

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DRIVERS OF ENGAGEMENT WITH AI VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

The growing presence of AI-powered virtual influencers (VIs) on social media has introduced new dynamics in digital marketing, yet little is known about how consumers in emerging markets perceive and respond to these synthetic personas. This study investigates the factors that shape consumer acceptance of virtual influencers in Indonesia, focusing on the interrelationship between social influence, performance expectancy, emotional resonance, and willingness to engage. Employing a qualitative research design, 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Indonesian consumers aged 18–35 were conducted, reaching thematic saturation. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 14, integrating both deductive and inductive coding strategies. Findings reveal four major themes and twelve subthemes: (1) social influence functions as a cultural endorsement mechanism, shaping normative beliefs; (2) performance expectancy is driven by informational credibility, entertainment value, and behavioral consistency; (3) emotional resonance—expressed through perceived authenticity and psychological comfort—is central to consumer attachment; and (4) willingness to use VIs is closely linked to digital identity projection and contextual social legitimacy. A clear majority of participants (around four out of five) described positive evaluations of VIs, while a minority expressed skepticism and emotional discomfort, highlighting ethical and psychological boundaries in AI–human interaction. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how social and emotional mechanisms converge in shaping digital consumer behavior, offering practical insights for marketers and advancing theory on technology acceptance in culturally nuanced settings.

Keywords: Virtual Influencers; AI Marketing; Consumer Engagement; Emotional Resonance; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) has dramatically reshaped the digital marketing landscape, introducing unprecedented opportunities and challenges for brands seeking deeper consumer engagement (Jhawar et al., 2023). Among these innovations, virtual influencers—AI-powered digital personas—have emerged as influential brand ambassadors capable of interacting seamlessly with consumers via social media platforms (Feng et al., 2023). Globally, prominent virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela and Shudu Gram have successfully captivated millions of followers, reinforcing their effectiveness in contemporary marketing (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023). Yet, as this novel marketing phenomenon continues to expand, significant uncertainties persist regarding consumer acceptance and long-term engagement with virtual influences, particularly within culturally nuanced markets.

In Indonesia, a dynamic and digitally populous market, virtual influencers such as Lentari Pagi (@lentaripagi) are rapidly gaining traction (Azzahra & Pratama, 2024; Kemp, 2023). Recent data show that social media usage is pervasive, with 143 million social media user identities by early 2025, representing over 50% of the national population, and 76% of users following at least one influencer, positioning Indonesia among the world's largest social media markets (Kemp, 2025; Taslaud, 2025). These figures underscore the critical need to understand how virtual influencer campaigns resonate within such a context. Accordingly, marketers' growing investment in virtual influencers hinges on insights into the socio-cultural and psychological mechanisms driving digital consumer engagement in Indonesia (Kembau et al., 2024; Kembau et al., 2025).

However, despite its expanding significance, academic inquiry into consumer acceptance of virtual influencers remains predominantly limited to quantitative evaluations within Western contexts (Belanche et al., 2024). Most extant studies have inadequately addressed subjective consumer experiences, social influences, and nuanced cultural factors shaping individual responses to virtual influencers in non-Western contexts (Chi & Vu, 2023; Cheng, Zhang et al., 2022). Recent studies in Asia, such as research in China and Korea, highlight both opportunities and challenges in integrating virtual influencers into culturally sensitive markets, emphasizing consumer concerns around authenticity and trust (Luo & Kim, 2023). In Indonesia, empirical evidence is emerging for instance, Cokki et al. (2025) demonstrate that virtual influencer-driven product placements significantly enhance brand recall and salience among university students in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, indicating the growing relevance of this phenomenon in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, comprehensive qualitative explorations into why and how this influence unfolds across broader consumer segments remain limited, leaving a notable empirical and theoretical gap that poses a critical barrier for practitioners aiming to leverage virtual influencers effectively in culturally diverse markets, where consumer acceptance and engagement can vary significantly based on complex social and cultural dynamics (Vafaei-Zadeh et al., 2024).

To address this conspicuous gap, our study qualitatively explores the specific role of social influence and performance expectancy in shaping consumer willingness to engage with virtual influencers among Indonesian consumers. Utilizing in-depth interviews, this research probes deeper into consumer perceptions, emotional responses, and social interactions underpinning their acceptance of virtual influencer technologies. By adopting this qualitative lens, we illuminate critical consumer insights that quantitative approaches often overlook, thereby enriching existing theoretical frameworks, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh, 2022; Yu et al., 2024).

