledge of how SMIs feel about using AI in their content creation activities, whether they feel that using AI compromises their authenticity, or the extent that they perceive a necessity to ‘get on the AI bandwagon’. The newness of the questions posed by these knowledge gaps is due to these extraordinary times – truly an AI-driven revolution in business practices. We approached the following questions using a qualitative phenomenological approach:

- **RQ1a:** What are the roles of AI in making SMIs effective and, in particular, in advancing relationships with followers?
- **RQ1b:** Are SMIs using AI/or planning to use AI? If so, in what ways?
- **RQ2:** What are SMIs’ views of the importance of authenticity with followers? What are the opportunities/dangers SMIs perceive in using AI, particularly in assuring authenticity?

3. Method

In our search to find “common meaning” of the lived experiences of SMIs regarding their thoughts and experiences with AI, we used a qualitative phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013). This approach allowed us to explore the concept of “authenticity” from SMIs’ perspectives and understand how SMI’s perceptions of their authenticity would be affected with AI in the mix. Further, it enabled us to “enlarge and deepen understanding of the range of immediate experiences” (Goulding, 2005, p.302) being felt by SMIs.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with three types of social media influencers included in the study. They were nano SMIs (0 to 10,000 followers), micro SMIs (10,000 to 100,000 followers), and macro SMIs (100,000 to one million followers). These three types of influencers represent nearly all influencers. For instance, 99.84 percent of Instagram SMIs have under one million followers (Statista, 2024b). We selected SMIs with at least one year operating in any of the top four social media channels (Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, TikTok). The procedure of identifying prospective participants began with searching on Google using various keywords. Web-based searches were followed by searching SMI’s name and/or their social media account in the platforms that they are active on. Additionally, we grew our database of potential participants by turning to a contact in a digital marketing agency. These actions resulted in a database of one hundred and forty SMIs. Each was sent an invitation letter via their publicly available email. Those who replied indicating their willingness to participate in the study were scheduled for a Zoom meeting, with detailed instructions provided in advance.

After following these procedures, 17 SMIs had agreed to participate. According to Guest et al.(2006), a sample of twelve or more participants is appropriate when purposive sampling is used to recruit a group of homogeneous participants, with the understanding that data saturation is often reached after as few as twelve interviews (Guest et al., 2006). The participants are between the ages of 19 and 43. Their influencing domains varied, including fashion and beauty, daily life, travel and outdoor adventure, food and nutrition, gardening, fitness and confidence building, real estate and home interior, comedy, and local-related content. Details of participants are provided (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants’ profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Years as SMI	Based City/Country	Nb. of Instagram followers*	Nb. of Tiktok followers*	Nb. of Youtube followers*	Nb. of Facebook followers*
KA	F	1 year	Alberta	2,500	21,000	6,110	-
EN	F	6 years	Saskatchewan	40,900	-	-	19,000
LS**	M	15 years	Sweden	44,800	355	36,000	11,000
RA	F	10 years	Saskatchewan	183,000	69,000	-	4,100
OE	F	5 years	Ontario	30,300	2,268	176	1,100
HN	F	10 years	Saskatchewan	26,500	7,088	-	5,000
YN	F	7 years	Saskatchewan	23,500	-	20,800	6,600
LM	M	2 years	British Columbia	16,700	14,800	58,200	-

KE	F	4 years	Saskatchewan	930	21,100	-	-
TA	F	4 years	Saskatchewan	14,500	36,700	-	-
NN	M	3 years	Prince Edward Island	69,500	187,700	-	27,000
SY	F	8 years	Saskatchewan	2,465	-	-	-
NE	F	2.5 years	Ontario	38,600	327,000	26,700	-
TS	F	4 years	Saskatchewan	6,968	1,400	186	-
SH	F	5 years	British Columbia	65,500	-	-	-
TH	F	3 years	Saskatchewan	1,146	9,193	-	-
DA	F	2 years	Saskatchewan	-	8,154	-	-

An interview guide was followed for each in-depth semi-structured interview. The interview guide included three main parts, with each addressing one of the three research questions. In addition to the core questions, additional probing questions were introduced as needed to enrich the discussions and enhance further understanding of the issues brought up by participants. All interviews were conducted in English and recorded in real-time, with interviews ranging from 25 to 50 minutes. During the interview, the researcher took memos and reflexive notes to capture participants’ thoughts, feelings, and expressions that might otherwise be missed from transcriptions alone.

