

Exploring the Dimensions of Virtual Influencer Effectiveness: A Conceptual Framework for Realness and Relatability

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

21-02-2026

Signature

Date

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Grammarly was only used to help with grammatical accuracy, sentence structure, and proofreading difficulties throughout the creation of this work. Grammarly generated no material other than language and editing support. I also acknowledge the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, such as ChatGPT, to assist in generating ideas and proofreading. These tools were not utilised to create final written material, analyses, or arguments without my critical review and adjustment. I accept full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and academic integrity of this work.

Finally, I acknowledge that this work has not been previously submitted for review at this or any other institution, unless otherwise specified.

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List of Definitions

Term	Definition	Page No.
Virtual Influencers	VIs are computer-generated personalities created to interact with audiences via social media platforms (Ju et al., 2024; Mrad et al., 2022).	12
Parasocial Relationship Theory	The PSR Theory describes how viewers create one-sided emotional ties with media characters, considering them as socially close companions despite the lack of direct communication (Horton & Wohl, 2006).	28
Uncanny valley effect	The uncanny valley effect is a phenomenon in which a virtual figure seems almost but not totally human, causing viewers to feel uneasy or uncomfortable (Liu & Wang, 2024).	29
Realness	The concept of realness in VIs “is often regarded as equal to ‘human-likeness,’ which mainly concerns whether a machine looks and feels like an actual human to users” (Huang & Jung, 2022, p. 2)	29
Relatability	Relatability in VIs refers to “the extent to which users connect personally with the avatar, embodying shared experiences and emotions” (Hao et al., 2024, p.3980).	31
Persona Realness	Persona Realness is defined as the degree to which a VI’s visual appearance, behavioural patterns, and design signals transmit believability as a human-like social actor (Koles et al., 2023; Lou et al., 2022).	35
Persona Relatability	Persona Relatability refers to how well viewers connect with the values, personality qualities, and lifestyles represented by the VI identity (Koles et al., 2023; Lim & Lee, 2023).	35
Message Realness	Message Realness is the perceived credibility, coherence, and transparency of a VI’s message communication (Gerrath et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2022; Muniz et al., 2023).	35
Message Relatability	Message Relatability refers to the extent to which a VI’s communications generate genuine connection and shared experience (Gerrath et al., 2024; Lim & Lee, 2023).	36

Abbreviation Key for Participant Themes and Codes

Code	Theme & Sub-Code Description	Participant (Name)
1A-SAR	General Usage and Engagement - Curiosity-Driven Engagement	Sarah
1A-MIL	General Usage and Engagement - Curiosity-Driven Engagement	Miles
1A-JAS	General Usage and Engagement - Curiosity-Driven Engagement	Jason
1B-SAM	General Usage and Engagement - Awareness/Visibility	Samantha
1B-PRE	General Usage and Engagement - Awareness/Visibility	Preston
1B-RUB	General Usage and Engagement - Awareness/Visibility	Ruben
2A-DYL	Perception of Realness - Facial Expressions	Dylan
2A-SAM	Perception of Realness - Facial Expressions	Samantha
2A-ADA	Perception of Realness - Facial Expressions	Adam
2B-SCO	Perception of Realness - Realistic Movements/Behaviour	Scott
2B-SAM	Perception of Realness - Realistic Movements/Behaviour	Samantha
2B-AAR	Perception of Realness - Realistic Movements/Behaviour	Aaron
2C-PRE	Perception of Realness - Consistency (Online Presence/Personality)	Preston
2C-DIA	Perception of Realness - Consistency (Online Presence/Personality)	Diana
2C-JAS	Perception of Realness - Consistency (Online Presence/Personality)	Jason
3A-EVA	Perception of Relatability - Shared Experiences/Values/Interests	Evan
3A-AUS	Perception of Relatability - Shared Experiences/Values/Interests	Austin
3A-ADA	Perception of Relatability - Shared Experiences/Values/Interests	Adam
3B-AAR	Perception of Relatability - Storytelling (Anecdotes/Struggles/Achievements)	Aaron
3B-EVA	Perception of Relatability - Storytelling (Anecdotes/Struggles/Achievements)	Evan
3B-SAR	Perception of Relatability - Storytelling (Anecdotes/Struggles/Achievements)	Sarah
3C-SAR	Perception of Relatability - Emotional Connection/Attachment	Sarah
3C-SOP	Perception of Relatability - Emotional Connection/Attachment	Sophie
3C-ADA	Perception of Relatability - Emotional Connection/Attachment	Adam
4A-SOP	Message Communication (Realness) - Tone/Clarity	Sophie
4A-MIL	Message Communication (Realness) - Tone/Clarity	Miles
4B-SCO	Message Communication (Realness) - Consistency/Coherence	Scott
4B-AUS	Message Communication (Realness) - Consistency/Coherence	Austin
4B-ADA	Message Communication (Realness) - Consistency/Coherence	Adam
4C-SOP	Message Communication (Realness) - Structure/Delivery	Sophie
4C-JAS	Message Communication (Realness) - Structure/Delivery	Jason
4C-SAM	Message Communication (Realness) - Structure/Delivery	Samantha
5A-EVA	Message Communication (Relatability) - Casual vs. Professional Tone	Evan
5A-RUB	Message Communication (Relatability) - Casual vs. Professional Tone	Ruben
5A-SAR	Message Communication (Relatability) - Casual vs. Professional Tone	Sarah
5B-SAB	Message Communication (Relatability) - Communication Techniques	Sabrina
5B-ADA	Message Communication (Relatability) - Communication Techniques	Adam
5B-SAM	Message Communication (Relatability) - Communication Techniques	Samantha
5C-JAS	Message Communication (Relatability) - Relatability of Message	Jason
5C-SAR	Message Communication (Relatability) - Relatability of Message	Sarah
5C-AUS	Message Communication (Relatability) - Relatability of Message	Austin
6A-EVA	Mediation Mechanism (PSR) - VIs Trustworthiness	Evan
6A-PRE	Mediation Mechanism (PSR) - VIs Trustworthiness	Preston
6A-SAR	Mediation Mechanism (PSR) - VIs Trustworthiness	Sarah
6B-ADA	Mediation Mechanism (PSR) - Attachment Type Construct	Adam
6B-SAM	Mediation Mechanism (PSR) - Attachment Type Construct	Samantha
6B-MIL	Mediation Mechanism (PSR) - Attachment Type Construct	Miles
7A-EVA	Brand Collaboration/Influence - Engagement with Brand Posts	Evan
7A-SCO	Brand Collaboration/Influence - Engagement with Brand Posts	Scott
7A-JAS	Brand Collaboration/Influence - Engagement with Brand Posts	Jason
7B-STE	Brand Collaboration/Influence - Ability to Build Connections	Stella
7B-ADA	Brand Collaboration/Influence - Ability to Build Connections	Adam
7B-AUS	Brand Collaboration/Influence - Ability to Build Connections	Austin
7C-EVA	Brand Collaboration/Influence - Comparison to Human Influencers	Evan
7C-STE	Brand Collaboration/Influence - Comparison to Human Influencers	Stella
7C-PRE	Brand Collaboration/Influence - Comparison to Human Influencers	Preston

Abstract

This thesis investigates how Perceived Realness and relatability, considered independently at the persona and message levels, influence consumer trust and engagement with VIs in digital marketing. Prior research frequently combines persona characteristics (e.g., human-likeness, behavioural realism) and message techniques (e.g., narrative tone, emotional framing) into a single “authenticity” construct, which limits theoretical accuracy. Based on Parasocial Relationship (PSR) theory, I propose and test a dual-lens 2x2 framework that views persona-level and message-level realness and relatability as independent yet interconnected pathways through which VIs develop parasocial connections, trust, and engagement.

A qualitative study design was used. Sixteen social media users were purposively recruited (N = 16; age \geq 21; active on Instagram and/or TikTok) and participated in semi-structured interviews conducted either in person or online. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant’s agreement. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, resulting in a total of 108 pages of transcripts, and processed inductively using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis. Analysis yielded seven key themes. The findings demonstrate that the proposed 2x2 typology reveals VIs produce influence through two separate design configurations: Synergised and Complementary. The findings indicate that Synergised Relatability promotes emotional connection, whereas Synergised Realness promotes cognitive trustworthiness. Importantly, complementary designs bridge gaps by allowing Message Relatability to compensate for poor persona reality (for example, cartoon-like avatars). Furthermore, interaction serves as a key moderator, increasing authenticity in all configurations.

The thesis makes a theoretical contribution by clarifying how persona and message mechanisms collaborate to produce PSRs with non-human agents, a methodological contribution by demonstrating the value of depth-interview evidence for understanding these processes, and a practical contribution by providing a Strategic Framework for VI Implementation as actionable advice for marketers. This framework guides marketers in calibrating visual and narrative cues to balance cognitive trust and emotional resonance, avoiding the uncanny valley while maximising engagement.

Keywords: Virtual influencers, Perceived Realness, relatability, parasocial interactions, parasocial relationships, message communication, trust, engagement, and thematic analysis.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Virtual Influencers (VIs) and Its Influences, Applications, and Current Research Landscape

VIs are computer-generated personalities created to interact with audiences via social media platforms (Ju et al., 2024; Mrad et al., 2022). Their growth is closely tied to the increasing digitalisation of consumer interactions and the growing influence of social media on consumer behaviour (Lou et al., 2022; Sands et al., 2022). VIs have become significant players in digital marketing ecosystems through their use of photorealistic design, narrative-driven communication, and strategic brand alignment (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Koles et al., 2023). They are able to create significant engagement and promote PSRs (Lou et al., 2022; Lim & Lee, 2023). One well-known example is Lil Miquela, who has collaborated with high-end companies such as Calvin Klein and Prada to enhance brand awareness and interaction (Muniz et al., 2023). Lil Miquela-focused campaigns have generated substantial levels of consumer engagement, as evidenced by impressions, comments, and reposts (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Muniz et al., 2023). Lil Miquela alone commands an estimated USD 6,000-10,000 per sponsored post, underscoring the substantial economic weight these digital entities now hold (Conti et al., 2022). These campaigns have also shown how visually complex and narratively cohesive VIs can form powerful emotional bonds with viewers (Muniz et al., 2023). These examples demonstrate how relatability, made possible by narrative and cultural relevance, and Perceived Realness achieved through human-like characteristics can promote customer trust and sustained engagement (Ju et al., 2024; I. Kim et al., 2024). This impact is evident in the rapidly growing global market for VIs, which was valued at approximately USD 6 billion in 2024 and is projected to surpass USD 45 billion by 2030 (Virtual Influencer Market Size & Share | Industry Report, 2030). Academic research indicates that VIs are increasingly adopted across sectors due to their scalability, controllability, and enhanced audience acceptance (Laszkiewicz & Kalińska-Kula, 2023; Mrad et al., 2022; Sands et al., 2022). Furthermore, research indicates that VIs may generate approximately three times more engagement than their real-life counterparts, averaging roughly 5.9% compared to 1.9% for traditional influencers (Junianta et al., 2024).

The emergence of VIs alters digital marketing by reducing the reputational risks and unpredictability associated with human influencers, giving firms more control over image and scalability (Allal-Chérif et al., 2023; Sands et al., 2022). Their programmability enables cost-effective, hyper-targeted worldwide marketing, particularly in visually driven industries such

as fashion and healthcare (Ahn et al., 2022; Ameen et al., 2023; Chung et al., 2024). Finally, VIs normalise AI-driven interactions, promoting parasocial connections and brand loyalty through constant, dependable content delivery (Jiang et al., 2023; Miao et al., 2021; Yoo et al., 2024). The rapidly growing scope of scholarly research on VIs has shown the complexities of consumer-avatar interactions. Current literature addresses VI efficacy from fragmented viewpoints, frequently isolating key design characteristics such as visual anthropomorphism or narrative style (Ahn et al., 2022; Liu & Wang, 2024). While research acknowledges that effective VIs must strike a balance between seeming 'human' and engaging emotionally with viewers (Lou et al., 2022; Mrad et al., 2024), these characteristics are typically explored separately. Various drivers of VI success have been studied, ranging from visual integrity in the fashion industry to credibility difficulties in tourism marketing (Dabiran et al., 2024; Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024). However, a comprehensive knowledge of how persona cues (visuals) and message cues (narratives) combine to form consumer impressions is still lacking. Existing research suggests underlying themes of authenticity and connection (Gerrath et al., 2024; Muniz et al., 2023), but it lacks a unified framework that systematically incorporates these elements. This thesis tackles this fragmentation by presenting a systematic typology that explains how different combinations of persona and message traits influence the creation of trust and parasocial connections.

1.2 Research Gap

From a managerial standpoint, building effective VIs is a challenging task: businesses must strike a delicate balance between technical innovation and genuine connection. Marketers typically struggle to balance a VI's visual form with its narrative voice; a mismatch here might result in the 'uncanny valley' effect or customer scepticism about the avatar's motivations (Ahn et al., 2022; Sands et al., 2022). Furthermore, sustaining a unified identity is challenging when great visual realism produces expectations of human-like conduct that the VI's communication fails to meet (I. Kim et al., 2024). Despite the expanding amount of research on VIs, previous studies have not combined the persona-level traits of VIs (e.g., human-likeness, behavioural realism) with the message-level communication they employ (e.g., storytelling, tone, narrative consistency) in an integrated framework. This makes it challenging to determine how Perceived Realness and relatability are produced, as well as how they individually or together affect customer trust and engagement (Ju et al., 2024; Muniz et al., 2023). Much of current research is focused on experimental or survey-based methods that focus on short-term responses, such as purchase intention, authenticity, or engagement (Liu & Wang, 2024; Lou et al., 2022), ignoring the subtle, subjective, and

emotional processes that consumers use to establish PSRs with VIs over time (Liu & Wang, 2024; Lou et al., 2022). Although several studies have examined how message cues, such as disclosure, emotional appeals, or narrative framing, shape perceptions of authenticity, trust, and relatability (Choudhry et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2024; Muniz et al., 2023; Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024), findings remain fragmented and sometimes contradictory. What is missing in the prior studies is an integrative framework that explains how persona design and message communication interact to balance realness and relatability, and how this balance shapes trust, PSRs, and long-term consumer-brand engagement. Addressing this gap is critical for helping businesses enhance VI design and communication strategies to increase trust and engagement. The proposed framework provides a strategic blueprint, allowing managers to move beyond trial and error and consciously construct VIs to achieve specified goals. Brands may build their digital avatars to suit exact marketing objectives by analysing which combinations create cognitive trust vs those that encourage emotional attachment. This ensures that investment in digital personas produces long-term customer loyalty.

1.3 Research Objective and Questions

The purpose of this research is to investigate how Perceived Realness and relatability, at both the persona and message levels, impact consumer trust, PSRs and engagement with VIs.

1.4 Main Research Questions:

1. How can the realness and relatability of VIs be conceptualised across persona and message dimensions?
2. How do perceptions of persona and message-level realness and relatability influence consumer trust and engagement with VIs?

1.5 Research Contributions

This research presents three main contributions: theoretical, methodological, and practical, based on the gaps discovered in the literature reviews and the insights gained from the findings. Theoretically, this study increases knowledge by untangling the frequently conflated conceptions of realness and relatability in VI research. Previous research tended to combine persona-level characteristics (e.g., anthropomorphism, behavioural realism) and message-level techniques (e.g., narrative coherence, emotional appeal) into a single “authenticity” concept (M. Kim & Baek, 2023; Lou et al., 2022). While numerous studies investigate either persona or message cues, few integrate both dimensions to explore how they collectively shape perceptions of realness and relatability, leading to a fragmented

understanding of VI effectiveness (Dabiran et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2024). To address this conceptual fragmentation, this study proposes a dual-lens 2x2 framework that integrates the persona and message dimensions. By investigating different levels concurrently rather than in isolation, the framework reveals how they interact to generate different outcomes. This theoretical contribution expands on PSR theory (Horton & Wohl, 2006) by distinguishing between two distinct parasocial pathways: a cognitive pathway leading to Trustworthiness (driven primarily by Synergised Realness) and an affective pathway leading to Relational Attachment (driven primarily by Synergised Relatability). Furthermore, the study finds Complementary Design configurations, illustrating how strategic mismatch (e.g., strong Message Relatability compensating for low Persona Realness) may effectively encourage connection despite artificiality. This provides predictive capacity in determining how specific combinations of character and message signals, influenced by interaction, impact audience acceptability. It represents an important synthesis of the literature. In this sense, the typology serves as a conceptual advancement because it integrates fragmented research into a cohesive framework that future scholars can use to test and refine theories of VI effectiveness (Ahn et al., 2022; Conde & Casais, 2023).

In addition, this study offers a unique methodological contribution by creating a framework based on the analysis of qualitative interviews. While previous quantitative research has been limited to examining established factors, the qualitative technique employed here offers greater explanatory power for theory development. It enabled the discovery of complex, emergent consumer responses, such as the distinct emotional triggers of hyper-realism vs relatable narrative, which rigid survey scales could not effectively capture. This methodological approach was crucial for distinguishing between the confused notions of realness and relatability observed in previous research.

Practically, the findings show that successful VI tactics rely on attaining congruence between persona and message across the characteristics of realness and relatability. It also provides actionable guidance for marketers through the Strategic Framework for VI Implementation (Chapter 6, Figure 4). This study provides managers with a comprehensive strategic roadmap for VI deployment, changing the emphasis from isolated visual design to the intentional calibration of persona and message congruence. Rather than relying on intuition, the approach enables marketers to objectively engineer specific relationship outcomes, tailoring their VI design to either solidify cognitive trust or foster emotional attachment in line with brand goals. By offering a formal mechanism for navigating hazards such as the 'uncanny valley' and utilising interactivity as a universal stabiliser, the framework

functions as a diagnostic tool, transforming VIs from static visual assets into dynamic, socially robust brand partners.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

Seven chapters comprise the remainder of this thesis. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review on VIs, focusing on persona- and message-level dimensions of realness and relatability, and establishes the rationale for conducting a structured narrative review. Chapter 3 presents the conceptual framework, grounded in PSR theory, to define realness and relatability, and introduces the dual-lens 2 x 2 typology that integrates persona and message cues. Chapter 4 details the research methodology, including the qualitative design, participant recruitment, data collection through semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis process, and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 outlines the key findings and analysis derived from seven major themes, demonstrating how participants perceive and evaluate persona-message congruence in shaping authenticity, trust, and engagement, creating a conceptual framework. Chapter 6 discusses the theoretical, methodological, and managerial implications of the study, highlighting how the proposed typologies and PSR mechanisms advance understanding of VI effectiveness. Chapter 7 discusses limitations and directions for future research, summarising the study's contributions and its broader significance for digital and AI-mediated marketing communication. Finally, Chapter 8 presents an overall conclusion and provides a closing reflection.

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1 VIs in Marketing: Persona-Message Dynamics and Consumer Response

The efficacy of VIs extends beyond visual beauty and is strongly dependent on their ability to build PSRs via authentic persona signals and resonant messaging (Jiang et al., 2023; Lou et al., 2022). Narrative-driven methods, such as Noonooori's, foster emotional resonance and relatability, both of which are crucial for enhancing engagement and brand affinity (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Dabiran et al., 2024). While viewers value personalisation, warmth, and shared experiences (Ameen et al., 2023; Chung et al., 2024), material that seems too polished or artificial might elicit suspicion and distrust (M. Kim & Baek, 2023; Lou et al., 2022). As a result, preventing judgments of artificiality necessitates a purposeful alignment of persona-level indicators (appearance and conduct) and message-level qualities (tone and coherence) (Liu & Wang, 2024). However, the current literature on Vis management is still fragmented. While some research focuses on message-level elements, such as narrative authenticity or brand consistency (Li & Ma, 2023; Lou et al., 2022), others highlight persona-level indicators, including form realism and behavioural realism (I. Kim et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2024). Their interaction is seldom discussed. This discrepancy emphasises the need for a more cohesive conceptual approach that examines how realness and relatability at the persona level interact with relatability and realness at the message level to influence engagement, trust, and PSR development (Liu & Wang, 2024; Muniz et al., 2023). These relationships are important because audience perception might be damaged by improperly adjusted content. According to Liu and Wang (2024), misalignment, such as a hyper-realistic VI delivering excessively scripted commercial messaging, might increase judgements of artificiality and weaken PSRs. According to De Brito Silva et al. (2022) and Ju et al. (2024), customers anticipate consistency between a VI's persona and the story it conveys; therefore, inconsistent tone or values across platforms can undermine message credibility and erode trust.

