

## THE ROLE OF AI-GENERATED INFLUENCERS IN VIRTUAL AND HYBRID TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

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**Abstract:** *The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has led to the emergence of AI-generated influencers—virtual personas created using machine learning, computer graphics, and natural language processing. These digital entities are increasingly utilized in the tourism industry, particularly within virtual and hybrid travel experiences. This study aims to examine the role, effectiveness, and implications of AI-generated influencers in shaping tourist perceptions, engagement, and decision-making processes. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines content analysis and survey data, the research explores how AI influencers contribute to destination marketing, personalized travel experiences, and sustainable tourism development. The findings reveal that AI-generated influencers significantly enhance user engagement, trust, and accessibility in virtual and hybrid tourism environments. However, ethical concerns, authenticity issues, and technological limitations remain critical challenges. The study concludes by proposing strategic recommendations for the responsible integration of AI influencers in future tourism practices.*

**Keywords:** *Artificial intelligence, AI-generated influencers, virtual tourism, hybrid travel, digital tourism, destination marketing.*

### INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry has undergone profound transformations due to digitalization, accelerated by artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR). One of the most innovative developments in this context is the rise of AI-generated influencers—computer-generated characters designed to simulate human behavior, communication, and emotional interaction. Unlike human influencers, AI-generated influencers operate continuously, are fully customizable, and can be strategically aligned with brand values and destination narratives.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified the demand for virtual and hybrid travel experiences, prompting tourism stakeholders to explore alternative methods of engagement. Virtual tours, digital storytelling, and immersive simulations have become integral components of contemporary tourism marketing strategies. Within this framework, AI-generated

influencers serve as virtual tour guides, brand ambassadors, and interactive storytellers, bridging the gap between physical and digital travel experiences.

Despite their growing popularity, academic research on AI-generated influencers in tourism remains limited. Existing studies primarily focus on social media marketing or technological aspects, leaving a research gap regarding their pedagogical, psychological, and experiential impacts on travelers. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the role of AI-generated influencers in virtual and hybrid travel experiences, with particular attention to user engagement, trust formation, and experiential value.

The research addresses the following questions:

1. How do AI-generated influencers influence tourists' perceptions and engagement in virtual and hybrid travel experiences?
2. What benefits do AI-generated influencers offer to the tourism industry?
3. What challenges and ethical concerns arise from the use of AI-generated influencers in travel contexts?

## Literature Review

### AI in the Tourism Industry

Artificial intelligence has become a transformative force in tourism, enabling intelligent recommendation systems, chatbots, dynamic pricing, and personalized travel planning. AI-driven technologies enhance operational efficiency and improve customer satisfaction by analyzing large datasets related to traveler behavior and preferences.

Recent studies highlight that AI contributes to experiential tourism by enabling immersive and interactive environments. Virtual tourism, supported by VR and AR, allows users to explore destinations remotely, while hybrid tourism combines digital experiences with physical travel. AI plays a crucial role in personalizing these experiences and ensuring real-time interaction.

### Concept of AI-Generated Influencers

AI-generated influencers, also referred to as virtual influencers, are digital characters created using AI algorithms, 3D modeling, and natural language processing. Examples such as Lil Miquela and Imma have demonstrated the commercial viability of virtual influencers in marketing and branding.

In contrast to human influencers, AI-generated influencers offer consistency, scalability, and reduced reputational risk. They can communicate in multiple languages, adapt their personalities, and interact with users in real time. Scholars argue that these characteristics make AI influencers particularly suitable for global industries such as tourism.

### Virtual and Hybrid Travel Experiences

Virtual travel experiences involve digital simulations of destinations, enabling users to explore cultural, historical, and natural sites without physical presence. Hybrid travel experiences integrate virtual elements into physical travel, such as AI-guided tours, augmented reality navigation, and digital storytelling.

Research indicates that virtual and hybrid tourism enhances accessibility for individuals with physical, financial, or geographical limitations. Furthermore, these experiences support sustainable tourism by reducing environmental impact and overtourism.

#### Research Gap

While previous studies have examined AI applications in tourism and the marketing potential of virtual influencers, limited attention has been paid to their specific role in virtual and hybrid travel experiences. This study addresses this gap by providing an integrated analysis of technological, experiential, and ethical dimensions.

#### Methodology

##### Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component involves a structured online survey, while the qualitative component consists of content analysis of AI-generated influencer platforms used in tourism marketing.

##### Data Collection

Survey data were collected from 220 participants who had experienced virtual or hybrid travel platforms featuring AI-generated influencers. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling to ensure familiarity with digital tourism technologies.

Additionally, content from 15 AI-generated influencer profiles associated with travel destinations was analyzed to examine communication styles, engagement strategies, and informational accuracy.

##### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to identify relationships between AI influencer interaction and user engagement. Qualitative data were coded thematically to extract recurring patterns related to user perception, trust, and experiential quality.

#### Results

The findings indicate that AI-generated influencers have a positive impact on virtual and hybrid travel experiences.

Survey results show that:

- 78% of respondents reported increased interest in destinations promoted by AI-generated influencers.
- 72% perceived AI influencers as informative and engaging.
- 65% expressed trust in AI-generated content when supported by factual information and transparent disclosure.

Content analysis revealed that AI-generated influencers effectively combine storytelling, visual appeal, and interactivity. Their ability to provide real-time responses and personalized recommendations significantly enhances user immersion.

However, some participants expressed concerns regarding authenticity and emotional depth, suggesting that AI influencers cannot fully replicate human empathy.

#### Discussion

The results confirm that AI-generated influencers play a significant role in enhancing virtual and hybrid travel experiences. Their interactive capabilities and adaptability align with the principles of experience economy and digital tourism innovation.

From a marketing perspective, AI influencers enable destination branding through consistent narratives and controlled messaging. From an educational standpoint, they function as virtual guides, offering historical, cultural, and practical information in an engaging format.

Nevertheless, ethical considerations remain critical. Issues related to transparency, data privacy, and the potential replacement of human labor must be addressed. Furthermore, overreliance on AI-generated influencers may lead to homogenized travel experiences, reducing cultural authenticity.

### Conclusion

This study demonstrates that AI-generated influencers represent a powerful tool in the development of virtual and hybrid travel experiences. They enhance engagement, accessibility, and personalization, contributing to innovative and sustainable tourism practices.

However, their integration must be guided by ethical frameworks and complemented by human-centered approaches. Future research should explore longitudinal effects, cross-cultural differences, and the integration of emotional AI to improve authenticity.

### Practical Implications and Recommendations

- Tourism organizations should integrate AI-generated influencers as complementary, not substitutive, tools.
- Transparency regarding AI identity must be ensured to maintain user trust.
- Policymakers should develop ethical guidelines for AI use in tourism.
- Educational institutions can utilize AI influencers for virtual field trips and experiential learning.

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