

The Dual Paths of Envy: Comparing Human and Virtual Influencers

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Cite as:

Nguyen Katie, DeFranza David, Zhang Xue, Ren Shengnan, Yu HongBo (2026), The Dual Paths of Envy: Comparing Human and Virtual Influencers. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (133880)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



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Abstract

Virtual influencers (VIs) offer brands operational control, yet their ability to forge genuine connections remains unclear. This research compares consumer responses to human influencers (HIs) versus VIs. Using an experimental design (N=199), findings indicate that HIs generate significantly higher trust, likeability, and purchase intention. We identify a dual-path mechanism where HIs evoke higher levels of constructive benign envy and lower levels of malicious envy compared to VIs. Furthermore, social comparison orientation moderates this relationship. Individuals with a high tendency to compare themselves to others experience greater benign envy toward humans than virtual entities, whereas low comparison tendencies yield no difference. These results suggest VIs disrupt the social comparison process, limiting their ability to inspire aspirational motivation.

Track: Digital Marketing & Social Media