2.2 Establishing the Need for a Structured Narrative Literature Review

Previous research has frequently conflated realness and relatability, failing to distinguish between the VI as a digital identity and the effectiveness of the messages it conveys. For example, M. Kim and Baek (2023) assessed VI efficacy based on audience involvement but did not distinguish between the VI's realistic look (Perceived Realness) and emotional tone and lifestyle alignment (Perceived Relatability). Given the fragmented nature of the existing literature which frequently isolates visual anthropomorphism from narrative

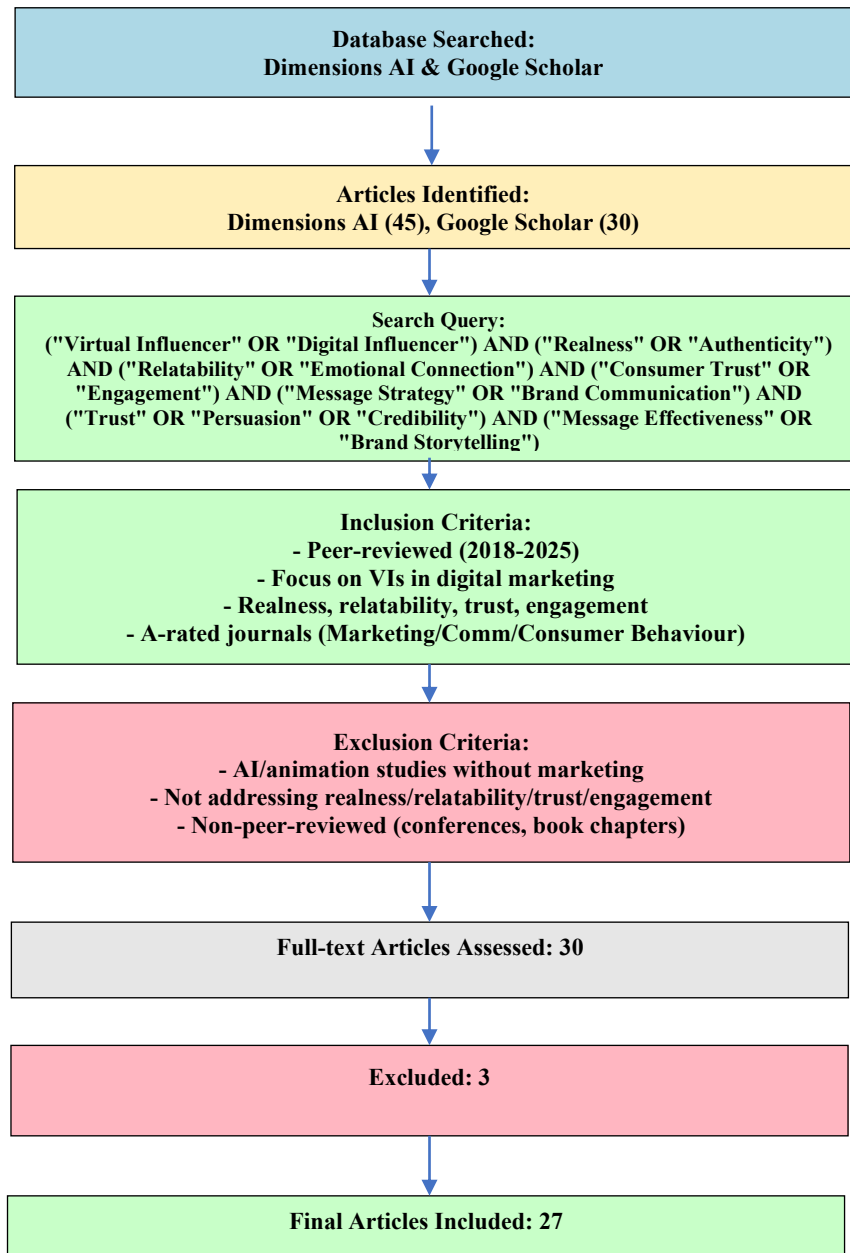
style a comprehensive synthesis is required to consolidate current research on VI marketing (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2024; Miao et al., 2021). To achieve this, this chapter undertakes a structured narrative literature review. While employing a systematic, methodical search protocol to ensure rigour and capture a comprehensive dataset, the analysis adopts a narrative approach (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023; Pradhan et al., 2023). This allows for a nuanced, thematic synthesis of how realness, relatability, consumer trust, and engagement are currently understood across the literature, ultimately identifying the gaps that inform this study's conceptual framework (Ameen et al., 2023; Koles et al., 2023; Lou et al., 2022).

The existing body of research shows a methodological imbalance, with a substantial emphasis on survey-based and experimental studies that focus on short-term consumer reactions (I. Kim et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2024). While these techniques offer useful insights into initial views, they frequently overlook the challenges of long-term interaction and trust creation with VIs. The gap is significant since industries like as health and tourism have traditionally relied on embodied authority and lived experience, which VIs lack. Unlike general lifestyle marketing, where aesthetics may suffice, these businesses confront a particular 'authenticity deficit' when deploying artificial agents, necessitating special trust-building tactics that current research has yet to fully investigate (Chung et al., 2024; Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024).

Given the research gaps, this research is required to consolidate and critically analyse current research on the importance of realness and relatability in VI marketing. This study aims to provide a comprehensive framework for distinguishing between VI persona features and message efficacy, as well as insights into how businesses can optimise their VI strategy for long-term customer engagement and trust. Therefore, the review prioritises depth of insight and theoretical integration over breadth, consistent with narrative review traditions in developing research domains.

2.2.1 Visualisation of the Search Procedure and Outcome

Figure 1. Structured Literature Review Process Flowchart



2.2.2 Explanation of the Search Procedure

To ensure a comprehensive and high-quality selection of relevant literature for this structured narrative review, a systematic Boolean search query was conducted across two major academic databases. Dimensions AI was chosen due to its extensive coverage of high-impact, peer-reviewed journals, resulting in the inclusion of 45 articles. Additionally, Google Scholar was used to supplement the findings and identify publicly available academic sources, resulting in the inclusion of 30 articles (see Figure 1). A total of 75 articles were initially gathered for consideration. The search query employed a combination of key terms to capture relevant research on VIs and their impact on consumer perceptions. The query included terms such as “Virtual Influencer” OR “Digital Influencer” in combination with concepts related to authenticity and engagement, including “Realness,” “Authenticity,” “Relatability,” “Emotional Connection,” “Consumer Trust,” “Engagement,” “Message Strategy,” “Brand Communication,” “Trust,” “Persuasion,” “Credibility,” “Message Effectiveness,” and “Brand Storytelling.” This structured approach ensured that the selected literature aligned with the study's core themes.

To refine the selection, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, outlined in Figure 1. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2018 and 2025 were considered, with a focus on studies examining VIs in digital marketing, particularly those exploring realness, relatability, consumer trust, or engagement. This timeline was chosen since 2018 was the year that VIs gained commercial momentum and scholarly attention, with designers such as Prada and Balmain pioneering VI marketing and generating academic interest (Mrad et al., 2022). Restricting the review to 2018 and later ensures that the literature represents the most recent breakthroughs in VI design, technology, and customer reaction, all of which are rapidly evolving in the age of AI-powered marketing. Including studies up to 2025 allows the research to capture the most recent conceptual and empirical insights into realness, relatability, and engagement, ensuring that the review is current and indicative of modern digital marketing tactics. Articles sourced from A-rated or above in marketing, communication, or consumer behaviour journals were prioritised to ensure academic rigour. Journal quality was evaluated using generally accepted rating methods, such as those employed by the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC). These lists categorise journals based on their scholarly impact, peer-review standards, and citation performance, allowing this assessment to focus on publications with strong legitimacy and influence in the academic world. Conversely, studies centred on AI development, animation, or deep learning without direct marketing implications were excluded, as were research papers that did not explicitly

address the key themes of realness, relatability, or consumer engagement. Additionally, conference papers, book chapters, and non-peer-reviewed sources were excluded to maintain the credibility of the literature review.

The selection process involved multiple screening stages. Initially, article titles and abstracts were reviewed to determine their relevance, resulting in the removal of studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria. This process narrowed the selection to 30 articles, which were then subjected to a full-text review. A more in-depth methodological and theoretical assessment was conducted to ensure that each study met the necessary quality and relevance standards. Following this evaluation, 27 high-quality studies were selected for inclusion in the literature review, as illustrated in Figure 1.

2.2.3 Overview of Selected Literature on VIs

Table 1. Overview of Selected Literature on VIs

Author(s)	Methodology	Context in which VI has been studied	VI		Message communicated by VI		Main findings
			Realness	Relatability	Realness	Relatability	
This research	Qualitative Interview	Digital marketing, consumer engagement, social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok)	✓	✓	✓	✓	To maintain trust and engagement, thematic analysis found that VI's persona-level realness and relatability must be consistent with message-level realness and relatability. Even with realistic character design, too polished or brand-heavy material diminished perceived realness. Conversely, relatable and emotionally captivating storylines may compensate for a less realistic VI design. According to this research, PSR strength is greatest when visual design, behavioural realism, and message delivery work together to foster trust, emotional closeness, and a propensity to connect with brands.
Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021)			✓	✓			VIs are perceived as “almost human,” but their lack of authenticity and emotional depth limits their ability to fully engage audiences compared to human influencers.
Chaihanchanchai et al. (2024)	Parallel mediation analysis.	Persuasion, brand trust, purchase intention		✓		✓	Brands should prioritize credibility and attractiveness when selecting a VI for endorsements. Trust transfer occurs from the brand to the VI when consumers trust a brand, they are more likely to trust the VI associated with it.
Choudhry et al. (2022)	Qualitative interviews	Psychological experience of following VIs	✓	✓		✓	VIs evoke curiosity and engagement through creativity, mystery, and storytelling but are perceived as less trustworthy than human influencers overall.
Chung et al. (2024)	Survey-based study	Virtual health influencers & preventive behaviour	✓			✓	Perceived severity of liver cancer, the strength of parasocial relationships with virtual health influencers, and belief in the effectiveness of preventive measures (response efficacy) are positively

							correlated with young adults' willingness to engage in liver cancer prevention.
Dabiran et al. (2024)	Mixed-methods approach	Anthropomorphism in VI marketing	✓	✓			Anthropomorphism in VIs promotes customer involvement and positive perceptions. Consumers relate better to VIs with human-like characteristics, increasing their trust and emotional connection to the business.
De Brito Silva et al. (2022)	Mixed methods (social network analysis and qualitative evaluation)	Engagement and authenticity of VIs	✓	✓	✓		High engagement levels are associated with perceived authenticity, as VIs effectively mimic real user interactions.
Ham et al. (2024)	Experimental study	Emotional expression of virtual humans on social media	✓				Users treat VIs as social actors, meaning they respond to them similarly to how they would respond to real humans. This leads to increased engagement and positive attitudes toward the VI.
Jiang et al. (2023)	Survey study	VIs and green marketing			✓		Emotional appeal of VIs enhances trust in sustainable branding.
Ju et al. (2024)	Experimental study	Authenticity and humanlikeness in VI communication	✓	✓		✓	A balance of authenticity and human likeness improves engagement, while excessive human likeness could trigger discomfort.
E. Kim et al. (2024)	Experimental study	Human-like vs. anime-like VIs	✓	✓	✓		Human-like VIs foster trust and relatability, but anime-like influencers do better in novelty-driven contexts.
I. Kim et al. (2024)	Survey-based study	Form and behavioural realism in VI marketing	✓	✓	✓		Mid-form realism VIs (somewhat humanlike but not fully) triggered higher eeriness, while high-form realism VIs (very humanlike) reduced eeriness and increased coolness. - Increased behavioural realism (more humanlike responses) intensified these effects. High behavioural realism strengthened the positive effects of form realism on coolness and marketing outcomes.
M. Kim and Baek (2023)	Survey-based study	Perceived creepiness & authenticity in VIs	✓		✓	✓	Authenticity increases customer trust, but extremely human-like VIs may be creepy, lowering engagement.
Koles et al. (2023)	Qualitative study (content analysis and interviews)	Authenticity in metaverse influencers	✓				Authenticity in the metaverse is achieved by consistency, openness, and meaningful interactions, which establish deep audience ties.

Laszkiewicz and Kalinska-Kula (2023)	Systematic literature review	VIs in marketing	✓	✓		✓	VIs are a new trend whose efficacy is determined by authenticity, engagement, and relatability in a variety of marketing scenarios.
Lee and Yuan (2023)	Content analysis and survey (audience reception of gender portrayals)	Gender presentations of VIs			✓		Gender portrayals by VIs are interpreted differently, with nuanced reactions to masculinity and femininity impacting audience perceptions and engagement.
Lim and Lee (2023)	Survey-based study	Origin disclosure & emotional narratives in VIs	✓			✓	Authenticity and Attractiveness Emphasise the importance of these traits in VIs to cultivate consumer trust. Parasocial Relationships Highlight how these relationships serve as a bridge between influencer characteristics and consumer purchasing behaviour.
Liu and Wang (2024)	Survey and experimental analysis	Parasocial relationships and the uncanny valley effect	✓			✓	Anthropomorphism and autonomy improve parasocial interactions. However, extreme realism may cause the uncanny valley effect, reducing audience interest.
Lou et al. (2022)	Qualitative, semi-structured interview method	Consumer response to VIs	✓	✓			Consumers frequently see VIs as “authentically fake,” with engagement driven by the appearance of authenticity, but trust issues may jeopardise long-term relationships.
Mrad et al. (2022)	Qualitative Interviews.	Digital personalities in influencer marketing	✓			✓	CGIs are perceived as brand entities composed of various identity components that shape their influence and engagement with audiences.
Mrad et al. (2024)	Qualitative Interviews.	VIs vs. real connections	✓	✓			VIs generate parasocial ties and social comparisons, which have conflicting effects: they can motivate self-improvement while possibly hurting self-esteem.
Muniz et al. (2023)	Experimental study	VI disclosure and brand trust	✓	✓		✓	Disclosing VI status increases transparency and brand trust, but it can reduce relatability.
Sands et al. (2022)	Literature review, survey	Opportunities and challenges of falsity in VIs	✓			✓	VIs open up new marketing options (for example, brand alignment and metaverse interactions), but they also present obstacles such as authenticity concerns, ethical dilemmas, and consumer scepticism.

Xie-Carson and Benckendorff (2024)	Five semi-structured focus groups with photo elicitation.	VIs in tourism marketing		✓		✓	Poor visual narrative, humanised content, and uncanny appearance are key factors hindering engagement. VIs face ethical concerns and relatability issues in tourism contexts.
Xie-Carson et al. (2023)	Qualitative Interview	Instagram users' engagement with VIs in tourism		✓		✓	Users perceive VIs as authentic and relatable, often forming emotional connections similar to those with human influencers. The visual appeal and consistent content delivery by VIs significantly enhance user engagement, suggesting that VIs can effectively influence tourism-related decisions and behaviours.
Yan et al. (2024)	Experimental study	Emotional attachment to VIs	✓				Mimic-human VIs elicit lower emotional attachment compared to animated-human and non-human VIs due to their uncanny valley effect, which makes them appear less relatable. In contrast, animated-human and non-human VIs foster stronger emotional attachment by providing a more engaging and familiar presence.
Yoo et al. (2024)	Experimental study	Trust and credibility in human-like VIs	✓			✓	Textual social cues enhance perceived attractiveness and attitude homophily, which boosts VI credibility and positively influence purchase intention
Q. Zhou et al. (2023)	Experimental study	Sensory-specific effectiveness of VIs	✓		✓		VIs are perceived as capable of distal sensory (visual/auditory) but not proximal (haptic/olfactory/gustatory) experiences, impacting endorsements.

2.3 Literature Review Analysis

2.3.1 Overview of VI Research: A Meta-Perspective

As shown in Table 1, the reviewed literature primarily focuses on major issues related to the function of VIs in digital marketing, specifically in terms of realness, relatability, consumer engagement, and trust. A recurring result is that audiences respond most positively when VIs strike a balance between human likeness and artificiality, avoiding the uncanny valley effect, in which overly realistic designs elicit discomfort. PSR theory explains this balance by stating that audiences build relationships with VIs when they are perceived as accessible, consistent, and socially engaged. Beyond persona design, research highlights the importance of message-level techniques, including narrative consistency, emotional appeal, and credibility transfer from linked brands in building trust and engagement (Chaihanchai et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2023). Together, this research shows that effective interaction with VIs requires both persona-level realness and relatability as well as message-level realness and relatability, which is the focus of this research.

2.3.2 Methodological Patterns

Most existing research uses quantitative approaches, notably surveys and experiments. Surveys frequently test trust, authenticity, and involvement by subjecting participants to various VI situations. For example, Jiang et al. (2023) discovered that emotionally appealing sustainability narratives increased trust, whereas I. Kim et al. (2024) demonstrated that behavioural realism (e.g., natural expressions, conversational flow) improves trust, even when high visual realism causes unsettling discomfort. Experimental investigations provide insights by changing VI features such as emotional expressiveness (Ham et al., 2024) and design style (Yan et al., 2024). However, the quantitative approaches might ignore the nuances in psychological responses when interacting with VIs. Although there are fewer qualitative studies, they give more in-depth insights into subjective experiences. Lou et al. (2022) and Muniz et al. (2023) found that consumers perceive VIs as “authentically fake,” engaging with them through storytelling and persona coherence while being aware of their artificiality. Yet these studies typically mix character and message, creating doubt regarding whether engagement derives from the VI itself or the communication method. This gap serves as the foundation for the research’s qualitative methodology, which focuses on both persona design and message communication.

2.3.3 Conceptual Fragmentation

VI research continues to be scattered in terms of realness and relatability. Some research highlights realness, emphasising human-likeness, authenticity, and behavioural

realism (Ju et al., 2024; M. Kim & Baek, 2023). Others focus on relatability, exploring parasocial ties and personality-based affinity (Dabiran et al., 2024; Lim & Lee, 2023). A separate stream looks at message communication, specifically how storytelling, brand transparency, and emotional resonance influence judgments of authenticity (Muniz et al., 2023; Xie-Carson et al., 2023). As can be seen in Table 1, this fragmentation demonstrates that studies frequently examine either persona or message, rather than their interaction. This lack of integration leads to theoretical uncertainty and reduces predictive power in understanding trust and engagement.

2.3.4 Addressing the Gap

The research tackles these problems by distinguishing between VI persona and message communication and explaining how each dimension leads to Perceived Realness and relatability. By combining both streams, this research creates a dual-lens framework in which persona and message collaborate to produce realness and relatability, impacting PSRs, trust, and engagement. This provides both theoretical clarity and practical assistance for businesses seeking to create VIs that strike a balance between realism and relatability, while avoiding issues such as uncanny discomfort or perceived inauthenticity (Allal-Chérif et al., 2023; Sands et al., 2022).

Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Introduction

The current framework creates a 2 x 2 typology in which the VI's persona (visual and identity-based features) and message (communicative and narrative expressions) contribute to impressions of realness and relatability (Ju et al., 2024; Lim & Lee, 2023). This approach is based on PSR theory, which explains how audiences create one-sided yet significant social ties with mediated figures (Conde & Casais, 2023; Horton & Wohl, 2006). These perceptions operate together to generate PSRs, which subsequently influence engagement habits and behavioural intents (Gerrath et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2024). The theoretical framework also acknowledges that disclosure of the VI's artificiality, uncanny valley effects, platform dynamics, and brand familiarity can boost or weaken these processes (Liu & Wang, 2024; Muniz et al., 2023; Sands et al., 2022). This chapter lays out the four quadrants of Persona Realness, Persona Relatability, Message Realness, and Message Relatability, providing a formal platform for investigating how VIs build trust, identification, emotional attachment, and, ultimately, engagement and behavioural intentions (Dabiran et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2022).

3.2 Parasocial Relationship Theory (PSR)

The PSR Theory, first proposed by Horton and Wohl in the 1950s, describes how viewers create one-sided emotional ties with media characters, considering them as socially close companions despite the lack of direct communication (Horton & Wohl, 2006). These connections are built on perceived familiarity, emotional connection, and authenticity, making viewers feel as if they "know" the media persona (Horton & Wohl, 2006). PSRs gradually shape viewers' views, actions, and loyalties, frequently mimicking real-life social relationships (Horton & Wohl, 2006; Lou et al., 2022).

PSR provides a theoretical foundation for analysing the interactions between VIs and their audiences (Dabiran et al., 2024). PSR is frequently utilised in various fields, including television, celebrity studies, and, increasingly, social media marketing, where followers form strong attachments to influencers (Conde & Casais, 2023; Lou et al., 2022). PSR has also been utilised in health communication to describe how AI-powered chatbots and virtual health **VIs** foster emotional connection and trust, ultimately leading to behavioural change (Chung et al., 2024). While VIs are artificial, they are designed to foster connection, familiarity, and engagement in ways that mimic human contact (Ju et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2024). PSR allows us to understand how users develop trust and emotional investment in VIs,

even in the absence of genuine human presence or experience (Ham et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2024). VIs frequently display human-like characteristics, such as humour, empathy, and relatability, which are important drivers of PSRs (Ju et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2024). It is especially essential in marketing, as emotional involvement has a significant impact on customer behaviour (E. Kim et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2022). These are the aspects by which viewers assess the legitimacy of media characters and create long-term parasocial interactions (M. Kim & Baek, 2023; Lou et al., 2022). Applying these dimensions to VIs clarifies how virtual personalities, although being artificial, may develop trust and affect consumer behaviour.

According to research, when VIs communicate emotion, humour, or empathy, they increase parasocial proximity by imitating the richness of actual human connection (Dabiran et al., 2024). However, overemphasis on realism may cause discomfort due to the “uncanny valley” effect, which occurs when great visual accuracy is combined with emotional dissonance (I. Kim et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2024). The uncanny valley effect is a phenomenon in which a virtual figure seems almost but not totally human, causing viewers to feel uneasy or uncomfortable (Liu & Wang, 2024). In the case of VIs, this happens when hyper-realistic graphics lack the emotional or behavioural complexity anticipated of actual persons, disturbing social presence and lowering engagement (Ju et al., 2024). Furthermore, unlike realness, which emphasises realistic presence, VIs establish relatability by strategic storytelling, emotional vulnerability, or audience involvement, even if such stories are scripted or stylised (Gerrath et al., 2024; Muniz et al., 2023). Building on the foundation of PSR theory, this research focuses on Perceived Realness and Perceived Relatability as the two primary aspects via which Vis establishes parasocial interactions and affects customer trust.

The sections that follow will delve more into Perceived Realness and relatability, illustrating how each alone impacts consumer views and interactions with VIs, and how their combined effect promotes better marketing results (Dabiran et al., 2024; Mrad et al., 2024).

3.3 Perceived Realness of VIs

Drawing on PSR theory, the concept of realness in VIs “is often regarded as equal to ‘human-likeness,’ which mainly concerns whether a machine looks and feels like an actual human to users” (Huang & Jung, 2022, p. 2). PSR theory posits that Perceived Realness enhances parasocial ties by making an influencer appear more authentic and relatable, rather than a remote media figure (Koles et al., 2023). According to research, VIs with realistic human-like characteristics, such as facial features, realistic movements, and cohesive

narration, improve consumers' perceptions of realness (M. Kim & Baek, 2023). According to research on visual realism, VIs with extremely human-like characteristics are viewed as more authentic, trustworthy, and competent (Huang & Jung, 2022; M. Kim & Baek, 2023). Consumers seek credible personas underpinned by consistent branding and narrative, rather than flawless human replication (Lou et al., 2022; Muniz et al., 2023). However, extremely lifelike designs run the danger of inducing the “uncanny valley” effect, in which near-human looks cause discomfort and impair emotional connection (Ju et al., 2024). These findings suggest that achieving a realistic balance that conveys authenticity without being unsettling is crucial for fostering trust and engagement. VIs' Perceived Realness is shaped by a combination of three main aspects: Human-like Visual Appearance (e.g., photorealistic facial features and body proportions), Natural Movement and Gestures (e.g., lifelike expressions and gestures), and Contextual Appropriateness (e.g., placement in realistic brand narratives and social settings) (Dondapati & Dehury, 2024; Huang & Jung, 2022; Ju et al., 2024; M. Kim & Baek, 2023; Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023).