4. Data Analysis & Findings

Data was interpreted using thematic analysis, with each step of the analysis process following Braun & Clarke's (2006) step-by-step guide. Data was automatically transcribed using Microsoft Word 365. Then, the data was manually revised by listening carefully to the recordings and cross-checking with the automated transcriptions to ensure that participants’ responses were accurately reflected in words. The data was further cleaned, removing repetitive words and non-sensical sounds that had been picked up in the transcript.

The next stage involved an in-depth analysis of the data set using Nvivo software. The interview data was sectioned in accordance with various research questions. Then, line-by-line coding was used to examine the transcripts in detail. Potential themes were identified while referencing Braun & Clarke (2006, p.82) on what counts as a theme: “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.” Once potential themes were identified, the next stage was reviewing themes, which involved reading each code for each theme to consider whether they formed patterns and fit under that theme. If not, they were either moved to another theme or discarded from the analysis. Three themes emerged as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. SMIs and AI: Themes and illustrative quotes

Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Theme 1 AI Applications in influencing, sustaining and advancing relationships RQ1a	<p><u>Content and caption generation</u></p> <p>“Some people just use it [AI] as a starting point. They go to ChatGPT and maybe they are not a writer per se, or even if they are a writer, sometimes it is just handy to have an almost like a bouncing board, a sounding board for your ideas.” (HN)</p> <p>“I think it [AI] will be helping to make my content look even cooler or even better and have different ways to get my messages out and across to people [...] So I guess it will help me in the sense to keep up with trends and keep up with other things that people are seeing and doing.” (OE)</p> <p><u>Advertising and digital marketing</u></p> <p>“I think AI is being used in some search engines, probably some ad campaigns, so there is probably a lot that I don't even know of.” (NE)</p> <p>“I was reading up on it and seeing how there are some brands and companies that are kind of</p>

