

Social Legitimacy of AI Influencers

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Социална легитимност на AI-инфлуенсърите

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Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of Bulgarian audiences toward AI influencers, specifically those created for the social experiment "The Dundarevs' Family" on TikTok. Findings from an online survey of 131 respondents indicate that simulacra elicit positive emotions such as laughter, sympathy, and a sense of closeness. Nevertheless, respondents express caution regarding the authenticity and social legitimacy of these virtual entities. Age emerges as a significant factor: younger users are more adept at recognizing synthetic content and tend to be more critical, whereas older users exhibit greater hesitancy. The exposure effect is also evident, as regular interaction with AI content increases both tolerance and willingness to follow virtual influencers. Despite these trends, skepticism remains prevalent, resulting in a gap between conceptual acceptance and actual willingness to engage with synthetic images. The status of AI influencers within Bulgarian digital culture is currently fluid; while simulacra effectively engage and entertain, they have yet to achieve social legitimacy.

Keywords: AI Influencers, social legitimacy, exposure effect, TikTok

Резюме

Изследването разглежда нагласите на българската аудитория към инфлуенсъри, създадени с изкуствен интелект (ИИ) в рамките на социалния експеримент „Семейство Дундареви“ в TikTok. Резултатите от онлайн проучване сред 131 респонденти показват, че симулакрите предизвикват положителни емоции като смях, емпатия и чувство за близост. Въпреки това аудиторията демонстрира предпазливост по отношение на автентичността и социалната легитимност на тези виртуални субекти. Възрастта се очертава като значим фактор: по-младите потребители са по-умели в разпознаването на синтетично съдържание и са по-критични, докато по-възрастните проявяват по-голямо колебание. Ефектът на експозиция (Exposure effect) също е очевиден – регулярното взаимодействие с ИИ съдържание повишава както толерантността, така и желанието да се следват виртуални инфлуенсъри. Въпреки тези тенденции, скептицизмът остава значителен, което води до разминаване между концептуалното приемане и действителното желание на потребителите да се ангажират със синтетични персонажи. На този етап отношението към симулакрите в българската дигитална култура е амбивалентно – макар ефективно да ангажират и забавляват, те все още не са постигнали социална легитимност.

Ключови думи: ИИ инфлуенсъри, социална легитимност, ефект на експозиция, TikTok

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These entities are not human, yet they exhibit convincingly human behaviors, attracting millions of followers. They smile, tell jokes, post selfies, collaborate with brands, and, most significantly, elicit emotional responses. Viewed through the theoretical framework of Jean Baudrillard (1981), such digital figures exemplify simulacra: simulations that no longer reflect reality but instead generate independent versions of it.

Baudrillard defines the hyperreal as a condition in which representation precedes reality, creating a realm where copies exist without originals (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 1). In contemporary digital environments, this concept is increasingly tangible. Social media platforms serve as hybrid spaces where authenticity and artificiality coexist as integrated elements of a single communicative ecosystem. Influencers embody this duality by functioning as both individuals and commodities, merging authenticity with performativity. AI-generated influencers further intensify this paradox by eliminating the human element while maintaining emotional resonance. Their success indicates that online engagement is driven less by biological authenticity and more by affective realism, or the perception of emotional genuineness regardless of technical origin.

TikTok, characterized by humor-driven formats, brevity, and viral dynamics, offers an optimal environment for examining audience responses to algorithmically simulated human behavior. Advances in generative AI have enabled digital avatars to exhibit personalized voices, expressions, and behaviors, allowing them to function as full-fledged communicators. These avatars effectively mimic human presence and engage viewers through anthropomorphism, the tendency to attribute human qualities to non-human agents (Ma & Li, 2024; Li, H., Lei, Y., Zhou, Q., & Yuan, H., 2023).

Consequently, these fictional personas are emerging as appealing alternatives to human opinion leaders. They provide complete creative control and substantially reduce reputational risks in branding and digital communication. Multidisciplinary teams of software engineers, public relations strategists, designers, and data analysts collaboratively construct their identities and narrative scripts. Algorithmic tools further facilitate real-time refinement of these simulacra in response to audience feedback (Moustakas, E., Lamba, N., Mahmoud, D., & Ranganathan, C., 2020).

The emergence of virtual influencers has prompted academic debate regarding their social legitimacy. Critics emphasize concerns such as the Uncanny Valley effect, which refers to the discomfort elicited by hyper-realistic artificial agents (Stein, J.-P., Linda Breves, P., & *Postmodernism Problems / Проблеми на постмодерността* Vol.16 , No.1 , 2026, ISSN: 1314-3700, <https://pmpjournal.org> <https://doi.org/10.46324/PMP2601001>

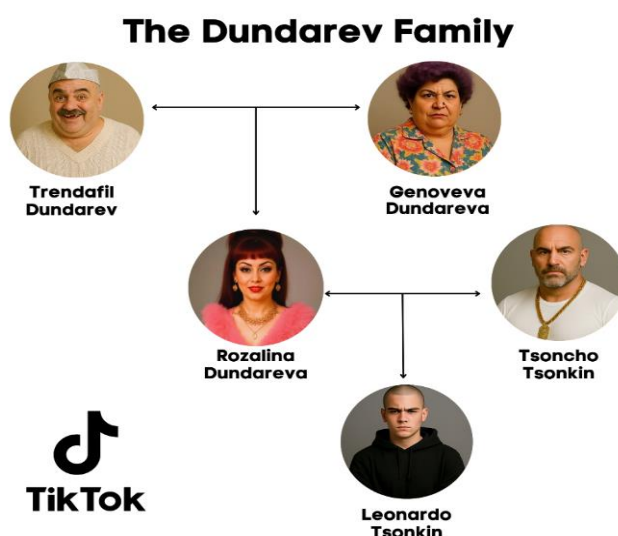
Anders, N., 2024). In contrast, proponents contend that audience trust is influenced more by perceptual authenticity, or the ability of these figures to foster parasocial relationships, than by physical human resemblance (Ma & Li, 2024).