According to research, consumers view VIs as more genuine when their digital avatars have high-fidelity, lifelike face characteristics and physical attractiveness (Huang & Jung, 2022). However, when visual realism becomes overly flawless, it may cause discomfort due to the uncanny valley effect (Ju et al., 2024), in which a person appears almost human yet exudes a sense of eeriness (M. Kim & Baek, 2023). Natural movement and gestures, referred to as realistic physical motion, such as facial expressions, walking, hand gestures, and lip synchronisation with speech, add to the apparent reality (X. Zhou et al., 2023). VIs with smooth and human-like motion are perceived as more realistic and immersive (M. Kim & Baek, 2023). This separates advanced VIs from previous or lower-tier models with rigid or robotic behaviours (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023). Contextual Appropriateness refers to the extent to which realness is determined by whether a VI behaves consistently across varied material and follows convincing human-like routines (Dondapati & Dehury, 2024). For example, VIs who travel, attend events, or engage in daily rituals (such as fashion styling or exercise) appear to have more real-life personalities (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023). This notion is further supported by their consistent responses to diverse brand collaborations and social circumstances (I. Kim et al., 2024). This has a unique implication for VI research: realness is a dynamic, created performance rather than a static visual attribute. It results from the interaction of appearance, conduct, and environment, implying that in order to be seen as genuine social participants, VIs must maintain a "lived" consistency that reflects human complexity.

3.4 Perceived Relatability of VIs

Drawing on PSR theory, this study defines Perceived Relatability in VIs as “the extent to which users connect personally with the avatar, embodying shared experiences and emotions” (Hao et al., 2024, p. 3980). According to PSR theory, people create greater relationships with influencers who represent their own personality, emotions, and social environment (Lou et al., 2022). This is especially crucial for VIs, who do not share genuine human experiences but may create relatability through narrative, humour, and culturally appropriate information (Muniz et al., 2023). According to research, consumers are more likely to build PSRs with VIs who have similar features and experiences (Dabiran et al., 2024). Lou et al. (2022) discovered that VIs who disclose their personal stories, problems, and goals form greater emotional relationships with their audience. This is especially important in areas such as fashion, fitness, and mental health, where customers seek influencers who reflect their sentiments and personal experiences (Jiang et al., 2023). For example, a VI that posts about self-care, conquering obstacles, or celebrating accomplishments is more likely to generate engagement than one who only sells things (M. Kim & Baek, 2023). This emotional involvement boosts follower retention, brand loyalty, and customer trust (Gerrath et al., 2024). The capacity of VIs to establish emotional connection by conveying ordinary events, humour, and personal narratives that meet audience expectations is an important part of relatability (Lou et al., 2022). According to research, when VIs employ narrative and interact with users in a natural and personalised way, they develop greater PSRs (Dabiran et al., 2024).

According to Lou et al. (2022), relatability is influenced by three main factors: Personal relevance, which refers to the degree to which the VI’s content corresponds to the audience’s interests, goals, and everyday experiences. Emotional engagement, which refers to the VI’s capacity to elicit emotions through narrative, humour, and group challenges. Social connectedness refers to how well the VI engages with the audience and takes part in community-driven debates. VIs who give fashion suggestions, routines, or aspirational material are more likely to develop emotional connections with their followers (Jiang et al., 2023). When users recognise characteristics of themselves in the VI, parasocial ties are reinforced (Muniz et al., 2023). According to Dabiran et al. (2024) and Ju et al. (2024), using tales, humour, and interactive material can enhance emotional engagement and foster deeper relationships. Warmth, empathy, and fun are traits that promote user loyalty, particularly

when VIs share personal tales or celebration moments (Dabiran et al., 2024; Ju et al., 2024). M. Kim and Baek (2023) found that emotional resonance improves trust and retention. Social connectedness, in which relatability is influenced by a VI's participation in two-way communication and community discourse (Gerrath et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2022). Real-time involvement, like as responding to comments or holding Q&A sessions, fosters audience trust and inclusion (Gerrath et al., 2024). However, highly choreographed encounters might impair perceived authenticity (Muniz et al., 2023). VI relatability is unique in its ability to cross the "artificiality gap." While VIs do not have a physical life, the combination of personal significance, emotional resonance, and social engagement produces a "psychological reality" in which the VI is treated as a peer. It implies that relatability for VIs is more than simply being liked; it is also about building a shared social reality that validates the user's personal experiences.

It is crucial to remember that Perceived Realness and relatability apply not only to the VI's digital persona but also to the words they convey. According to research, audiences establish trust and engagement by evaluating both the source (the VI) and the content (the message) (M. Kim & Baek, 2023; Liu & Wang, 2024). For example, while a VI may look physically realistic and behave consistently, if the message they offer lacks emotional subtlety or cultural significance, customers may consider the influencer as fake or untrustworthy (Ju et al., 2024). In contrast, even a stylised or apparently fake VI can be viewed as real if the message is accessible, emotionally resonant, and socially significant (Lou et al., 2022; Muniz et al., 2023). This implies that Perceived Realness and relatability are co-constructed by both the VI's qualities and the framing, tone, and substance of the messages they communicate (Dabiran et al., 2024; Gerrath et al., 2024). As a result, this study adopts a dual-lens approach, examining how these two constructs operate at both the persona level (the VI) and the message level (the content), thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of their impact on parasocial connections and consumer trust.

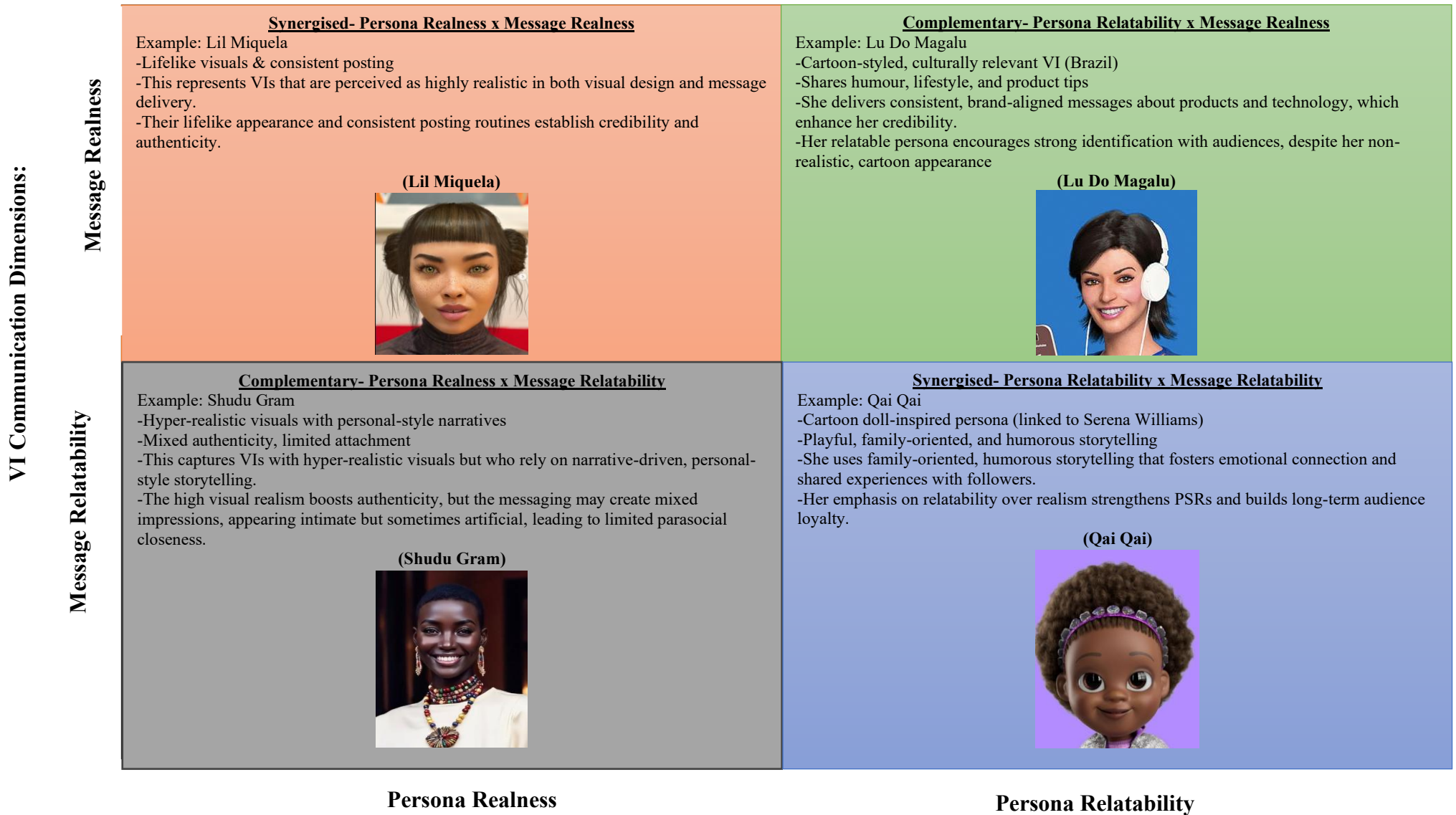
3.5 The 2 x 2 Typology: Persona vs. Message x Realness vs. Relatability

The 2 x 2 typology (Figure 2) illustrates how persona- and message-based cues impact consumer perception of realness and relatability in VIs. Each quadrant makes a unique contribution to the establishment and maintenance of PSRs, which influences trust, engagement, and behavioural intentions. By connecting the quadrants to real-world VIs, the theory explains why certain digital personalities succeed in building genuine connections while others are sceptical. This 2x2 typology was developed directly in response to the conceptual fragmentation identified in the structured narrative literature review (Chapter 2).

Previous studies have largely examined visual realism (anthropomorphism) and narrative style (communication) as isolated variables. By synthesising these previously disconnected streams of research through the lens of PSR theory, this typology proposes that consumer perceptions are not based on isolated traits, but rather on the structural alignment (Synergised) or intentional mismatch (Complementary) of persona and message cues. This conceptual model serves as the theoretical proposition that is subsequently explored and tested through the empirical findings of this study.

3.6 2x2 Typology: Core Perceptions

Figure 2. 2x2 Typology: Core Perceptions



VI Persona Dimension:

Persona Realness is defined as the degree to which a VI's visual appearance, behavioural patterns, and design signals transmit believability as a human-like social actor (Koles et al., 2023; Lou et al., 2022). It explicitly relates to anthropomorphism, demonstrating that realistic conduct and lifelike visuals enhance credibility and narrow the psychological gap between media personalities and viewers (Ahn et al., 2022; Huang & Jung, 2022). Consistent posting schedules, identifiable facial expressions, and genuine body language, for example, help consumers view VIs as capable members of online society rather than as robotic scripts. However, studies also warn that too many human characteristics might cause discomfort and undermine trust by triggering the uncanny valley effect (Liu & Wang, 2024). Because of this duality, Persona Realness is essential as it establishes the foundation for credibility-based PSRs, in which future interactions are anchored by trust in the VI's social presence (Koles et al., 2023; Lou et al., 2022). Theoretically, Persona Realness is included because credibility is a necessary component of social presence, and PSRs cannot emerge without a credible "social actor" (Ham et al., 2024).

Persona Relatability refers to the extent to which viewers connect with the values, personality qualities, and lifestyles represented by the VI identity (Koles et al., 2023; Lim & Lee, 2023). In contrast to Persona Realness, which promotes genuineness (Ju et al., 2024), relatability emphasises identification and connection (Yan et al., 2024). This dimension builds upon social identity theory and PSR research, which demonstrates that viewers who perceive self-other overlap or share similar values with media characters develop greater PSRs (Ju et al., 2024; Lim & Lee, 2023). Humour, quirky traits, goals, or progressive positions that speak to the cultural or generational identity of the target audience are examples of relatability (Yu et al., 2023). VIs that align with Gen Z culture, for instance, through activism, diversity, or memes, enhance identity-based appeal and foster an emotional sense of community (Dabiran et al., 2024). Therefore, identification-based PSRs are driven by Persona Relatability, where audiences are drawn in not because the VI seems human but rather because it feels "like them" in terms of social or cultural aspects (Lim & Lee, 2023). According to PSR research, resemblance and identification are important mediators of long-term loyalty, which is why this dimension was theoretically chosen (Conde & Casais, 2023).

Message Realness is the perceived credibility, coherence, and transparency of a VI's message communication (Gerrath et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2022; Muniz et al., 2023). This degree of realness at the message level is achieved when the VI's content avoids conflicts,

such as off-brand endorsements or excessively commercial intrusions, and aligns with its persona identity (De Brito Silva et al., 2022; Muniz et al., 2023). A skincare focused VI that regularly shares articles on regimens and tips, for instance, strengthens credibility; on the other hand, abruptly promoting unrelated goods undermines coherence and conveys insincerity (Jiang et al., 2023). According to research, when VI messages appear artificial or unrelated to persona cues, audiences react adversely, which in turn lowers trust (Gerrath et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2022). Assuring audiences that the VI's messages are trustworthy, persona-aligned communications rather than random outputs, Message Realness reinforces trust-based PSRs (Mrad et al., 2022). This dimension's inclusion is conceptually supported by credibility and PSR research, which shows that maintaining trust and persuasive (Lim & Lee, 2023) impact requires consistent messaging (Gerrath et al., 2024).

Message Relatability refers to the extent to which a VI's communications generate genuine connection and shared experience (Gerrath et al., 2024; Lim & Lee, 2023). Message Relatability places more emphasis on emotional connection than Message Realness, which is more concerned with coherence (M. Kim & Baek, 2023). The PSR theory supports this aspect by emphasising that even in one-sided interactions, conversational tone, humour, vulnerability, and cultural references foster emotions of closeness (Gerrath et al., 2024; Lim & Lee, 2023). When VI communications employ memes, storytelling, colloquial language, or emotionally charged narratives to arouse empathy, laughter, or contemplation, relatability arises (Lou et al., 2022). For example, although VIs are artificial, audiences find them more emotionally approachable when discussing socially important topics or relating to ordinary experiences (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Attachment-based PSRs, in which viewers develop bonds based on emotional resonance rather than just credibility, are driven by this factor (Ham et al., 2024; Horton & Wohl, 2006). PSR theory consistently demonstrates that connection is a crucial factor in fostering long-term engagement and loyalty, which is why Message Relatability was included (M. Kim & Baek, 2023). When combined, these four dimensions show how viewers assess VIs as "authentically fake" characters (Lou et al., 2022). While message dimensions (realness and relatability) influence whether messages are viewed as emotionally compelling and trustworthy, persona dimensions (realness and relatability) lay the groundwork for credibility and identification.

The framework illustrates how consumer involvement with VIs is co-constructed through persona and message cues, each of which shapes attachment, trust, identification, and eventually behavioural intents. This is done by framing the typology within PSR theory. This typology provides researchers with a more coherent approach to resolving diverse findings in

the literature and offers a better lens through which to examine the ways in which various combinations of persona- and message-based cues affect customer reactions. It emphasises for practitioners that the success of VIs depends on attaining congruence between persona-level realness/relatability and message-level realness/relatability, rather than being only attributed to visual design. This indicates that companies need to approach VI planning as a two-step process: creating a convincing and relevant VI persona while ensuring that the manner in which messages are delivered supports, rather than contradicts, those perceptions.

3.7 VI Design based on Realness and Relatability

The interaction between persona and message dimensions is visually synthesised in Figure 2. Two unique strategic configurations for VI design are revealed by the typology, which maps the intersections of persona-level signals (visuals/behaviour) and message-level signals (communication/narrative): complementary and synergised. These configurations clarify how the cognitive and affective pathways of PSR theory are variously activated by the particular alignment or misalignment of realness and relatability across the quadrants in Figure 2.

First, I refer to “Synergised VI design” as arrangements where the same authentic quality is emphasised by both persona and message signals, either both are realness-oriented, or both are relatability-oriented, leading to a reinforcing, or synergistic, parasocial reaction. Theoretically, this Synergised Realness configuration strongly activates the cognitive pathway of PSR because it meets the user's expectations for consistency and predictability. This is accomplished through the concept of congruence: when a VI's photorealistic appearance (indicating a serious social actor) is combined with logical, fact-based content, cognitive dissonance is reduced. This congruence allows the audience to disregard scepticism about the VI's artificiality and instead view the entity as a knowledgeable and trusted source of information, thereby establishing cognitive credibility.

When both levels communicate realness, the VI is perceived as a credible and plausible social actor, thereby enhancing cognitive trustworthiness. Conversely, a Synergised Relatability configuration (e.g., a stylised, expressive VI who employs vulnerability and comedy) strongly activates the affective pathway because it produces an emotional resonance loop that reinforces itself. This operates by amplifying social cues: when a VI's visual design conveys warmth (e.g., through expressive, non-threatening aesthetics) and its story evokes empathy (e.g., through shared problems), the audience receives a unified signal of 'friendliness.' The lack of conflict helps the user to relax and participate in mimetic empathy, resulting in a stronger sensation of emotional connection and attachment. When both persona

and message emphasise relatability, the VI is perceived as socially accessible and emotionally genuine, which strengthens attachment.

Second, Complementary VI design outlines situations in which persona and message signals highlight distinct aspects, such as a very realistic persona conveying emotionally warm messages (Persona Realness + Message Relatability) or a blatantly fake persona communicating candid, introspective narratives (Persona Relatability + Message Realness). Theoretically, this “complementary” design activates both PSR processes concurrently. For example, a visually realistic VI (Persona Realness) evokes trust, while its emotionally engaging narrative (Message Relatability) evokes attachment. This balance, where emotional attachment from relatability and cognitive trust from realness are activated together, can be especially compelling for audiences who value transparency but still need human-like empathy.

When taken as a whole, these tactics clarify how parasocial connection is moulded not just by whether a VI seems relatable or real, but also by how these attributes are purposefully and consistently integrated across visual and verbal dimensions. While synergised designs strengthen a particular parasocial process, complementary designs give balance by increasing simultaneous trust and attachment. The quadrant-level analysis that follows is supported by this theoretical reasoning.

3.8 Implications of Each Quadrant

The 2x2 typology (Figure 2) illustrates how consumer perceptions of VIs’ realness and relatability are influenced by the interaction between persona- and message-level cues. Every quadrant denotes a unique process by which PSRs are created, maintained, or weakened. The framework provides a sophisticated explanation of why certain VIs evoke ambivalence or scepticism while others foster trust, engagement, and loyalty by connecting the quadrants to actual instances of well-known VIs.

Quadrant 1: Synergised- Persona Realness x Message Realness

This quadrant is distinguished by the combination of strong visual realism with a fact-based, cohesive message. Authentic and trustworthy VIs are those with realistic images and message delivery consistent with their persona. Lil Miquela is a prime example of this quadrant; her photorealistic look, regular posting, and partnerships with leading companies establish credibility and support trust-based PSRs (Ahn et al., 2022; Allal-Chérif et al., 2023). Theoretically, this quadrant represents a synergised realness design, in which credibility becomes the dominant parasocial mechanism. Practically, companies should be aware that, although this realism fosters trust, over-polished or highly commercial content risks

triggering the uncanny valley effect and lowering comfort (Ju et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2024). Success in this sector thus hinges on striking a balance between realism and the VI's small flaws, which give it a human face (Huang & Jung, 2022).

Quadrant 2: Complementary- Persona Relatability x Message Realness)

This quadrant represents the intersection where high Persona Relatability is paired with high message-level realness. Lu do Magalu, a cartoon-like VI created by Brazilian shop Magazine Luiza, exhibits this technique (Conti et al., 2022). Despite the lack of realism, Lu is extremely approachable because of her eccentric personality, hilarious tone, and cultural congruence with Brazilian internet culture. Her message delivery is consistent and brand-aligned, with product suggestions, tech guidance, and everyday shopping tips that build trust and authenticity (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023; Sands et al., 2022). Theoretically, this quadrant represents a complementary configuration that shows how persona-level relatability can facilitate trust-based PSRs when supported by message-level realness. Practically, it suggests that businesses can effectively use cartoon-style visual aids to convey reliable information, provided their identity and language are clearly linked. The primary risk here is that if the humour or tone departs from the VI's recognised identity, people may see the messaging as fake or too commercial, undermining trust.

Quadrant 3: Complementary- Persona Realness x Message Relatability

The design configuration combines hyper-realistic visuals with emotionally driven, narrative-based communication. For example, known as the “world's first digital supermodel,” Shudu Gram provides hyper-realistic images along with narratives in the manner of the individual (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021). While Message Relatability promotes closeness, strong realism establishes initial authenticity (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021). However, this quadrant also represents inconsistent authenticity; viewers may doubt the depth of connection due to Shudu's artificiality and lack of lived experience, even as they appreciate the realism (M. Kim & Baek, 2023). This may limit the depth of PSRs. Theoretically, this quadrant reflects a complementary design in which credibility and emotional connection coexist but remain fragile. Practically, businesses should employ storytelling techniques to mitigate artificiality in this context but refrain from exaggerating closeness since this might backfire and raise customer mistrust (Lou et al., 2022).