	<p>getting to the AI aspect of an AI will run the page, or a lot of it will be AI.” (NN)</p> <p><u>AI as tool for Management:</u> “I know a lot of people will look up a schedule for posting content, for example, or what is an idea to get a lot of views on social media, and AI will spit out something, some ideas for them.” (DA) “I just feel like it is something that could probably save me some time, especially on the business side. If I have invoices or taxes and stuff like that that are on the side or dealing with stuff with brands or whatever, if they have questions or whatever, I can kind of have AI do things for me.” (NN)</p> <p><u>AI as tool for improving data analytics</u> “[...] possibly, you know, looking into my demographic and looking into, you know, if you can look into my past posts and see which were the most engaging and stuff like that and recreate more similar posts to those would probably be something that could be utilized in the future.” (LS) “There are some forms of AI and algorithms that are helping create those statistics. It would be nice to even dig a little bit deeper or have even more accurate statistics, because that is just going to help you create better authentic content knowing who is watching your stuff. [...] so really, understanding your audience through, you know, the use of AI.” (TA)</p> <p><u>AI as tool for enhanced connectedness</u> “Especially smaller influencers ... you might not have a lot of time to reply to comments and DMs so just having automated responses for common questions I think would be super helpful to save time and also stay engaged with your community.” (RA) “AI would probably be able to give me trending news topics, trends that are going on in that region...AI might be able to say, hey, this is what is trending or new, or what is going on hot in my area...So it might even let me engage more personally for my followers. (NN)</p>
<p>Theme 2 SMIs actions and views toward incorporating AI RQ1b</p>	<p><u>Underwhelmed Skeptics</u> “So far the only use of it is just trying ChatGPT to see what it is like to create a blog post with it and the information it pulls and how accurate it is or what it looks like. Overall, I wasn't very impressed. The language it was written in was not very great for the style of the writing that most people read, and lots of the information was incorrect as well.” (EN) “So I (gave AI a try with hashtags)... I was like, we will see if it does anything for me, but it didn't really.” (KA) “It [ChatGPT] is not always accurate, and it is taking things from Google itself. So if you were to type something in, and if you actually read, sometimes it is not going to make sense or it is not going to be accurate.” (KE)</p> <p><u>Enthusiastic Exploiters</u> “I actually used ChatGPT to help with content ideas. So I will say build me a 30-day plan on social media content around skincare, and it will actually give me good ideas.” (NE) “Sometimes I use ChatGPT for example for generating ideas. ChatGPT can give me some ideas for posts, when to post, when not to post, or whatever.” (TS) “I have used a little bit of AI when it comes to writing captions and that kind of thing for posts. [...]”</p> <p><u>Hopeful Anticipators</u> “I feel like I will be looking into applications and stuff as I grow and kind of get some ideas and maybe let it help me in the business aspect of it as well.” (NN) “I do want to start using AI for my page. I think the main way I want to do it is to know there are automated ways to respond to direct messages, for example or comments. [...] I think that might be a good tool to use if it is relevant to me in the future. (RA)</p>
<p>Theme 3 Effects of AI on authenticity RQ2 (five dimensions revealed, but the three shown here included AI comments)</p>	<p><u>Loss of true-self</u> “I think the issue is if you use AI to kind of change your content or alter your content or [...] AI telling you how you should make your day in the life for example, I think then that can really affect your authenticity. If you are getting ideas to represent yourself in a different way because it is going to gain more, I guess, more popular if you do it a certain way and you are using AI to do that, then that can really affect your authenticity.” (DA) “I love to have my own authentic thoughts coming out so there could be some issues like that and potentially just getting too comfortable with AI and just allowing it to write your captions, not even checking it over and then that would really start breaking down the authenticity, right?” (TA)</p> <p><u>Loss of honesty</u> “With AI, you can make yourself look a completely different way. You can make yourself</p>

	<p>sound a different way. You could be writing captions or writing, sharing videos that they weren't even your words. And then you meet the influencer person, and they can't even make eye contact with you or they look completely different from what they share online.” (OE)</p> <p>“If we just gave people a bunch of tools to go out and change the way they look, change the way they talk and all of that, that could get really strange very quickly...it could get more and more, you know, popularized where we just sort of forget what people actually look like or how they talk. So I think if we are not careful, it could really ruin a lot of trust.” (NE)</p> <p><u>Disclosing as Mechanism to Protect Authenticity</u></p> <p>“I think in terms of using filters and things like that with Instagram, for example, it is obvious, so if somebody is watching my story, they can see the filter and what the filter is if I have used it. So it is not like I am hiding it or lying to them about using something like that. It is very transparent, and they can see that.” (EN)</p> <p>“I would say that I am pretty transparent in regards to when I do use AI, it is usually pretty obvious.” (NE)</p>
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4.1 Theme 1: AI Applications in Influencing, Sustaining and Advancing Relationships (RQ1a)

Participants indicated that AI offers significant opportunities for marketing, including content generation, captions and hashtag generation, advertising and digital marketing, and management. For content generation, idea generation and creative content enhancement were noted, aka, practical, easy-to-implement AI applications ranging from brainstorming and generating ideas to enhancing visual appeal to improving the overall quality of the content are understood as accelerators for SMIs. Participants also expressed that AI offers opportunities to create and enhance the overall visual attractiveness and quality of their content. Some participants further remarked that they use AI for specific activities, including captions and hashtag generation, as well as in advertising and digital marketing.

Several participants discussed ways that AI capabilities give them opportunities to improve data analytics and enhance connectedness with their followers. According to participants, AI and its algorithms provide data and analytics about their followers’ demographics, behaviors, and preferences. This information enables them to gain a deeper understanding of their followers, empowering them to recreate or generate more engaging content. Participants also shared that AI helps them to advance their relationships with followers by enhancing connectedness. AI provides various tools, such as AI-powered communication channels and AI-automated responses to followers’ comments and direct messages (DMs), allowing SMIs to stay connected and retain their followers.