Recent empirical research increasingly identifies emotional expressiveness and curiosity about novelty as primary predictors of success among virtual influencers (Jayasingh, S., Sivakumar, A., & Vanathaiyan, A. A., 2025; Franke & Gröppel-Klein, 2024). Comparative studies of human and AI-generated creators indicate that, although human influencers retain a modest advantage in establishing long-term trust, artificial counterparts attract audiences through content originality, consistency, and their immunity to aging, fatigue, and error (Looi & Kahlor, 2024).

This context prompts a central research question: how do Bulgarian TikTok users perceive these simulacra? The present study represents one of the first comprehensive efforts to investigate trust, social legitimacy, and audience engagement with AI-generated influencers within an authentic online environment (TikTok) and a specific local cultural context. The empirical basis is the social experiment *The Dundarevs' Family*, which features five AI-generated personas representing three generations. These personas were created using a range of generative AI tools, including HeyGen, Midjourney, Suno AI, Veo 3, ChatGPT, and Affogato AI, which collectively determine their visual, vocal, and behavioral characteristics (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Virtual avatars of the Dundarevs' family members, created through generative artificial intelligence



Beyond their technical construction, the characters were integrated into a scripted communication model that employed a humorous, digital-sitcom narrative to sustain audience attention. This strategy is well documented in audiovisual media research.

Data from the social media experiment were collected using TikTok Analytics between June 13 and September 1, 2025, during which 58 videos were released. These videos featured comedic monologues and dialogues that depicted everyday situations with significant cultural and social relevance (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Systematized set of performance indicators from the Dundarevs' Family TikTok profile

TikTok Account Performance Overview

INDICATOR	VALUE	INDICATOR	VALUE
Total Views	793,000	Profile Views	3,425
Total Unique Viewers	673,000	Total Followers	1,601
New Viewers	365,000	Traffic	93.1% "For You" / 5.3% Profile
Likes	26,000	User Gender	52% male / 48% female
Comments	951	User Age Groups	18–24 (13.7%), 25–34 (22.8%), 35–44 (25.4%), 45–54 (22.3%), 55+ (15.8%)
Shares	13,000		

Qualitative and quantitative analyses of the Dundarevs' performance and user interactions indicate positive audience attitudes, as well as notable emotional engagement and a sense of attachment. Notably, viewers did not exhibit discomfort associated with the Uncanny Valley or technophobic responses toward the artificial nature of the characters.

Methodology

To examine perceptions of the Dundarevs' Family among an unbiased audience, defined as individuals outside TikTok's algorithmically curated environment, an online survey was conducted with 131 Bulgarian participants. The questionnaire was administered using the Google Forms platform between 9 September and 2 October 2025.

Respondents viewed a series of short video clips featuring the five AI-generated members of the Dundarevs' Family. Each clip depicted familiar and easily recognisable scenarios, such as humorous scenes related to family interactions, small-town life, and everyday communication. After viewing, participants assessed their impressions, emotional reactions, and perceived authenticity by completing a 13-item survey.

The survey instrument assessed several key dimensions:

- Frequency of TikTok use;
- Exposure to AI-generated content;
- Emotional and ethical attitudes toward virtual personas;
- Willingness to follow an AI influencer.

Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics. Cross-tabulation analyses were performed to identify variations across age, gender, and behavioral profiles, such as the relationship between TikTok usage intensity and the willingness to follow AI-generated accounts.

Results and Discussion

The sample composition indicates a notable gender imbalance, with 68.7% of respondents identifying as women and 31.3% as men. This necessitates cautious interpretation of gender-based cross-tabulations. The age distribution is also uneven: the largest proportion of participants is in the 36-45 age group (42%), followed by the youngest cohort (18-25) at 22.1%. Respondents aged 26-35 constitute 10.7%, those aged 46-55 account for 14.5%, participants aged 56-65 make up 6.1%, and individuals over 65 represent 4.6%. Although younger adults (26-35) and older respondents (56+) are underrepresented, their inclusion provides meaningful generational contrasts. Overall, the distribution is sufficiently diverse to support reliable age-based cross-tabulation and interpretation of emerging trends.