Quadrant 4: Synergised- Persona Relatability x Message Relatability

This quadrant describes a design strategy where both the persona and the message prioritise relatability cues. Qai Qai, a cartoon-like doll VI associated with Serena Williams, exemplifies this type. Unlike hyper-realistic VIs, Qai Qai's humorous and non-human

demeanour encourages viewers to connect with her on a symbolic and emotional level (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2024). Her postings frequently incorporate light-hearted humour, culturally relevant comments, and family-oriented storytelling to foster a feeling of shared experience and social closeness (Choudhry et al., 2022; Lou et al., 2022). Theoretically, this quadrant illustrates a synergised relatability design, where relatability-focused cues may compensate for the lack of reality, enabling audiences to form strong parasocial ties with “authentically fake” individuals. Practically, this quadrant suggests that businesses seeking to establish strong emotional connections, particularly in lifestyle, entertainment, or family-oriented campaigns, can benefit from cartoon-style VIs, whose relatability fosters loyalty and long-term engagement. However, if the messaging is insufficient or inconsistent, it risks being viewed as overly frivolous or childish.

3.9 Summary

This chapter builds the research’s conceptual framework, which is based on PSR theory and explains how customers engage with VIs. The framework combines persona and message clues to create a 2x2 typology of consumer perceptions, as seen in Figure 2. The approach improves theory by demonstrating that PSRs are co-constructed through the interaction of persona and message-level signals, rather than being defined by standalone qualities (Conde & Casais, 2023; Horton & Wohl, 2006). Persona Realness increases credibility, while Persona Relatability encourages identification; Message Realness strengthens trust, while Message Relatability promotes attachment (Ju et al., 2024; Lim & Lee, 2023). These four dimensions describe how VIs are seen as “authentically fake” characters, whose efficacy is determined by the consistency with which they appear, behave, and communicate (Lou et al., 2022). By identifying both synergised and complementary design strategies, this chapter provides theoretical clarity and practical guidance for the strategic deployment of VIs in marketing contexts.

Chapter 4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

In this study, a qualitative approach was employed to investigate how consumers perceive and respond to the Perceived Realness and relatability of VIs in the context of digital marketing. This approach was chosen because qualitative data collection enables a thorough analysis of people's lived experiences, beliefs, and emotional responses, which is especially important when researching emerging, complex, and emotionally charged phenomena such as VIs (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Choudhry et al., 2022; Sands et al., 2022). Given that the concepts of realness and relatability are highly subjective, often influenced by factors such as digital literacy, cultural norms, personal beliefs, and social media habits, a qualitative, exploratory approach was deemed most suitable for allowing these interpretations to develop naturally. The objective was not to test hypotheses, but rather to provide grounded insights that may help to develop theories and inspire practical tactics for VI design, content generation, and brand communication. Open-ended interviews were used to learn not only what participants believe about VIs, but also why they hold those beliefs and how their emotions and digital surroundings influence those beliefs.

4.2 Participant Selection and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used as the recruitment approach to ensure that interviews were conducted only with individuals capable of providing significant, experience-based insights on the phenomenon of VIs. This strategy enabled the selection of participants based on precise inclusion criteria relevant to the study's objective. The study targeted individuals aged 21 and above, including university students and members of the general public residing in New Zealand. These groups were chosen because they are part of a digitally literate population that actively consumes material on platforms where VIs are most evident, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

To verify that participants were familiar with the topic, past exposure to at least one VI was checked via a pre-screening questionnaire, whether through direct following, brand contact, or general internet knowledge. A total of 16 participants were recruited, a sample size exceeding the threshold typically required to achieve data saturation in qualitative inquiry (Guest et al., 2005), while ensuring diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and media consumption. Inclusion requirements included being above the age of 21, regularly engaging with social media, and recognising or interacting with VI content. Individuals were excluded

if they were under 21, had no knowledge of VIs, or had a close personal contact with me, in order to avoid any biases or power imbalances. Recruitment was carried out using a combination of social media posts (such as Instagram Stories) and word-of-mouth recommendations. Upon expressing interest, participants received an information sheet outlining the study's goal, followed by a consent form. Following an assessment of the research criteria, all individuals who volunteered to participate were included in the study.

4.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data that captured the richness and depth of participants' perceptions and experiences. This structure enabled the verification of uniformity among participants while also allowing the freedom to follow up on unusual or unexpected responses. Semi-structured interviews were ideal because they allowed for the examination of very personal and subjective notions such as Perceived Realness, emotional resonance, and narrative engagement with VIs.

Interviews were conducted in person at Auckland University of Technology's City Campus or online via Microsoft Teams, depending on the participant's preference. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes and was audio recorded with the participant's agreement. Participants were advised that they could pause, skip questions, or withdraw at any time without penalty. The interview guide included a set of open-ended core questions, such as: What makes a VI feel "real" or "human-like" to you? Can you recall a time when a VI resonated with your own experiences or values? How do you respond emotionally or behaviourally to content from VIs? In your view, what makes a VI more trustworthy or engaging? These questions were aimed at garnering consideration of both the VI's persona (e.g., voice, tone, visuals, behaviour) and the content they provide (messages, stories, collaborations). Participants were invited to contribute their stories, perceptions, and emotions, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of how VIs are received and emotionally processed. During the interviews, close attention was paid to linguistic clues, hesitations, and emotional tones, using questions like "Can you tell me more about that?" or "What made you feel that way?" to deepen the conversation. Follow-up questions were tailored based on participant replies, ensuring that each interview was participant-led while remaining in line with the research's objectives.

4.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using **thematic analysis**, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected due to its flexibility and

suitability for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets, particularly in exploratory research contexts.

The analysis followed a hybrid inductive–deductive approach. Initial coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants’ accounts without being constrained by predefined categories. At the same time, the analysis was theoretically sensitised by the study’s conceptual framework, which distinguishes between persona and message dimensions of realness and relatability. Importantly, the framework was used as an interpretive lens rather than a rigid coding template, ensuring that findings remained grounded in the data while still contributing to theory development.

The analysis proceeded through six stages:

1. Familiarisation: All interview transcripts were read multiple times to develop a deep understanding of participant responses. Initial observations and reflections were noted during this stage.

2. Generating Initial Codes: Open, line-by-line coding was conducted to identify meaningful segments of data. Codes were kept close to participants’ language to preserve interpretive accuracy.

3. Searching for Themes: Codes were grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarity, forming preliminary themes that captured recurring patterns across the dataset.

4. Reviewing Themes: Themes were refined through an iterative process to ensure internal coherence and clear distinction between themes. This involved revisiting both coded extracts and the full dataset.

5. Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined, with sub-themes identified where appropriate. Definitions were aligned with the research objectives and conceptual framework.

6. Producing the Report: The final themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework, forming the basis of the findings and analysis.

To enhance transparency, a coding structure was developed linking raw data extracts to codes and themes (see Table 2). Additionally, reflexive notes were maintained throughout the analysis to acknowledge the researcher’s interpretive role in theme development.

4.5 Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several measures were implemented across credibility, transferability, dependability, and reflexivity. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, detailed transcript analysis, and the use of

direct participant quotations to ground interpretations. Regular supervisory meetings supported critical reflection on coding decisions, emerging themes, and potential researcher biases.

Transferability and dependability were supported by detailed demographic reporting and a methodological checklist. A reflective notebook was maintained to monitor the researcher's influence. A clear audit trail was implemented to assure dependability. This entailed keeping a strict methodological checklist that recorded every step of the study process, from recruiting to the final theme map. By specifically defining the six steps of Braun and Clarke's (2006) research and retaining raw data (transcripts and field notes), the study ensures that the analytical logic is consistent, traceable, and open to scrutiny. A reflective journal was kept during data collection to track the researcher's influence on participant responses, which aided reflexivity. Additionally, ethical norms were strictly adhered to; participants provided informed consent after reviewing the study's voluntary nature and withdrawal rights. Data privacy was strictly maintained by anonymising transcripts with pseudonyms and storing material on a password-protected university server. As a token of appreciation, participants received a \$10 online coupon upon completion.

Chapter 5. Findings and Analysis

This chapter covers the key themes that emerged from thematic analysis of in-depth interviews. The study investigates how people perceive and interact with VIs, focusing on elements such as realness, relatability, communication, and brand influence. The findings are organised under seven major themes.

5.1 Themes and Codes of Participant Interview.

Table 2. Themes and Codes of Participant Interview.

Theme	Codes	Source Citations (where the concept appears)
1. General Usage and Engagement:	Curiosity-Driven Engagement (1A): Content from VIs is often watched or observed out of curiosity.	<p>Sarah (1A-SAR)- “Actually, I don’t follow any specific one, but they do catch my attention sometimes. Usually, you know, when you pause and you’re like, oh, wait, is this person real? And then I click on the profile just out of curiosity”</p> <p>Miles (1A-MIL)- “Let’s say I do find ideas of VI, making it really interesting, especially as a digital trend. I am more likely to observe in front of curiosity and marketing points of view than interact with its personality.”</p> <p>Jason (1A-JAS)- “VIs, yeah, they pop up in my feed every now and then, like Lil Miquela. I’ll see maybe a couple of times a week, I’ll stop and look because her content is so different.”</p>
	Awareness/Visibility (1B): VIs frequently appear in social media feeds, sponsored posts, or explore pages without active searching.	<p>Samantha (1B-SAM)- “Occasionally I’ll watch the stories or swipe through their branded campaigns, especially when they partner with, you know, a well-known brand, like Prada or Samsung.”</p> <p>Preston (1B-PRE)- “I have seen VIs, mostly in sponsor ads, brands like Balmain and Prada use them for fashion campaign recently on YouTube also, they appear in shorts animated skits or product promotion.”</p> <p>Ruben (1B-RUB)- “Instagram is still good for forming my influencer content, but I notice VIs more in sponsored posts in my regular feed.”</p>
2. Perception of Realness:	Facial Expressions (2A): Realistic facial expressions make a big difference and help in emotional connection.	<p>Dylan (2A-DYL)- “Facial expression then subtle movements help for sure. If a VI moves like a real person or reacts naturally.”</p> <p>Samantha (2A-SAM)- “So details like facial expressions, blinking and realistic movement make a huge difference. When a VI’s face moves in subtle ways, reacts naturally in videos and animations, it creates a stronger illusion of sentience, which enhances the feeling of realness.”</p> <p>Adam (2A-ADA)- “Facial expressions and realistic movements make a big difference. If they movement react like a real person, it’s easier to connect with them emotionally and believe in what they are saying.”</p>
	Realistic Movements/Behaviour (2B): Natural, human-like movements and	Scott (2B-SCO)- “I definitely felt more engaged when an influencer looked or behaved in a human-like way. It made the content feel more personal and relatable, almost like interacting with the real person. Realistic behaviour helped build more trust and interest in what they were promoting.”

	behaviour are crucial for perception of realness and emotional connection.	<p>Samantha (2B-SAM)- “Behaviour is more important than appearance when it comes to realness. How VIs act, their tone, mannerisms, how often they post, how they respond to followers, and how real they seem.”</p> <p>Aaron (2B-AAR)- “I saw a post from a VI named Lil Miquella, her post regarding doing meditation felt so real. That kind of realistic behaviour was on point.”</p>
	<p>Consistency (Online Presence/Personality) (2C): Regular posting and sticking to a certain style or personality makes them feel more genuine and trustworthy.</p>	<p>Preston (2C-PRE)- “But if they reply to comments or like, go live or share casual behind-the-scenes moments, they feel more human to me. For example, I would say, when Miquela posted about a breakup, even though she’s not real, it made me feel like a real influencer.”</p> <p>Diana (2C-DIA)- “I think consistency is huge. If their personality and behaviour are consistent across posts and over time, they feel more trustworthy and a little less like a gimmick.”</p> <p>Jason (2C-JAS)- “But I see Lil Miquela post regularly like outfit checks thoughts and about random topics, like even coffee runs. That consistency makes her feel like she’s got an actual life beyond just selling stuff.”</p>
3. Perception of Relatability:	<p>Shared Experiences/Values/Interests (3A): Connecting over common topics or life situations.</p>	<p>Evan (3A-EVA)- “If the audience is able to relate to the VI, if they have similar experiences, they are more likely to connect with the influencer. So that’s how I think that the VI is more relatable if they have shared experiences.”</p> <p>Austin (3A-AUS)- “I have felt a sense of connection to Lil Miquella, especially when she shares about her struggles with identity and belonging. Also when Emma posts about her daily life or interest, it feels like catching up with a friend, which creates a personal attachment, shared values and sustainability makes me feel closer to them.”</p> <p>Adam (3A-ADA)- “I think what makes a VI relatable is when they have a strong personality, like if they show more emotions, share experiences or have a unique way of expressing themselves, it makes them feel more human.”</p>
	<p>Storytelling (Personal Anecdotes/Struggles/Achievements) (3B): Sharing narratives that feel genuine and reflect human experiences, even if fictional.</p>	<p>Aaron (3B-AAR)- “Storytelling makes a huge difference because sometimes the way they are saying it, their body language, like adding some humour to it and adding some facial expressions to it, makes sense, its more humanised that way.”</p> <p>Evan (3B-EVA)- “Yes, so I’ll give you an example about storytelling. So there was just a VI. I guess it was Miquela itself. So when she promoted Samsung, she actually told the story about it story about how she was facing difficulties using different products”</p> <p>Sarah (3B-SAR)- “Storytelling is a key. If they tell me why they like something or what happened that day that led to a product discovery, it feels genuine.”</p>
	<p>Emotional Connection/Attachment (3C): The ability to evoke feelings or personal bonds, even if not deep.</p>	<p>Sarah (3C-SAR)- “Their personality plays usual. If a VI come across as chill, honest, or even a little quirky, I’m way more likely to follow or engage.”</p> <p>Sophie (3C-SOP)- “A relatable experiences definitely make an impact, as I could relate to those influencers more, and I might be emotionally connected with them even though they are virtual in this world.”</p> <p>Adam (3C-ADA)- “There was a time when a VI shared content mental health and, even though I knew they weren’t real, the message felt genuine and it made me stop and think that kind of content definitely makes them more human like.”</p>
	<p>Tone/Clarity (4A): How the tone and clarity of the message affect authenticity and believability.</p>	<p>Sophie (4A-SOP)- “So, for me, I’ll say the way the voice node has been put in that VI. Like they’re pitch while talking will make a difference for me to communicate with them, and their body language when I see them, which doesn’t make it feel more AI or like edited rather than making it real.”</p>

4. Message Communication (Realness):		Miles (4A-MIL) - “Authenticity in a VI’s communication. It’s all about how genuine and natural the message feels. It’s now just what they say, it’s how they say it and whether it’s feel consistent to personality and tone.”
	Consistency/Coherence (4B): Message aligns with personality and past content, building trust.	<p>Scott (4B-SCO)- “Coherence and consistency are key. A VI sticks to a clear personality and message over time. It builds trust and makes them feel more real. It’s like getting to know someone”</p> <p>Austin (4B-AUS)- “Coherence and consistency in their messaging ongoing narrative about her life makes her feel authentic.”</p> <p>Adam (4B-ADA)- “Yeah, a clear and coherent message makes them feel more real. It shows that there’s thought behind what they’re saying, just like a real person would do.”</p>
	Structure/Delivery (4C): How message organisation and presentation impacts credibility and Perceived Realness.	<p>Sophie (4C-SOP)- “I mean, to make it coherent message of and the structured thing that it has in it definitely makes an difference because if you see if the tone or like, if the message is in the same tone, it might not feel real to me.”</p> <p>Jason (4C-JAS)- “The sweet spot for me would be when it feels natural, like a real person telling you a real story with the beginning, middle and end, but with a little imperfection of actual things.”</p> <p>Samantha (4C-SAM)- “Yes, messages that have a narrative structure like starting with a problem, then reflecting and ending with a lesson feel more genuine, like a human reflecting on their experience.”</p>
5. Message Communication (Relatability):	Casual vs. Professional Tone (5A): Preference for informal, friendly language over formal or scripted for better engagement.	<p>Evan (5A-EVA)- “I believe it should be more in a casual manner than a formal manner, because if it’s more in a formal manner, it might just seem like the VI is literally AI and not a relatable person. So I believe it should be more casual and more humour, more sarcasm, etc.”</p> <p>Ruben (5A-RUB)- “I definitely prefer a more casual, or friendly tone. It feels more genuine, less like an advertisement. Professional or formal language can make the influencer seem distant and harder to connect with.”</p> <p>Sarah (5A-SAR)- “Well, of course, casual all the way. I love when they talk like they’re in a group chat, not like they’re giving a presentation for Formality just makes it feel too stiff. I want them to feel like a part of a social media culture, not separate from it.”</p>
	Communication Techniques (5B): Specific methods that make messages relatable (e.g., storytelling, humour, natural language).	<p>Sabrina (5B-SAB)- “For a message to feel more relatable, it has to have easy language or maybe considered slang and every expressions, which can make this message more relatable, more connectible. Additionally, you can incorporate humour, anecdotes, empathetic responses, whatever works with you.”</p> <p>Adam (5B-ADA)- “Relatable messages usually come from how they communicate, if they speak naturally, use humour, or talk about things we all go through, it’s more about how real they sound than how perfect their control looks.”</p> <p>Samantha (5B-SAM)- “I think communication techniques like storytelling, humour, self-disclosure, and interactivity all help make a VIs message feel more human.”</p>
	Relatability of Message (5C): Content that feels familiar or mirrors audience experiences.	<p>Jason (5C-JAS)- “So, even if it is probably, I feel it’s automated, when she likes comments or replies, with some things specific. It feels personal. There was this time someone commented, love your outfit, and she replied, Thanks, it took forever for me to render LOL. That tiny joke made the interaction feel genuine.”</p> <p>Sarah (5C-SAR)- “I relate to most are the ones who don’t just show perfect lives. They tell stories, laugh at themselves, and include their audience in conversations.”</p> <p>Austin (5C-AUS)- “When a VI shares personal opinions or experiences, it bridges the gap between digital and human. If a VI’s message prompts me to reflect or change my perspective, it feels especially relatable and impactful.”</p>

<p>6. Mediation Mechanism (PSR)</p>	<p>VIs trustworthiness (6A): Participants' opinions of a VI's honesty and trustworthiness are impacted by its presented character and brand values, consistent conduct, and message coherence.</p>	<p>Evan (6A-EVA)- "So if the VI is able to portray what she's trying to say, or what he is trying to say, and they have consistency in their amount of content they post. I believe that does play role in making the VIs more authentic and make them more relatable."</p> <p>Preston (6A-PRE)- "The post looks so realistic that I paused to click if she was an actual person. I clicked on the link out of curiosity, but I didn't buy the product because I wasn't sure if a recommendation was trustworthy."</p> <p>Sarah (6A-SAR)- "If a VI is replying to comments, sharing personal thoughts in their stories, or doing things like Q&As, it gives me the feeling that there is some kind of personality behind the screen. And as a pilot, I value consistency and structure. It builds trust."</p>
	<p>Attachment type of construct (6B): Captures the essence of the emotional ties that viewers develop with VIs, including sentiments of familiarity, affection or loyalty that mimic real social ties in PSRs.</p>	<p>Adam (6B-ADA)- "Humour definitely helps if they can make me laugh or show some vulnerability. It creates a real connection between me and them."</p> <p>Samantha (6B-SAM)- "So yes, I did feel an emotional connection Miquela during a time when she started engaging with social issues and personal narratives. She posted a Black Lives Matter post and also shared a post expressing confusion about her identity as a virtual being. It felt like she had depth and values, not just surface level branding. That emotional layer made me feel more than a digital property."</p> <p>Miles (6B-MIL)- "Emotional expression is just as important, whether it's excitement or frustrations or when vulnerability, emotions make the message more human, helping me connect on a personal level."</p>
<p>7. Brand Collaboration/Influence and Overall Impact/Potential of Vis:</p>	<p>Engagement with Brand Posts (7A): Checking out products, liking, sharing, or discussing brand promotions.</p>	<p>Evan (7A-EVA)- "Yes, I actually do know this VI. Her name is Miquela, and she once collaborated with Samsung. That collaboration made me think about VIs and their skills a bit."</p> <p>Scott (7A-SCO)- "Yes, I've come across a few brand collaborations with VIs, mostly on Instagram and TikTok. I didn't buy anything directly because of them, but they're posts definitely made the products look cool and got my attention."</p> <p>Jason (7A-JAS)- "Okay, so this is one time that I saw Lil Miquela promoting this vegan skincare line and I actually clicked through their website because the ad was so trippy."</p>
	<p>Ability to Build Connections (7B): A belief that VIs can form real and meaningful connections with consumers.</p>	<p>Stella (7B-STE)- "Yes, I think VIs can build emotional connections with audiences, maybe not real in a physical sense, but emotionally real. If they are content is consistent, emotionally engaging and interactive, they can create bonds just like human influencers do."</p> <p>Adam (7B-ADA)- "Yeah, I think VIs can build real connections, but it depends on how well they are made and how authentic they come across if they feel relatable and interacted genuinely, people can definitely connect to them."</p> <p>Austin (7B-AUS)- "I believe VIs like Miquela and Imma can build genuine connections if they are authentic and relatable in their interactions. Emotional bonds can be formed through storytelling and engagement, even if the influencer isn't human."</p>
	<p>Comparison to Human Influencers (7C): How VIs compare in terms of influence, connection, or cost-effectiveness to human counterparts.</p>	<p>Evan (7C-EVA)- "There's a big amount of population that might be able to connect with the influencers. They might be able to have a better synergy with the VIs rather than their real influencers, real as in human influencers."</p> <p>Stella (7C-STE)- "Yes, I think VIs can build emotional connections with audiences, maybe not real in a physical sense, but emotionally real. If they are content is consistent, emotionally engaging and interactive, they can create bonds just like human influencers do."</p> <p>Preston (7C-PRE)- "Now, I say they can perform meaningful connections with the audience, but with some important you know aspects also what what's most interesting is how these connections, you know, form differently than with human influencers. I find myself projecting human qualities onto them in a way that feels more active and participatory."</p>

5.2 General Usage and Engagement

The majority of the participants' interactions with VIs were characterised as passive and curiosity-driven rather than deliberate or ongoing. Instead of intentionally following, the majority of VIs were discovered through commercial marketing. Early parasocial impressions can be triggered by initial, observable contacts with mediated figures, as explained by PSR Theory (Horton & Wohl, 2006). This short, curiosity-based engagement frequently resulted from interest in the VIs' human-like yet artificial nature (Choudhry et al., 2022; Lou et al., 2022). VIs were mostly found in sponsored posts or suggested material, according to participants, indicating that brand-led marketing and algorithmic visibility, rather than user initiative, are what increased awareness (*Participant quotes 1B-SAM, 1B-PRE, 1B-RUB; see Table 2*).

