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Algorithmic Wellness: How AI-Curated Trend Exposure Shapes Young Adults' Purchasing Behavior and Small Brand Strategy

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ABSTRACT

AI is now extremely prominent in wellness content, appearing before people even search for it, replacing keyword-based targeting. Despite this major shift, no one has tested whether algorithmic trend exposure predicts purchasing independent of health consciousness or connected it to how small brands should strategize in the future. The wellness industry is growing rapidly, and there is a growing need for research in this niche. Wellness growth is 7.6% annually and is projected to reach up to 9.8 trillion by 2029. Generation Z spends more than any other demographic. The research focuses especially on young adults. Content analysis uses 41 posts to discover current trends in the AI wellness industry on TikTok and Instagram. The survey tests among 123 individuals aged 18 to 45 to demonstrate the audience's perspectives, while drawing on relevant literature to identify gaps and inform the paper's topics. Four hypotheses displayed trend exposure predicted purchase behavior, and the results were H1: $r = .479$, $p < .0001$. Consumers chose a real image over an AI image on brand trust, displaying H3: $\chi^2 = 160.59$, $p < .0001$. Then, a combined model showcased predictors of purchasing behavior. Visual quality and trend exposure led to the results being H4: $F(9,113) = 12.10$, $p < .0001$, $R^2 = .491$. This paper argues that trend exposure is a separate pathway from individuals' health consciousness, extending an existing WTP model. The health-conscious literature and strategies for how small brands should operate in the fast-growing AI world contribute to this. These findings would help small businesses decide whether to adopt AI marketing strategies while staying true to their human approaches. There is a growing global debate on AI and consumer trust research. This study is among the first to connect these three areas within the search conducted for this literature review.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence Marketing, Social Media Trend Exposure, Wellness Consumer Behavior, Willingness to Pay/ Health Consciousness, Small Business Marketing Strategy*

INTRODUCTION

There's been a large shift in marketing strategies over the last 5 years, driven by advancements in Artificial Intelligence, with algorithms curating content to reach consumers before they even search for anything (Rita et al., 2025). With this new algorithm, old keyword-based targeting has been replaced by dynamic personalization (Amin, 2025). The wellness niche has changed due to this new system. When a

product becomes "viral," it's not from word of mouth spreading; it's from algorithmic amplification. The global wellness economy is projected to expand by 7.6% annually, reaching nearly $9.8 trillion by 2029 (Global Wellness Institute, 2024). This growth isn't going away; it's real stakes for business and real money. Younger generations are more exposed to wellness content on social media and are more likely to be influenced into purchasing. Gen Z and millennials make up 36% of U.S. adults but drive over 41% of annual wellness spending (Pione et al., 2025). Despite this growth, it remains unexplained why it's happening. Is it because young consumers are more health-conscious or because AI algorithms are pushing content at them?

The research question in this study is: How does exposure to AI-driven social media trends shape young adults' purchasing behavior, and how should small wellness brands strategize? Health consciousness is the degree to which a person focuses on their health, not because of outside influence. (Ali & Ali, 2020) Yet, the AI driven trend is the opposite: people buy a product due to algorithmic influence, regardless of their health concerns. This study treats these as two paths, rather than assuming trend exposure is another form of health consciousness. For small, non-influencer businesses, knowing how to strategize their marketing effectively is important, since they can't outspend big organizations. If people only research whether trend exposure predicts behavior independently of health consciousness or only how small businesses should strategize, without establishing a behavior-focused approach, there would be no evidence. The research is important for the future of AI driven marketing, especially for businesses seeking to succeed. Understanding how young adults are influenced to purchase products is necessary for all businesses in the U.S. wellness industry.

The study focuses on literature review, content analysis, and surveys. Therefore, the literature review situates the study theoretically by using previous research to validate the patterns, and the content analysis of TikTok and Instagram focuses on posts promoted by AI wellness. Then, the survey was conducted to examine young adults' buying behavior and the audience's perspective. I'm focusing on young adults aged 18 to 45 who currently reside in the United States and use social media. Through the content analysis, the study focuses on 30 to 50 of the most viewed posts on TikTok and Instagram over the last 3 to 6 months. A mixed-methods design was used because the research question requires both descriptive data on social media content patterns and individual-level measures of purchasing attitudes. Content analysis alone cannot capture individual responses, and survey data alone cannot describe what content is actually circulating. These three methods are necessary because each one fills a gap in knowledge that the others can't.

The literature search identified several important insights and gaps. First, health consciousness emerged as an important factor in consumer spending in the wellness industry (Ali & Ali, 2020). Nevertheless, this source applied it broadly to WTP and never tested it as an explanation for algorithmic exposure. AI disclosure lowers trust, but the effect isn't universal (Baryshkov et al., 2026). They specifically mentioned a gap in most existing research, which studied attitudes rather than actual behavior. They also did not study wellness specific, brand size specific, or behaviourally measured aspects. Wilska et al. (2023) found

that social media shapes young adults' consumption identity but describes it as a passive feed rather than algorithmically pushed content, and did not measure actual spending amounts. Following this, labeling a post as AI-generated reduces overall trust and purchase intention, with a stronger negative effect for high-risk products (Cicek et al., 2025). AI marketing technologies positively affect purchasing decisions (Mousa et al., 2026). Both sources showed an AI effect on purchasing decisions, but never on the wellness small brand model. None of the five models focuses on two different pathways and connects their findings to how small brands should respond.

Small wellness brands without influencer brands have to make big decisions on AI marketing in this growing world. Without good data, they lack the knowledge to decide whether to stay authentic in their marketing without AI strategies or follow the large brands using AI methods. They need to know whether disclosure is necessary or whether the audience will lose trust in the company (Cicek et al., 2025; Baryshkov et al., 2026). With limited knowledge, small brands investing in AI generated content could see their relationship with their audience made or broken. However, using AI driven strategies could help their content get shown, but there is a risk that could hurt them instead (Mousa et al., 2026). When contending with big business in the wellness market, small businesses face the challenge of authenticity vs. AI. In algorithm driven social media environments, competition is intense, making financial survival difficult. The economic opportunities in the market require strategic thinking and effective approaches.

Ali & Ali (2020) established health consciousness as the dominant psychological driver of WTP for wellness products. Currently, that is their model, but the study proposes that it is incomplete. The model does not account for AI driven marketing or include algorithmic exposure as a distinct variable. This mechanism of exposure to AI created algorithms wasn't as prominent when these consumer psychology models were developed. If the study's findings show that trend exposure predicts spending and is independent of health consciousness, then adding a second pathway to the model would be intellectually justified. Adding this would provide more depth than treating health consciousness as the sole explanation. This relates to the call for more behavioral research on AI's role in consumer trust (Baryshkov et al., 2026). The research would specifically answer the question centered on the wellness industry.

METHODS

The research is on content analysis, literature review, and survey evaluation. The content analysis of TikTok and Instagram focuses on curated posts that demonstrate AI wellness marketing strategies and capture trend patterns. The survey examines young adults' buying behavior in light of these AI trends. The mixed methods approach is needed because we want to capture young adults' perspectives through the survey, validate the reasons through a literature review of previous research, and map the trends the audience is viewing through a content analysis. This research is explanatory with a descriptive element in content analysis.

The survey also has an exploratory angle, discovering whether exposure predicts behavior. The target population consists of algorithmically prompted posts, AI generated visuals, or AI generated content tied to trending wellness products posted in the last 3 to 6 months. The target population for the survey is adults aged 18 to 45 in the United States who are interested in wellness products and use social media.