Explicitly, this study seeks to investigate three interrelated research questions. First, it examines how social influences shape Indonesian consumers' expectations of virtual influencer usefulness and acceptance. Second, it explores in what ways performance expectancy and emotional resonance contribute to consumers' willingness to engage with virtual influences. Finally, it analyzes how cultural and social contexts influence consumer perceptions of authenticity and long-term engagement with these AI-generated personas.

Ultimately, this study contributes significantly to marketing scholarship and practice by providing empirically grounded, culturally sensitive insights into consumer acceptance dynamics regarding virtual influencers in Indonesia. For scholars, our findings expand theoretical understanding of digital consumer behavior within non-Western contexts, particularly emphasizing the interplay between social influence, performance expectancy, and consumer emotional engagement. For marketing practitioners, this research offers strategic guidance on tailoring virtual influencer campaigns effectively to resonate with culturally nuanced consumer segments, ensuring not only initial acceptance but sustained long-term engagement and brand loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of virtual influencers (VI), characterized by artificially intelligent (AI)-powered avatars designed to emulate human-like interactions on digital platforms, has marked a significant shift in digital marketing practices (Jhavar et al., 2023; Kembau & Lendo, 2025). While global brands increasingly leverage virtual influencers due to their controlled brand representation and novelty, research exploring consumer acceptance, especially from a qualitative perspective in culturally distinct markets such as Indonesia, remains scarce (Kembau et al., 2024; Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023).

Social influence is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in the adoption and continued use of emerging technologies, particularly in contexts shaped by collective norms (Venkatesh, 2022; Dwivedi et al., 2020). It embodies how perceptions and behaviors of consumers are shaped by their interactions within social networks. Recent studies by Zhang et al. (2024) highlight how social endorsement and perceived normative pressure significantly determine the acceptance of AI influencers. Furthermore, Vafaei-Zadeh et al. (2024) underscore the necessity of integrating social norms into technology acceptance frameworks, especially within collective cultural contexts like those prevalent in Indonesia.

In parallel, performance expectancy has been reaffirmed in recent studies as a core determinant of technology adoption, referring to the extent to which individuals believe that using a given technology will improve task performance (Venkatesh, 2022; Chatterjee et al., 2023), is central to technology adoption theories. Research consistently indicates that consumers who anticipate tangible benefits, such as accurate information dissemination or meaningful entertainment, are more inclined toward sustained engagement with AI-driven platforms (Gursoy et al., 2019). Feng et al. (2023) add that perceived influencer-product fit significantly enhances consumer attitudes, trust, and consequently, their expectancy of technology performance. Thus, a critical assessment of performance expectancy in the context of virtual influencers necessitates exploring consumer beliefs regarding the authenticity, informational value, and entertainment quality provided by these virtual entities.

Integrating these findings with TAM and UTAUT underscores that consumer willingness to engage with virtual influencers is not driven solely by utilitarian performance expectations. Rather, engagement is deeply rooted in emotional resonance and cultural framing, particularly within collectivist societies like Indonesia (Kim & Biocca, 1997; Mendelson & Papacharissi,

2020). Recent studies further confirm that parasocial bonds with digital agents and influencers are shaped not only by technological affordances but also by cultural expectations of authenticity and trust, reinforcing the role of effective and socio-cultural contexts in technology acceptance (Hu et al., 2023; Lee & Watkins, 2016). This study, therefore, does not propose constructing a novel model; instead, it situates its contribution in extending TAM/UTAUT by embedding affective and cultural dimensions that have received limited attention in prior research.

Finally, consumer willingness to use virtual influencers is intimately tied to social influence and performance expectancy. Yu et al. (2024) identify emotional engagement and trust as critical mediators influencing consumer willingness. Given that trust in AI technologies significantly increases when consumers perceive an anthropomorphic resonance (Chi & Vu, 2023; Cheng et al., 2022), the ability of virtual influencers to emulate relatable human-like interactions emerges as pivotal. Therefore, understanding how social influence and performance expectancy interplay to shape consumer trust and emotional connectivity becomes crucial for unpacking willingness to engage with virtual influencers. Drawing upon these insights, this study proposes the following:

1. **Proposition 1:** Social influence significantly shapes Indonesian consumers' performance expectancy toward virtual influencers by reinforcing normative beliefs and expectations within their social networks.
2. **Proposition 2:** Consumers' performance expectancy positively impacts their willingness to use virtual influencers when interactions are perceived as authentic, entertaining, and information rich.
3. **Proposition 3:** The relationship between social influence and willingness to use virtual influencers is mediated by consumers' emotional engagement and perceived authenticity of interactions with these AI entities.