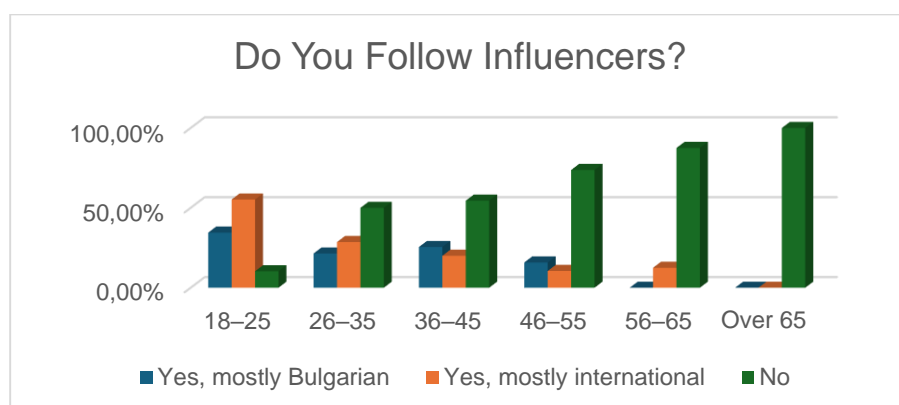
A substantial proportion of respondents, 46.6%, report that they do not use TikTok. Among active users, 26.7% browse the platform daily, and an equal share engage with it several times a week. In contrast, respondents demonstrate significantly higher engagement with YouTube: 39.7% use it daily, 33.6% use it several times a week, and only 2.3% report never

using the platform. These figures indicate that YouTube remains the dominant video-based platform among participants, with 70% of the sample using it regularly.

The survey also examines broader patterns of following influencers, a practice that has become mainstream in the past decade. Half of the respondents (51.1%) do not follow any online opinion leaders, while 26% follow international influencers and 22.9% follow Bulgarian creators. These patterns align with both global and local observations: members of Generation Z show a clear preference for English-language content, as reflected in the cross-tabulation (55.2%). The youngest respondents (18-25) are the most active followers, with nearly 90% engaging with influencers and more than half preferring international ones. In contrast, among those aged 35 and older, the proportion of non-followers increases sharply, surpassing 70% in the 46-55 cohort. For respondents aged 56 and above, particularly those over 65, following influencers is almost nonexistent (see Figure 3). The trend is clear and expected: interest declines steadily with age.

Figure 3

Influencer-following habits (age-group distribution)



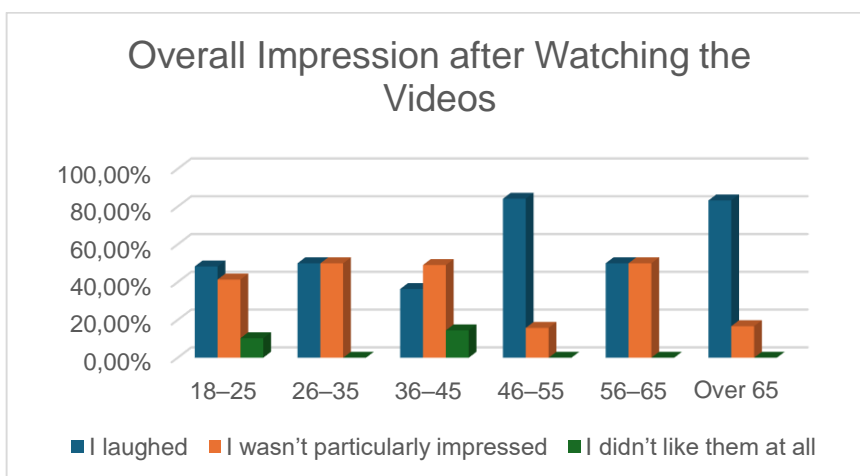
To evaluate the appeal of AI influencers, participants viewed five short videos featuring different members of the Dundarevs' Family. Each video introduced a satirical character, and the fictional setting was described as “*somewhere between Vratsa, Middle Bela Rechka, and TikTok.*” Immediate responses showed that 50.4% of respondents found the AI personas humorous, 41.2% were indifferent, and 8.4% did not like the characters.

Age-based cross-tabulations reveal several notable trends (see Figure 4). Skepticism was most pronounced among middle-aged respondents, with only 36.4% reporting amusement. The youngest group (18-25) exhibited a more moderate response; nearly half found the content amusing, while over 40% indicated they were “not particularly impressed.” In contrast, older audiences (46+) responded most positively, with more than 80% reporting amusement and

almost no negative reactions.

Figure 4

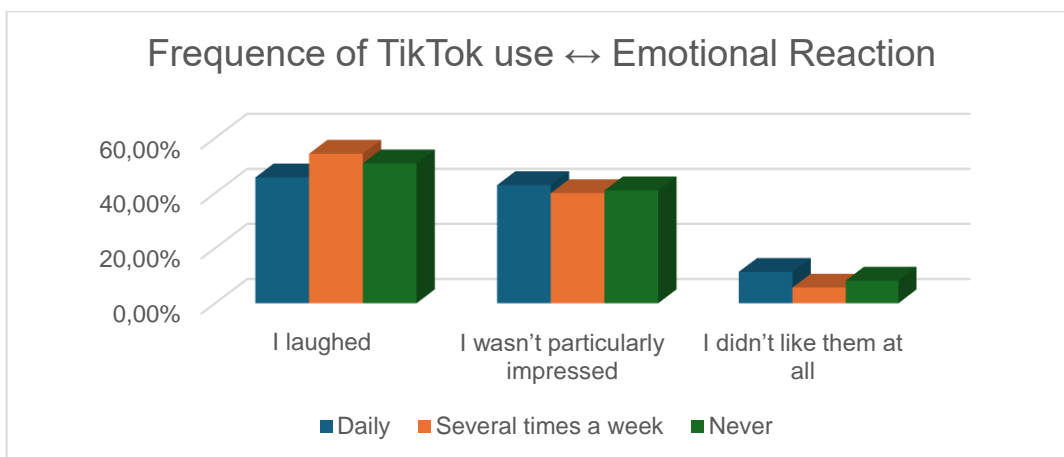
Appeal of AI influencers videos (age-group distribution)



An additional cross-tabulation examined whether regular TikTok users, who are familiar with parody and entertainment formats, respond more favorably to satirical AI characters (see Figure 5). The results do not support this hypothesis. Across all frequency categories, approximately 40% of respondents indicated that the Dundarevs “did not particularly impress” them. Conversely, positive reactions, such as “I laughed,” consistently predominate, ranging from 46% to 54%. Strongly negative reactions, including “I didn’t like them at all,” remain low across all groups, at less than 12%.