For the content analysis sample, the paper focuses on 30 to 50 of the most viewed or interacted with AI generated wellness posts on TikTok and Instagram in the last 3 to 6 months. The Purchase Behaviour Score is based on self-reported past purchases and stated purchase likelihood; it reflects reported behavior and intention rather than verified transaction data. For the survey sample, the research includes 100 responses from 18 to 45 year olds living in the United States. This research uses purposive sampling with snowball sampling to collect data. The exclusion criteria require participants to be aged 18 to 45, reside in the United States, and use social media consistently. The posts for the content analysis must be from TikTok and Instagram, from the last 3 to 6 months, and must be AI generated posts in the wellness industry.

Through content analysis, the study organizes the data into five categories: AI involvement type, AI disclosure, wellness category, brand size, and engagement level. The step by step process to collect the data would be (1) Use a hashtag search, #AIwellness, (2) Organize posts into 5 categories, (3) Use the self created survey and distribute the survey via the connections, (4) Collect responses and close the survey. Through data analysis of the content research, the study specifically examines engagement, AI disclosure, the wellness category this falls under, and the type of AI used (e.g., voiceover). For the quantitative survey data, the paper presents descriptive statistics, including percentages and frequencies. Also, the author uses correlation in Excel to test whether two variables move together (e.g., whether the frequency of trend exposure correlates with the amount spent on wellness products).

Algorithmic exposure was operationalized through two self-reported items measuring unprompted, repeated appearance of wellness content in a respondent's feed (Items 1–2). This approach captures passive, repeated exposure consistent with algorithmic curation, but it cannot distinguish content delivered through platform algorithms from content encountered via followed accounts, advertisements, or interpersonal sharing. Establishing a direct algorithmic mechanism would require platform-level data or an experimental design (Li, Grahl, & Hinz, 2022). This limitation is addressed further below.

For the primary data, the paper uses Google Forms to create a credible survey, and the secondary data falls into the category of literature data, especially focusing on (Baryshkov et al., Wilska et al., the WTP/health-consciousness literature, etc.) The survey instruments include both multiple choice and open ended questions.

The data: literature review, surveys, and content analysis. Through content analysis, the study identifies patterns in AI generated content that directly inform the survey questions used to measure whether exposure to these patterns predicts purchasing behavior. The literature review provides a structure for the

theoretical framework. As previously stated, the triangulation is literature analysis, content analysis, and a survey. To ensure consistency in research, a second coder coded a portion of the posts using the same codebook, without seeing the codes first.

Informed consent is obtained at the start of the survey, and responses are anonymous; no personal information is requested. For public content, we use publicly available posts and do not collect personal data from creators. The paper studies people aged 18 and over, so this does not require ethical approval. The research uses these three methods: content analysis, literature review, and survey to ultimately collect data relevant to the research on AI wellness and consumer behavior. These three methods answer the research question more effectively than other methods because the paper needs to find what is being pushed on social media, as well as the consumer's reaction, and no single method answers both.

Literature Review

The literature review synthesizes research on AI driven marketing strategies in the wellness industry, with an emphasis on consumer behavior. Even more specifically, this prioritizes the WTP model and small business marketing strategy. Sources range from 2020 onward, reflecting the surge in AI marketing research. Google Scholar was the only tool used throughout the project, and it was used to find all studies for the literature review. This search did not systematically include adjacent literatures such as recommender systems research and algorithmic willingness-to-pay studies. Two additional sources were reviewed to partially address this gap: Li, Grahl, and Hinz (2022), who found that recommender systems increase purchases through consumers' consideration sets in a field experiment, and Adomavicius et al. (2018), who found that algorithmic recommendations can shift consumers' willingness to pay. The search terms were AI marketing, consumer behavior, and wellness trends. The specific keywords were AI generated social media content, young adults' willingness to buy, behavior, willingness to pay, small brands, and AI disclosure. Studies were prioritized to (i) examine AI driven algorithmic marketing techniques, (ii) address consumer trust and purchase intentions, or (iii) review brand size and strategy in a wellness, social media environment.

The literature reveals prominent themes throughout the social media wellness industries, including AI and consumer trust (Baryshkov, Cicek, Mousa; 2025, 2026); health consciousness as a WTP driver (Ali and Ali, 2020); social media's role in consumption (Wilska, Lata & Rana, Amin; 2023, 2025); and AI marketing (Mukhtar, Himani, Rita et al., 2026). The following literature review examines these themes in greater depth, using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. There is also a range of countries represented globally, including the UAE, Portugal, India, and Finland.

Table 1: Selected Literature Review

Study	Methods	Country / Global	Factors	Findings
Baryshkov, Kuzina, Smuk, Tkachuk (2026)	Mixed	Global	● AI disclosure ● Moral disgust ● Cultural context ● Content type	● AI lowers trust ● AI disclosure helps persuade knowledge ● Effects aren't universal ● Most studies measure attitudes rather than actual behavior
Lata, Rana, (2025)	Qualitative	N/A	● Personalization ● Customization ● Social influence ● Promotion of sustainable practices ● Community engagement	● AI driven technologies influence young consumers' purchasing decisions ● (AI) It shapes the lifestyles of young consumers and influences their behaviours. ● AI's ability to personalise experiences is changing how young consumers interact with products.
Amin (2025)	Quantitative	UAE	● AI driven recommendations ● Visibility of AI driven labels ● Impulsive buying behavior ● Generational differences ● Consumer knowledge of AI	● Social media and online communities are the most prominent influencers that shape consumer behaviour. ● How the visibility of AI driven labels influences impulsive buying behaviour ● It examines the moderating effects of generational differences.
Mukhtar, Burhan Ud Din Ali Hamid (2026)	Quantitative	N/A	● Social media influence (SMI) ● Value co-creation ● AI chatbot adoption ● Customer	● SMI positively affects the customer adoption rate ● AI chatbot adoption did not significantly moderate the relationship between SMI and value co-creation

			adoption	• Value co-creation significantly mediates the relationship between SMI and customer adoption.
Rita, Omran, Ramos, Costa (2025)	Both	Portugal	• Learning models • Expert systems • Natural language processing • Social media • Consumer centricity	• There are dominant trends in the AI marketing literature from 1980 to 2022. • Health and technology in youth are underexplored. •
Himani, Praveen Kumar Pandey (2026)	Both	N/A	• Digital marketing strategies • AI driven technologies • Social media influencers • Sustainable consumer engagement: long term behavioral, emotional, and cognitive commitment to responsible brands	• All three elements have positive effects on engagement • AI personalization paired with influencer content boosted engagement by 35–45% • It increased sustainable purchase intentions • Builds on the Technology Acceptance Model and Service Dominant Logic frameworks
Wilska, Holkkola, Tuominen (2023)	Qualitative	Finland	• Consumption Style • Social media activity • Type of social identity • Age and gender	• Three consumption styles emerged • Luxury brand consumers: • Trendy second hand consumers: 16 to 17-year-olds • Sustainable consumers: mostly older girls (18–19)

				• Age and gender shaped which style teens adopted more than social class did • Many participants said they used to be more brand focused
Cicek et al. (2025)	Quantitative	N/A	• AI disclosure • Emotion trust • Consumer trust • Perceived Risk	• Including AI disclosure decreases the buyer's intention to purchase • Emotional trust from consumers decreases, leading them to distrust the brand. • High risk products suffer the most. • Low risk products suffer less than high risk products.
Mousa et al. (2026)	Quantitative	N/A	• AI marketing • Customer experience (virtually) • Purchasing choices • Sustainability	• AI marketing technologies increase purchasing • Virtual customer experience moderates their choices • 71.2% of the variance in purchasing choices • AI marketing helps companies have more sales.
Ali & Ali (2020)	Quantitative	India	• Health consciousness • Product quality • Willingness to pay • Price of product	• 44% of consumers are willing to pay more for a "premium route” • Wellness products are things people are willing to pay a large amount of money for • Health consciousness is the strongest factor in people’s willingness to pay. • The WTP model is stronger than quality or price

Summary of literature review

AI Disclosure and Consumer Trust

Across the literature review, three sources found that AI involvement in the marketing environment reduces consumer trust. It was found that AI disclosure reduces trust and purchase intention, whereas AI marketing tech increases purchase intention. (Baryshkov et al. 2026, Cicek et al. 2025, Mousa et al. 2026). In contrast, other sources found that AI disclosure specifically hurt consumers' intentions to spend and weakened trust (Cicek 2025; Baryshkov 2026). AI marketing technology increases consumer purchases (Mousa 2026). The key difference most likely comes down to whether there is disclosure, which can make consumers feel as if they are being lied to or tricked.