Through qualitative exploration, these propositions aim to deepen understanding of how social contexts and perceived technological performance converge to influence consumer behaviors toward virtual influencers in Indonesia's culturally rich digital marketplace.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to gain a deeper, contextualized understanding of how Indonesian consumers perceive and interact with virtual influencers, focusing specifically on the constructs of social influence, performance expectancy, and willingness to use. A qualitative approach was selected to capture the richness of subjective experiences and the social meanings attached to AI-driven digital interactions that quantitative instruments may fail to reveal.

Sampling and Participant Criteria

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth of insight. Inclusion criteria were clearly defined to capture the appropriate segment of digitally literate consumers: (1) aged between 18 to 35 years; (2) actively engaged with social media for more than two hours daily; (3) have followed or interacted with at least one virtual influencer; (4) have previously consumed content or products recommended by influencers (virtual or human); and (5) have used or are familiar with AI-driven platforms or features, such as virtual assistants (e.g., Siri, Alexa), filters, or chatbots. This targeted recruitment aimed to ensure that participants could reflect meaningfully on the virtual influencer experience. A total of 25

participants were selected to reach theoretical saturation, ensuring no new insights emerged after the final interviews.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed in this study. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, with clear communication regarding voluntary involvement, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit permission, and transcripts were anonymized to protect participant identity.

A total of 25 participants were selected based on the principle of data saturation. Following the 22nd interview, no substantially new themes emerged, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation and strengthen the credibility of findings. The decision to limit the sample to 25 participants was therefore not arbitrary but grounded in qualitative research logic, prioritizing depth of insight over breadth. This approach aligns with Braun & Clarke (2021) and Guest et al. (2020) recommendations on thematic saturation, particularly in studies exploring emerging and context-specific digital phenomena such as virtual influencers.

Data Collection Procedures

The research was conducted over a six-week period. Semi-structured interviews were used to maintain consistency while allowing flexibility to probe emerging themes. An interview guide was developed based on the conceptual constructs derived from the literature, including questions around peer influence, expectations from digital personas, emotional resonance, and perceptions of authenticity. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 75 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, either via Zoom or face-to-face in urban locations across Jakarta and Bandung, depending on participant availability and preference. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent, then transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis.

Participants represented variation in gender, educational background, and city of origin, although the sample was largely concentrated among digitally active university students from urban areas. While this demographic focus provided rich insights into youth-oriented digital culture, it also introduced certain limitations in terms of representativeness. Specifically, the predominance of urban and student participants may constrain the transferability of findings to older or more rural populations. This limitation is acknowledged and further discussed in the conclusion to guide future research.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterned meaning across the data. The updated six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021) was rigorously followed, encompassing familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme definition, and final reporting. To ensure analytical robustness, NVivo 14 software was used to manage and organize the qualitative data. This allowed for systematic coding and facilitated the cross-referencing of themes across multiple transcripts. Coding was conducted both deductively—based on theoretical constructs such as social influence and performance expectancy—and inductively to allow emergent themes to surface organically from participant narratives.

Trustworthiness Measures

To strengthen the credibility and reliability of the findings, multiple strategies were applied: (1) investigator triangulation through peer debriefing sessions with qualitative experts; (2) member checking by sharing summary interpretations with selected participants for

validation; and (3) maintaining an audit trail throughout the coding and analysis process. Ethical clearance was secured from the affiliated institution's ethics committee, and participants were briefed on confidentiality, data usage, and their right to withdraw at any time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the qualitative interview data, facilitated by NVivo 14, produced four major categories and twelve subthemes, all of which emerged through iterative coding, axial refinement, and constant comparison across 25 participant transcripts. Themes were derived through both deductive coding—based on the core constructs of social influence, performance expectancy, emotional resonance, and willingness to use—and inductive coding that allowed new, unanticipated meanings to surface from participant narratives (Saldaña, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Table 1. Thematic Categories and Subthemes