Novelty, visual curiosity, and a resulting cognitive strain were key motivators for this initial engagement. This was evident in participants' responses; (*Participant quote 1A-SAR; see Table 2*) needed to check if a VI was "real", highlighting the cognitive strain and curiosity VIs can create, while (*Participant quote 1A-JAS; see Table 2*) was drawn to their "different" content, indicating novelty. (*Participant quote 1A-MIL; see Table 2*) also framed his observation as being driven by curiosity. This aligns with Ahn et al. (2022) and Mrad et al. (2022), who emphasise that VIs' dual character as social actors and technical objects provokes this exact kind of interest.

In visual-centric businesses like fashion and technology, this novelty advantage draws attention (Allal-Chérif et al., 2023). In line with Conde and Casais (2023), these early PSRs tend to stay shallow; participants' interactions were characterised as mostly observational rather than relational. This observational stage is itself a form of parasocial processing; audiences were motivated to evaluate a VI's realism and authenticity after even a brief exposure (*Participant quotes 1A-SAR and 1A-JAS; see Table 2*). This suggests that initial parasocial perceptions (e.g., judgments of authenticity) can form even with minimal, shallow interaction. Overall, participants primarily encountered VIs through passive exposure to sponsored posts, branded campaigns, and YouTube Shorts (*Participant quotes 1B-SAM, 1B-PRE, 1B-RUB; see Table 2*), rather than actively seeking them out. Such exposure seldom leads to a deeper connection, even though it maintains visibility and early excitement.

These findings suggest VIs frequently function as "surface-level spectacles" (Horton & Wohl, 2006; Lou et al., 2022). They attract attention with visual novelty, but this inert curiosity seldom transforms into sustained engagement without regular narrative and identity reinforcement (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Lou et al., 2022; Muniz et al., 2023). Therefore,

the key observation from this theme is that initial VI engagement is predominantly passive and shallow, presenting a significant challenge for marketers seeking to convert this novelty-based curiosity into deeper, relational parasocial bonds.

5.3 Perception of Realness

Participants assessed the realism of VIs based on their human-like behaviour and interaction, more so than their visual appearance *alone* (*Participant quotes 2B-SAM and 2B-SCO; see Table 2*). They distinguished between a VI that “looked real” and one that “acted real,” as articulated by (*Participant quote 2B-SAM; see Table 2*). This demonstrates that behavioural realism, which encompasses credible behaviours, natural motions, and emotional expression, was a more accurate indicator of participants’ authenticity than photorealism. Participants’ emphasis on subtle, dynamic indicators demonstrated this concern on Persona Realness. Participants were able to suspend disbelief and establish connections when VIs displayed nuanced, human-like mannerisms, including “blinking and realistic movement” (*Participant quote 2A-SAM; see Table 2*) and “subtle movements” (*Participant quote 2A-DYL; see Table 2*). These small details create what (*Participant quote 2A-SAM; see Table 2*) called a “stronger illusion of sentience.” This extended from micro-expressions to broader, believable actions. For instance, (*Participant quote 2B-AAR; see Table 2*) found a post about meditation to feel “so real,” while (*Participant quote 2B-SCO; see Table 2*) felt content was “more personal and relatable” when the VI “behaved in a human-like way.”

These findings support Ahn et al. (2022) and Ham et al. (2024), who found that natural motion and emotional signals promote feelings of trust. This directly relates to the concept of Persona Realness, as these behavioural cues provide the audience with evidence of a “living” entity, allowing them to perceive the VI as a genuine social actor, which is a prerequisite for forming a parasocial relationship. Building on this, participants discovered that another crucial aspect of Persona Realness is behavioural consistency. This was about the persona’s persistence over time rather than a single deed. When a VI’s “personality and behaviour are consistent... they feel more trustworthy and a little less like a gimmick,” according to (*Participant quote 2C-DIA; see Table 2*), “consistency is huge.”

Additionally, habitual, human-like activities were used to develop this consistency. Lil Miquela’s frequent posts on “random topics, like even coffee runs” gave (*Participant quote 2C-JAS; see Table 2*) the impression that she had “an actual life.” Additionally, social and interactive behaviours improved Persona Realness. VIs were deemed “more human” by (*Participant quote 2C-PRE; see Table 2*) if they “go live,” “reply to comments,” or reveal “casual behind-the-scenes moments.” These behaviours, including consistency, carrying out

everyday tasks, and interacting with others, combine to create a solid, continuous persona identity, providing viewers with proof of a life being lived.

In general, participants saw realness as a dynamic behavioural performance rather than a static visual characteristic. Audiences were able to perceive VIs as actual, socially present persons rather than artificial intelligence (AI) constructs when they exhibited social agency through modest bodily motions, emotional reactions, consistent self-presentation, and engaging social behaviours. According to PSR Theory, this kind of cumulative behavioural realism enables viewers to form early PSRs based on perceived authenticity and confidence in the character itself (Horton & Wohl, 2006).

5.4 Perception of Relatability

Relatability captured the participants' emotional and intimate feelings of connection to VIs, which they distinguished from perceptions of realness. As a participant explained, "what makes a VI relatable ... it makes them feel more human" (*Participant quote 3A-ADA; see Table 2*). According to participants, relatability was the VI's capacity to convey human-like feelings, ideals, and life experiences that were similar to their own. They were more drawn to VIs who demonstrated these qualities, as they were perceived as indicators of authenticity and depth. This connection was manifested when VIs discussed shared experiences (*Participant quote 3A-EVA; see Table 2*), personal struggles and values (*Participant quote 3A-AUS; see Table 2*), or showed emotions and a strong personality (*Participant quote 3A-ADA; see Table 2*).

This supports the claims made by Ameen et al. (2023) and Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021) that emotional intimacy and familiarity are fostered through social identification with mediated characters. One of the primary mechanisms for establishing a relatable persona was the existence of a coherent life narrative. VIs seemed more genuine and "alive" when they were perceived as having a story that included emotions, hardships, or moral thoughts (*Participant quotes 3B-AAR, 3B-SAR, and 3B-EVA; see Table 2*). This construction of a backstory turns VIs from immobile artefacts into likeable personalities who can evoke empathy (Lou et al., 2022; Li & Ma, 2023).

Additionally, participants formed emotional connections based on the VI's perceived personality traits. Participants reacted well to humour, social awareness, and emotional expressiveness, viewing these as signs of a "true personality" (*Participant quotes 3C-ADA, 3C-SAR; see Table 2*). A VI's persona being perceived as "chill, honest, or even a little quirky" (*Participant quote 3C-SAR; see Table 2*) was more likely to lead to engagement and

an “emotional connection” (and Casais (2023), who point out that self-disclosure and emotional resonance (as persona attributes) strengthen parasocial connection. In general, rather than technical realism, participants believed that relatability emerged from shared emotions, a coherent life narrative, and the perceived sincerity of the persona. The sense that a VI “understands” or represents human experience is the source of relatability, whereas realness is dependent on external behavioural indicators. Such emotional familiarity maintains the appearance of closeness that is essential to the creation of PSR, as shown by Horton and Wohl (2006). Audiences viewed VIs as socially real when their persona demonstrated empathy, humour, or vulnerability; this allowed for parasocial identification and turned digital presence into perceived personality.

5.5 Message Communication (Realness)

Participants underlined that perceptions of realness were greatly influenced by the tone, coherence, and delivery of VIs’ messages. They determined that whether communication felt socially real or algorithmic depended on three essential components: conversational delivery, message coherence and consistency, and natural tone and expression. Overly polished communications came off as fake, whereas natural tone, a range of expressiveness, and little flaws (such as pauses or casual wording) were seen as human-like and emotionally spontaneous (*Participant quotes 4A-SOP and 4A-MIL; see Table 2*). This finding is consistent with those of Dabiran et al. (2024) and Ham et al. (2024), who discovered that vocal subtleties and minor speech flaws enhance social presence and genuineness. Perceived credibility was further strengthened by the VI’s messaging and the established character’s consistency. In line with research by Koles et al. (2023) and Lou et al. (2022), which shows that narrative consistency enhances identity stability, participants identified discrepancies or sudden changes in tone as indications of artificiality (*Participant quotes 4B-SCO, 4B-AUS, and 4B-ADA; see Table 2*).

According to PSR theory, this equilibrium is crucial. A message that is overly regimented or “in the same tone” (*Participant quote 4C-SOP; see Table 2*) destroys the “illusion of intimacy” described by Horton and Wohl (2006) and comes off as robotic. It serves as a reminder to the audience that they are dealing with a machine. The “little imperfection” (*Participant quote 4C-JAS; see Table 2*) in a cohesive framework, on the other hand, mimics the spontaneity of a real, in-person social encounter. This equilibrium, which Liu and Wang (2024) and Volles et al. (2024) refer to as conversational flow, enables the audience to view the VI not as a program carrying out a script but rather as a thinking, social

actor capable of “reflecting” (*Participant quote 4C-SAM; see Table 2*). It is this apparent spontaneity that gives the one-sided parasocial contact a sense of authenticity and presence.

Overall, rather than being mechanical, Message Realness was viewed as performative and social. Audiences perceived VIs as socially present interlocutors rather than programmed things when they spoke with warmth, coherence, and natural diversity. This communicative authenticity allowed listeners to “hear” the VI as a relevant voice, strengthening parasocial ties and creating the appearance of real social contact, in line with PSR Theory (Horton & Wohl, 2006).

5.6 Message Communication (Relatability)

Participants said that when VIs employed conversational, casual language and demonstrated human-like communication techniques such as humour, self-disclosure, and narrative, Message Relatability emerged. Because of these characteristics, VIs came off as personable and socially genuine, which decreased psychological distance and promoted identification (*Participant quotes 5A-EVA, 5A-RUB, and 5A-SAR; see Table 2*). This finding aligns with the results of Lim and Lee (2023) and Lou et al. (2022), who discovered that informal, platform-native language enhances parasocial engagement and social presence.

According to Li and Ma (2023), emojis, slang, and rhetorical questions are examples of colloquial cues that promote emotional warmth and cultural familiarity. Posts that expressed humour, empathy, and imperfection were well received by participants, who saw them as genuine and emotionally stirring. Participants found messages relatable when they employed human-like communication techniques such as “storytelling, humour, self-disclosure, and interactivity” (*Participant quote 5B-SAM; see Table 2*). These techniques were seen as genuine and emotionally stirring. Participants noted that using “easy language,” “slang” (*Participant quote 5B-SAB; see Table 2*), or “humour” made the message more connectible and “real” (*Participant quote 5B-ADA; see Table 2*). This supports the findings of Gerrath et al. (2024) and E. Kim et al. (2023) demonstrate how narrative expressiveness and humour humanise digital communication. Additionally, relatability rose when VIs discussed common feelings or experiences, indicating social consciousness and emotional openness (*Participant quotes 5C-JAS, 5C-SAR, and 5C-AUS; see Table 2*). Such personalised, context-aware messaging allowed participants to perceive VIs as empathetic and genuine social actors rather than brand constructs.

Overall, message-level relatability was not a product of technological realism but rather manifested through a combination of a conversational tone, emotional resonance, and a sense of shared experience. Communication seemed personal and emotionally authentic when the tone and substance matched the conventions of the audience. According to Horton and Wohl (2006), PSR development is supported by this “illusion of mutual comprehension.” These results demonstrate that the core components of Message Relatability, an accessible conversational tone, emotional resonance (built through techniques like humour and self-disclosure), and a sense of shared experience (built through storytelling and vulnerability) are critical for creating long-lasting parasocial ties. They convert VIs into relatable communicators capable of genuine social connection, which aligns with the findings of Gerrath et al. (2024) and Lim and Lee (2023).

5.7 Mediation Mechanism (PSR)

The experiences of the participants revealed two interrelated pathways: an emotional mechanism of attachment and a cognitive mechanism of trustworthiness. When participants perceived VIs as reliable, transparent, and consistent qualities that demonstrated logical trust and authenticity, a cognitive pathway emerged (*Participant quotes 5A-MIL, 5A-EVA, and 5A-SCO; see Table 2*). This finding aligns with Ameen et al. (2023) and Lou et al. (2022), who demonstrate that credibility and parasocial appraisal are driven by coherence and dependability.

When participants felt affection, sympathy, or intimacy with VIs despite being aware that they were fake, emotional PSRs emerged (*Participant quotes 5B-ADA, 5B-AUS, and 5B-SAR; see Table 2*). This emotional connection aligns with the findings of Chung et al. (2024) and Conde and Casais (2023), who discovered that expressiveness and emotional resonance create a “illusion of intimacy at a distance” (Horton & Wohl, 2006). According to Liu and Wang (2024), even in one-sided virtual encounters, convincing emotional cues may evoke empathy and connection. These emotional and cognitive processes work together to explain how viewers internalise VIs as emotionally and socially significant. While attachment humanises digital identities and trust verifies authenticity, they work together to convert perceptions of realness and relatability into engagement and loyalty. In line with PSR theory and current studies (Ameen et al., 2023; Chung et al., 2024), this dual process shows how VIs transform from technological objects into being regarded as social partners that may build long-lasting customer relationships and trust.

5.8 Brand Collaboration/Influence and Overall Impact/Potential of VIs

Even during brief exchanges, participants frequently paused to look at sponsored material because they saw VIs as visually arresting and emotionally captivating. Initial attention was drawn to novelty, visual appeal, and emotional tone, but brand connection was strengthened by storytelling and consistency (*Participant quotes 7A-EVA, 7A-SCO, and 7A-JAS; see Table 2*). These observations are in line with those of De Cicco et al. (2024) and E. Kim et al. (2023) note that VIs enhance brand engagement by fostering emotional resonance, visual coherence, and uniqueness.

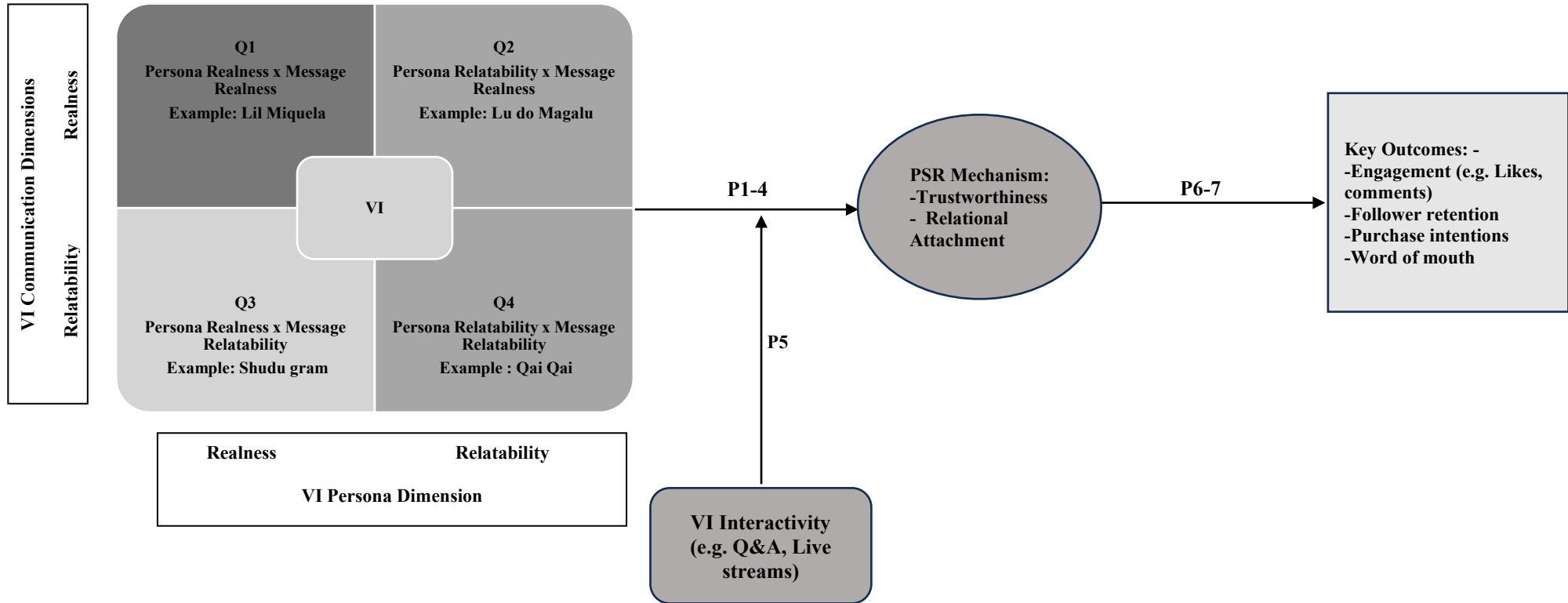
In line with Allal-Chérif et al. (2023) and Mrad et al. (2024), who emphasise the strategic value of VIs in digital marketing, participants noted that brand relationships, rather than organic following, drive the significance of VIs. Participants acknowledged that emotional narrative and consistency enhanced trust and brand and VI identification beyond mere attraction (*Participant quotes 7B-STE, 7B-ADA, and 7B-AUS; see Table 2*). Conde and Casais (2023) and Ameen et al. (2023) argue that parasocial attachment influences the persuasive impact, which supports their claims. Participants also compared VIs with human influences, realising that despite their blatant artificiality, VIs may be useful in fostering these relationships. Despite being “not real in a physical sense,” (7C-STE) pointed out that these relationships may be “emotionally real.” Because it demonstrates that consumers are prepared to consider VIs as genuine social agents, this discovery has a direct impact on brand perception. The VI becomes a successful ambassador as a result of this acceptance, which enables the formation of a parasocial tie. Similar to a human influencer, the VI may create trust and genuine engagement for a company through the “emotionally real” connection (*Participant quote 7C-STE; see Table 2*) and the possibility of “better synergy” (*Participant quote 7C-EVA; see Table 2*).

In general, participants thought that when VIs communicated with warmth, consistency, and sincerity, they might increase engagement and trust. According to PSR Theory, VIs’ power comes from their capacity to elicit sincere emotive reactions and maintain parasocial ties, rather than from their inherent human authenticity (Liu & Wang, 2024; Lou et al., 2022). VIs may build trust, engagement, and long-term brand effect by fusing technology innovation with human-like connection, as participants’ reflections indicate.

According to these results, PSRs act as the psychological link that converts views of relatability and reality into engagement, trust, and brand loyalty. Participants believed that when VIs were used in brand contexts, they might attract attention and create an emotional bond by communicating honestly and consistently. Together, the findings show that the synergistic interaction between authenticity cues at the persona and message levels is essential to VI efficacy. PSRs thrive through the twin mediators of trust and attachment when realness and relatability line up, encouraging both behavioural engagement and emotional commitment. The empirical findings not only support the proposed conceptual framework but also refine the 2×2 typology by illustrating how participants interpret and respond to different persona–message combinations in practice. The VI Design Framework, which incorporates these findings into a structured model that differentiates between synergised and complementary VI design methods, is introduced in the next section as a conceptual representation of these mechanisms.

5.9 Conceptual Framework: PSR and VI Impact

Figure 3. 2x2 Typology Conceptual Framework: PSR and VI Impact



5.10 VI design Framework

The empirical findings derived from the thematic analysis directly validated and refined the conceptual 2x2 typology proposed in Chapter 3. The interview data confirmed that audiences do not evaluate VIs based on standalone features, but rather through the combined alignment of persona and message. While the data strongly supported the theoretical prediction that Synergised designs primarily drive either cognitive trust or emotional attachment, the inductive findings unexpectedly highlighted the robust viability of Complementary designs. The qualitative insights revealed that Message Relatability can successfully compensate for a lack of Persona Realness (e.g., stylised or cartoonish avatars), functioning as a vital bridge to establish parasocial connections despite obvious artificiality.

The findings of the interviews showed that audiences assess VIs using a dual process based on PSR Theory, with the main cognitive and affective mechanisms being trustworthiness and emotional attachment (Horton & Wohl, 2006; Chung et al., 2024; Conde & Casais, 2023). Participants consistently evaluated VIs by integrating persona cues and message cues rather than reacting to isolated features. This is consistent with research showing that human-likeness, narrative style, and expressive behaviour interact to influence authenticity perceptions (Ahn et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2022; Koles et al., 2023). The VI's perceived authenticity, credibility, and emotional appeal were influenced by this combined evaluation. The interviews revealed that audiences want VIs to display both competence and human-like social traits, implying that realism and relatability alone are insufficient to elicit substantial parasocial reactions (Ameen et al., 2023; Ham et al., 2024; I. Kim et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2024).

These observations prompted the creation of the VI Design Framework (Figure 3), which identifies four key persona-message pairings. Two are synergised designs, in which the persona and message highlight the same dimension (realness or relatability), hence strengthening cognitive trust or emotional connection (De Cicco et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2024). The other two are complementary designs, in which the persona and message highlight separate cues, resulting in mixed or unbalanced outcomes depending on which dimension is dominant (Ju et al., 2024; M. Kim & Baek, 2023; Miao et al., 2021). Interactivity is identified as a crucial mediator across all quadrants, strengthening perceived authenticity through responsiveness and social presence (Lim & Lee, 2023; Yoo et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2023). This approach offers a systematic explanation of how authenticity signals impact audience trust, attachment, and subsequent behavioural consequences (Gerrath et al., 2024; Volles et al., 2024).