Health Consciousness vs. Algorithmic Exposure as Purchase Drivers

The study builds on research that found that health consciousness is the dominant factor in the WTP model (Ali & Ali, 2020). They state it's stronger than other factors, such as the quality or price. Their model uses a health motivated and conscious buyer, whereas others state that purchase intentions can also be driven by algorithmic exposure without health consciousness (Wilska et al, 2023; Lata & Rana, 2025; Amin, 2025). These sources display how social media affects young consumers and shapes their identity. This is through consumption, AI personalization driving sustainable purchases, and AI driving impulsive purchases (Wilska et al, 2023; Lata & Rana, 2025; Amin, 2025). Social media is passive content that teens discover. (Wilska et al, 2023) There are tests that discover the actual AI driven algorithm as the mechanism. This study is very similar to mine in terms of the algorithmic mechanism, but Wilska's is closer in terms of population and age (Amin, 2025).

AI Marketing Effectiveness and Growing Research Attention

AI driven marketing tools improve engagement and, when combined with influencer content, boost involvement by 35 to 45%. AI research is a growing field, and studies have found that social media positively affects adoption and that AI increases consumer purchases (Mukhtar et al. 2026; Himani et al. 2026; Rita et al. 2025). Rita et al. differ from the other two in that they state that the health impact on youth is an underexplored topic and use 2,255 marketing articles to identify this gap.

Previous research focuses on youth social media studies, other AI trust studies, and also integrates health consciousness, algorithmic exposure, small businesses, and trust findings. Given the rapid growth of the five billion dollar wellness industry, it is important to understand how small businesses should market themselves. This industry, combined with the 18-24 age range, whose spending is disproportionately high relative to their population (they make up 36% of the U.S. population but account for 41% of spending in the wellness industry), needs the data to strategize effectively.

Based on the literature search conducted for this study, no identified source has tested trend exposure against health consciousness using an AI algorithmic background or explained how small brands could

succeed with this information. Future research could extend beyond the wellness industry or test whether disclosure framing specifically changes small brands' consumer trust.

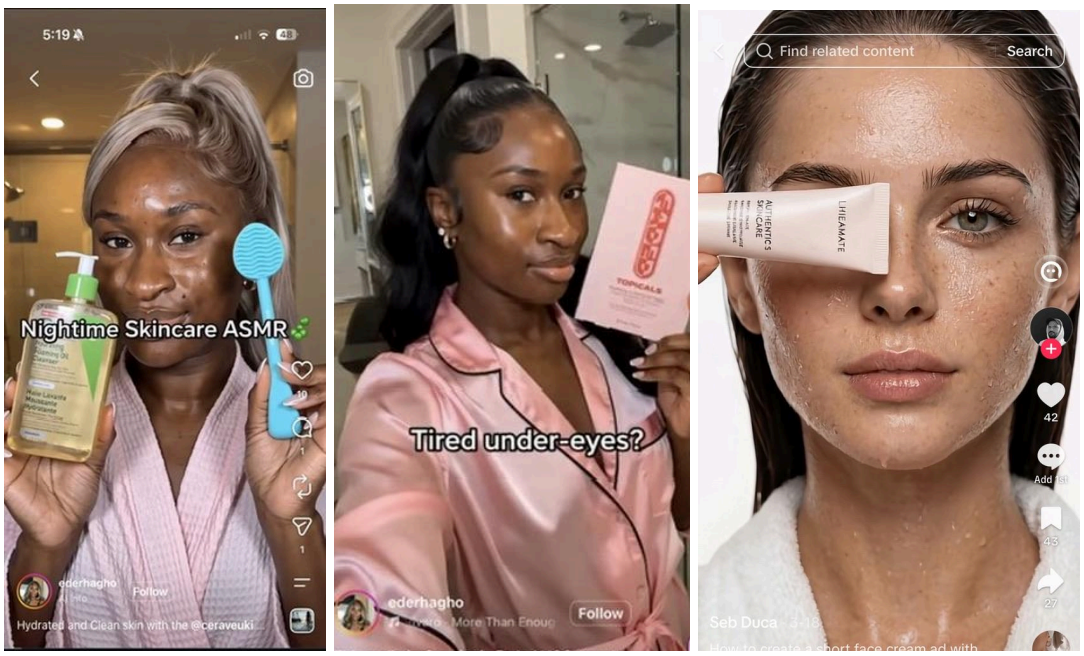
Content Analysis

AI driven wellness marketing is growing rapidly, and specific analysis helps clarify what actual AI generated wellness content looks like. Content analysis is evidence that AI avatar care and makeup posts are real, common patterns. AI disclosure labels are rarely in the posts. The survey is solely to understand how people feel about or react to AI trends, while the content analysis shows what is actually being posted. The content types identified through the analysis were TikTok and Instagram posts promoting skincare, makeup, and other wellness products, featuring visible AI generated elements such as avatars, product visuals, and videos. The data collection was through hashtag searches such as #AIwellness, #AIskincare, #AImakeup, etc. Also, it was categorized as online content that had to have been posted within the last 3 to 6 months, with a total of 41 posts collected in the content analysis. It was organized by content type, and within each theme, it was categorized into Instagram and TikTok posts. The research consisted of manual coding, following five codebook categories: AI involvement type, disclosure, wellness category, brand size, and engagement.

The AI Influencer

In the last 3-6 months, there has been an increase in the number of posts using an AI influencer to promote a product. An “AI Influencer” is defined as an AI generated human promoting a skincare product, and the study identified it through visual repetition. 41 posts, of which 17 were AI influencers, making them the most prominent. Disclosure in this theme was fairly rare: 6 of 17 posts disclosed their use of AI (35.29%). There were mostly large and recognizable brands, such as Topical, CeraVe, Rhode, and Glow Recipe, making up 76.47% of the study. Figure 1 shows the common themes, including clear, bright, quality, and close-up video of the “AI Influencer”. The study discovered 100% were young adult women, and 58.82% were African American, Asian, or Indian, with the rest being White.

Figure 1: AI Influencer



Notes: "Example AI Influencer content from the dataset, featuring an AI-generated human promoting a skincare product." **Source:** ederhagho (instagram)-cerave; ederhagho (instagram); seb.duca.ai (tiktok)

Faceless Product Showcase

There has to be no human or AI generated human in their product promotion. Instead, there are AI generated visual effects or backgrounds around the product, making it more aesthetic. The study grouped the themes by visual repetition, organizing the content into the Faceless Product Showcase. Of the 41 posts analyzed, 10 were from the Faceless Product Showcase. In the content analysis, 24.39% of this theme was included, and disclosure did not appear in any of the posts. 8 out of the 10 posts were from large, well-known brands, making up 80% of this theme, such as Rhode, Glossier, and Belief. The colors ended up being bright, flashy, and designed to catch consumers' attention. They often had backgrounds like ice cream or water, in unique colors such as pink, rainbow, or bright white. They always consisted of close-up shots of these products, ensuring the focus was on the product rather than the background. There were recurring cloud backgrounds, and the Rhode product even featured bananas around it, symbolizing the lip tint's flavor. One Glossier post promoting a blush features a background with white clouds and the blush floating in it, with no AI disclosure.

