



AI vs HUMAN INFLUENCERS: THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED MORAL AGENCY AND MORAL DISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The study investigates how consumers evaluate AI-generated influencers compared to human influencers from the moral lens. The study aims to explore how perceived moral agency and moral distance affect consumer responses namely, trust and admiration. Leveraging Moral Disengagement and Moral Attribution Theory, this study closes a significant theoretical gap by linking psychological evaluation with AI marketing communication. **Methodology:** A between-subject experimental design was employed with 120 participants – randomly assigned to view an AI and human generated influencer post. Validated Likert-scale instruments were used to measure perceived moral agency, moral distance, trust, and admiration. Transparency was employed as a moderate effect between the type of influencer and perceived moral agency. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). **Results:** ANOVA tests confirmed significant group differences in moral agency and moral distance. The SEM results showed that AI influencers were perceived to have significantly lower moral agency, which increased moral distance. Moral agency and moral distance significantly influenced trust and admiration. Transparency moderates the influence of influencer type on perceived moral agency. **Findings:** The findings of the study indicate that AI influencers are viewed as less morally accountable by consumers, leading to a wider emotional distance and reduced consumer trust and admiration. As a moderator, Transparency mitigates some of these negative effects by enhancing the perceived agency of AI influencers. **Theoretical and Practical Implications:** The findings of the study enhance the application of Moral Attribution Theory and Moral Disengagement Theory in digital marketing. The emergence of moral distance as a mediator is a novel insight in consumer influence evaluations. For marketing practitioners, the results provide guidance on how to enhance AI influencer's acceptance through the means of transparency disclosure and ethical design practices.

Keywords: *AI Influencers; Moral Agency; Moral Distance; Transparency; Trust; Admiration; Digital Marketing*