Figure 5

Correlation between frequency of TikTok use and emotional reaction to AI-generated videos



To determine the sources of likability, respondents were asked to specify what aspects they found amusing. A plurality (31.3%) cited “the overall character and message,” while 28.2% appreciated the humor. Only 3.8% were amused by the exaggerated visual depiction of

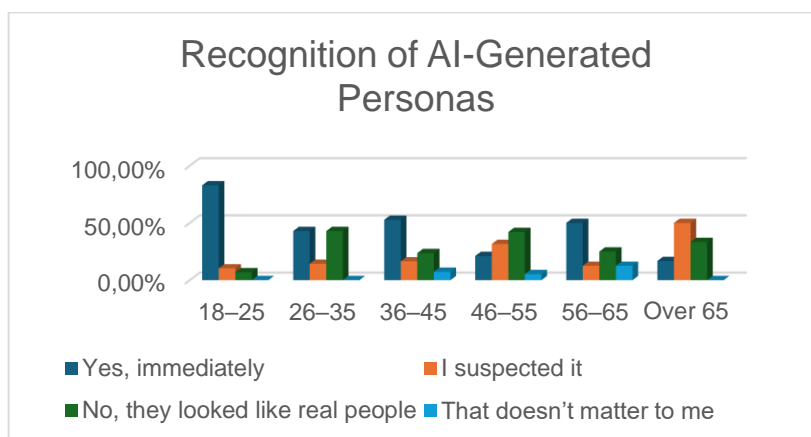
a stereotypical Northwestern Bulgarian family. Notably, 36.6% did not find the characters humorous.

A key question examined whether respondents recognized that the characters were AI-generated. Approximately 25.2% did not realize the Dundarevs were synthetic, while 51.9% immediately identified their artificial origin. An additional 18.3% suspected the characters were not real.

Substantial age-related differences were observed (see Figure 6). The youngest group (18-25) demonstrated the highest sensitivity to synthetic content, with 82.8% instantly identifying the characters as artificial. In the 26-35 group, responses were nearly evenly divided between immediate recognition and perceiving the characters as real (approximately 40% each). Among respondents aged 46 and older, the proportion who either did not recognize or only suspected the artificial origin increased. The 65+ group exhibited the lowest confidence, with half merely suspecting artificiality and only 17% recognizing it immediately.

Figure 6

Perception of artificiality (age-group distribution)



Awareness of artificiality appears to influence attitudes toward AI-generated content. Most respondents approached the experiment with curiosity, yet a preference for authenticity persisted. Over half (51.9%) selected the option, “I respect the effort, but I prefer real people.” Nearly one third (29.8%) indicated that the artificial origin was irrelevant, while 16.8% prioritized entertainment over authenticity. Only 1.5% reported that the AI nature increased the characters’ appeal.

Cross-tabulation analysis indicates that moderate positivity toward AI-generated content is consistent across age groups. The youngest (18-25) and oldest (65+) respondents demonstrated the strongest preference for real people (58.6% and 66.7%, respectively). Respondents aged 26-35 exhibited greater tolerance, with nearly 30% stating that the artificial *Postmodernism Problems / Проблеми на постмодерността*
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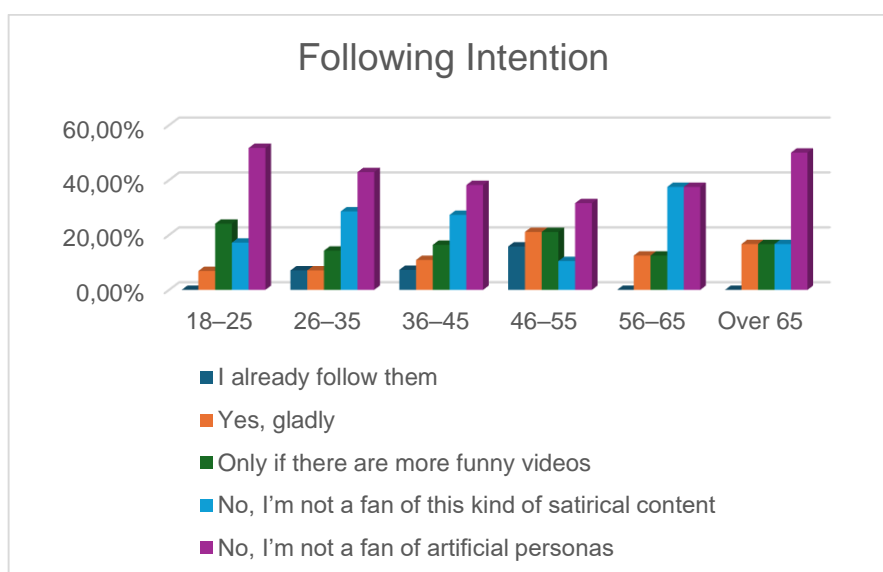
origin was unimportant provided the content was entertaining. Middle-aged participants (36-45) and a portion of the 56-65 group displayed higher levels of indifference, with approximately 37-38% reporting that such humor did not amuse them.