Thematic Category	Subthemes	Description
1. Social Influence as Cultural Endorsement	1.1 Peer Group Validation	Acceptance is driven by alignment with group norms and peer recommendations.
	1.2 Family and Authority Figures' Impact	Family opinions and respected figures influence legitimacy of virtual influencer use.
	1.3 Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)	Social pressure and desire to stay updated with trends motivate engagement with VIs.
2. Performance Expectancy and Functional Trust	2.1 Informational Credibility	Users expect product endorsements and information to be reliable and helpful.
	2.2 Entertainment and Escapism	VIs are seen as a source of enjoyable content and emotional distraction.
	2.3 Consistency and Responsiveness	Regular posting and interactivity enhance the perception of usefulness.
3. Emotional Resonance and Digital Attachment	3.1 Perceived Authenticity and Relatability	Anthropomorphic design and relatable storytelling foster emotional bonding.
	3.2 Trust Beyond Realness	Users prioritize emotional connection over whether the influencer is "real."
	3.3 Psychological Comfort and Familiarity	Repeated exposure to VIs creates a sense of safety and continuity.
4. Willingness to Use and Social Identity Projection	4.1 Self-Branding Through Association	Following VIs is perceived as part of one's digital identity and personal branding.
	4.2 Aspirational Alignment	Users see VIs as reflecting ideals they wish to embody or associate with.
	4.3 Conditional Use Based on Social Relevance	Engagement depends on how socially acceptable or useful the VI appears to be in context.

Source: NVivo 14, semi-structured interviews (n = 25), (2025)

Table 1 presents the finalized structure of thematic categories and subthemes. The first category, Social Influence as Cultural Endorsement, foregrounds the ways in which participants' orientations toward virtual influencers are shaped by peer validation, family authority, and the wider social environment. This theme illustrates how normative pressure and cultural validation form the initial basis of acceptance, highlighting the inherently social nature of engagement.

Building on this social grounding, the second category, Performance Expectancy and Functional Trust, reflects participants' evaluations of the functional value of virtual influencers—particularly their informational credibility, entertainment value, and consistency in interaction. These assessments did not appear in isolation but were often interwoven with emotional satisfaction and habitual media use, suggesting a qualitative blending of instrumental and affective judgments (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Moving beyond functional considerations, the third category, Emotional Resonance and Digital Attachment, captures participants' accounts of psychological closeness, perceived authenticity, and the sense of comfort fostered through repeated interaction. Expressions such as "comforting," "relatable," and "understanding" frequently surfaced, indicating that affective resonance was a salient dimension across diverse participant profiles, underscoring the role of emotion in sustaining engagement.

Finally, converging these dynamics, the fourth category, Willingness to Use and Social Identity Projection, emphasizes how participants incorporated virtual influencers into their sense of self and social presentation. Here, engagement was narrated not only as a functional or emotional response but as part of digital identity work—expressed through self-branding, aspirational alignment, and conditional use depending on perceived social legitimacy (Guest et al., 2020; Chatterjee et al., 2023).

As shown in Table 1, the thematic analysis generated four major categories and twelve subthemes that capture the multifaceted nature of consumer engagement with virtual influencers. To complement the tabular presentation, Figure 1 visualizes the interpretive relationships among these categories, emphasizing how social, functional, and emotional mechanisms converge to shape willingness to use. Social Influence functions as the cultural entry point that legitimizes virtual influencer adoption, while Performance Expectancy represents participants' evaluation of informational reliability, entertainment value, and functional trust. Emotional Resonance, closely connected to both social and functional assessments, emerges as the affective bridge that strengthens digital attachment. Collectively, these three dimensions feed into Willingness to Use and Social Identity Projection, which reflect consumers' self-branding, aspirational alignment, and conditional engagement.