5.11 Proposition table

Table 3. Proposition table

Proposition	Details
P1	<i>Synergised VI design, when both persona and Message Realness are high (vs low) up to a certain threshold, will likely lead to a positive impact on trustworthiness. The impact on attachment remains moderate.</i>
P2	<i>Synergised VI design, when both persona and Message Relatability are high (vs low) up to a certain threshold, will likely lead to a positive impact on attachment. The impact on trust remains moderate.</i>
P3	<i>Complementary VI design outcomes when Persona Realness is high, and Message Relatability is low, leading to high trust but moderate attachment. While Persona Relatability is high and Message Realness is low, it leads to high attachment but moderate trust.</i>
P4	<i>Complementary VI design outcome when Message Realness is high and Persona Relatability is low, leading to higher trust but weak attachment. While Message Relatability is high and Persona Realness is low, it leads to higher attachment but weak trust.</i>
P5a	<i>The impact of synergised persona x communicating message (realness) on trustworthiness and attachment is moderated by VI interactivity, such that under high (vs. low) perceived VI interactivity, the effect on trustworthiness is amplified, whereas the effect on attachment remains unchanged or unlikely to have any significant impact.</i>
P5b	<i>The impact of synergised persona x communicating message (relatability) on trustworthiness and attachment is moderated by VI interactivity, such that under high (vs. low) perceived VI interactivity, the effect on attachment is amplified, whereas the effect on trustworthiness remains unchanged or unlikely to have any significant impact.</i>
P5c	<i>The impact of complementary Persona Realness x communicating Message Relatability on trustworthiness and attachment is moderated by VI interactivity, such that under high (vs. low) perceived VI interactivity, the effect on both trustworthiness and attachment is amplified.</i>
P5d	<i>The impact of complementary Persona Relatability x communicating Message Realness on trustworthiness and attachment is moderated by VI interactivity, such that under high (vs. low) perceived VI interactivity, the effect on trustworthiness is amplified, whereas the effect on attachment remains unchanged or unlikely to have any significant impact.</i>
P6	<i>Perceived trustworthiness mediates the effect of quadrant position on purchase intention and WOM.</i>
P7	<i>Perceived emotional attachment mediates the effect of quadrant position on engagement.</i>

The Proposition Table (Table 3) summarises the study's theoretical contributions into seven predictions about how VI design configurations influence customer interactions via PSR processes. It contends that synergised designs, in which persona and message alignment focuses on either realness or relatability, clearly drive cognitive trustworthiness (P1) or emotional connection (P2), but complementary designs provide asymmetric outcomes in which one mechanism dominates the other (P3-P4). Crucially, the table indicates that interaction serves as a positive moderator (P5), suggesting that two-way communication acts as a social amplifier, thereby increasing perceived authenticity across all quadrants. Finally, the propositions relate psychological states to commercial results, suggesting that

trustworthiness affects purchase intention and word-of-mouth (P6) and emotional connection mediates follower engagement (P7).

Synergised design: Persona Realness x Message Realness

According to the interview data, audiences reacted most favourably to VIs that combined a realistic visual appearance (*Participant quotes 2A-DYL and 2B-SAM; see Table 2*) with information conveyed in a clear, concise, and contextually consistent manner (*Participant quotes 4A-MIL and 4B-SCO; see Table 2*). This combination creates what this research refers to as a synergised realness design, where realness is emphasised in both the persona and the content. It illustrates a system of reinforcement whereby visual (persona) and verbal (message) signals coincide to elicit cognitive evaluations of believability and authenticity. Participants consistently linked this behavioural realism to capability and sincerity (Ahn et al., 2022; Dabiran et al., 2024) and message-level coherence to dependability and informational trustworthiness (Ameen et al., 2023; Liu & Wang, 2024).

The primary effect of this synergy is the powerful stimulation of the cognitive mechanism of PSR-trustworthiness (Horton & Wohl, 2006; Lou et al., 2022). When both persona and message cues are high in realness, they compel the audience to process the VI through an evaluative lens of competence, coherence, and credibility. This combination of communicative and behavioural realism enables viewers to attribute human-like dependability and agency to the VI (I. Kim et al., 2024; Miao et al., 2021). However, this intense focus on realism has a critical side-effect: it creates heightened expectations for perfection. As evidenced by (*Participant quote 6A-PRE; see Table 2*), this realism fosters initial confidence but also makes any “slight artificiality” more jarring, which can arouse suspicion. Participants noted this effect, with one stating, “the more you try to make a VI human, the creepier it looks” (*Appendix 1; Evan*), and another admitting, “perfect and polished delivery from VI actually makes me, you know, suspicious” (*Appendix 1; Preston*). One participant even directly referenced the “weird, uncanny valley” (*Appendix 1; Jason*). Consequently, while this synergised realness strongly builds trust, it does not automatically translate into emotional attachment. The argument is that this very synergy can be detrimental to attachment by triggering the Uncanny Valley effect. According to Liu and Wang (2024), this phenomenon occurs when excessive anthropomorphism or near-human realism causes discomfort or a sense of remoteness. The VI is perceived as competent but cold. This design lacks the tenderness or subliminal emotional indicators, such as humour, empathy, or vulnerability, that Ham et al. (2024) identify as necessary to convert this cognitive trust into affective attachment.

Therefore, rather than attachment, synergised realness largely stimulates trust. Unless augmented by interactive or affective signals, the realism of both visual and linguistic aspects results in a consistent, believable impression that meets informational expectations but leaves emotional engagement low. This supports research findings that realism and coherence enhance brand trust but not always emotional intimacy (Ameen et al., 2023; De Cicco et al., 2024) and align with PSR's cognitive route (Horton & Wohl, 2006). The design form that dominates cognition is synergised realness. Although it may not evoke strong emotional resonance, it consistently conveys a sense of trustworthiness and perceived knowledge. According to the Uncanny Valley hypothesis, high anthropomorphism may decrease warmth while increasing the sense of competence.

***Proposition 1:** Synergised VI design, when both persona and Message Realness are high (vs low) up to a certain threshold, will likely lead to a positive impact on trustworthiness. The impact on attachment remains moderate.*

Synergised design: Persona Relatability x Message Relatability

The analysis showed that audiences develop a deeper emotional bond and sense of familiarity when a VI's persona and message prioritise relatability through friendliness, humour, openness, and shared experiences. This alignment results in what this research refers to as a synergised relatability design, in which both dimensions support the PSR's emotive systems, especially perceived similarity and emotional connection. Participants often reported feeling emotionally pulled to VIs who offered personal stories, displayed human-like emotions, or spoke in casual and friendly tones (*Participant quotes 3A-EVA, 3A-AUS and 5B-SAB; see Table 2*). These observations show that the VI's self-expression, emotional transparency, and shared social identity cues qualities that give the influencer a warm and approachable appearance, which leads to relatability at the persona level. At the messaging level, relatability is conveyed through narrative, conversational tone, and the use of commonplace experiences that reflect the audience's reality. These characteristics work together to provide a positive feedback loop. For instance, a relatable persona built on "shared... struggles with identity" (*Participant quote 3A-AUS; see Table 2*) is powerfully reinforced by a relatable message that uses "easy language or maybe considered slang" and "humour, anecdotes" (*Participant quote 5B-SAB; see Table 2*). This synergy, in which the relatable message strengthens empathy through emotional resonance and shared values, while the relatable persona lays the groundwork for empathy (Gerrath et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2022), triggers the parasocial bonding emotional circuit. Audiences view the VI as a social peer rather than a remote figure when both the persona and the message are relatable, which elicits

emotive reactions including warmth, empathy, and a sense of belonging (Ju et al., 2024; Sands et al., 2022). This finding is consistent with research that demonstrates narrative empathy and emotional similarity to be key antecedents of parasocial attachment (Conde & Casais, 2023). Furthermore, Lou et al. (2022) argue that even if VIs are artificial, audiences perceive conversational warmth and self-disclosure as indicators of sincerity, which in turn fosters emotional trust. One participant noted, “If their message aligns with their personality and past content, it builds trust” (*Appendix 1; Adam*). On the one hand, synergised relatability significantly increases emotional connection; on the other hand, it does not always increase trustworthiness. The cognitive cues (clarity, structure, or factual information) that audiences associate with competence or dependability are frequently absent from the casual, emotionally expressive tone. This trade-off was highlighted by participants, who explicitly linked trust to “consistency and structure” qualities that are often deprioritised in this purely relatability-focused design (*Participant quote 6A-SAR; see Table 2*). This finding is supported by other research, which has found that overly emotional relatability can sometimes appear forced, thereby lowering believability (M. Kim & Baek, 2023; Muniz et al., 2023).

Thus, by meeting the human need for empathy and connection, synergised relatability promotes attachment, the emotional component of PSR, but results in worse trust outcomes because people perceive less professionalism and informational accuracy. However, in situations where social engagement and emotional resonance are more important than informational persuasion, such as in brand storytelling, cause-related marketing, and community participation, this combination works incredibly well. The emotionally dominating design configuration is synergised with relatability. Through empathy, self-disclosure, and shared identity, it elicits the biggest emotive reaction; nevertheless, notions of competence or trustworthiness are not as strongly evoked.

Proposition 2: *Synergised VI design, when both persona and Message Relatability are high (vs low) up to a certain threshold, will likely lead to a positive impact on attachment. The impact on trust remains moderate.*

Complementary design: Persona Realness x Message Relatability

The complementary design also takes into account scenarios when one dimension of Persona Realness or Message Relatability is high while the other is low. These asymmetric setups highlight significant trade-offs in the development of trust and attachment, reflecting research that shows authenticity cues often operate unevenly rather than symmetrically (Ju et al., 2024; Kim & Baek, 2023; Miao et al., 2021). When the persona's realness is strong, but

the message's relatability is low, participants acknowledged the VI as visually compelling and behaviourally believable but reported trouble connecting emotionally. For example, one participant stressed that "facial expressions and realistic movements make a big difference" because they help the spectator to "believe in what they are saying" (*Participant quote 2A-ADA; see Table 2*). Similarly, (*Participant quote 2B-AAR; see Table 2*) observed that "realistic behaviour" indicates genuine presence, noting that when it is "on point," the material seems "so real." Another participant corroborated this, noting, "When a VI's eyes move, or they gesture naturally, it's easier to forget they are computer-generated" (*Appendix 1; Ruben*). However, when these believable signals were combined with messages that appeared scripted, too professional, or disconnected from the user experience, viewers experienced emotional distance. (*Participant quote 5A-SAR; see Table 2*) described such a message as distancing because "formality just makes it feel too stiff". Furthermore, one stated that attachments are restricted until the message "prompts me to reflect or change my perspective," making it "relatable and impactful" (*Participant quote 5C-AUS; see Table 2*). One participant remarked, "If it's robotic or overly salesy, it feels fake and I lose interest" (*Appendix 1; Stella*). This mismatch reflects the split between cognitive and affective pathways in PSR theory; high Persona Realness engages systematic, credibility-based processing, which fosters trust. However, without related narrative cues, emotional attachment remains low (Horton & Wohl, 2006; Lou et al., 2022). As a result, this combination produces a high level of trust but a moderate level of attachment.

In contrast, when Persona Relatability is high but Message Realness is low, participants strongly identified with the VI's identity, values, and personality cues such as humour, shared experiences, or lifestyle alignment reflecting prior evidence that relatability and expressive warmth drive identification and emotional affinity (Conde & Casais, 2023; Lou et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2024). However, they questioned its overall credibility because the messaging felt inconsistent or overly polished, consistent with studies showing that weak informational realism or overly curated communication undermines authenticity and reduces perceived trustworthiness (M. Kim & Baek, 2023; Li & Ma, 2023; Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024). (*Participant quote 3A-EVA; see Table 2*) stated that he related to VIs who shared "similar experiences" with the audience, and (*Participant quote 3C-SAR; see Table 2*) described emotional warmth and affiliation when VIs communicated personality-driven content, stating that she is "way more likely to follow or engage" with honest or quirky personas. Furthermore, one participant stated that "If the VIs' word building is strong, even a cartoonist character can feel real in their own context" (*Appendix 1; Austin*).

However, when these accessible personalities were combined with messages that were viewed as promotional, contradictory, or inadequately honest, trust weakened (*Participant quote 4B-SCO; see Table 2*) regarded such information as fragmented, emphasising the need for consistency because "it builds trust and makes them feel more real," and that without it, the connection is lost. (*Participant quote 4C-JAS; see Table 2*) stated that message structure produces the "sweet spot" for naturalness, meaning that highly structured or brand-heavy messages impair perceived sincerity. Similarly, one user commented that when a VI "randomly endorsed some protein powder... that felt off-brand and kind of desperate" (*Appendix 1; Jason*). This result is consistent with PSR research, which suggests that while identification-based signals can promote attachment, cognitive trust is restricted without message-level coherence and credibility (Gerrath et al., 2024; Muniz et al., 2023).

Taken together, these two asymmetric examples demonstrate that complementarity is more than just the existence of one strong cue; successful complementary design occurs only when both Persona Realness and Message Relatability work in tandem. When audiences are misaligned, they either trust without connecting (high Persona Realness + low Message Relatability) or bond without completely trusting.

Proposition 3: *Complementary VI design outcomes when Persona Realness is high and Message Relatability is low, leading to high trust but moderate attachment. While Persona Relatability is high and Message Realness is low, it leads to high attachment but moderate trust.*

Complementary design: Persona Relatability x Message Realness

Although the complementing relatability-realness design works best when both cues are high, interview evidence reveals that two asymmetric circumstances yield different results: low Persona Realness with high Message Relatability and low Persona Relatability with high Message Realness. When Persona Realness is low, but Message Relatability is high, participants report building emotional connections through humour, common beliefs, and personality cues, even when the VI's appearance or attitude was evidently artificially generated (Choudhry et al., 2022; Li & Ma, 2023; Lou et al., 2022). (*Participant statement 3A-EVA; see Table 2*) stated that "if the audience can relate to the VI... they are more likely to connect," highlighting shared experience above visual accuracy. (*Participant quote 3A-ADA; see Table 2*) noticed the sense of connection provided by informal, personality-driven expression, noting that "if they show more emotions... it makes them feel more human". One participant stated that "human-like features do make a VI feel more authentic... however, a more animated style... can also feel real" provided the storyline is interesting (*Appendix*

I; Austin). However, the absence of authentic persona signals reduced cognitive credibility. Participants explained that while they feel connected, they are hesitant to trust an influencer who lacks realism; (*Participant quote 4A-MIL; see Table 2*) noted that authenticity is about "how genuine and natural the message feels" in terms of tone, and (*Participant quote 4C-SAM; see Table 2*) added that structure is required to make the message "feel more genuine". According to PSR theory, emotional heuristics can trigger attachment, but without reliable persona indications, message-driven relatability seldom leads to substantial trust (Horton & Wohl, 2006; Lou et al., 2022). As a result, this design promotes more attachment but less trust.

Similarly, when Persona Relatability is low but Message Realness is high, participants acknowledged the VI's communication for its clarity, coherence, and informational dependability, but felt socially distant due to a lack of emotional, cultural, or personality-based indications. (*Participant quotation 4A-MIL, see Table 2*) It is emphasised that realistic messages make the VI feel consistent, yet without humour or warmth, the persona appears manufactured. Similarly, one participant stated, "If it's really, really structured and coherent, it might actually seem like AI... it should have some slow-paced structure, which should not sound robotic and scripted" (*Appendix 1; Evan*). Trust in knowledge does not promote emotional closeness in the absence of personality-driven relatability; nonetheless, content consistency plays a part in making them authentic (*Participant quote 6A-EVA; see Table 2*). Even when messages were clear and well-structured, viewers failed to establish emotional attachments since the VI seemed robotic. (*Participant quote 5C-AUS; see Table 2*) went on to say that relatability bridges the gap, and that without "personal opinions or experiences," the link is gone. This is consistent with the dual-processing concept, which predicts that systematic message processing (realness) increases credibility; yet, in the absence of social or emotional signals, the affective pathway required for attachment remains undeveloped (Gerrath et al., 2024; Li & Ma, 2023). As a result, this scenario generates high trust based on message clarity but low attachment owing to minimal persona resonance.

Across both asymmetric circumstances, evidence suggests that complementarity requires the simultaneous activity of both cognitive and emotional networks. When just one route is activated, either through relevant persona signals (emotional) or realistic message (cognitive), audiences perceive unequal consequences, resulting in either attachment without trust or trust without attachment. Thus, the efficacy of a complementary relatability-realness design is dependent on the alignment of persona-level and message-level signals, with misalignment resulting in predictable but limited parasocial effects.

Proposition 4: *Complementary VI design outcome when Message Realness is high and Persona Relatability is low, leading to higher trust but weak attachment. While Message Relatability is high and Persona Realness is low, it leads to higher attachment but weak trust.*

Interactivity as Moderator

In the context of VIs, interactivity is defined as the perceived level of reciprocity, responsiveness, and mutual exchange between the audience and the influencer in a digital communication environment. It includes perceived social responsiveness, such as when a VI modifies material, responds to comments, or amusingly recognises user participation, as well as technology affordances, likes, answers, Q&As, live sessions, and polls. According to this interpretation, interactivity is the user's perception of having two-way communication with a social other, even if that "other" is created by is an artificial VI (Ahn et al., 2022; Liu & Wang, 2024; Yu et al., 2023).

Interactivity functions as a social amplifier in VI communication, enhancing parasocial experiences and reducing perceived artificiality across all persona-message quadrants. Audiences can transition from passive observation to reciprocal engagement through reciprocal communication, such as personalised responses or interactive story elements (Chung et al., 2024; Lim & Lee, 2023). Participants confirmed this, noting that when a VI responds, "it feels less like watching a scripted character and more like engaging with someone real" (*Appendix 1; Scott*). This change enhances attachment and trustworthiness by triggering social presence, which is the subjective experience of being with someone else (Yoo et al., 2024). As one participant stated, "It's like having a real-time discussion, which fosters a sense of connection and community and also makes the VI more engaged in a world where it is prone to be more robotic" (*Appendix 1; Sabrina*). According to Ham et al. (2024), interaction serves as a stand-in for embodied authenticity in VIs by humanising the artificial agent through conversational cues, including humour, recognition, and responsive discourse. Such instances demonstrate that humour, recognition, and response function as compensating genuineness that bridge cognitive and emotional PSR systems, especially when persona or Message Realness is constrained, according to participant observations (*Participant quotes 5C-JAS and 6A-SAR; see Table 2*). In contrast to one-way postings, Chung et al. (2024) empirically show that two-way engagement (such as real-time conversations) greatly increases parasocial sentiments and social presence. Similarly, active influencer-audience involvement improves relationship intimacy and trust, according to Lou et al. (2022). Therefore, the role of interaction is amplificatory rather than additive; it reduces discrepancies between textual and visual validity while reinforcing persona-message effects

that already exist. Using interactive affordances, such as polls, live Q&As, and comment replies, can therefore stabilise PSR formation and promote perceived transparency, especially for stylised or low-realness VIs that rely on personality and narrative over physical realism. Two-way cues enhance social presence and parasocial feelings even for less realistic VIs (Chung et al., 2024; Lim & Lee, 2023). While interaction regularly boosts parasocial strength, findings imply that it may not affect all VI designs equally. Rather, its impacts differ depending on whether realness or relatability is the prevailing design rationale inside a specific quadrant. Therefore, interactivity functions as a conditional mechanism that amplifies particular parasocial pathways already engaged by persona and message cues rather than as a general enhancement factor. Depending on the underlying design configuration, interaction either enhances cognitive assessment (trustworthiness) or emotional processing (attachment). This distinction is crucial to Proposition 5 and its accompanying sub-propositions, which explain how interaction operates differently across the four quadrants.

In the Synergised Realness design, high realism fosters strong cognitive trust, but this can be brittle; any perceived artificiality can shatter it (Liu & Wang, 2024). Interactivity serves to amplify and solidify this trustworthiness. By engaging in Q&As or providing consistent, responsive replies, the VI demonstrates its informational reliability and consistency in real-time. As one participant noted, a VI feels “more human” when they “reply to comments or... go live” (*Participant quote 2C-PRE; see Table 2*). This was echoed by another participant who stated, “If the VI replies back with genuine reasoning, it might feel real to me” (*Appendix 1; Aaron*). This interaction converts cognitive trust into affective involvement, humanising the VI and alleviating the Uncanny Valley effect. Here, interactivity amplifies trust by validating consistency and reliability, but attachment remains secondary because emotional closeness is not structurally prioritised in this configuration. As emotional connection is not the major mechanism in this quadrant, interaction mostly encourages trustworthiness rather than attachment, establishing the basis for Proposition 5a. On the other hand, the Synergised Relatability design can undermine professionalism and, therefore, trust (M. Kim & Baek, 2023). On the other hand, in the Synergised Relatability design, the primary audience outcome is emotional connection (M. Kim & Baek, 2023). Interactivity functions to amplify this affective attachment. When a VI who is already perceived as a friend (*Participant quotes 3A-AUS and 5B-SAB; see Table 2*) replies to comments, remembers users, or uses inclusive language in live sessions, it deepens the sense of perceived intimacy and social presence (Lou et al., 2022). As one participant explained, “When they do Q&N sessions or replies to comments. I feel like I’m being heard. That

interaction makes me feel like a community, then a one-way broadcast” (*Appendix 1; Stella*). This reciprocity reinforces the ‘social peer’ dynamic, making the parasocial bond feel more like a genuine, two-way friendship. This interaction is processed emotionally, strengthening the feeling of connection and belonging. However, because this interaction is still informal and relationship-focused, it does not necessarily “restore” professionalism or alter the audience’s cognitive assessment of the VI’s competence. Thus, the impact on trustworthiness remains unchanged, while attachment is significantly amplified. Interactivity here increases emotional attachments but does not appreciably affect credibility evaluations, which underpins Proposition 5b. Furthermore, the Complementary (Persona Realness x Message Relatability) design allows audiences to navigate both cognitive and emotional pathways. Interactivity ties these processes together. It provides evidence that a believable, human-like VI can also react emotionally, as noted by participants who associated responsiveness with “an actual life” and emotional content (*Participant quotes 3C-ADA and 2C-JAS; see Table 2*). When a VI “replies to the comments, answering Q&A sessions or reactions to their trending topic, it gives an impression that they are actually present and listening” (*Appendix 1; Miles*). In this quadrant, interactivity synchronises trust and attachment by ensuring that emotional warmth does not contradict credibility, thereby reinforcing both outcomes, forming the rationale for Proposition 5c. Finally, a complementary (Persona Relatability x Message Realness) design, which features a friendly persona with informative messages, can feel shallow. Interactivity reinforces this arrangement by transforming friendliness into dependability. Live, Q&As or response acknowledgements communicate responsibility and transparency, transforming soft relatability into observable trustworthiness (Chung et al., 2024). As one participant valued “consistency and structure” for trust (*Participant quote 6A-MIL; see Table 2*), adding this interactive reciprocity, such as when a VI “personally interacts with the people” (*Appendix 1; Evan*), strengthens that sense of dependability, primarily boosting cognitive trust. As emotional closeness is already established through persona cues, interactivity here predominantly improves cognitive trust rather than attachment, consistent with Proposition 5d.