4.2 Theme 2: SMIs Actions and Views toward Incorporating AI (RQ1b)

While all participants had an awareness of AI and were familiar with various aspects of AI’s potential for facilitating SMI efforts, they had varying perspectives as to the usefulness of AI in their activities. We characterized participants as underwhelmed skeptics (10), enthusiastic exploiters (4), and hopeful anticipators (3). The underwhelmed skeptics have tried AI in various activities, finding it lacking in various ways and deciding to ‘pull back’ from using it for the most part. This included comments about concerns about the accuracy and quality of AI-generated content, the workload associated with AI implementation, and the ethical risks involved with using AI.

Several SMIs are *enthusiastically exploiting* AI in their workflow. They have incorporated AI into brainstorming ideas, creating blog posts, writing captions, and editing social media content such as photos or videos. These SMIs also appreciate that AI saves time and enhances followers' engagement through automated responses, many enthusiastic exploiters intend to utilize AI more in the future. The *hopeful anticipators* have not yet incorporated AI in their

social media influencing activities but intend to utilize this technology in the future. These SMIs can envision ways they will incorporate AI.

4.3 Theme 3: AI Effect on Authenticity (RQ2)

Prior to addressing AI, interview questions delved into the perceptions SMIs have toward authenticity. We identified five dimensions of perceived authenticity: be true-self, honesty, unedited, disclosing, and avoid crass commercialism. The first dimension, **be true-self**, is based on a critical part of Zniva et al's (2023) definition of authenticity: "...the extent to which consumers perceive a social media influencer as behaving in accordance with his/her true self." Zniva et al., (2023) suggest that the true self has unwavering qualities that include behavioral stability (c.f. Moulard et al., 2020), which is comprised of longevity and longitudinal consistency. Most participants associated authenticity with "true self", indicating that they act, express, and behave in accordance with who they really are. They emphasized the consistency between their digital persona and their real-life identity. Participants also viewed "true-self" as doing what they love and sharing what they are passionate about. They expressed that their content and behaviors should originate from their true desires and passions. As a participant expressed: "I think authenticity comes in where I love what I am doing now. I think it is so much fun. I love the content I am producing. Because it is just who I am." (KA). A few participants indicated that AI could be viewed as a form of misrepresenting themselves just to attract more followers and that doing this would have an impact on their authenticity. Still others spoke of the danger of relying on AI for content, accompanied by failing to review its output could result in inauthentic content.

The second dimension, **honesty**, refers to being truthful about what they share and not trying to mislead people with fabricated or deceptive information. This dimension aligns with the "sincerity" dimension in current literature (Balaban & Szabolics, 2022; Lee & Eastin, 2021). One participant, DA, spoke disapprovingly of SMIs who "will kind of embellish or make things seem a certain way when they are really not," as well as it being important for followers "to hear from someone who is going to share the raw parts of their journey and be honest and not kind of hide things or mislead people". Participants noted that AI allows influencers to change their voice and appearance; therefore, they might not be truthful about how they look or sound. In addition, AI also allows influencers to create ideas and content for topics that they are not experts in, hence, making them seem to be more knowledgeable than they are. In this sense, they are no longer honest about their knowledge and expertise. The compromised relationships that result when SMIs are revealed to be faking expertise is why it should come as no surprise that brands are urged to select SMIs (the message source) by being "attentive to the message source's attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise" (Ooi et al 2023, p.10).

The third dimension, **disclosing as mechanism to protect authenticity**, means the disclosure of sponsor relationships with their brand partners and the disclosure of the use of AI. This dimension aligns with the *transparent* dimension in previous work (Ardley et al., 2022; Audrezet et al., 2020). However, *transparent* in this sense only refers to sponsorships disclosure while "disclosing" in the present context also refers to AI use disclosure.