The study also examined whether curiosity could outweigh skepticism. The findings suggest that skepticism prevails, as 41.2% of respondents stated unequivocally that they “are not fans of artificial personas.” Nevertheless, 18.2% indicated a willingness to follow the Dundarevs or other AI creators if the humorous content persisted. Additionally, 11.5% of respondents would follow such creators “with pleasure,” and 6.1% already follow AI influencers.

Skepticism is evident across all age groups, with 38% to 52% reporting that they “are not fans of artificial images” (see Figure 7). The youngest cohort (18-25) is the most critical, as more than half (51.7%) indicated they would not follow such profiles. Respondents aged 36-55 demonstrate the highest level of conditional openness, expressing willingness to follow “if the videos are funny.” Both the oldest (65+) and youngest respondents share similar reservations, although a small proportion (approximately 17%) remain curious.

Figure 7

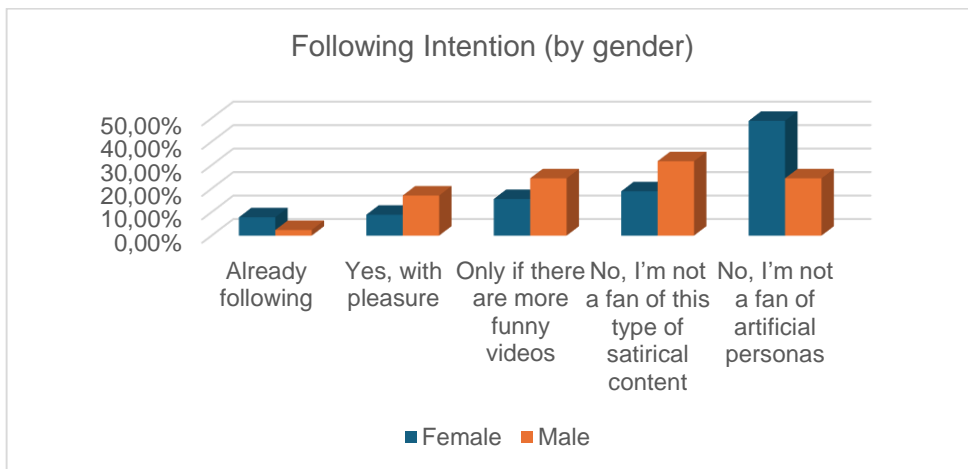
Following intention of AI influencers (age-group distribution)



Gender-based patterns provide additional insight (see Figure 8). Women demonstrate greater reservation, with nearly half (48.9%) reporting they “are not fans of artificial images.” In contrast, men exhibit more openness; 17.1% would follow AI influencers “with pleasure,” and 24.4% would do so “if the videos are funny.” However, negative attitudes among men remain substantial (31.7%).

Figure 8

Following intention of AI influencers (gender distribution)

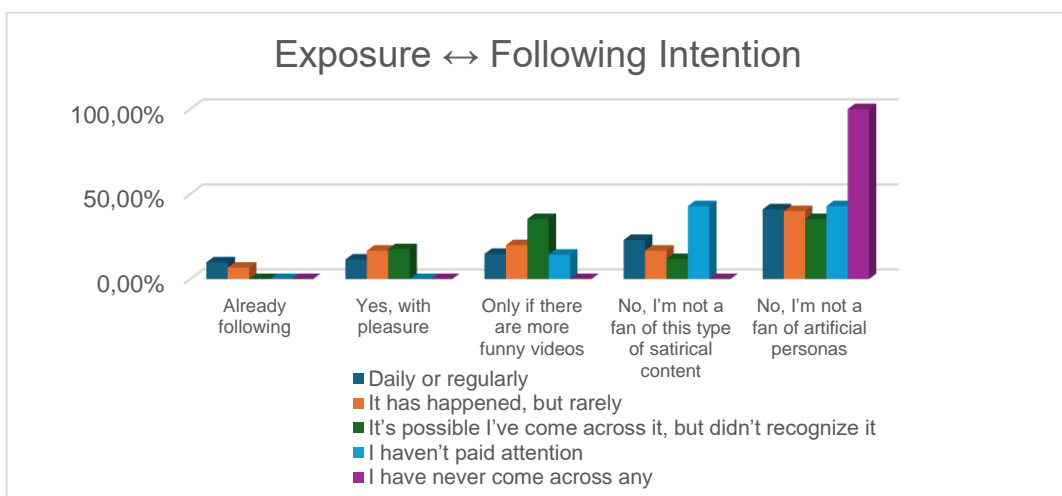


Exposure to AI-generated content represents another important aspect. Nearly half of respondents (46.6%) indicated encountering such content daily or regularly, which suggests increasing prevalence. In contrast, only 1.5% reported never encountering AI-generated material.

Cross-tabulation analysis supports the hypothesis that frequent exposure increases acceptance of virtual influencers (see Figure 9). Among respondents regularly exposed to AI content, more than 25% would follow a virtual influencer “with pleasure” or if the content is humorous, and nearly 10% already do so. In contrast, those who rarely or unknowingly encounter such material demonstrate conditional curiosity and uncertainty. Respondents who have never been exposed are predominantly negative, with over 85% indicating they would not follow such profiles.

Figure 9.