Again, previous findings showed that AI disclosure lowers trust and triggers persuasion knowledge, but also flagged that the effects aren't universal (Baryshkov et al., 2026). AI disclosure reduces purchase

intention by weakening emotional trust, and the effect is stronger for higher risk products, as stated previously. In the Faceless Product Showcase, disclosure was absent entirely. None of the 10 posts disclosed the use of AI, suggesting that brands using faceless, only product AI content don't think disclosure is necessary. If faceless AI content has lower disclosure norms and there is no clear literature yet testing consumer reactions to it, this may be lower risk (Ugurlayan 2026). This could be a more accessible entry point for small brands considering AI marketing strategies. This is different from the higher stakes "AI Influencer" approach, where an AI generated human is on the line.

Figure 2: Faceless Product Showcase

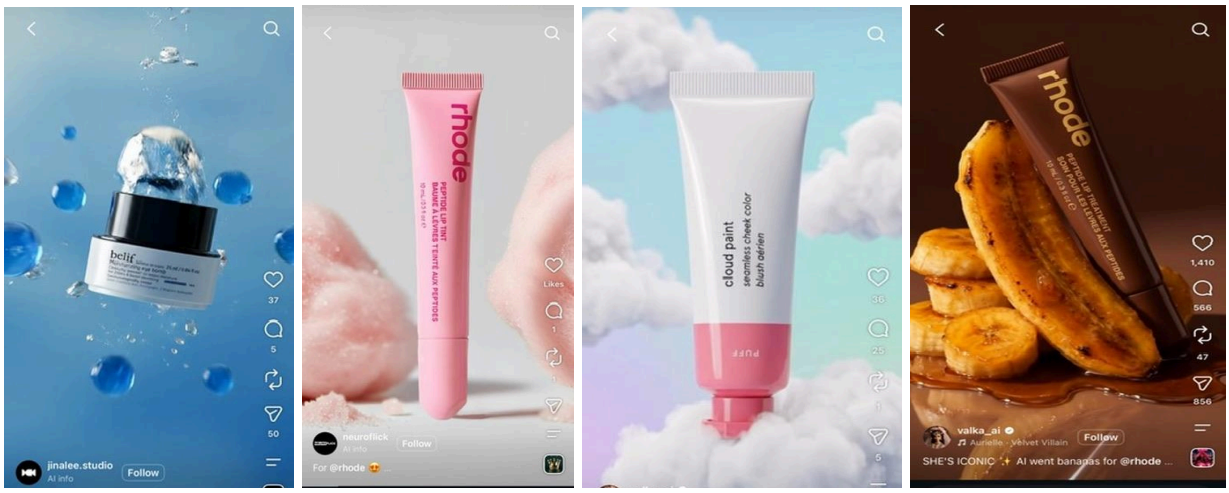


Figure 2 shows an example of this theme, including the bright colors and close-up product framing. Notes: "Example Faceless Product Showcase content from the dataset, featuring AI-generated visual effects and a background with no human figure present." **Source:** jinalee.studio (instagram); neuroflick (instagram)-rhode; valko_ai (instagram); valko_ai (instagram)

Animated AI

The theme of Animated AI includes cartoon style AI promotion when wellness products are being shown. Visual repetition was included to organize the cartoon style posts. 5 out of the 41 posts fell into this niche, representing 12.20% of the content analysis. The disclosures in these posts were without disclosures as well, with 0% of these posts indicating they used AI. 4 out of 5 of these posts were from large, recognizable brands, making 80% large brands. These brands included: Ordinary, CeraVe, Vaseline, and Revive. The colors in these posts included warm, normal tones with bright lighting. There are close up video shots of these, with locations ranging from bathrooms to on top of someone's ski to bedrooms. For example, the post featuring the Revive eye cream shows a cartoon style girl who seems sad about her dark under eye circles, but after using the eye cream, she looks younger and refreshed. Posts in this theme were classified as AI-related based on visual style and hashtag association (e.g., #AIwellness). Whether the animation itself was AI-generated, rather than manually illustrated or built from a template, could not be

verified without access to each creator's production process. The findings from the 5 Illustrated AI posts, with 0% disclosed AI use, are similar to those from the Faceless Product Showcase.

Figure 3: Animated AI Marketing

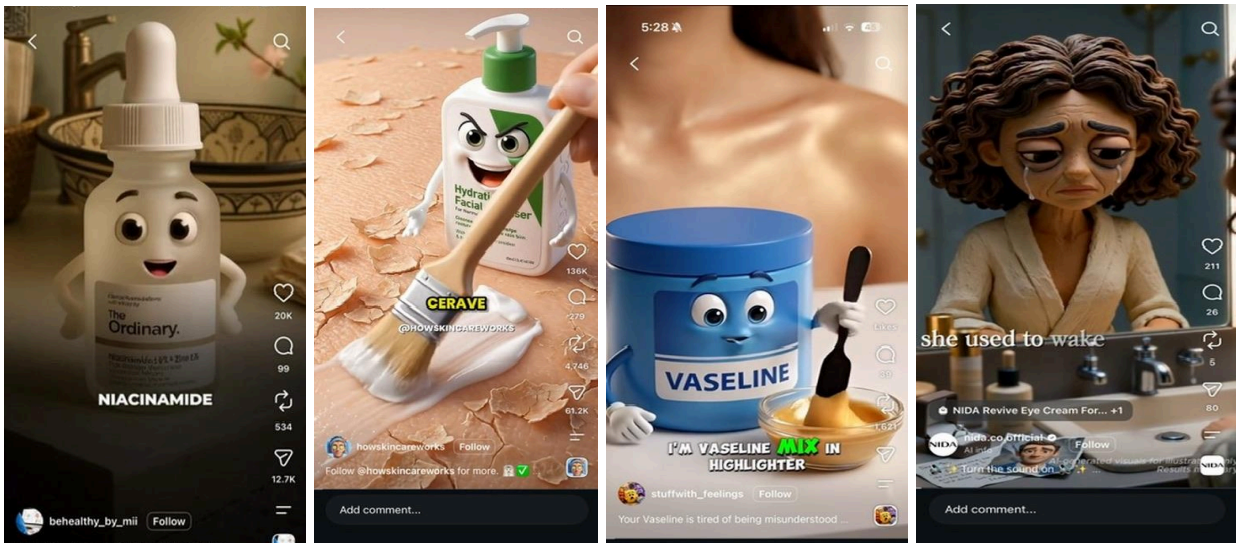


Figure 3 shows an example of this cartoon-style approach, including the Revive eye cream post.
Notes: "Example Animated AI content from the dataset, featuring cartoon-style illustrations promoting wellness and skincare products." **Source:** behealthy_by_mii-(Instagram); howskincareworks-(instagram); stuffwith_feelings-(Instagram); nida.co.official-(instagram)

Cartoon style content is an even stronger case than Faceless Product Showcase for why disclosure is unnecessary to brands, because people could still mistake the Faceless Product Showcase for a real photograph. Because a cartoon character is not necessarily real, no one could confuse a cartoon girl with a real person. Faceless Product Showcase and Illustrated AI both have 0% disclosure, but also 80% large brand dominance; this suggests that disclosure is more concentrated in specific styles that resemble reality, like the "AI Influencer". More obviously stylized or without human AI content is universally undisclosed. Illustrated cartoon style AI content may be even lower risk for small brands than a Faceless Product Showcase, since it lacks the realism that could make consumers feel "tricked".

