

# Timeless Appeal: Exploring the Optimal Age of Virtual Influencers Through the Lens of Source Credibility, Gender, and Consumer Engagement

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## **Abstract:**

Virtual influencers (VIs) are transforming digital marketing, yet how old they should appear for optimal influence remains unclear. This research uses source credibility theory to examine how the VI age impacts attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness. Across two online experiments and a TikTok field study, we reveal an inverted U-shaped relationship between VI age and effectiveness, moderated by gender and audience demographics. Middle-aged VIs balance attractiveness and expertise, achieving maximum impact. Gender moderates these effects: younger female VIs outperform older ones due to stereotypes favouring youth, while male VIs gain credibility with age. Homophily amplifies preferences for age-similar VIs, independent of gender. For TikTok, optimal VI ages peak at 32 years for females and 44 years for males in terms of engagement. Future research should explore platform-specific dynamics, inclusivity, and the evolving relevance of VI age.

*Keywords: virtual influencers, optimal age, source credibility*

*Track: Digital Marketing & Social Media*