This analysis leads to the following propositions, which summarise how interactivity transforms static cues into evolving social exchanges that sustain Perceived Realness, relatability in both persona and message cues, and relational depth over time.

Proposition 5a: *The impact of synergised persona x communicating message (realness) on trustworthiness and attachment is moderated by VI interactivity, such that under high (vs. low) perceived VI interactivity, the effect on trustworthiness is amplified,*

whereas the effect on attachment remains unchanged or unlikely to have any significant impact.

Proposition 5b: *The impact of synergised persona x communicating message (relatability) on trustworthiness and attachment is moderated by VI interactivity, such that under high (vs. low) perceived VI interactivity, the effect on attachment is amplified, whereas the effect on trustworthiness remains unchanged or unlikely to have any significant impact.*

Proposition 5c: *The impact of complementary Persona Realness x communicating Message Relatability on trustworthiness and attachment is moderated by VI interactivity, such that under high (vs. low) perceived VI interactivity, the effect on both trustworthiness and attachment is amplified.*

Proposition 5d: *The impact of complementary Persona Relatability x communicating Message Realness on trustworthiness and attachment is moderated by VI interactivity, such that under high (vs. low) perceived VI interactivity, the effect on trustworthiness is amplified, whereas the effect on attachment remains unchanged or unlikely to have any significant impact.*

Across all quadrants, interactivity operates as a dynamic moderator that amplifies PSR intensity but in mechanism-specific ways: it humanises realistic VIs (5a), legitimises relatable ones (5b), harmonises mixed cues (5c), and substantiates credibility in friendly communicators (5d). In doing so, interactivity transforms static cues into evolving social exchanges that sustain Perceived Realness, relatability, and relational depth over time.

Mediated Pathways: From Trust and Attachment to Behaviour

According to the conceptual framework, persona-message combinations are linked to behavioural outcomes, including engagement (likes, comments, time-on-post), purchase intention, follower retention, and word-of-mouth (WOM), through the twin mediating processes of trustworthiness and attachment. According to the PSR theory (Horton & Wohl, 2006), these two mechanisms reflect cognitive and emotive pathways to influence.

A logical, critical assessment of the VI's legitimacy, knowledge, and openness is known as perceived trustworthiness. Participants assume dependability when they sense "authentic congruence," or consistency between persona behaviour and message delivery, as defined by Miao et al. (2021). Participants linked this directly to action; one said, "I have actually followed brands... simply because [the VI] endorsed them in a way that felt authentic and aligned with her character" (*Appendix 1; Samantha*). This leads to a greater readiness to embrace product recommendations (Ameen et al., 2023; Volles et al., 2024). Audiences associate trustworthiness with dependable communication patterns, as evident in her focus on

structure and consistency (*Participant quote 6A-SAR; see Table 2*). Another participant stated, “A clear structure helps convey the message effectively and build trust” (*Appendix 1; Ruben*). According to Ameen et al. (2023), trust functions as the cognitive link between behavioural intention and authenticity perception, resulting in favourable consequences, including the likelihood of a purchase and favourable WOM. Trust predicts persuasion and behavioural intentions (Ameen et al., 2023; Volles et al., 2024).

Proposition 6: *Perceived trustworthiness mediates the effect of quadrant position on purchase intention and WOM.*

Parasocial attachment, on the other hand, functions via perceived closeness and emotional resonance. Participants feel empathy and connection when they relate to a VI’s personality or stories; one participant felt connected when a VI “opened up about feeling pressure to be perfect all the time” (*Appendix 1; Stella*). These emotions result in advocacy, frequent involvement, and behavioural loyalty (Horton & Wohl, 2006; Lou et al., 2022). Even when users are aware of the influencer’s artificiality, they continue to remark, share, and follow because of the narrative’s persistent emotional presence (*Participant quote 3A-AUS; see table 2*). Emotional bonds lead to increased repeated interaction and follower retention (Horton & Wohl, 2006; Lou et al., 2022).

Proposition 7: *Perceived emotional attachment mediates the effect of quadrant position on engagement.*

Attachment and trustworthiness together account for different but complementary behavioural processes. While attachment, an emotional mechanism, maintains relational behaviours like likes, shares, and sustained engagement, trust, a cognitive process, promotes conversion behaviours like purchases and WOM. These mediators are further strengthened by interaction, which produces a feedback loop in which response interactions gradually enhance trust and deepen attachment (Chung et al., 2024; Lim & Lee, 2023).

Overall, the framework proposes that audiences integrate persona-level and message-level clues into coherent authenticity judgements to create parasocial emotions. Trustworthiness and attachment flourish when both dimensions exhibit constant realness or relatability; when they deviate, interactivity makes up for it by encouraging social presence and connection in communication. These propositions (P1-P7), which extend VIs, offer empirically testable mechanisms that explain how interaction-driven social presence and realness-relatability synergy lead to the twin outcomes of engagement and trust, which are the emotional and cognitive pillars of long-lasting VI-audience relationships.

Chapter 6. Theoretical Implications

By applying the PSR theory to the field of VIs via the persona-Message Realness-relatability lens, this research advances this theory. Although PSR was initially developed to characterise one-sided interactions between viewers and human media personalities (Horton & Wohl, 2006), this study shows that parasocial ties can also form with computer-generated, non-human characters when their communication and design complement each other in ways that promote perceived authenticity..

6.1 Unpacking Role of Persona and Message: Advancing the Conceptual Typology

The primary theoretical contribution in this thesis is the VI Design Framework. It presents two typologies, complementary design and synergised design, that describe how connections and trust are determined by the alignment of persona and message signals. This framework builds on PSR theory in three major ways. First, it shows that the cognitive (trustworthiness) and emotional (attachment) processes that underpin PSRs develop from inter-level coherence between persona and message, rather than standalone cues like realism or narrative tone (Chung et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2022). This reframes PSRs as physically generated through design alignment rather than psychologically assumed via similarity-based illusion. Second, the framework provides an integrative lens for analysing parasocial processes involving non-human actors by combining findings from the media realism, social presence, and influencer authenticity literatures (Ahn et al., 2022; Gerrath et al., 2024). Rather than framing VIs as inadequate human alternatives, it conceptualises them as fundamentally unique social agents driven by different credibility logics. Third, the framework creates a testable model that connects PSR strength, trust, and engagement to persona-message congruence, allowing future empirical research to investigate how different configurations of realness and relatability influence behavioural outcomes across platforms and contexts (Mrad et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2024). Overall, this transition in PSR theory transforms it from a descriptive account of felt closeness to a comparative explanatory model capable of accounting for heterogeneity among digital design techniques.

More broadly, this dual-lens typology enhances PSR theory by shifting the explanatory focus from anthropomorphism to relational coherence. According to the findings, perceived authenticity is dictated more by the coherence between the persona and the message, allowing non-human, stylised, or symbolic agents to behave as believable social actors (Lou et al., 2022; Muniz et al., 2023). In doing so, the study questions anthropocentric

assumptions in influencer research and offers a post-human extension of PSR theory appropriate for AI-mediated communication settings. This reconceptualisation directly challenges dominant models in the literature that approach authenticity as a static trait or surface characteristic (e.g., realism, human likeness, or influencer disclosure) (Gerrath et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2022). Instead, this thesis contends that authenticity in VIs is a dynamic interactional outcome caused by persona-message fit. This means that authenticity is not an inherent property of the avatar, but a perception that must be consistently 'earned' by properly aligning visual expectations with narrative delivery in every contact.

Situations when persona and message signals reinforce the same genuine dimension are described by synergised design. For example, when both demonstrate relatability (e.g., a warm persona offering emotionally compelling storylines) or realness (e.g., realistic conduct backed by a coherent, transparent message). This congruence increases perceived genuineness and cognitive trust by enhancing coherence and transparency (Dabiran et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2022). Crucially, this finding goes beyond previous authenticity research, which has generally investigated realism and emotionality as parallel predictors rather than as interacting factors (Gerrath et al., 2024; Muniz et al., 2023). The critical implication is that VI effectiveness cannot be engineered through visual fidelity or narrative emotionality alone; it requires a holistic 'congruence strategy'. As a result, the framework shows that neither relatability nor realism, by itself, ensures trust or attachment; rather, their impact depends on their consistent implementation at both the persona and message levels.

On the other hand, complementary design happens when persona and message signals highlight distinct but complementary aspects of genuineness. For instance, a physically realistic persona (realness) coupled with a highly relevant message (relatability) would be an example of complementary design. An experience that promotes emotional attachment and behavioural engagement is created when this balance engages both affective and cognitive pathways (Ham et al., 2024; Muniz et al., 2023). This finding broadens PSR theory by contradicting the widely held belief that persona-message discrepancy always destroys parasocial connection. While traditional frameworks argue that any mismatch causes cognitive dissonance and damages the relationship (Horton & Wohl, 2006), this study shows that 'strategic imbalance', when a persona and message complement rather than contradict, can actually strengthen the bond. This thesis introduces the concept of 'functional inconsistency' to the PSR literature by demonstrating that different forms of mismatch can simultaneously activate trust and attachment pathways (for example, a cartoonish persona

presenting highly believable information). This thesis demonstrates that not all inconsistencies are harmful; some types of mismatch are functionally beneficial, in contrast to previous research, which typically views misalignment as a risk (e.g., artificiality leading to distrust).

6.2 PSRs as a Mediating Mechanism

This adaptation of PSR theory for AI-mediated situations provides theoretical advances. As long as consumers perceive real social signals across persona and message layers, it shows that PSRs can emerge even in the absence of true human action (Ahn et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2024). According to the theory, emotionally compelling messages and consistent behavioural signals activate two complementary pathways that PSRs use to function: attachment (the emotional channel) and trustworthiness (the cognitive channel) (Huang & Jung, 2022; I. Kim et al., 2024). The model explains how alignment between persona and message cues converts Perceived Realness and relatability into relational outcomes by integrating PSRs into the synergised and complementary design typologies. PSRs are strengthened by high congruence between these cues, and this in turn results in advocacy, loyalty, and trust for VI-endorsed products (Mrad et al., 2024; E. Kim et al., 2023).

All things considered, this research advances theory by bridging the gap between human-AI interaction frameworks and PSR theory, providing a cohesive model that clarifies how relatability and Perceived Realness foster relational, trust-based engagement even when a human agent is not present. In addition to strengthening PSR's explanatory capacity, this rethink lays the groundwork for further research into how customers interact with artificial intelligence (AI)-driven and synthetic personas in various digital contexts.

6.3 Linking VI Interactivity to Existing Literature

Although the impacts of visual realism, anthropomorphism, and authenticity have been thoroughly studied in previous studies on VIs (Ahn et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2024; I. Kim et al., 2024), the moderating influence of VI interactivity has received relatively less attention. Previous research frequently views VIs as static communicators whose efficacy is based on message congruence or appearance (De Cicco et al., 2024; Dondapati & Dehury, 2024). This thesis adds to the body of research by demonstrating that VI interaction conditions the conversion of persona-level (realness, relatability) and message-level signals into trust and attachment, rather than just increasing engagement. Interaction compensates for apparent artificiality by strengthening the relationship route when persona and message congruence is

weak (Yoo et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2024). The findings of Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021) and De Brito Silva et al. (2022), who noted that VIs with social reciprocity promote more user identification and emotional involvement, are theoretically extended by this moderating role. Additionally, it is consistent with M. Kim and Baek's (2023) finding that when an influencer exhibits responsiveness and humour, two crucial interaction cues, user perceptions of VI "creepiness" decrease. To bridge the experience divide between artificial and human influences, this thesis posits interactivity as a crucial design factor that transforms VIs from algorithmic communicators into perceived relational beings.

6.4 Managerial Implications

This research offers substantial managerial implications for brands and agencies seeking to leverage VIs in digital marketing. Grounded in the VI Design Framework, the findings demonstrate that realness and relatability, as manifested through persona and message alignment, are the core antecedents of PSR formation.

6.4.1 Building Trust

The framework emphasises that a key component of building trust is Persona Realness, which is based on behavioural consistency and visual plausibility. Although human-like cues improve social perception, as has long been acknowledged in earlier anthropomorphism literature (Ahn et al., 2022; Liu & Wang, 2024), this research adds to our understanding by demonstrating how synergised design must balance persona realism. Audiences see the VI as a cohesive and reliable entity when the persona and message both support realism. As a result, the manager's task is not just to make things more realistic, but to create a balanced approach that maintains digital uniqueness while ensuring consistency in conduct and appearance. Cross-platform persona coherence and consistent visual cues (eye gaze, facial expressions, posture) might help achieve this balance (I. Kim et al., 2024; Franke & Groeppel-Klein, 2024). Kyra, India's first VI from FUTR STUDIOS, which partners with boAt, Amazon Prime Video, and John Jacobs, is a prime example (Jha & Yadav, 2025). Her work embodies synergised design, wherein character and message both convey genuine sophistication by fusing ambitious modernism with identifiable human warmth. This emphasises for managers the necessity of spending money on long-term persona building as opposed to transient advertising. When maintained consistently and strategically, realism enhances credibility, which is closely related to customer trust and intention to buy (Muniz et al., 2023; Volles et al., 2024). Alternatively, Cohesive Community Building (Persona Relatability + Message Relatability). The focus switches to building a "Quirky/Niche VI"

where the objective is not necessarily human-like realism, but a strong stylistic alignment that generates a unique community identity. Managers can decide whether to invest in stylistic consistency for community belonging or high-fidelity realism for credibility by striking a balance between both methods.

6.4.2 Fostering Emotional Resonance

Relatability is the emotional catalyst that propels PSR, whereas realness fosters cognitive trust. The framework's complementary design element demonstrates how persona realism and Message Relatability work together to provide an emotionally complex and captivating experience. Through humour, vulnerability, and shared values, relatable messaging humanises the digital identity and establishes emotional accessibility that overcomes psychological distance (Lim & Lee, 2023; Jiang et al., 2023). By creating content that describes commonplace experiences, acknowledges flaws, and makes allusions to pop culture or societal concerns relevant to the target audience, managers can operationalise this (Gerrath et al., 2024). Clueless Agency's Spanish VI, Aitana López, is a prime example of this style (Paglieri, 2024). Her material demonstrates how message-level relatability enhances persona reality to promote attachment and loyalty by fusing motivational captions with lifestyle stories. According to this result, consumers are likely to suspend disbelief when they feel emotionally understood, suggesting that relatability may influence PSRs more than reality. To promote the VI as a sympathetic companion that reflects audience ambitions and cultural touchpoints, rather than an idealised idol, marketing teams should incorporate narrative realism into VI scripts, captions, and interactions. Alternatively, managers may emphasise on Genuine Partnership (Persona Relatability + Message Realness), as demonstrated with Nobody Sausage. This method allows the viewer to suspend disbelief since the messaging is solid and "real," even when the visual character may be abstract or comical. In both circumstances, marketing teams should add narrative reality into VI scripts to present the VI as a sympathetic companion rather than an idealised idol.

6.4.3 Strengthening Brand Genuineness Through Sustained Partnership

According to the framework, genuineness is relational and develops over time through persistent persona-message coherence. As a result, VIs shouldn't be viewed as campaign experiments or one-time innovations (Sands et al., 2022). Rather, long-term partnerships that use synergised design to increase Perceived Realness and PSR stability by reaffirming consistency between the VI's character and brand identity. As audiences are exposed to consistent personas and logical messages on a regular basis, their connection and trust grow.

This idea is illustrated by Hugo Boss's collaboration with Nobody Sausage (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2024). The VI, who represents the company's innovative spirit and forward-thinking ideals, has established himself as an enduring brand ambassador via consistent use of humour, flair, and story alignment. It is obvious to management that isolated activations cannot be used to create legitimacy. It must develop via a consistent, time-bound identity and message. Sustained partnerships allow audiences to perceive relational growth, transforming the VI from a novelty to a familiar, trusted social actor, thus embedding the brand within ongoing parasocial narratives

6.4.4 Aligning VI Strategies with Platform Affordances

The framework also highlights how the platform environment affects how well personas and messages align. Every platform has distinct affordances that influence the expression and interpretation of authentic cues. Synergised design works well on Instagram because of the platform's emphasis on aesthetics and visuals, which makes personas more consistent and authentic (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Conversely, TikTok supports complementary design, allowing for relatability driven by messages through comedy, music, and brief narratives (Lim & Lee, 2023). Long-form narratives, Q&As, and behind-the-scenes videos on YouTube enhance PSRs by adding emotional depth at the message level. As an illustration of platform-tailored authenticity, consider the NARS Power Players, three meta-human avatars created for the Powermatte Lipstick campaign (Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2024). NARS was able to engage consumers with interactive, personality-driven content by carefully tailoring each avatar's identity and message for Instagram and TikTok (Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2024). Therefore, managers should align design typology with platform affordances: complementary design for dynamic narrative and emotional engagement, and synergised design for visual reality and brand credibility. In every social media setting, this alignment maximises the development of PSRs and authentic perceptions.

6.4.5 Customising VIs for Segment-Specific Engagement

Finally, the VI Design Framework emphasises that audience variety must be reflected in persona-message coherence. The efficacy of realness and relatability varies depending on the cultural and demographic context, as they are socially constructed notions. When material represents their language, humour, and values, younger, digitally native consumers, particularly Gen Z, are more open to connecting with virtual entities and are more inclined to create PSRs (Um, 2023). Managers should thus create VIs whose message tone and character traits align with the subtle cultural differences of particular target segments. For example,

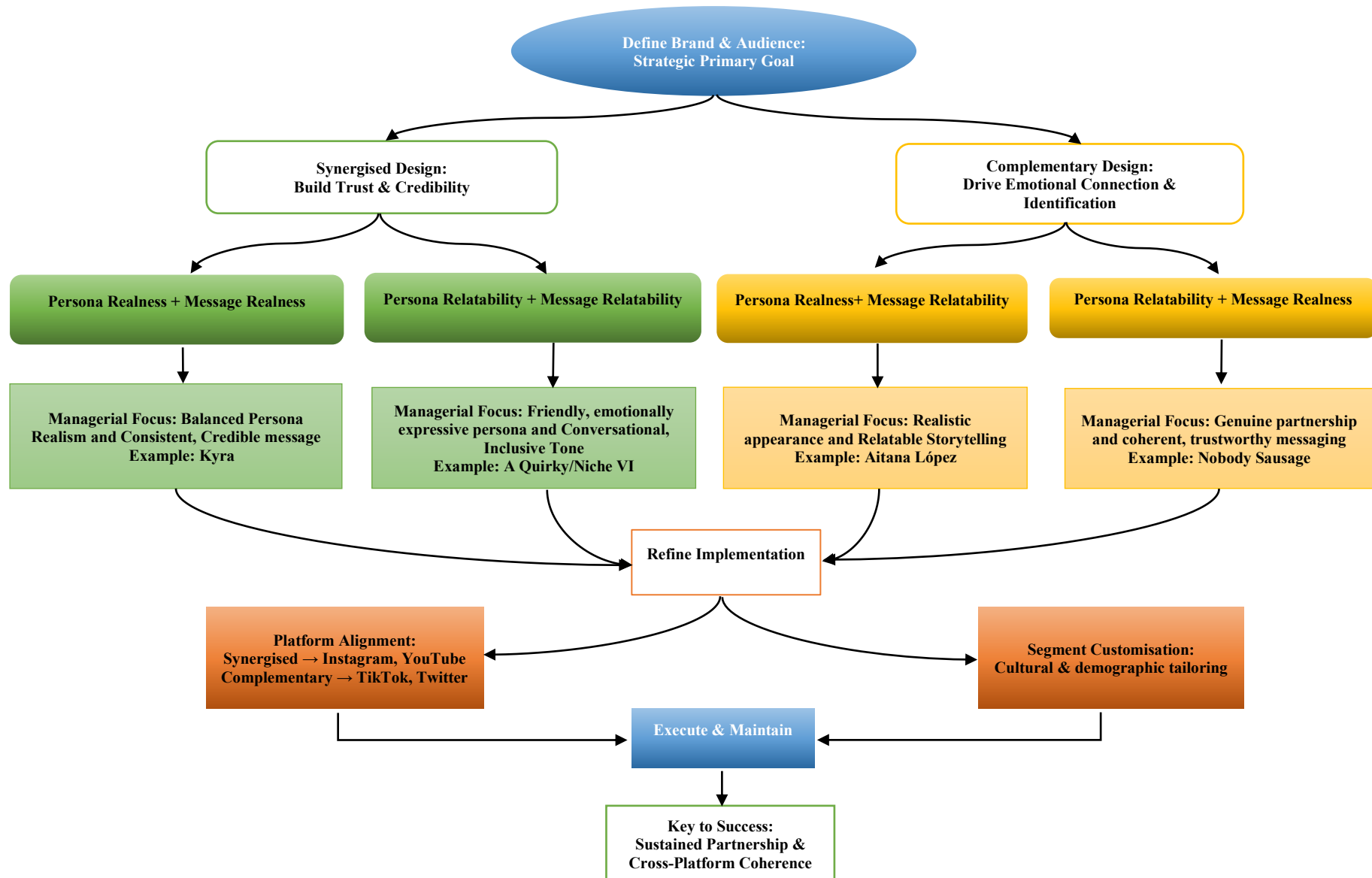
Kyra represents Indian young culture and aesthetics (Jha & Yadav, 2025), Aitana López caters to European audiences with wellness-focused storytelling (Paglieri, 2024), and the NARS Power Players stand for diversity and inclusiveness in the international beauty business (Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2024). By fusing realistic characters with culturally relevant messaging, these examples demonstrate how segment-specific tailoring enables businesses to leverage complementary design concepts and achieve greater inclusion and resonance. Customisation ensures that VIs are culturally rooted communicators who can express ideals that complement the identities and lifestyles of specific audiences, rather than being generic digital faces.