Link between exposure and following intention

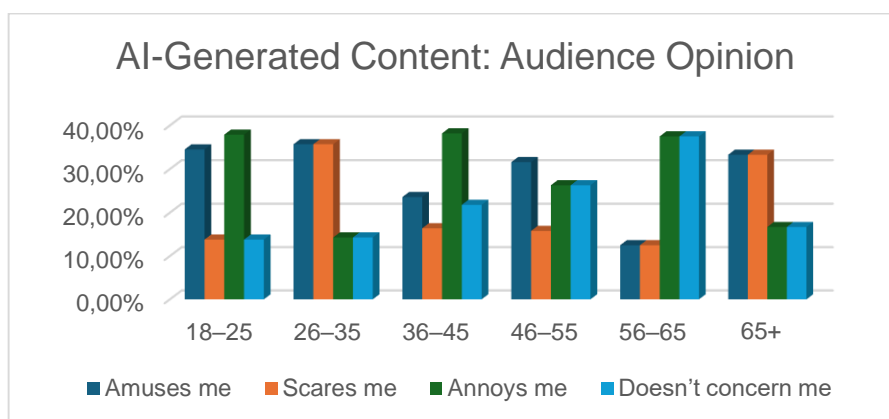


Attitudes toward AI-generated content were also assessed. Negative evaluations predominate, with 32.8% of respondents finding such content irritating and 18.3% considering it frightening. However, nearly one third (28.2%) perceive AI-generated content as interesting, innovative, or entertaining, and 20.6% report indifference.

Age differences are significant (see Figure 10). Respondents aged 18-35 demonstrate the greatest openness, with approximately 35% finding AI-generated content interesting. Those aged 36-45 and 56-65 more frequently report irritation or indifference (approximately 38%). Fear is most prevalent among respondents aged 26-35 and 65+, reaching 33-35%.

Figure 10

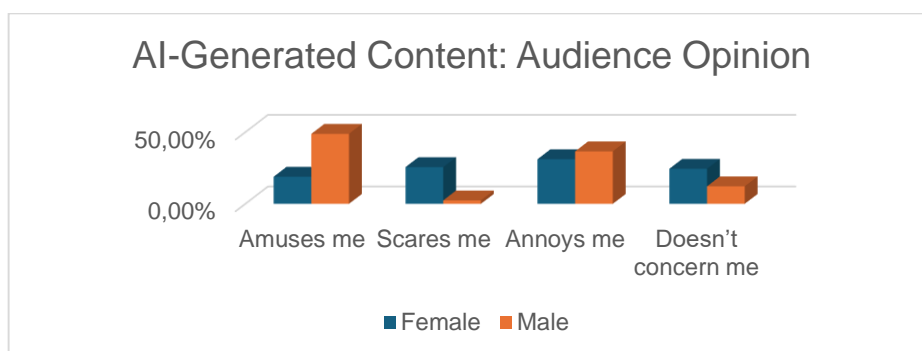
Attitudes toward AI-generated content (age-group distribution)



Gender-based analysis indicates that men exhibit significantly more positive attitudes, with nearly half (48.8%) describing AI content as interesting, compared to only 18.9% of women (see Figure 11). Women report higher levels of fear (25%) and irritation (approximately 32%). Indifference is also more prevalent among women (24%) than among men (12%).

Figure 11

Attitudes toward AI-generated content (gender distribution)



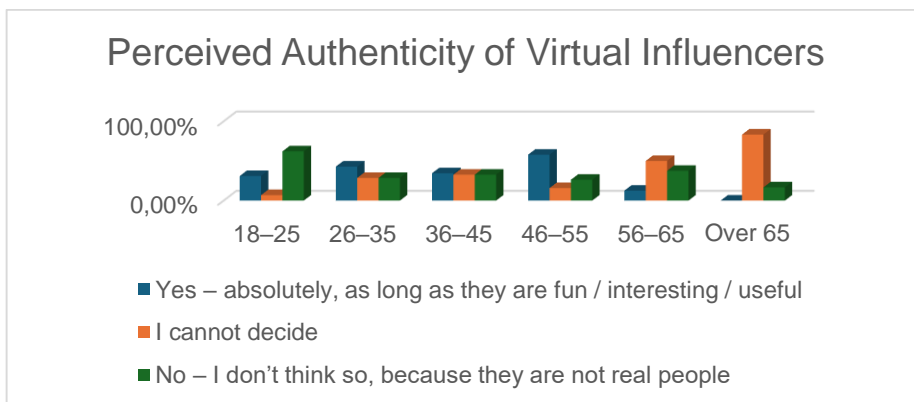
Participants were also asked whether virtual influencers could be perceived as “real.”

Responses were nearly balanced between those identified as “pessimists” (37.4%) and “optimists” (35.1%), while 27.5% remained uncertain. This distribution is consistent with the rapid evolution of these technologies.

Age-based patterns (see Figure 12) reveal pronounced contrasts. The youngest respondents (18-25) are the most skeptical, with more than 60% rejecting the idea that virtual personas could be perceived as real influencers. The 26-45 cohort is more evenly divided, with approximately one third agreeing and another third remaining uncertain. The 46-55 group is the most optimistic, as almost 58% indicate that virtual influencers could be perceived as real if they are interesting or entertaining. The 65+ cohort demonstrates the highest level of uncertainty, with 83% responding “I cannot decide.”