Although the next two dimensions were discussed by our participants as aspects of authenticity, neither were brought up as being related to AI (thus, they are not included in Table 2). The fourth dimension, **unedited**, means keeping content raw and untouched as much as possible. This represents a dimension not previously discussed in the literature. KA said that her unedited videos went viral while her edited ones did not, believing that leaving the videos unedited made them so authentic to the followers, hence, enhancing engagement. Similarly, KE kept her videos untouched even though in the videos her look was never

perfect. The fifth dimension, **avoid crass commercialism**, means avoiding excessive focus on making money. This also represents a dimension not previously discussed in the literature. Though compensation by partnering with brands is a substantial part of income for some participants, they expressed that they only work with brands that align with their personal brand and identity, as SH said: “Authenticity means [...] not letting certain things like money sort of get in the way of how I authentically want to post and show up online. LS spoke strongly about avoiding crass commercialization when saying, “I have been given many, many opportunities to share a lot of things that can make a ton of money, but if it doesn't make sense to me, it doesn't ring true to me that I have zero interest in sharing it, no matter the money that comes with it so it is just a part of my ethos.”

5. Discussion

Influencer marketing worldwide grew from an estimated 1.7 billion to nearly 24 billion in 2024 (Statista, 2024a). This pace of growth shows no sign of slowing in 2025 and beyond. Simultaneously, AI, itself with a rapid growth trajectory has become heralded as a necessity for businesses to thrive. Headlines speak of leveraging AI, harnessing AI, unleashing AI, enhancing business through AI, and more. Today, AI has an effect on all business models, with SMIs no exception. At this critical juncture, much is being learned about how consumers perceive AI but much less is understood about what SMIs are thinking about AI as a tool for their activities. Given this important gap and the accelerated changes happening here and now, our research explored SMI perceptions of AI's applications for advancing relationships with followers, and opportunities and perceived risks of using AI, including effects of AI on SMI authenticity.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, our understanding of influencer-follower parasocial relationships is expanded by including the role of AI. The existing literature focuses on SMIs' characteristics, such as physical attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise, as focal determinants that foster SMIs' parasocial relationships with their followers (Ashraf et al., 2023; Aw & Chuah, 2021; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sakib et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Su et al., 2021; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Little is known about how SMIs perceive and embrace AI technology to advance their relationships with followers. Our findings showed that AI is perceived to improve data analytics and enhance connectedness with followers. More specifically, AI is perceived to enable SMIs to get deeper insights into their followers' behaviors and preferences by collecting and analyzing past data metrics. Additionally, AI-driven communications, such as automated responses, are seen to facilitate followers' engagement, thereby enhancing connectedness. On the one hand, SMIs believe that AI offers significant opportunities to strengthen their relationships with followers. On the other hand, SMIs underscored that the overreliance on AI for their social media influencing practices could diminish the intimacy and the feeling of human connection with followers, which is essential for relationship building (Brüns & Meißner, 2024).

Secondly, this research is amongst the first to shed light on how SMIs embrace AI to enhance their relationships with followers. Current literature has shown that brands are increasingly adopting AI in their marketing practices, especially to automate content generation process (Boddu et al., 2022). However, we lack knowledge of whether and how SMIs are utilizing AI for their social media influencing activities. Our findings indicated that SMIs are in three camps, including underwhelmed skeptics, enthusiastic exploiters, and hopeful anticipators. Given that AI is here to stay, and the likelihood that AI is on a developmental trajectory guaranteeing greater capabilities in years to come, transitioning toward enthusiastic exploiters

seems the path for increasing numbers of SMIs. Thirdly, there is a greater understanding of how SMIs perceive shortcomings, risks, and ethical concerns about AI. This adds to knowledge about concerns about the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated content as well as the ethical risks involved with using AI.