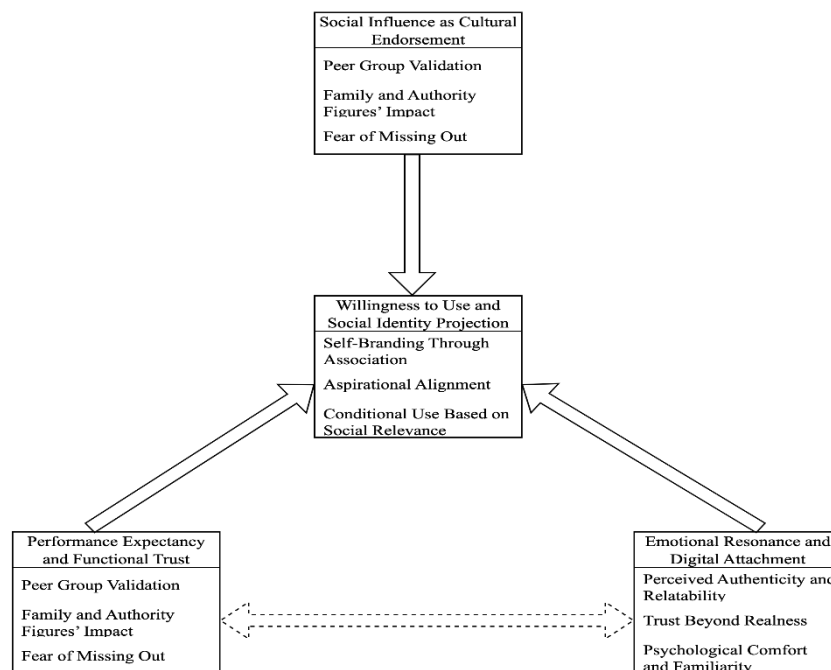


Figure 1. Thematic Map of Virtual Influencer Engagement

This thematic map not only illustrates the layered connections among the categories but also underscores the interpretive, non-linear nature of the findings, consistent with the reflexive approach of qualitative inquiry. To enrich this structural visualization, the subsequent Table 2 provides representative participant quotations that exemplify how these themes were

articulated in practice, thereby grounding the thematic map in lived experiences and authentic voices.

Table 2. Representative Quotations (Thick Description)

Subtheme	Participant Quote	Code
1.1 Peer Group Validation	"My friends started following her, so I felt like I had to as well—just to keep up with what they were talking about."	P03, Male, 22
1.2 Family and Authority Figures' Impact	"My older cousin, who's into tech and branding, recommended a virtual influencer to me. I trust his taste."	P11, Female, 24
1.3 Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)	"You don't want to be the only one who doesn't know the 'cool' AI character everyone's posting about."	P17, Male, 21
2.1 Informational Credibility	"She [VI] talks about skincare like she actually knows what she's doing—it feels more legit than some human influencers."	P09, Female, 23
2.2 Entertainment and Escapism	"I follow her for fun. Her content is entertaining, visually satisfying, and kind of futuristic."	P05, Female, 20
2.3 Consistency and Responsiveness	"They always post on time and respond through comments or stories, which feels more reliable than real people sometimes."	P14, Male, 26
3.1 Perceived Authenticity and Relatability	"Even though she's not real, her posts feel personal and emotional, like she understands the vibe."	P08, Female, 19
3.2 Trust Beyond Realness	"I don't really care if she's fake. As long as the content connects and feels genuine, I'm in."	P16, Male, 28
3.3 Psychological Comfort and Familiarity	"Her presence online feels stable, like I can expect her to always be there—it's comforting somehow."	P20, Female, 25
4.1 Self-Branding Through Association	"Following her says something about me—I'm someone who's into AI and digital stuff, it's part of my image."	P07, Male, 22
4.2 Aspirational Alignment	"She represents a version of me I want to be—stylish, independent, futuristic."	P12, Female, 21
4.3 Conditional Use Based on Social Relevance	"If my circle finds it cringy, I'll unfollow. But if she's trending, I'll stay connected."	P06, Male, 23

Source: NVivo 14, semi-structured interviews (n = 25), (2025)

Table 2 supports these themes by providing thick, contextualized quotations that anchor the analysis in participants' lived experiences. These quotations are not presented as mere illustrations but as windows into how individuals actively negotiated meaning in their interactions with virtual influencers. By directly connecting subthemes with participants' voices, the table demonstrates how abstract analytical categories were grounded in authentic narratives, thereby strengthening interpretive depth and transparency.

Each quotation was extracted from coded nodes within NVivo, cross-referenced with demographic metadata, and validated through researcher triangulation. This analytic strategy reflects recent qualitative standards that emphasize reflexivity, transparency, and rigor in reporting thematic insights (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Guest et al., 2020). Furthermore, attention to iterative checking and saturation enhanced the credibility of the findings, ensuring that both convergent and divergent perspectives were adequately represented (Vasileiou et al., 2018; Chatterjee et al., 2023).