AI Beyond Beauty

The theme of AI Beyond Beauty is when wellness or fitness personas outside skincare and makeup use an AI generated human to promote a product. Visual repetition was used to group these posts. 14.63% of the whole content analysis contained AI Beyond Beauty. 3 of the 6 posts disclosed their use of AI, bringing the total to 50%. Also, 50% of these posts were large brands, including Peak Fuel, Apple cider vinegar, and EOS. These posts also had bright, clear lighting and close up videos of the AI generated content.

100% of the posts featured young AI generated women, 50% of whom were Asian or Black. The location was equipped with bathrooms, bedrooms, kitchens, gyms, and even a cabana. The background aligned with the product they were promoting. For example, Peak Fuel was being promoted by the AI generated women in a gym, associating it with them. That post did not include a disclosure when promoting the pre workout. Previous findings suggest AI disclosure lowers trust and weakens purchase intention (Baryshkov et al., 2026; Cicek et al., 2025), unlike Faceless Product Showcase and Illustrated AI, where disclosure was at 0%. Previous studies were designed to measure this.

Figure 4: AI Beyond Beauty

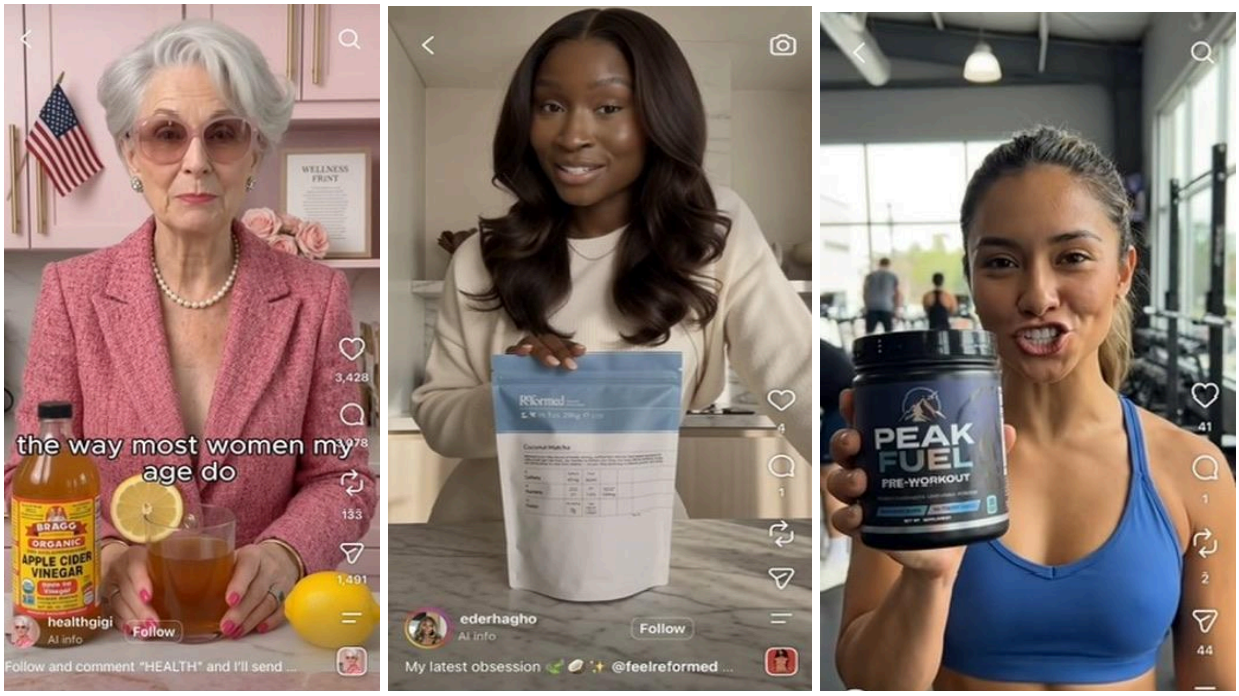


Figure 4 shows an example of this theme, including the gym setting used to promote Peak Fuel.
Notes: "Example AI Beyond Beauty content from the dataset, featuring AI-generated personas promoting wellness or fitness products outside the skincare and makeup categories." **Source:** healthgigi-(Instagram); ederhago-(instagram); realveo.ai-(instagram)

There were realistic AI generated humans, similar to the AI Influencer, rather than cartoons or faceless themes. Among the larger brands, two thirds disclosed their use of AI. The diversity pattern has not been addressed in existing AI marketing literature, representing a small observation from this dataset.

AI Selling AI

The theme of AI Selling includes content that promotes AI powered tools. Such as AI powered shopping or skincare analysis tools. Visual repetition was used to collect the posts. This theme accounted for 7.32% of the study. The theme of AI Selling made no disclosure of AI use, and all content featured small brands.

They promoted a FloAI app to help with your skincare routine, as well as other apps to help build wellness schedules. In the literature review, no prior studies cover AI tools that market themselves as AI. Other research papers have only studied AI promoting unrelated products. When the product itself is AI, they might not even need to provide a disclosure because AI is the entire point of the app. Other findings assume that AI is being used to market something else and that it can be hidden (Baryshkov et al., 2026; Cicek et al., 2025). AI is the value in the product, so they can't hide or fail to disclose anything. The literature review does not address this, but the study includes the specific marketing category. So, small brands may currently be ahead of large brands in specific AI tool marketing.

Figure 5: AI Selling AI

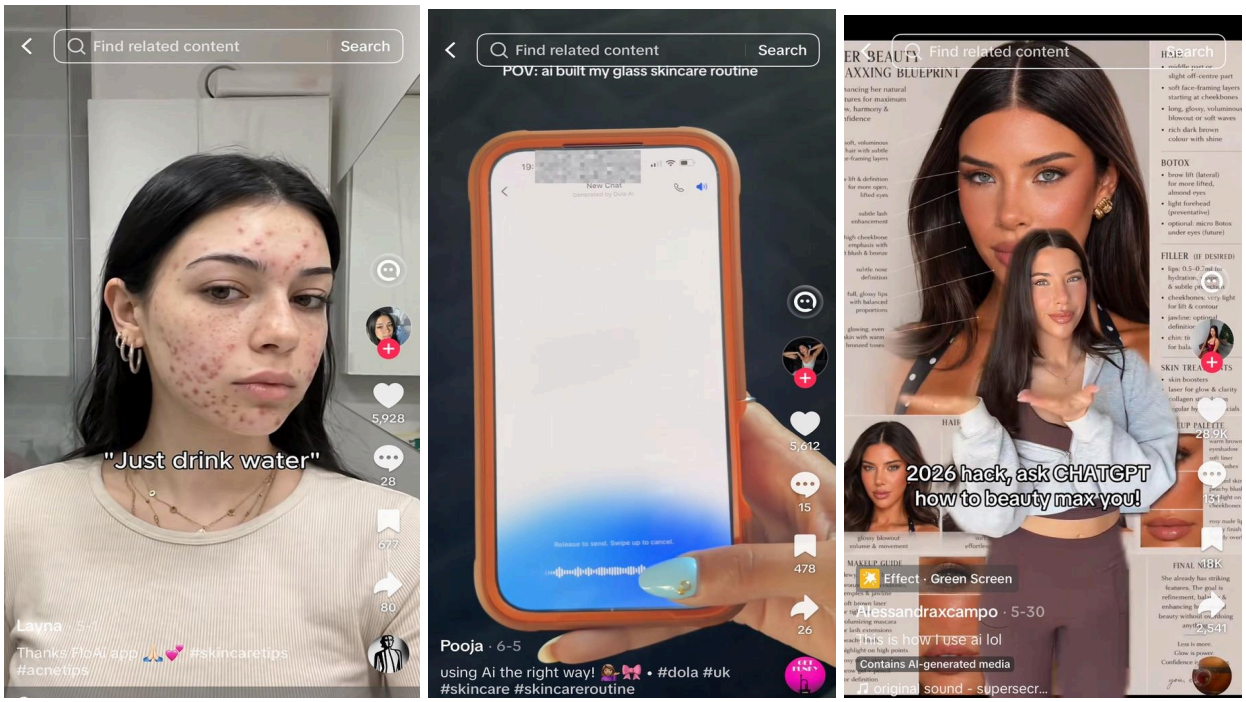


Figure 5 shows an example of this theme, including the FloAI app promotion described above.
Notes: "Example AI Selling AI content from the dataset, featuring posts promoting AI-powered shopping or skincare-analysis tools." **Source:** laynamrs-(TikTok); floai.app-(TikTok); pooja(Tiktok); Alessandraxcampo (Tiktok)

Survey

The target audience is young adults aged 18-45 who currently live in the United States and use Social Media. The survey was distributed through Survey Circle, Survey Swap, and snowball sampling. The survey was opened on August 10, 2026, and closed on August 21. The target for the survey was 100 responses, and ultimately 123 were received.