Furthermore, we shifted the focus of authenticity away from how consumers perceive SMIs' authenticity (Ardley et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee & Eastin, 2021; Moulard et al., 2015; Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021; Zniva et al., 2023) to how SMIs perceive authenticity. Consistent with prior research, dimensions included "being true-self" (Le & Aydin, 2022), "honesty", referred to by previous authors as sincerity (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022; Lee & Eastin, 2021), and "disclosing", referred to by previous authors as "transparent" (Ardley et al., 2022; Audrezet et al., 2020). This research identified two additional dimensions. The first, *unedited*, means keeping their content raw and untouched as much as possible, and the second, *avoid crass commercialism*, means avoiding excessive focus on making money. The pressure to make money can result in taking actions seen by followers as inauthentic. Grgurić Čop et al. (2024, p.11) when discussing the challenges SMIs have between the various roles they assume, suggest that SMIs have a need to show commitment to not only their client brands but also to the expectations their followers have for being authentic. As the authors report, "SMIs must juggle between meeting their brands' expectations through commitment and meeting their followers' expectations through authenticity."

The identification of these two dimensions represents a significant contribution to the authenticity literature. We also found that despite SMIs seeing advantages of using AI for various activities, they simultaneously see AI as a danger to their authenticity. Specifically, SMIs expressed their concerns about the loss of expressing one's true-self and loss of honesty in their relationships with followers. Generally, they expressed their concerns about authenticity when adopting AI. As authenticity is a key driver of a strong influencer-follower relationship (Giles, 2002; Närvänen et al., 2020), this concern could explain SMIs' reluctance to use AI.

5.2 Practical Implications

Considering the huge growth in influencer marketing and the astonishingly fast adoption of AI, it is essential for SMIs to understand the opportunities and challenges they are facing. As discussed, most of our participating SMIs understand that AI has the potential to offer value strengthening their business models. Even so, at this early stage in the AI revolution, many SMIs find themselves being underwhelmed skeptics, having taken a few stabs at using AI and finding it lacking. At the same time, there are already enthusiastic exploiters leveraging AI to good impact and a small number at the edge of using AI for the first time, what we call hopeful anticipators. Our insights should help SMIs reflect on ways to take advantage of AI to strengthen their relationships, while still being mindful of the risks associated with AI use, especially the potential impacts on authenticity. We advise SMIs to approach AI with caution, selecting AI applications that avoid compromising authenticity and other potential negative responses from followers.

Given the importance of authenticity to SMI success, we remind SMIs to purposefully foster authenticity, taking actions that build follower perceptions of their authenticity. This is particularly important as SMIs increase their use of AI for follower interfacing activities. Here, it will be valuable for SMIs to prime followers as to their AI use, assuring followers that AI is being used to assist in creating great experiences but not replacing their personalized messaging. This recommendation is consistent with Brüns & Meißner (2024; p.1) suggestion that "negative reactions (toward AI) are attenuated if GenAI is used to assist humans in content creation rather than to replace them through automation". Priming for a

positive response is essential, as consumers can be positively or negatively predisposed toward an SMI's authenticity depending on the priming (Luoma-Aho et al., 2021). Ultimately, by providing positive signaling of their human-AI teaming, SMIs should gain good acceptance, especially as this may enhance perceptions that AI is authentic and effective; Li et al. (2024) found this effect in experiments with gaining chatbot acceptance.

Simultaneously, this should be valued by brands as they choose influencers. For brands, the search for ideal SMIs is a long-standing challenge. In terms of having effects on consumer attitudes, brands should search for SMIs perceived as being authentic. This, along with factors including source attractiveness, and match-up (defined as "a fit between an endorsed product and the image conveyed by the endorser" (Chia et al., 2021 p.9), brands can anticipate significant impacts on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions. At the same time, Gu & Duan (2024) compel brands to recognize that there are limitations in the ROI they can expect from SMIs, as SMIs tend to lack the ability to gain "deeper levels of consumer engagement".

Finally, our findings provide implications for legislators and regulators. Considering the potential risks associated with the use of AI, especially the dissemination of misleading and deceptive content, regulators should consider policies that require SMIs to be transparent about the use of AI in their social media content; an increasing number of countries have proposed regulations regarding the use of AI (Whyman, 2023) and these kinds of regulatory actions should be advanced everywhere. In creating policies, regulators around the world could be informed by the European Union's *EU Digital Services Act* and the EU's *Artificial Intelligence Act*. As stated in the DSA, the intent is to "protect consumers and their fundamental rights online by setting clear and proportionate rules" (*The Digital Services Act*, 2024).

