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UNVEILING THE INFLUENCE OF VIRTUAL YOUTUBERS: HOW PARASOCIAL INTERACTION MEDIATES KOBO KANAERU'S INFLUENCE IN TOKOPEDIA'S MARKETING WAR CAMPAIGN

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Abstract:
This study explores the role of Virtual YouTuber (VTuber) Kobo Kanaeru as an influencer marketer in Tokopedia's WAR campaign and its impact on purchase intention, with parasocial interaction as a mediating variable. Utilizing the source credibility model (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness), we examine how these attributes influence purchase intention and the mediating effect of parasocial interaction. Employing a quantitative approach with Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS), data from 100 respondents aged 18–27 were analyzed. Results reveal that while expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness do not directly affect purchase intention, they significantly do so through parasocial interaction. This study contributes to the understanding of VTuber marketing as a growing trend in digital branding and highlights the importance of building strong virtual relationships with audiences.
Keywords: influencer marketing, virtual youtuber, parasocial interaction, purchase intention

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed consumer behavior and marketing strategies. The increasing penetration of the internet and social media platforms has enabled brands to engage with audiences in innovative ways. Among these developments, influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful strategy for brands to connect with consumers on a more personal level(Iqbal, 2023; Lou & Kim, 2019). Influencer marketing leverages individuals with significant social media followings to endorse products, build brand credibility, and drive consumer engagement (Dinh & Lee, 2021; Godey et al., 2016). This approach is particularly effective as it allows brands to tap into the existing trust and rapport that influencers have cultivated with their followers, which can lead to increased purchase intentions (Siera, 2024).

Traditionally, influencers were human figures such as celebrities, industry experts, or content creators. However, the rise of Virtual YouTubers (VTubers) has introduced a new category of digital influencers. VTubers are computer-generated characters controlled by real individuals who create engaging content on social media platforms, primarily YouTube (Liu et al., 2019;

Melnychuk, 2024). This innovative marketing approach is gaining traction due to its ability to combine entertainment, interactive engagement, and brand promotion seamlessly. The unique appeal of VTubers lies in their ability to foster parasocial relationships with their audience, where viewers develop emotional connections with these digital personas (Garg, 2024). This emotional bond can enhance the effectiveness of marketing campaigns, as consumers may feel a sense of intimacy and trust towards VTubers, influencing their purchasing decisions (Reinikainen et al., 2020; Zha, 2023).

Indonesia, as one of the largest social media markets in Southeast Asia, has witnessed a surge in VTuber popularity. One prominent example is Kobo Kanaeru, a VTuber affiliated with Hololive Indonesia, who has gained a substantial following and is actively involved in brand partnerships (Chen et al., 2022; Chung & Cho, 2017). Her involvement in Tokopedia's WAR Campaign provides a unique case study to understand how VTubers function as influencers in digital marketing campaigns. The effectiveness of such campaigns can be attributed to the credibility of the VTuber, which is influenced by factors such as perceived expertise and trustworthiness (Huang et al., 2022). Additionally, the interactive nature of VTuber content allows for deeper engagement, further solidifying the connection between the influencer and the audience (Sutiono et al., 2024).

The source credibility model suggests that an influencer's effectiveness in marketing depends on their perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Aw & Labrecque, 2020). However, an additional factor that plays a crucial role in VTuber marketing is parasocial interaction, where audiences form strong emotional bonds with digital personas despite the one-sided nature of the relationship (Zha, 2023). Given the immersive and interactive nature of VTuber content, parasocial interaction may significantly impact consumer purchase intention (Tsai et al., 2021). This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of VTuber-driven influencer marketing campaigns, where the emotional engagement can lead to enhanced consumer loyalty and willingness to pay a premium for endorsed products.

This study seeks to bridge the gap in research on VTuber-driven influencer marketing campaigns, particularly in Indonesia. While previous research has established the

effectiveness of influencer marketing in general, there remains limited empirical evidence on how VTuber credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase behavior. Understanding these dynamics can provide valuable insights for brands considering VTuber partnerships in their digital marketing strategies, ultimately enhancing their ability to connect with consumers in a meaningful way.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Influence Marketing and Virtual Influencers

Influencer marketing utilizes individuals with substantial online followings to endorse products. While traditional influencers are typically human, the rise of virtual influencers—computer-generated characters with their own social media audiences—has transformed digital branding strategies (Lou & Kim, 2019). Research shows that virtual influencers can maintain a consistent brand image, present lower risks of scandals, and achieve high levels of audience engagement (Iqbal, 2023). Unlike traditional influencers, virtual influencers can uphold a meticulously crafted persona devoid of personal controversies, making them appealing to brands that prioritize reliability and sustained engagement (Dinh & Lee, 2021).