Figure 12

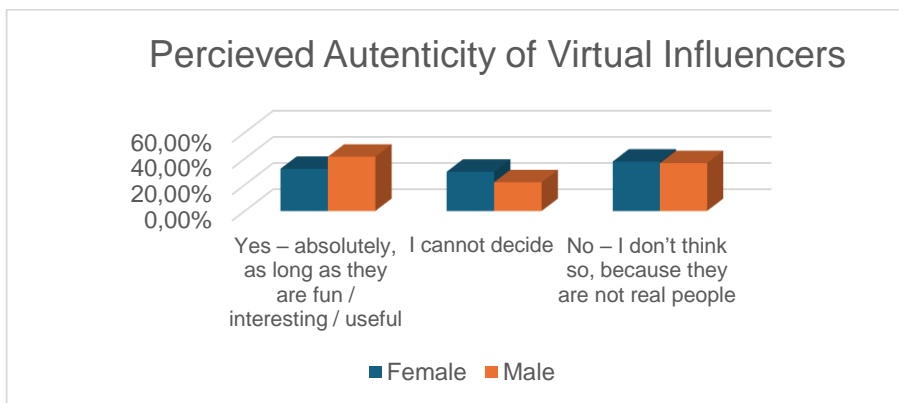
Authenticity potential of AI-generated influencers (age-group distribution)



Gender differences are also evident in these findings. While both men and women are divided in their views, men demonstrate greater optimism, with 41.5% expressing agreement. In contrast, women exhibit more caution, as nearly 38% reject the idea outright and 30% remain undecided (see Figure 13).

Figure 13

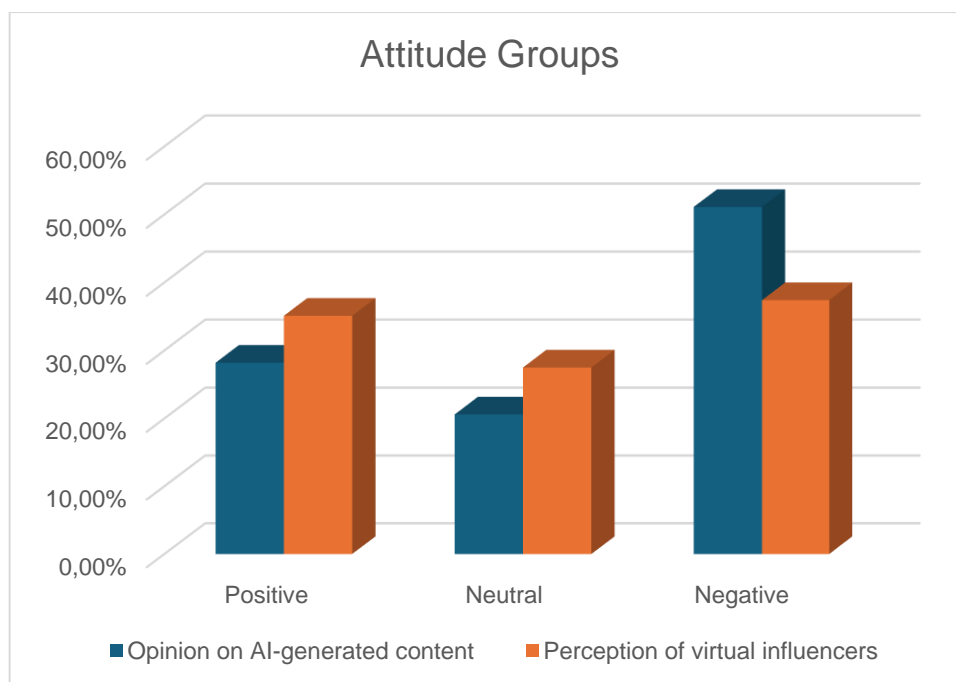
Authenticity potential of AI-generated influencers (gender distribution)



To investigate underlying attitudinal structures, emotional responses to AI content were compared with assessments of the authenticity of virtual influencers. This analysis identified three distinct attitudinal profiles: positive, negative, and neutral (see Figure 14).

Figure 14

Emotional responses to AI content and perceived authenticity of virtual influencers



Positive emotional responses are strongly associated with a greater willingness to accept and trust virtual influencers. Individuals who perceive AI content as interesting or innovative are more likely to consider virtual personas as authentic influencers. This pattern is particularly pronounced among men and respondents aged 26 to 45.

In contrast, fear and irritation are predictive of rejection. Respondents who characterize AI content as frightening or irritating most frequently responded “No, I don’t think so” when asked about virtual influencers. This relationship is especially strong among women and individuals over the age of 45.

Neutral respondents, defined as those who state that AI content “does not matter,” typically exhibit limited familiarity with AI profiles. This group most frequently selects “I cannot decide” when evaluating the authenticity of virtual influencers.