Additionally, social media platforms have started to implement new guidelines requiring creators to disclose the use of AI (Blest et al., 2024). For instance, Tiktok has launched new labels, such as "AI-generated", to help creators disclose their use of AI in their social media content (Tiktok, 2023). Such policies protect social media users, especially vulnerable groups like young adults, from deceptive social media content while also guiding SMIs toward making decisions that assure greater authenticity with their followers.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this research is not without limitations. Firstly, while the sample was appropriate to the method, participants were limited to one nation (Canadian influencers), with most of these influencers being Saskatchewan-based. These influencers are shaped by their beliefs, values, and cultures, which could influence their perspectives. In order to determine if the results are generalizable, it would be important to examine whether different cultures might have different perspectives on AI and new technologies; exploring attitudes toward AI using the individualism/collectivism cultural variable (c.f. Barnes et al., 2024) might be a good starting point. Therefore, we recommend future researchers replicate and extend this study by involving participants from other cultures.

Secondly, this research only includes influencers of under one million followers. Other types of influencers, such as mega and celebrity influencers, have been more likely to scale up their business models, possibly taking advantage of the opportunities AI offers for being more effective and efficient in idea and content generation, among other things. Therefore, they might be more likely to have already adopted AI technology, such as AI-driven automated responses, to manage their followers' engagement.

Thirdly, this research restricted inclusion to SMIs who were using any of four social media channels, Tiktok, Youtube, Instagram, and Facebook. We acknowledge that there are several other established and emerging social media platforms that SMIs use, with the possibility that SMIs using alternative platforms might perceive the implications of AI differently. Therefore, we suggest researchers include SMIs using other types of AI-incorporated platforms in their studies.

Although not a limitation per se, there is an additional opportunity for future research that relates to a comment made by one of the participants. DA said: “I know a lot of social media influencers will kind of embellish or make things seem a certain way when they are really not.” If this is the case, it is possible that many SMIs are willing to forgo some aspect of honesty if they feel it is advantageous. This opens a new direction for research where questions about how common it is for SMIs to be dishonest and in what aspects of their presence do they feel comfortable being dishonest. A recent meta-analysis on honesty/dishonesty provides a number of factors, ranging from “situational factors, such as reward magnitude and externalities, and personal factors, such as the participant’s gender and age” (Gerlach et al., 2019, p.1), can be a starting point for this research direction.

Finally, AI has enabled the creation of Virtual SMIs (VSMIs), a form of social media influencers that are “autonomously controlled by artificial intelligence and visually presented as an interactive, real-time rendered being in a digital environment” (Sands et al., 2022, p.778). VSMIs are often considered to be as effective as human influencers (Sands, Campbell, et al., 2022) and are increasingly used by brands to promote their products and services (Conti et al., 2022). Some examples of brands that are partnering with VSMIs include Dior, Porsche, and Valentino (de Boissieu & Baudier, 2023). SMIs are already being impacted by this competitive form and it would be valuable to have researchers seek understanding of how SMIs are responding to this threat.

7. Conclusion

With the increasing adoption of AI in influencer marketing, will it be boom or doom for social media influencers? This research uncovered how SMIs perceive their influencing activities to be affected by AI. The results indicated that SMIs view AI as a tool that has various applications including ideas and content generation, helping them with brainstorming, generating, and enhancing their social media content. Additionally, AI enables SMIs to sustain and advance their relationships with followers by improving data analytics and enhancing connectedness. Specifically, AI gathers follower insights through past engagement metrics, suggests topics that are tailored to followers’ interests, and retains followers by helping with followers’ management.

However, SMIs perceive AI as a threat to their authenticity with followers. They expressed their concern about the dangers of overreliance on AI for content generation and other influencing activities, underscoring that it could lead to a loss of ones’ true-self and loss of honesty. Generally, they are concerned about the loss of authenticity in influencer-follower relationships.

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