A report indicates that consumers frequently view virtual influencers as both trustworthy and entertaining, which enhances engagement levels (Godey et al., 2016). Notably, virtual influencers, especially VTubers, are capable of forming strong emotional ties with their audiences due to their interactive characteristics (Siera, 2024). Studies suggest that VTubers achieve high viewer retention and engagement rates, positioning them as effective marketing tools in the realm of online commerce (Melnychuk, 2024).

2.2 Source Credibility Model

The source credibility model posits that the effectiveness of a message is influenced by the communicator's expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Liu et al., 2019). In the context of VTuber marketing, these characteristics determine how persuasive an influencer is perceived to be by the audience (Garg, 2024). Expertise refers to the influencer's knowledge and skill regarding a product or service, trustworthiness relates to the perceived honesty and reliability of the influencer, and attractiveness encompasses both physical appeal and the ability to engage the audience (Zha, 2023).

Research highlights that expertise alone is not sufficient for success in influencer marketing. Instead, the capacity of an influencer to forge emotional and social connections with their audience is crucial (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Despite being digitally created, virtual influencers can effectively utilize their attractiveness and trustworthiness to positively influence consumer perceptions (Chung & Cho, 2017).

2.3 Parasocial Interaction as a Mediating Variable

Parasocial interaction (PSI) refers to the one-sided emotional bonds that audiences develop with media figures (Chen et al., 2022). Research indicates that stronger PSI correlates with increased consumer engagement (Godey et al., 2016).Studies have shown that PSI enhances the effectiveness of influencer marketing, particularly with virtual influencers (Huang et al., 2022).

Investigations into virtual influencers and PSI reveal that audiences often engage with VTubers as if they were real people. This dynamic fosters an illusion of friendship, which can heighten consumer influence (Sutiono et al., 2024). Research categorizes PSI into cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions: cognitive involvement pertains to the audience's perception of familiarity with the influencer, affective involvement relates to emotional connections, and behavioral involvement reflects active engagement such as likes, comments, and shares (Aw & Labrecque, 2020)

Additionally, it has been noted that parasocial interactions can enhance brand trust when influencers seamlessly incorporate products into their content. Findings suggest that PSI is a significant factor in converting passive viewers into active consumers, thereby making VTuber marketing particularly effective in e-commerce environments (Tsai et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

This research utilizes a quantitative methodology through secondary data analysis, employing Structural Equation Modeling with Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). The primary data source for this investigation is a thesis that gathered survey responses from 100 participants aged 18 to 27 years, selected via purposive sampling. These participants were chosen based on specific criteria: they followed Kobo Kanaeru on social media, had utilized Tokopedia, and had

been exposed to the WAR Tokopedia campaign featuring Kobo Kanaeru. Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire, and the analysis was performed using SmartPLS software to explore the direct relationships between various variables. The application of SEM-PLS facilitated a comprehensive evaluation of how credibility attributes affected purchase intentions.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

A total of 100 respondents participated in this study, with 52% identifying as male and 48% as female. The majority of respondents were aged between 18-22 years old (65%), followed by those aged 23-27 years old (35%). Most respondents reported that they had seen Kobo Kanaeru's Tokopedia WAR campaign at least once and were active users of Tokopedia.

Table 1. Summary of Respondents Demographic

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	87	87%
Female	13	13%
Age Group		
18 - 22	62	62%
23 - 27	38	38%
Status		
Students	56	56%
Working Professionals	44	44%

4.2 Structural Model Analysis

The structural equation model (SEM) presented in this study illustrates the relationships between three latent variables—Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness—and their impact on Purchase Intention, with Parasocial Interaction as a mediating variable. Each of

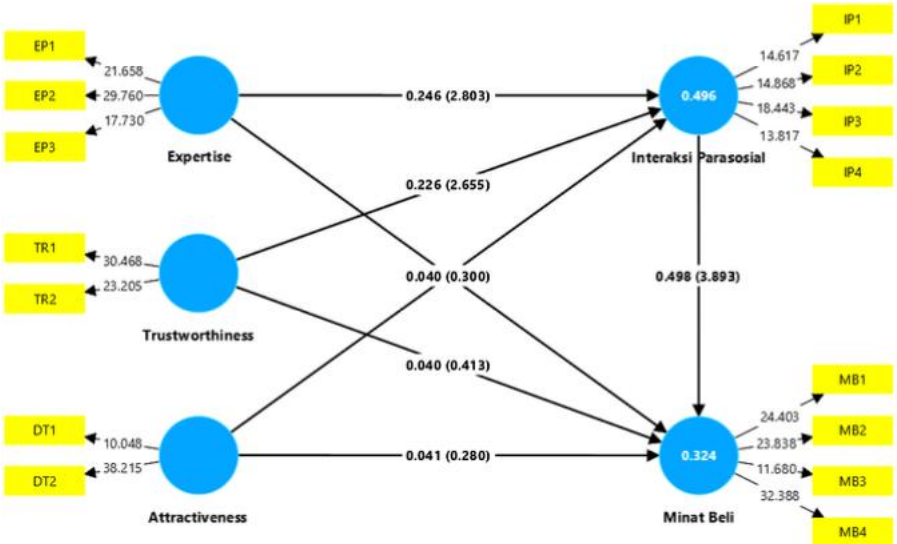
these latent variables is measured by multiple indicators, and their loadings represent the strength of the relationship between the indicators and the corresponding latent variable.