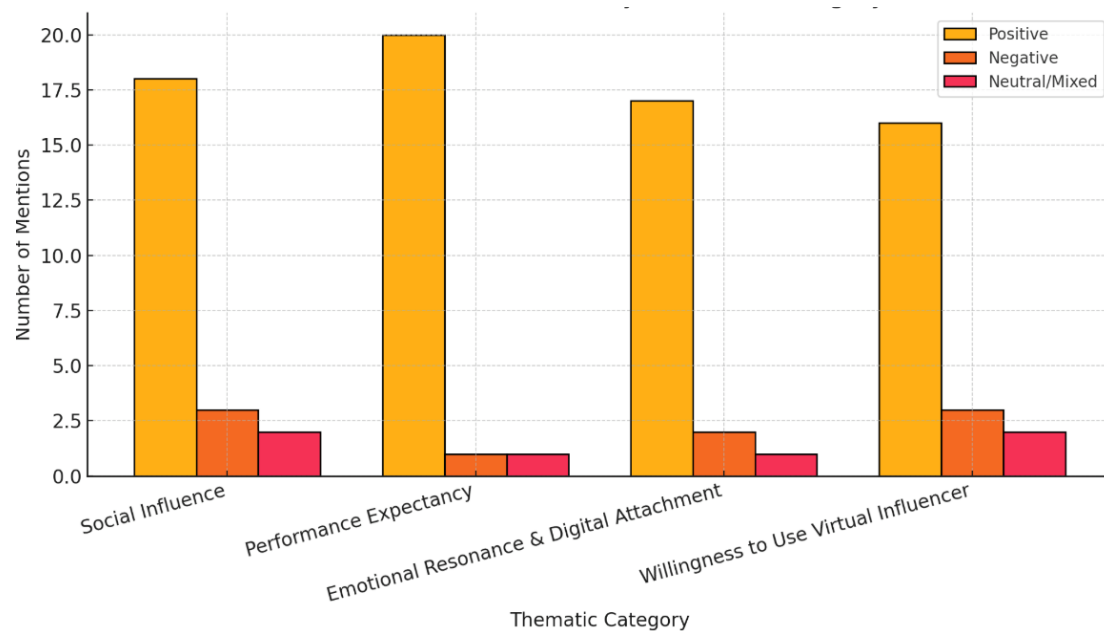


Figure 2. Frequency and Sentiment Pattern Summary by Thematic Category
Source: NVivo 14, semi-structured interviews (n = 25), (2025)

Figure 1 illustrates the affective landscape of participant narratives by visualizing the distribution of sentiments across the four main thematic categories. Rather than functioning as a quantitative measurement, sentiment coding was employed as an interpretive lens that combined manual reading with assisted classification in NVivo, enabling the identification of dominant emotional tones within the data. The analysis indicated that positive affect was particularly salient in relation to functional trust and emotional resonance, reflecting participants' appreciation of reliability, entertainment, and comfort. At the same time, a smaller yet meaningful set of negative or ambivalent responses surfaced, especially in relation to perceptions of artificiality and the uncanny qualities of anthropomorphized virtual influencers. These contrasting patterns highlight the layered and sometimes contradictory ways participants made sense of their engagement, underscoring the interpretive, non-linear character of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Guest et al., 2020).

Table 3. Contrasting Views on Emotional Resonance

Participant Quote	Interpretation	Participant Code
"Honestly, I find virtual influencers a bit creepy... I prefer real humans even if they're imperfect."	Participant expresses unease with artificiality, showing preference for authentic, flawed human interaction.	P19, Female, 30
"They're trying too hard to look human. It's unsettling. I don't trust something that pretends to be alive."	Emotional discomfort stems from the uncanny valley effect; lack of trust in anthropomorphized AI.	P16, Male, 28
"I know it's fake. There's no way I can feel connected to something that's programmed to act human."	Cognitive awareness of artificiality leads to emotional detachment and rejection of the illusion.	P05, Male, 24
"It feels manipulative, like they're using emotions to sell without actually being real people."	Highlights ethical skepticism; perceives emotional cues as calculated, not genuine.	P21, Female, 26

Source: NVivo 14, semi-structured interviews (n = 25), (2025)

To account for disconfirming evidence and to enhance the credibility of the findings, Table 4 presents a focused selection of contrasting cases that highlight negative emotional

reactions to virtual influencers. These cases, identified through NVivo queries that filtered references coded simultaneously as emotional detachment and skepticism, reveal participants' discomfort with artificiality, distrust toward anthropomorphized personas, and perceptions of emotional manipulation. Including these divergent voices adds interpretive depth by showing that engagement was not uniformly positive but instead negotiated through ambivalence and resistance, reflecting the complex and contested nature of human–AI interactions. Such attention to disconfirming evidence aligns with contemporary qualitative standards that emphasize reflexivity, credibility, and analytic transparency (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Guest et al., 2020). Collectively, the tables and figure substantiate the thematic claims developed through iterative coding cycles, with the resulting thematic map providing a coherent, data-driven foundation for the interpretive synthesis presented in the subsequent Discussion section.

