Exploring the effect of social media content of virtual influencers on generation Z's purchase intention: An elaboration likelihood model approach

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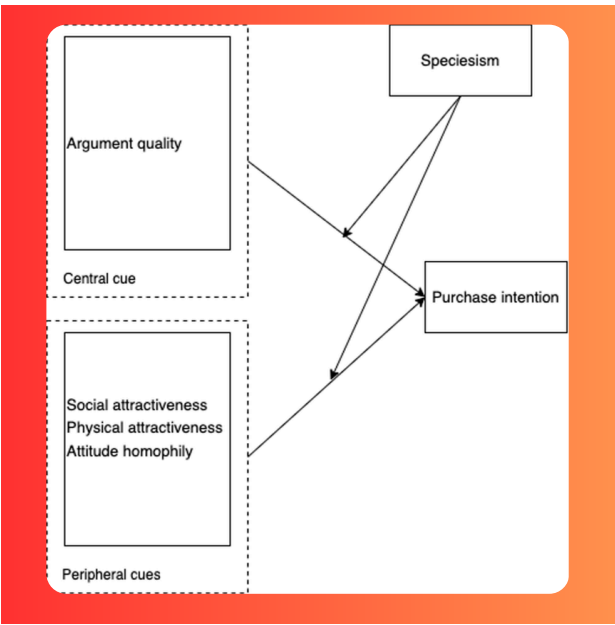
Abstract

This study explored the effectiveness of virtual influencers (VIs) in advertising to Generation Z consumers. Utilizing the elaboration likelihood model and using a survey experiment, researchers found that the virtual influencer's appearance and social appeal ("peripheral cues") were stronger predictors of purchase intention (PI) than the argument quality of the content on social posts. Furthermore, "speciesism" – a preference for humans over virtual beings – negatively impacted purchase intention, particularly when the VI lacked strong peripheral cues.

Introduction

VIs has strong potential to be a marketing strategy. They could promote products and create brand engagement. However, VIs has not been widely awared and little is know about their effectiveness.

Objectives

To study the effects of virtual influencer content including external beauty and the argument quality of their content on social media (Instagram).
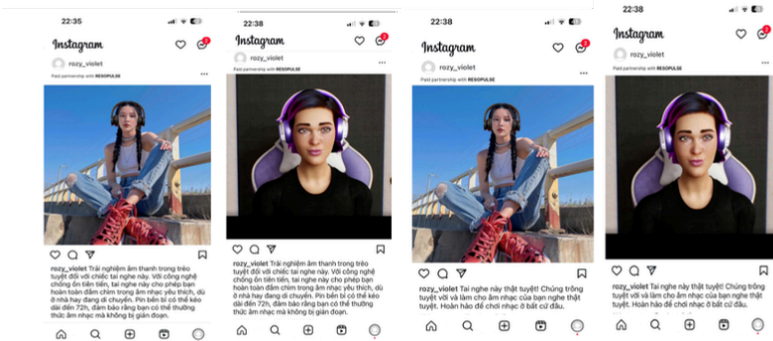

Methodology

Survey experiment on 244 Gen Z		Peripheral cues	
		High	Low
Central cue	High	Block 1	Block 2
	Low	Block 3	Block 4

Using google form and convenience sampling method
Results show statistically assigned randomly the participants.

Experiment manipulation check

• Manipulation check:
Independent samples t-test: significant differences in peripheral cue scores (M = 3.01 vs M = 3.83)
Significant differences in Central cue (M = 3.75 vs M = 4.49)
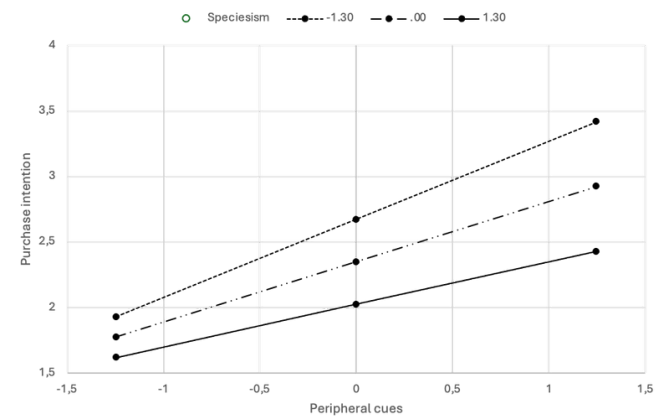

Results

Multiple regression analysis: Direct effect
Argument quality → PI ✅ ACCEPTED
Social attractiveness → PI ✅ ACCEPTED
Physical attractiveness → PI ✅ ACCEPTED
Attitude homophily → PI ✅ ACCEPTED

Two way ANOVA: Interaction effect
There is no interaction effect of central and peripheral cues on PI.
Peripheral cues could *independently* affect PI.

One way ANOVA: Moderation effect
High-speciesism individuals show low PI regardless of VI peripheral cues.

Low-speciesism individuals respond more favorably to VIs with high peripheral cues.

Theoretical contributions
Shows how the psychology of persuasion applies to VIs. For young people, influencer's appearance can outweigh argument quality. Also, those who prefer human influencers are less swayed by virtual ones, especially if they lack appeal.

Managerial implications
• Design appealing and relatable characters
• Align with consumer interests
• Deliver credible messages
• Consider "speciesism" for targeting

Future research
Back-translation techniques
Examine VIs across platforms and content types such as short videos or mini-games.