The survey measured two specific things: exposure to AI driven wellness trend content and its

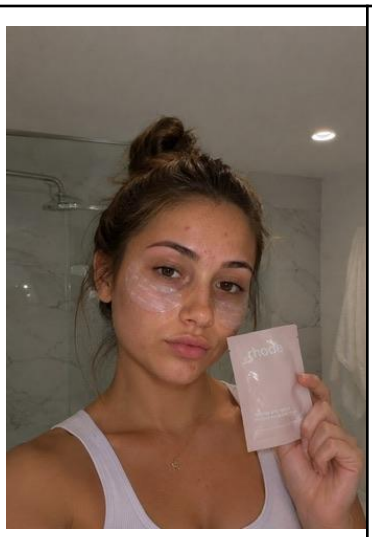
relationship to purchasing behavior, and trust and purchase intention toward small, without influencers, including an AI vs. Real image comparison. To mitigate bias, the survey questions were carefully shaped, incorporating multiple choice, one open ended question, and an image based trust experiment, on a Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree scale without leading question wording.

This study collected survey data from people aged 18-45 living in the United States and required approval from a Student Research Committee (SRC) to meet ethical research requirements prior to data collection. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary. Before beginning the survey, participants were provided with information about the study's purpose and how their responses would be used. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they proceeded with the survey via a three question block. They could decline at any time, and no personal information was collected from the participants, making the survey anonymous. This study used Google Forms, accessible only to the author.

Survey Questionnaire

Hi! My name is Ford, an 11th grader at Valor Christian High School. Through this research, I am exploring how AI driven social media trends influence young adults' purchasing behaviour for wellness products and what this means for small wellness brands' strategies. I request that you fill out this survey for academic purposes. It takes about 5 minutes. All responses are anonymous and confidential, used for research purposes only. Thank you!			
Dimension / Construct	**Question**	**Options**	**Frequency**
I confirm that I reside in the United States and am 18 years of age or older.		1. Yes 2. No	1.100%
I understand that my participation is anonymous, no personal identifiers are being collected, and results will be used for academic research only.		3. Yes 4. No	3. 100%
I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I am free to withdraw at any time, and that I may skip any question I don't want to answer.		5. Yes 6. No	5. 100%
Passive Algorithmic Exposure	1. My social media feed regularly shows me wellness or self care content without me having to search for it.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 7.3% 2. 7.3% 3. 21.1% 4. 44.7% 5. 19.5%

Perceived Trend Ubiquity	2. I've noticed the same wellness product or routine appearing across multiple accounts I follow around the same time.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 8.9% 2. 8.9% 3. 18.7% 4. 48.8% 5. 14.6%
Repeated Exposure Purchase Behavior Purchase Behavior/Intention Index (DV1)	3. I have purchased a wellness product after seeing it repeatedly on social media.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 18.7% 2. 21.1% 3. 13.0% 4. 35.8% 5. 11.4%
Repeated Exposure Purchase Intention - Purchase Behavior/Intention Index (DV1)	4. Seeing a wellness product multiple times online makes me more likely to consider buying it, even if I hadn't planned to.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 12.2% 2. 13.8% 3. 15.4% 4. 44.7% 5. 13.8%
Visual Quality Sensitivity	5. The visual quality of a wellness product's promotional image affects how appealing the product seems to me.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 5.7% 2. 8.9% 3. 12.2% 4. 51.2% 5. 22.0%
AI Image Appeal to Appeal Gap (Authenticity Appeal Premium)	6. The product in Image 1 is visually appealing.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 13.8% 2. 26.8% 3. 35.0% 4. 19.5% 5. 4.9%

			
AI Detection Accuracy (Image 1)- AI Literacy Score (0-2)	7. To you, Image 1 appears to be created by:	1. AI generated 2. Human/Real photograph 3. Not sure	1. 39.0% 2. 47.2% 3. 13.8%
	It is AI generated!		
Willingness-Change Magnitude (AI)	8. After learning that Image 1 was AI generated, your willingness to purchase the product changed.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 9.8% 2. 13.8% 3. 22.0% 4. 27.6% 5. 26.8%
Directional Valence of Change (AI)	9. If your willingness changed, was it positive (more inclined to buy) or negative (Less inclined to buy)?	1. Highly Negative 2. Negative 3. No Change 4. Positive 5. Highly Positive	1. 31.8% 2. 26.1% 3. 33.0% 4. 2.3% 5. 1.1%

Real Image Appeal- Appeal Gap (Authenticity Appeal Premium)	10. The product in Image 2 is visually appealing. 	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 2.4% 2. 9.8% 3. 14.6% 4. 43.9% 5. 29.3%
Authenticity Detection Accuracy- AI Literacy Score (0-2)	11. To you, Image 2 appears to be created by:	1. AI generated 2. Human/Real photograph 3. Not sure	1. 13.8% 2. 82.1% 3. 4.1%
	It is a REAL photo!!		
Willingness-Change Magnitude (Real)	12. After learning that Image 1 was AI generated, your willingness to purchase the product changed.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 4.1% 2. 15.4% 3. 35.0% 4. 29.3% 5. 16.3%
Comparative Trust Preference	13. Overall, which image made you trust the brand more?	1. Image 1 (AI) 2. Image 2 (Real) 3. No difference	1. 2.4% 2. 87.0% 3. 10.6%
Small Brand Relative Trust- Small Brand & Disclosure Trust (predictor)	14. I trust wellness recommendations from small or independent brands more than from large, well known ones.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 3.3% 2. 18.7% 3. 42.3% 4. 23.6% 5. 12.2%

Disclosure Contingent Trust- Small Brand & Disclosure Trust (predictor)	15. If a small wellness brand clearly disclosed that it used AI generated content, I would still trust the brand.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 17.9% 2. 34.1% 3. 25.2% 4. 20.3% 5. 2.4%
Authenticity Price Premium (DV2)	16. I would be willing to pay more for a wellness product from a small brand if it felt authentic, rather than AI polished.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree	1. 1.6% 2. 3.3% 3. 17.9% 4. 55.3% 5. 22.0%
Discover the pathway and purchase trigger	17. Describe a time you discovered a wellness product through social media. What made you consider trying it?	Open ended	69 different responses
Demographic Controls	Gender	1. Male 2. Female 3. Other 4. Prefer not to say	1. 29.3% 2. 69.1% 3. 0% 4. 1.6%
Demographic Controls	Age	1. **Millennials (Gen Y)**: Born 1981–1996 (Ages 30–45 2. **Generation Z**: Born 1997–2012 (Ages 14–29) 3. Prefer not to say	1. 22.8% 2. 77.2%, 3. 0%
Demographic Controls	Highest Education	1. 12th Pass 2. Undergraduate 3. Post-Graduate 4. Professional Degree	1. 39.8% 2. 35.8% 3. 17.9% 4. 6.5%