Discussion

This study reveals that Indonesian consumers' engagement with virtual influencers is shaped by three interrelated dynamics: the normative power of social influence, the functional assessments embedded in performance expectancy, and the affective bonds arising from emotional resonance. Drawing from 25 in-depth interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, the findings highlight how these mechanisms intersect to explain why virtual influencers are accepted, resisted, or contested within Indonesia's digitally active youth culture.

Proposition 1 suggested that social influence shaped how consumers came to view VIs as useful within their social ecosystems. This was reflected strongly in Table 1 and Table 2, where peer validation and social endorsement consistently emerged as key triggers of acceptance. The prominence of "peer group validation" and "FOMO" (fear of missing out) illustrates how engagement with VIs is deeply situated within Indonesia's collectivist orientation, where conformity to group behavior is an essential social mechanism (Venkatesh, 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). As seen in the participant accounts (e.g., P03, P17), many respondents did not initially seek out VIs independently but engaged with them through their circulation in trusted networks—an insight that underscores the importance of cultural validation for technology acceptance in Southeast Asian digital contexts (Vafaei-Zadeh et al., 2024).

Proposition 2 indicated that performance expectancy was closely tied to participants' willingness to remain engaged with VIs when interactions were perceived as authentic, entertaining, and informative. This was substantiated by multiple thematic and narrative indicators. Respondents associated VIs with informational credibility, entertainment, and consistency—qualities that enhanced the perceived value of engagement (Feng et al., 2023; Gursoy et al., 2019). The subtheme "Informational Credibility," as illustrated by quotes from P09 and P14, suggests that participants often treated the expertise and content quality of VIs as digital trust markers. This aligns with recent research emphasizing the significance of functionality and informational relevance in digital endorsement contexts (Longoni & Cian, 2020; Cheng et al., 2022; Christanti & Kembau, 2024).

Proposition 3 emphasized that emotional engagement and perceptions of authenticity acted as a bridge between social influence and willingness to use. Thematic evidence from Table 1 and Table 2 reveals that emotional resonance emerged as a catalyst for moving from passive exposure to active acceptance. Participants described expectations not only in terms of functional performance but also in their search for affective familiarity and psychological comfort. Subthemes such as "Perceived Authenticity," "Digital Attachment," and "Trust Beyond Realness" demonstrate how consumers anthropomorphized VIs, attributing them with human-like reliability and emotional presence (Chi & Vu, 2023; Yu et al., 2024). Yet, Table 4

shows that this resonance was not universal; some participants (e.g., P19, P21) articulated discomfort, mistrust, and even rejection of what they perceived as emotional manipulation. These contrasting cases underscore the complex role of authenticity, resonating with recent studies that caution against the uncanny valley effect and highlight limits to anthropomorphism in AI-mediated engagement (Munnukka et al., 2022; Uysal et al., 2022).

Taken together, the three propositions reveal an interlocking framework in which social influence sets the stage, functional expectations provide justification, and emotional authenticity bridges the cognitive–affective divide. Engagement with VIs thus appears not as a purely rational decision but as a socially embedded and emotionally negotiated process. This finding expands foundational acceptance frameworks by integrating socio-cultural and affective dimensions that are critical for understanding AI–human interaction in non-Western contexts (Venkatesh, 2022; Gursoy et al., 2019).

In sum, this study extends marketing scholarship by showing that emotional resonance is not merely an outcome of engagement but a mediating force that shapes the entire acceptance process. For marketers, this underscores the importance of developing VIs that are not only visually appealing and informative but also emotionally attuned to local cultural norms and consumer expectations. For scholars, the findings suggest a need for more integrative approaches that bring together social psychology, cultural anthropology, and digital design in studying AI-driven marketing strategies.

Nonetheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The study’s focus on digitally active Indonesian youth may limit the transferability of findings to older or less digitally engaged populations. Furthermore, as with all qualitative research, the interpretation of data is shaped by researcher reflexivity, which, despite triangulation and saturation checks, may introduce interpretive bias. These limitations highlight opportunities for future studies to include more diverse demographic groups and to explore longitudinal dynamics of consumer engagement with VIs in varying cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study enriches the discourse on digital consumer behavior by illuminating the nuanced interplay between social influence, performance expectancy, and consumer willingness to engage with AI-powered virtual influencers within the Indonesian cultural context. The findings suggest that social influence provides a normative foundation for acceptance, performance expectancy offers functional justification, and emotional engagement anchored in perceived authenticity acts as an affective bridge connecting social and functional dimensions. Together, these insights reveal that acceptance of virtual influencers is not a purely rational decision but a socially embedded and emotionally negotiated process.

From a practical perspective, the study highlights strategic pathways for marketers. By leveraging peer endorsement, emphasizing the functional benefits of virtual influencer interactions, and fostering emotional authenticity, brands can design more culturally resonant campaigns that cultivate receptivity and strengthen consumer loyalty.

Nonetheless, this study carries certain limitations. The focus on digitally active Indonesian youth constrains the transferability of findings to older or less digitally engaged populations. In addition, as with all qualitative inquiry, the interpretive process is shaped by researcher reflexivity, which, despite efforts at triangulation and saturation, may still introduce bias into the interpretation of data. The relatively small number of participants and the predominance of urban-based university students further limit the demographic representativeness of the sample, creating an urban bias that may not fully capture perspectives

from rural or older populations. These constraints should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings and highlight the need for future research to expand sample diversity across age groups, education levels, and geographical settings.

Future research could extend these insights by adopting comparative designs across generational or cross-cultural contexts, or by examining how consumer engagement with virtual influencers evolves over time in longitudinal studies. There is also scope for integrating mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative depth with quantitative validation in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how virtual influencers shape consumer–brand relationships.

In conclusion, this study contributes meaningfully to digital marketing scholarship by foregrounding the social, functional, and emotional mechanisms that shape consumer responses to virtual influencers in culturally distinct settings. It also offers practical frameworks for marketers and points toward new avenues for future inquiry.

APPENDIX

A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Title of Study: *Consumer Acceptance of AI-Powered Virtual Influencers in Indonesia: A Qualitative Exploration Using the AIDUA Model*

Purpose of Interview: To explore Indonesian consumers' perceptions, experiences, and motivations in engaging with virtual influencers (VIs), particularly in relation to social influence, performance expectancy, emotional connection, and willingness to use.

Interview Format: Semi-structured; conducted either in person or via secure video conferencing platform. Duration: 60–75 minutes. Language: Bahasa Indonesia (with translation for analysis).

Section 1: Introduction and Consent

1. Explain the purpose of the study and confidentiality procedures.
2. Obtain verbal consent to record the session and use anonymized data.
3. Ask basic demographic questions:
 - a. Age
 - b. Gender
 - c. Occupation/Field of study
 - d. Time spent daily on social media
 - e. Familiarity with virtual influencers (e.g., names, platforms followed)

Section 2: Social Influence

1. Can you tell me how you first encountered a virtual influencer (VI)?
2. What made you decide to follow or engage with them?
3. Have people around you (e.g., friends, family, coworkers) influenced your decision to interact with a VI? How so?
4. Do you feel any social pressure to stay informed or engaged with trending digital personas?

Section 3: Performance Expectancy

1. What kind of value or benefit do you expect from virtual influencers?
2. Have you ever relied on a VI for product information, entertainment, or lifestyle ideas?
3. Compared to human influencers, what do you perceive as advantages or disadvantages of virtual influencers?

Section 4: Emotional Engagement

1. Do you feel emotionally connected to any virtual influencer? Why or why not?
2. Can you describe a time when a virtual influencer's content felt relatable or meaningful?
3. Do you perceive them as authentic or "real" in any way?
4. How do you respond when you know they are powered by AI and not real humans?

Section 5: Willingness to Use and Continued Engagement

1. What makes you continue or stop following a virtual influencer?
2. How does following a VI reflect your identity or digital persona?
3. Would you recommend a VI to others? Under what conditions?

Section 6: Concluding Reflections

1. In your opinion, what makes a virtual influencer successful?
2. What could make you trust or distrust a VI?
3. Is there anything you would like to add about your experience with virtual influencers?

Closing Statement: Thank the participant for their time and contribution. Reassure confidentiality and inform them of potential follow-up for clarification if needed.

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