In conclusion, these managerial implications show that technological innovation is insufficient to guarantee VI effectiveness. To align PSRs with target audience groups, platform affordances, and brand identity, businesses must intentionally develop personalities and messages that effectively promote PSRs. Successful examples like Kyra, Aitana López, Nobody Sausage, and the NARS Power Players show that when VIs are strategically integrated while striking a balance between realness and relatability, they can achieve levels of trust, engagement, and loyalty that are comparable to or even higher than those of human influencers (Volles et al., 2024). Therefore, managers should view VIs as strategic relationship agents, digital entities designed to foster genuine, trust-based, and emotionally engaging customer relationships, rather than merely as visual assets. Businesses may turn VIs into long-lasting brand partners that can maintain engagement and loyalty in dynamic digital environments by implementing synergised and complementary design concepts (Allal-Chérif et al., 2023; Volles et al., 2024). The framework's practical utility ultimately resides in bridging the gap between managerial action and theoretical understanding by converting PSRs and the psychology of reliability into workable plans for creating AI-driven influencer campaigns that are believable, emotionally impactful, and culturally sensitive.

To operationalise these findings, we present a complete managerial pathway that turns the theoretical antecedents of PSRs into tangible activities. As shown in Figure 4, the process starts with identifying the main strategic objective, which determines whether to use a Synergised or Complementary design typology. This objective may be to foster emotional identification or to develop cognitive trust. The concept describes how these typologies split off into distinct operational focusses, resulting in a "Refine Implementation" phase where tactics are tailored to particular platform affordances and cultural niches.

6.4.6 Strategic Framework for VI Implementation: From Design Typologies to Execution.

Figure 4. Strategic Framework for VI Implementation: From Design Typologies to Execution.



Chapter 7. Limitations and Future Directions

When evaluating the findings and theoretical ramifications of this research, it is critical to acknowledge its limitations. These restrictions establish the contextual framework within which the suggested VI Design Framework, which connects persona-Message Realness and relatability to PSR formation, should be interpreted, not the validity of the outcomes. First, the sample makeup limits how broadly the results may be applied. New Zealand university students and young adults, who are frequently characterised as digital natives and heavily engaged on social media, made up most of the participant pool (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021). Although this cohort was appropriate for investigating how people perceive synthetic personalities, it restricts the findings relevance to older, less tech-savvy, or culturally diverse groups. Perceptions of realness, relatability, and trust may be significantly influenced by cross-cultural differences in technology literacy, social media usage norms, and trust in AI-driven agents (Conde & Casais, 2023; Franke & Groeppel-Klein, 2024). To determine if the processes suggested in the VI Design Framework, specifically the co-creation of authenticity through persona-message congruence, are culturally or demographically unique, future research should expand its reach. Second, statistical generalisability is limited by the exploratory and qualitative approach, even if it offers profound interpretative insight. Although the results are context-rich rather than inferential, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) enabled a nuanced understanding of emotional reactions and meaning-making processes. Mixed methods approach that integrate quantitative validation with qualitative depth may be used in future research. To experimentally assess their causal impacts on PSR strength, attachment, and trust, for instance, experimental designs might alter aspects of persona and message (De Cicco et al., 2024; Volles et al., 2024). Such triangulation would assess the robustness of observed links across different audiences and media settings, thereby improving the framework's external validity. Third, this research was conducted during a specific technological juncture, when artificial intelligence and computer-generated imagery were rapidly evolving. The perceptual limits of plausibility, authenticity, and the uncanny valley are probably going to change as generative models advance. Over time, audiences' perceptions of VIs may change as they become more realistic and used to AI-generated creatures (Ahn et al., 2022; Liu & Wang, 2024). For instance, with cultural acclimatisation, design features that now seem uneasy could become commonplace or even preferred (E. Kim et al., 2024). On the other hand, ethical questions about manipulation, disclosure, and openness could become more pressing as VIs gain

greater autonomy (Muniz et al., 2023; Sands et al., 2022). This implies that the methodology presented here is a snapshot of attitudes during a technological transitional period and should be reassessed when public expectations and corporate practices change. Finally, this research did not separate algorithmic mediation or platform-specific affordances, which might have a big impact on how viewers see realness and relatability.

Media contexts, such as Instagram's emphasis on visual narrative vs TikTok's casual, humour-driven style, can either reinforce or repress these notions, according to existing research (Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024; Yu et al., 2023). Because of this, the framework's applicability may differ depending on the platform, necessitating additional research to look at how persona-message alignment functions in various algorithmic logics, content structures, and engagement formats. All of these drawbacks suggest that further cross-platform, cross-cultural, ecologically sound research is required to improve and stress-test the VI Design Framework. By addressing these issues, its theoretical and practical usefulness will be strengthened and insights into relatability, realness, and PSR creation will continue to be flexible in response to changing social and technological circumstances.

7.1 Future Research Directions

Building on these findings, several exciting directions for future research could further our understanding of how VIs function within the evolving digital marketing landscape. The VI Design Framework and the PSR-based relational mechanisms it suggests could be improved or expanded in each direction. First and foremost, cross-cultural research should be used to investigate how cultural orientations influence the interpretation of Synergised and Complementary configurations. This research's focus on New Zealand, a mostly Western and individualist setting, restricts its understanding of collectivist countries, where social norms, relationship harmony, and shared identity may have a distinct impact on PSR development (Luo & Kim, 2023). Future studies should examine whether Synergised designs (focused on consistency) or Complementary designs (focused on relational gaps) are more effective in cultures with interdependent value systems. Second, further comparisons between VIs and humans should be made. Although earlier studies have demonstrated that both can evoke trust and engagement (De Cicco et al., 2024; Volles et al., 2024), the circumstances under which VIs may outperform humans remain unknown. To determine whether relationship effects result from design control, novelty, or consistency of persona-message congruence, future quantitative or experimental designs could examine the relative strength of PSR routes among influencer types. In situations involving human-AI interaction, this might improve the PSR theory's boundary conditions. Third, to document the evolution

of PSRs with VIs over time, longitudinal studies are required. According to current research, parasocial bonding is initially triggered by feelings of realness and relatability, but it remains unclear whether these interactions become stronger, more stable, or weaker with repeated exposure. It would be possible to verify the persistence of realness and relatability perceptions in long-term VI-consumer interactions and provide PSR theory with a temporal component by monitoring audience reactions over extended periods to determine whether trust and attachment endure, diminish, or change with familiarity. Lastly, ethical and legal issues must be considered, particularly those related to algorithmic transparency and the disclosure of artificial intelligence. According to this research, when realness and relatability were high, participants still felt a sense of attachment, even though they were aware that VIs were manufactured. Future research may investigate whether explicitly revealing a VI's non-human identity enhances credibility (via the cognitive trustworthiness pathway) or detracts from it by disrupting the affective attachment maintained through social presence (Muniz et al., 2023). It would be easier to match theoretical advancements with changing society expectations if frameworks included considerations of transparency, algorithmic bias, and digital ethics. Together, these strategies directly build on the conceptualisation offered in this thesis, which maintains that persona and Message Realness and relatability interact to produce PSRs with VIs, and that these perceptions impact engagement, trust, and brand outcomes. The findings suggest that the power of VIs lies less in their technological ingenuity and more in their ability to reproduce strong, human-like interactions. This highlights the need for scholars to modify PSR theory for an AI-powered media landscape, and for practitioners, it presents an opportunity to proactively position VIs as approachable and reliable brand partners who can affect the direction of influencer marketing.

The main idea of this thesis is that parasocial connections with VIs arise from the dynamic interaction of persona and message cues that together convey realness and relatability. Taken together, these directions expand upon the VI Design Framework. In addition to strengthening this model's resilience, future research that considers cross-cultural, longitudinal, ethical, and comparative aspects will also modify PSR theory to fit the reality of a media environment mediated by AI. For academics, this emphasises the theoretical need to expand PSR frameworks to include human-AI relationship dynamics in addition to human-media interaction. It highlights the chance for practitioners to proactively position VIs as genuine, reliable, and culturally sensitive brand partners who can build long-lasting connections with audiences in the future of digital marketing.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

Through the dual processes of realness and relatability, two perceptual factors that affect how audiences engage with artificial personas in digital marketing contexts, this thesis sought to understand how VIs enhance PSRs. By integrating persona-level (visual and behavioural characteristics) and message-level (linguistic and narrative content) clues into a single conceptual framework, the study provided a novel viewpoint on the co-construction between virtual entities and human audiences. This work advances the theory of PSR research by demonstrating that parasocial bonds are not only dependent on human-likeness but also on the congruence between a VI's design and its communicative performance, and by providing valuable insights for companies seeking to utilise VIs as believable, emotionally compelling marketing partners. The findings demonstrate how assessments of realness and relatability interact to influence customer reactions through two different typologies: complementary design and synergised design, which became crucial components of the VI Design Framework. This categorisation makes a unique theoretical contribution to the marketing sector, extending beyond static interpretations of anthropomorphism to explain how dynamic alignment between persona and message produces customer value. The results show that whereas Synergised Relatability (a likeable persona and message) fosters emotional connection, Synergised Realness (a realistic persona and message) largely drives cognitive trustworthiness. The study also shows that complementary designs may fill in gaps; strong attachment can be fostered even in the absence of physical realism by compensating for poor persona realism with high message-level relatability. Crucially, interaction was found as a critical moderator that increases social presence and confirms authenticity across all design types. For practitioners and businesses navigating the new VI marketing landscape, the VI Design Framework offers valuable management guidance, particularly through the Strategic Framework for VI Implementation. The paradigm underlines that strategic design coherence, notably how persona and message characteristics align to evoke realness and relatability, is more crucial for VI efficacy than technology innovation alone. These observations establish a connection between theoretical ideas and real-world tactics, demonstrating that the framework's value lies in its capacity to translate into effective marketing strategies. Brands may develop VIs that serve as emotionally compelling, reliable, and long-lasting digital ambassadors by focusing on persona and message design that achieves the dual objectives of realness and relatability.

The thesis concludes by demonstrating that, although artificial, VIs can create interactions that appear genuinely human. This research reframes the cultivation of trust and emotional engagement in the digital age by conceptualising the outcome of consistent persona-message congruence. For academics and professionals alike, the VI Design Framework provides a theoretically sound yet practically applicable approach. It demonstrates how VIs become relational partners, digital personalities that can inspire trust, empathy, and sustained engagement when realness and relatability are skilfully combined. Ultimately, this research expands our understanding of how people engage with non-human entities in the era of algorithmic communication. It marks a step toward reconsidering connection, reliability, and influence in a world where the distinctions between real and virtual social actors are increasingly blurred.

8.1 Closing Reflection

Looking back on the path of this research, it becomes clear that VIs are much more than just a commercial or technological breakthrough. They herald a new era in human communication, trust-building, and meaning-making in increasingly digital contexts. The study's participants' descriptions of their encounters with VIs as truly social and emotional, rather than robotic or surface-level, really stood out to me. Participants expressed sentiments of connection, respect, and even despair, acknowledging that these statistics were manufactured, yet demonstrating that the human need to relate and fit in transcends biological limits. This research highlights a deeper realisation: developing technologies that enhance genuine human encounters, rather than substituting for human connection with robots, are the way of the future for marketing and communication. VIs show that artificial beings may act as mediators of meaning, emotion, and community when they are created with the proper ratio of realness to relatability. They question our presumptions about identity, empathy, and trustworthiness in digital settings by blurring the distinction between humans and machines. This thesis advances our understanding of how businesses can engage with customers in ways that are both technologically and emotionally responsible, from both an ethical and creative perspective. Ultimately, I view my research as a critical invitation to reflect on what these digital identities reveal about us and as a valuable contribution to the academic community. VIs reflect our shared yearning for acceptance and connection. The way we create, interact with, and react to them reveals as much about how technology has changed as it does about the persistent human desire for social connection in a mediated society.

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APPENDIX 1- Additional Quotes Table

Participant	Quote
<i>Evan</i> <i>(Synergised Realness)</i>	“Humanlike features do make them look more authentic, but I personally like the animated style more because the more you try to make a VI human, the creepier it looks. And I say, I personally prefer more animated style, so that's the reason.”
<i>Preston</i> <i>(Synergised Realness)</i>	“The VIs that feel most authentic to me use natural speech patterns, occasional pauses, changes in pacing, or like verbal filler, like you know, the worst, like, uh, there's a, I've realised that perfect and polished delivery from a VI actually makes me, you know, suspicious. It's about small imperfections in the speech and mannerism that convince me that the real behind, you know, the digital pace.”
<i>Jason</i> <i>(Synergised Realness)</i>	“But someone like Lil Mikquela, she is in this weird, uncanny valley I say a like sweet spot where she's clearly not human but has all these little details. Like the way her hair moves, or how her skin has texture and even pores. It's creepy but in a cool way, like sometimes I'll see a post and forget for half a second that she's not a real person until she does something impossible like change outfit mid scene.”
<i>Adam</i> <i>(Synergised Relatability)</i>	“Yeah, definitely coherence and consistency really matter. If their message aligns with their personality and past content, it builds trust between the person who's watching them when they are consistent, it feels like you're hearing from the same person each time.”
<i>Ruben</i> <i>(Complementary Persona Realness X Message Relatability)</i>	“Realistic facial expressions and natural movements help bridge the gap between digital and real for me. When a VI's eyes move or they gesture naturally, it's easier to forget they are computer-generated.”
<i>Stella</i> <i>(Complementary Persona Realness x Message Relatability)</i>	“If the message flows naturally and feels like something, a real person would say it deals credibility. But if it's robotic or overly salesy, it feels fake and I immensely lose interest.”
<i>Austin</i> <i>(Complementary Persona Realness x Message Relatability)</i>	“For me, it's less about the time and more about how the VI interacts and presents themselves online. If the VIs word building is strong, even a cartoonist character can feel real in their own context. “
<i>Jason</i> <i>(Complementary Persona Realness x Message Relatability)</i>	“There was this one campaign where Lil Miquela promoted a tech product and she actually met sense because she's all about digital life. But when she randomly endorsed some protein powder or something, that felt off brand and kind of desperate.”
<i>Austin</i> <i>(Complementary Persona Relatability x Message Realness)</i>	“Humanlike features do make a VI feel more authentic to me, especially when they blend in seamlessly with real people in photos; however, a more animated style like Noonouri can also feel real if her personality and storytelling are consistent and engaging.”
<i>Evan</i> <i>(Complementary Persona Relatability x Message Realness)</i>	“It is, but it should be to some extent. If it's really, really structured and coherent, it might actually seem like AI, like I mentioned in the previous question. With that said, it should have some slow-paced structure, which should not sound robotic and scripted, that might help the realness of the VI, you know.”
<i>Scott</i> <i>(Interactivity as Moderator)</i>	“Those interactions really change their experience. When a VI replies to comments or joins its chats, it feels less like watching a scripted character and more like engaging with someone real. It creates a sense of connection and spontaneity, which makes the presence feel more genuine and dynamic.”
<i>Sabrina</i> <i>(Interactivity as Moderator)</i>	“It's like having a real-time discussion, which fosters a sense of connection and community and also makes the VI

	more engaged in a world where it is prone to be more robotic.”
Aaron <i>(Interactivity as Moderator)</i>	“We get some doubts, and while we post it on the comment, if the VI replies back with genuine reasoning, it might feel real to me.”
Stella <i>(Interactivity as Moderator)</i>	“When they do Q&N sessions or replies to comments. I feel like I'm being heard. That interaction makes me feel like a community, then a one-way broadcast.”
Miles <i>(Interactivity as Moderator)</i>	“Interactive features make a huge difference when a VI replies to the comments, answering Q&A sessions or reactions to their trending topic. It gives an impression that they are actually present and listening.”
Evan <i>(Interactivity as Moderator)</i>	“They're actually talking to a real person. And if I talk about personalised interactions, that's the main thing that's actually really good. If the VI actually personally interacts with the people, that's just great. The VI is able to connect with the people will make them feel real and relatable. So I would say that's the thing.”
Samantha <i>(Mediated Pathways)</i>	“Yes, I have actually followed brands that I wasn't interested in before, simply because Imma a endorsed them in a way that felt authentic and aligned with her character. So, yes, my behaviours have changed due to a VI's influence.”
Ruben <i>(Mediated Pathways)</i>	“Disorganised or inconsistent post make it's harder for me to engage or take them seriously. A clear structure helps convey the message effectively and build stress. It's easier to follow and relate to influencers who communicate clearly.”
Stella <i>(Mediated Pathways)</i>	“Yes, there was one post where the VI opened up about feeling pressure to be perfect all the time. It reminded me of real influencers who talk about mental health. I connected with that deeply because I felt that way too. Always feeling like you have to show your best self online.”

APPENDIX 2- Interview Questions

GENERAL QUESTION ABOUT PARTICIPANT'S ATTITUDE/OPINION ABOUT

VI

- Q1.** Which social media platforms do you primarily use, and how often do you engage with Virtual Influencers on these platforms?
- Q2.** Have you ever engaged with a brand collaboration that involved a Virtual Influencer?

QUESTIONS ABOUT VI REALNESS

Main Question

- Q3.** Does a virtual influencer's appearance affect how real they feel to you? Why or why not?
- **Prompt 1:** Would you say that human-like features make a VI feel more authentic, or do you think a more animated style can also feel real? Why?
 - **Prompt 2:** How do details like facial expressions or realistic movements influence your perception of realness?
 - **Prompt 3:** Have you ever felt more influenced or engaged because the VI looked or behaved in a human-like way?

Main Question

- Q4.** How important is realistic behaviour in making a virtual influencer feel real to you?
- **Prompt 1:** Do interactions such as responding to comments or engaging in live conversations make a difference? Please elaborate your response.
 - **Prompt 2:** How does consistency in their online presence affect your perception of their realness? Why?

QUESTIONS ABOUT VI RELATABILITY

Main Questions

- Q5.** Have you ever felt an emotional connection or personal attachment to a virtual influencer? If so, what contributed to this feeling?
- **Prompt 1:** Can you describe a specific moment when you felt connected to a virtual influencer? What was it about their content or interactions that made you feel this way?
 - **Prompt 2:** Do you think shared experiences, values, or interests play a role in making a virtual influencer feel more relatable? If so, how?
- Q6.** What aspects of a virtual influencer's personality or storytelling make them relatable to you?

- **Prompt 1:** How do factors like humor and vulnerability in a virtual influencer's personality affect your sense of connection with them? Are there any other aspects of the personality that also contribute to your sense of connection?
- **Prompt 2:** Can you think of a time when a virtual influencer's storytelling, such as sharing personal struggles or achievements, made them feel more relatable to you?

QUESTIONS ABOUT MESSAGE COMMUNICATION BY VI REALNESS

Main Questions

Q7. What specific elements within a virtual influencer's communication messages contribute to making it feel authentic?

- **Prompt 1:** Would you say coherence and consistency play a role? If so, how?
- **Prompt 2:** Do you think factual accuracy of the message is important, or is emotional appeal in the message communicated by the VIs more influential?

Q8. How do the structure and delivery of a virtual influencer's message impact its credibility?

- **Prompt 1:** Does a structured and coherent message make a virtual influencer feel more real to you? Why or why not?
- **Prompt 2:** How do factors like natural language, emotional expression, or personalised interactions influence your perception of a virtual influencer's authenticity?
- **Prompt 3:** Does the message feel more trustworthy or impactful when it matches their personality?

QUESTIONS ABOUT MESSAGE COMMUNICATION BY VI RELATABILITY

Main Questions

Q9. How does the content and tone of a virtual influencer's message influence your level of engagement or emotional connection with it?

- **Prompt 1:** How do storytelling elements, such as personal anecdotes or relatable experiences, impact your emotional connection with a virtual influencer's message?
- **Prompt 2:** Does a professional tone or casual language make them feel more engaging? (formal vs informal / professional vs casual / friendly tone vs distance tone)

Q10. What communication techniques make a virtual influencer's message feel more relatable?

- **Prompt 1:** Do you think storytelling contributes to this? Could you elaborate?

- **Prompt 2:** How do interactive elements, such as responding to comments or engaging in Q&A sessions, make a virtual influencer's message feel more relatable?
- **Prompt 3:** Have you ever changed your opinion, behaviour, or habits because of a virtual influencer's message or presence?

ENDING QUESTION

Q11. Considering everything we've discussed, do you believe virtual influencers can build real and meaningful connections with consumers? What do you think about the brands that use virtual influencers to promote their products or services?

APPENDIX 3- Ethics Approval



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH)

30 April 2025

Khanh Le

Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Khanh

Re Ethics Application: **25/88 Exploring the Dimensions of Virtual Influencer**

Effectiveness: A Conceptual Framework for Realness and Relatability

Thank you for your responses to AUTECH's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 29 April 2028.

Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. Please note that digital data and consent storage will only be accessed by supervisor (not student) after analysis completed;
2. Changes to the Information Sheet:
 - a. Under the screening process remove 'and online communities';
 - b. Inclusion and exclusion criteria:
 - i. Delete the sentences Participants were included or excluded and just include the criteria;
 - ii. Delete the first two criteria in the exclusion section as these are implied in the inclusion criteria;
 - c. Will the results of the study be published:
 - i. Delete the word anonymised and replace with de-identified.
 - d. What will my participation involve:
 - i. Delete Google meet as option as not included in the advert;

- e. Include mention that withdrawal may not be possible after analysis has been undertaken to be consistent with Consent Form;
 - f. Remove statement around providing a list of support people;
3. Provide clean version of all updated public facing documents.

Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTEK unless requested but must be completed before commencing your study.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research and as approved by AUTEK.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEK approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEK prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEK, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEK grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact the Secretariat at ethics@aut.ac.nz

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEK Secretariat

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: ryandcunha289@gmail.com