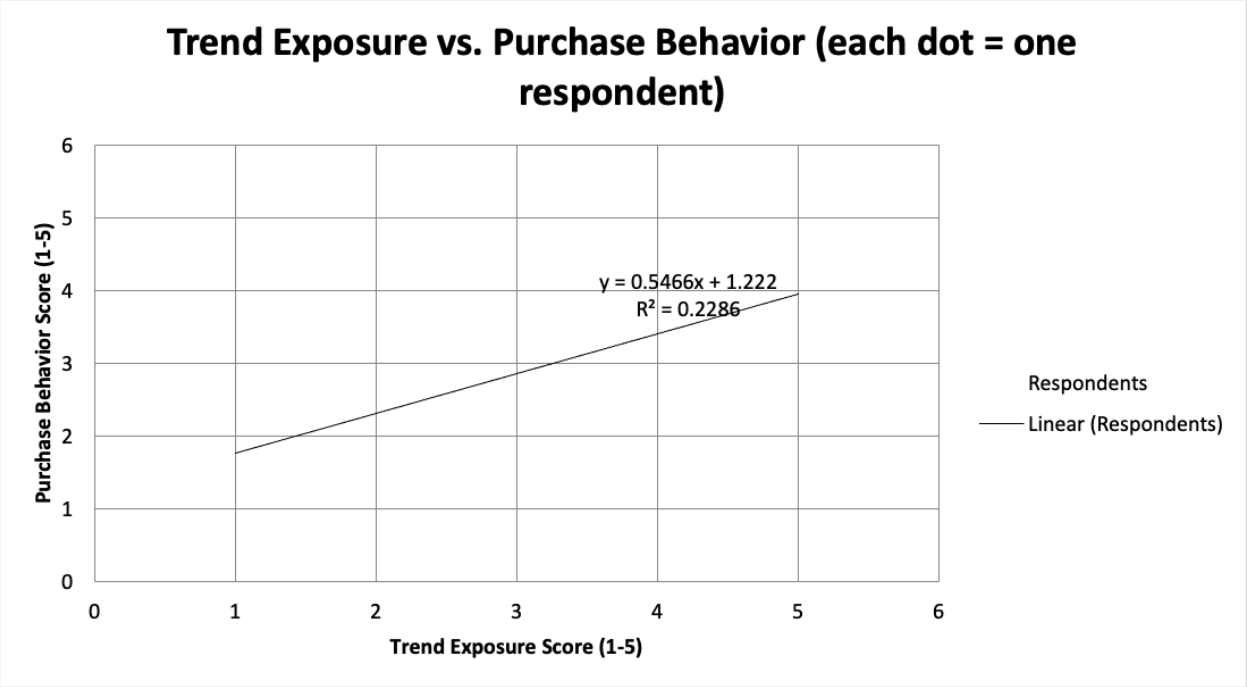
Insights from the Survey

The survey's purpose is to measure exposure to AI driven trends and the authenticity of AI vs. real content. The study measures its impact on wellness purchasing behavior and small brand trust. The survey gathered 123 respondents: 69.1% female and 29.3% male. Further, 77.2% were Gen Z and 22.8% were Millennials. In terms of education, the majority were 12th pass (39.8%) and undergraduates (35.8%).

Trend Exposure and Purchase Behavior

Figure 6 is a scatter plot with a linear trendline, in which each dot represents a respondent's exposure score plotted against their purchase behavior score. There was a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.479$, $p < .0001$), indicating that the more someone reports exposure to wellness trends on social media, the more likely they are to buy wellness products. Exposure and behavior consistently move together, and neither is just a few isolated respondents. This suggests that reported exposure to wellness trends is associated with self-reported purchasing, beyond passive scrolling alone. In contrast to my literature review, none of the sources reviewed by the study tested this exposure behavior. Sources never had it linked directly to wellness products. The study finds that exposure predicts behavior, but it is important to know why people trust what they are being shown. This is a relationship tested as Hypothesis 1.

Figure 6: Trend Exposure vs Purchase Behavior

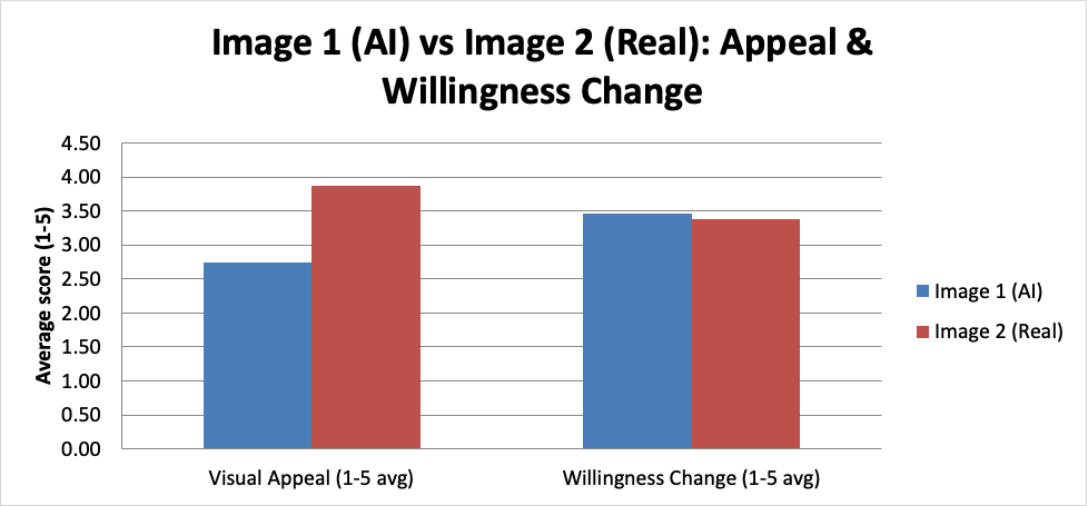


"Scatter plot of Trend Exposure Score against Purchase Behavior Score for all respondents (n = 123), with a linear trendline. Each point represents one respondent."

AI vs. Real Trust

Figure 7 demonstrates the visual appeal of two images: Image 1 is AI, and Image 2 is real. Comparing average scores across these two metrics using grouped bars, there are many findings. The appeal gap was 3.88 (Real) vs. 2.75 (AI), and the p-value was < .0001, indicating statistical significance. Notably, the gap is nearly a full point on a 5-point scale, indicating less visual appeal for AI. The willingness to purchase didn't shift as much as visual appeal did, but people may dislike AI content without fully changing their buying decisions. Visual authenticity has a measurable emotional effect before changes in trust or willingness are measured. This comparison is demonstrated as Hypothesis 2.

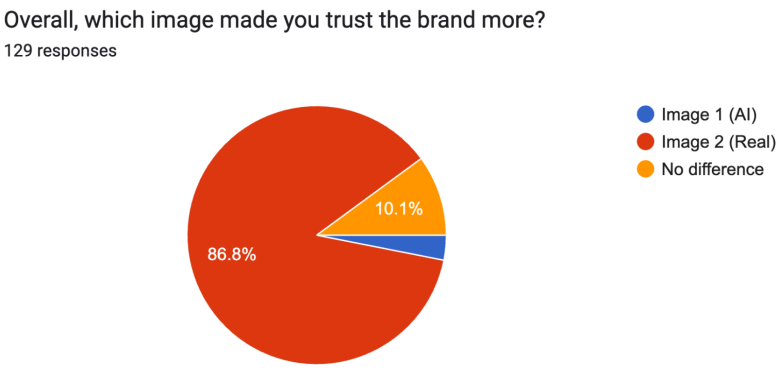
Figure 7: Image 1 (AI) vs Image 2 (Real) Appeal & Willingness Change



"Grouped bar chart comparing mean visual appeal and willingness-to-purchase change between Image 1 (AI-generated) and Image 2 (real photograph)."