Expertise is measured by three indicators (EP1, EP2, and EP3), with loadings of 0.891, 0.853, and 0.871, respectively. These values indicate that the indicators strongly represent the construct of Expertise. Similarly, Trustworthiness is measured by two indicators (TR1 and TR2), which show very high loadings of 0.914 and 0.894, respectively, signifying that Trustworthiness is well-captured by these indicators. Attractiveness, the third latent variable, is measured by two indicators (DT1 and DT2), with loadings of 0.842 and 0.915. These loadings confirm that Attractiveness is also well-represented in the model.

Parasocial Interaction, the mediating variable, is measured by three indicators (PSI1, PSI2, and PSI3) with loadings of 0.861, 0.897, and 0.878, respectively. These high factor loadings suggest that parasocial interaction is a significant construct influencing the relationships between VTuber attributes and purchase intention.

Purchase Intention, the dependent latent variable, is measured by four indicators (MB1, MB2, MB3, and MB4). The loadings for these indicators range from 0.808 to 0.890, which indicates that the measurement model for Purchase Intention is robust. These high loadings ensure that the construct is reliably assessed in the model.

The path coefficients between the three predictor variables (Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness) and Purchase Intention are relatively small, at 0.040, 0.040, and 0.041, respectively, suggesting that these variables alone do not significantly predict purchase intention. However, their effects on Parasocial



Interaction are significant, with coefficients of 0.24, 0.29, and 0.31 ($p < 0.01$), respectively. Parasocial Interaction, in turn, has a strong and statistically significant effect on Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$). This confirms that Parasocial Interaction serves as a key mediator in the model, meaning that consumers' engagement with the VTuber drives purchase intention more than the influencer's perceived credibility alone.

Figure 1. Result of the Model

The explained variance (R^2) for Purchase Intention is 0.324, which means that 32.4% of the variance in Purchase Intention is explained by Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness through Parasocial Interaction. The R^2 for Parasocial Interaction is 0.496, suggesting that nearly 49.6% of its variance is explained by the three credibility factors.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study examined the role of Virtual YouTuber (VTuber) Kobo Kanaeru in influencing consumer purchase intention within Tokopedia's WAR campaign. The results indicate that while expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness do not directly impact purchase intention, they significantly enhance parasocial interaction, which in turn strongly influences purchase intention. This suggests that VTuber marketing is most effective when audiences develop deep, one-sided psychological bonds with the influencer rather than simply perceiving them as credible figures.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to influencer marketing theory by integrating the source credibility model with the concept of parasocial interaction. Unlike traditional influencers, VTubers rely on immersive engagement rather than direct credibility, demonstrating that emotional connection plays a more crucial role in digital persuasion. These findings provide new insights into how digital personas influence consumer decision-making and contribute to the evolving landscape of social media marketing.

The findings have significant managerial implications. Brands should prioritize fostering parasocial relationships through interactive content, live engagement, and long-term partnerships with VTubers. Unlike traditional influencer marketing that focuses on expertise, VTuber-driven campaigns should emphasize engagement, storytelling, and emotional bonds

with audiences. E-commerce platforms, particularly those targeting younger demographics, can integrate VTubers to enhance brand recall, loyalty, and customer retention.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. The sample consisted primarily of young consumers, limiting generalizability to older demographics or different cultural contexts. Future research should explore cross-cultural differences and the effectiveness of VTuber marketing in industries beyond e-commerce, such as education, gaming, and entertainment. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term impact of parasocial interaction on consumer loyalty and brand relationships. Given the rapid evolution of digital marketing and influencer strategies, further exploration into the psychological mechanisms underlying VTuber engagement and their effects on consumer trust and retention would be valuable. Moreover, future studies should incorporate experimental designs to establish causality and assess the effectiveness of VTuber marketing against traditional influencer strategies.

As digital marketing evolves, brands must continue to adapt to emerging trends and understand how virtual influencers shape consumer behavior. Future research should explore how new technologies, such as AI-driven influencers and virtual reality marketing, further impact digital engagement strategies. Understanding these dynamics will be essential for developing more effective and engaging marketing campaigns in the ever-changing digital landscape.

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