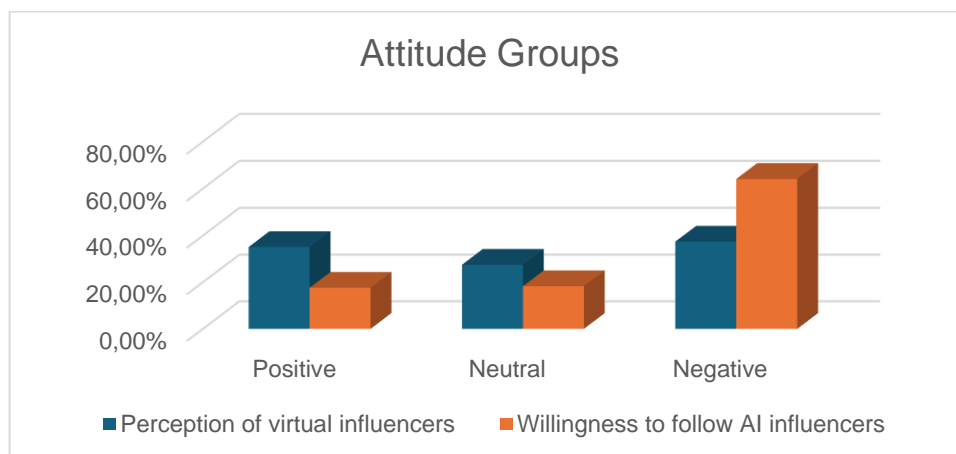
A comparison of attitudinal distributions across both questions indicates that negative reactions are more prevalent toward AI content itself (51%) than toward the concept of virtual influencers (37%). Positive attitudes increase by approximately seven percentage points when respondents assess specific AI personas rather than abstract content. Neutral responses also rise,

from 21% to 28%, underscoring uncertainty and the lack of firmly established opinions.

Finally, attitudes toward virtual influencers were also compared with behavioral intentions (see Figure 15). Three distinct clusters emerged: positive, neutral/uncertain, and negative.

Figure 15

Perceived authenticity of virtual influencers and willingness to follow AI influencers



There is a consistent alignment between beliefs and actions. Among respondents who believe that virtual influencers can be perceived as real, approximately one third express willingness to follow them. More than half of those who consider AI personas inauthentic indicate they would not follow such profiles. Neutral respondents demonstrate conditional openness, with most stating they would follow virtual influencers only if the videos remain humorous. This suggests that humor may serve as a mechanism for shifting attitudes.

Although one third of respondents acknowledge that virtual influencers could be perceived as real, actual willingness to follow them is nearly half that figure (17.6%). Negative attitudes intensify when shifting from theoretical judgments to concrete behavioral intentions, increasing from 37% to 64%. Neutral respondents (18-27%) constitute a potentially influenceable group whose attitudes may shift when exposed to relatable and entertaining content.

The survey identifies several notable patterns:

- AI-generated influencers evoke genuine emotional reactions, such as amusement and attachment. This demonstrates that affective realism can override the awareness of synthetic origin.
- Recognition of artificiality varies significantly by age. Younger audiences are the most perceptive, while older groups are the least aware.

- Despite curiosity, authenticity remains a core value. More than half of respondents prefer real people, even when entertained by AI personas.
- Skepticism predominates in behavioral intentions, even among those who theoretically accept virtual influencers.
- Exposure is a significant factor. Regular contact with AI content substantially increases openness to virtual personas, confirming an exposure effect.
- Attitudes are polarized: irritation and fear drive rejection, whereas interest and novelty drive acceptance.
- Humor moderates resistance. Conditional openness, as indicated by statements such as “I’ll follow them if the videos are funny,” suggests that comedic framing can shift attitudes.
- Virtual influencers have not yet achieved full social legitimacy in Bulgaria. However, they occupy an emerging and contested space shaped by curiosity, caution, and generational differences.

Conclusion

The findings of this study offer one of the first empirically grounded insights into how Bulgarian social media users perceive AI-generated influencers and the extent to which such simulacra can achieve social legitimacy. Although humorous content featuring the Dundarevs’ Family elicited predominantly positive emotional reactions, overall attitudes toward artificially generated personas remain cautious and conditional.

Age is the most significant differentiating factor. Younger respondents (18-25) demonstrate higher media literacy and a greater ability to recognize AI-generated imagery, yet they are also among the most critical, expressing skepticism about the possibility that virtual influencers could be perceived as real. Middle-aged users (36-55) exhibit a more balanced stance, combining curiosity with reservations, while older respondents (56+) tend to display uncertainty or low confidence regarding the authenticity of AI-driven personas.

Exposure plays a decisive role. Individuals who frequently encounter AI-generated content online demonstrate significantly greater openness, stronger emotional tolerance, and a higher willingness to follow an AI influencer. This finding confirms the exposure effect, defined as the gradual normalization of synthetic media through repetition and algorithmic familiarity. In contrast, those who rarely or never interact with such content maintain predominantly negative or apprehensive attitudes.

Across demographic groups, emotional responses to AI-generated content – such as

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interest, irritation, fear, or indifference – strongly predict perceptions of virtual influencers. Positive affect correlates with a higher readiness to accept virtual personas as legitimate communicators, while negative emotions, including fear and irritation, lead to consistent rejection. Neutral respondents demonstrate uncertainty but also represent a potential convertible group whose attitudes could shift under appropriate contextual framing, such as humorous or relatable content.

A notable discrepancy exists between *belief* and *behavior*. Although approximately one third of respondents believe that virtual influencers *could* be perceived as real, only half as many express readiness to follow such a profile. Negative attitudes intensify when the question shifts from theoretical judgment to concrete action, indicating that social acceptance of artificial influencers remains in an early and tentative stage.

Overall, the results indicate that although AI-generated influencers can evoke empathy, laughter, and recognition, their social legitimacy remains limited and is highly dependent on generational differences, emotional disposition, and prior exposure to synthetic media. Virtual influencers are not yet perceived as credible substitutes for human creators, but they are increasingly recognized as culturally relevant digital actors capable of attracting attention, provoking discussion, and challenging established notions of authenticity within the contemporary influencer ecosystem.

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