Figure 8 shows a 3 way split in consumers' trust among AI Images, real images, or no difference at all. 87.0% trusted the real image more, 10.6% chose no difference, and 2.4% said AI. Compared to Figure 7's appeal gap, trust preference is even more extreme than appeal preference. Connecting direct trust decisions to appeal, the study demonstrates that the majority would trust a real wellness content post more than an AI generated one. This preference is tested formally as Hypothesis 3.

Figure 8: Image Trust



"Bar chart of respondents' reported trust preference among Image 1 (AI), Image 2 (Real), and No difference (n = 123)."

Small Brand Strategy

The 5 point likelihood distribution asked whether consumers would still trust the brand if it disclosed its use of AI. The results were: 36.4% disagreed, 24% neutral, 20.2% agreed, and 17.1% strongly disagreed. Disclosure is often used to help consumers trust the brand, but the data show that a majority distrust disclosure, with agreement rates more than double. Previous research found these effects aren't universal, but the data suggest that wellness consumers lean toward the negative end of the spectrum (Baryshkov et al., 2026).

We asked if consumers are willing to pay more for a wellness product from a small brand without AI polishing. 57.4% agreed with this statement, 20.9% strongly agreed, and 17.1% were neutral. 78.3% agreed that they are willing to pay more for authenticity. People will pay more for authenticity, and small brands should not use AI in their posts to protect trust and increase spending. Small brands should actively avoid using AI based on Figure 8's findings, and preference is strong enough to translate into a real willingness to pay a premium. This small brand strategy and disclosure trust was a predictor in Hypothesis 4.

Hypothesis Testing Results

All four hypotheses reached statistical significance, but effect sizes varied in practical magnitude. The correlation in Hypothesis 1 (r = .479) reflects a moderate relationship. The mean difference in Hypothesis 2 reflects a large practical gap in perceived appeal, nearly a full point on a 5-point scale. Because Hypotheses 1 and 4 rely on correlational and regression analyses of cross-sectional data, results indicate association rather than causation.

Hypothesis 1: Trend Exposure and Purchase Behavior

Trend exposure measures how frequently content appears in a consumer's feed unprompted, and purchase behavior measures self-reported past purchasing tied to repeated exposure. Social media builds credibility through its algorithms and repetition. Previous sources have linked influencer credibility to purchase intention, with purchase intention showing a significant increase (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Through others, algorithm driven recommendations alone raised purchase intentions with no influencer required (Aoki and Matsui, 2025). If algorithmically pushed content works just as well as influencers, exposure alone should predict buying. The direction was positive, showcasing that it wouldn't just be conscious health searching.

> ***H_0:*** *There is no significant relationship between trend exposure and purchase behavior.*
> ***H_1:*** *Trend exposure is significantly correlated with purchase behavior.*

Hypothesis 1 was taken directly from the research question, which asks whether AI driven trend exposure shapes purchasing behavior. The independent variable is the Trend Exposure score, which combines survey items measuring exposure to wellness content and repetition. The dependent variable is the Purchase Behavior Score, which combines past purchases and purchase likelihood. A Pearson correlation was run in Python between the two continuous variables and was significant at $\alpha = 0.05$.

The finding was a statistically significant positive relationship ($r = 0.479$, $p < .0001$, $n = 123$). The results support the purchase hypotheses and demonstrate that purchase behavior and exposure move together positively, thereby confirming the mechanism posited in the research question. This suggests that visibility within repeated or algorithmically surfaced content may matter more for small brands than large influencer partnerships, though this interpretation would need to be tested directly.

Hypothesis 2: Appeal of AI Generated vs. Real Images

Image type, which is AI generated vs. real, is the independent variable, and visual appeal rating. Visual appeal is how attractive the image seems on a 5 point scale, which is the dependent variable. If something is perceived as artificial, people are more critical of it before making a purchase decision and base their intentions on emotional trust or knowledge. Previous research found that labeling content ‘AI generated’ reduces purchase intention and worsens emotional trust (Cicek et al., 2025). If AI disclosure lowers trust, then visual appeal should also be affected before the purchase decision. This was less negative than the real one.

> ***H_0:*** *There is no significant difference in perceived visual appeal between the AI generated and real images.*
> ***H_1:*** *The real image is rated significantly more appealing than the AI generated image.*

The independent variable is Image Type, and the dependent variable is Visual appeal ranking. A paired t-test was run in Python. The significance level was $\alpha = 0.05$. The findings were Real image $M = 3.88$, AI image $M = 2.75$, $t = -10.75$, $p < .0001$, and $n = 123$. The real image was significantly more appealing than the AI image.

This supports other hypotheses, and there's a big gap that favors the authentic photo, without telling people which one is AI. Small brands are at risk when they use AI, and it immediately shows up to consumers visually, before purchase decisions.

Hypothesis 3: Trust Preference Between Images

The variable is trust preference: which image makes someone trust the brand more? It is not just an appeal rating; it is a trust judgment, unlike Hypothesis 2. Previously found, AI involvement increases consumer distrust and should manifest as a preference when people are asked to choose (Baryshkov et al., 2026). If the appeal gap from hypothesis 2 is real, then people should come out and say what they trust more. A significant preference is expected to lean towards the real image.

> ***H_0:*** *Respondents show no significant preference between the AI generated and real images when determining brand trust.*
> ***H_1:*** *Respondents show a significant preference for one image over the other.*

The variable is trust preference, which is categorical: Image 1/AI, Image 2/Real, and no difference. The test was a chi-square goodness of fit test for categorical data, which was not continuous, conducted in Python against an equal split null hypothesis. The significance level was $\alpha = 0.05$. The finding was $\chi^2 = 160.59$, $df = 2$, $p < .0001$. 107 (87.0%) Real, 13 (10.6%) No difference, and 3 (2.4%) AI.

When people are forced to choose, they choose authenticity, and real photography for small brands will build more trust. The results support the alternative hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4: Multiple Predictors of Purchase Behavior

The independent variables tested were trend exposure, visual quality sensitivity, small brand trust, AI vs. real preference, AI literacy, appeal gap, and demographics, with purchase behavior as the outcome. Previous research has found that health consciousness is the ultimate driver of wellness and spending. Compared to spending, quality, or price, it was stronger. No algorithmic factor was considered (Ali and Ali, 2020). Purchase behavior is driven by health consciousness; trend exposure, visual quality, and brand trust together have at least one significant factor. The combined model matters, and at least one factor is significant.

> ***H_0:*** *None of the predictor variables (trend exposure, visual quality sensitivity, small brand trust, AI versus real preference, AI literacy, appeal gap, and demographic factors) significantly predict purchase behavior*
> ***H_1:*** *At least one predictor variable significantly predicts purchase behavior.*

The independent variables are Trend Exposure, Visual Quality Sensitivity, Small Brand & Disclosure Trust, Trust Real over AI, AI Literacy, Appeal Gap, and demographic controls. The dependent variable is Purchase Behavior Score. The test was a multiple regression (OLS) in Python, and the model was

evaluated using an F-test. The significance level at $\alpha = 0.05$ The full model was statistically significant, $F(9, 113) = 12.10$, $p < .0001$, explaining 49.1% of the variance in purchase behavior ($R^2 = .491$, Adjusted $R^2 = .450$). Individually, Visual Quality Sensitivity ($p < .0001$) and Trend Exposure ($p = .003$) were the strongest significant predictors, followed by Small Brand & Disclosure Trust ($p = .021$).

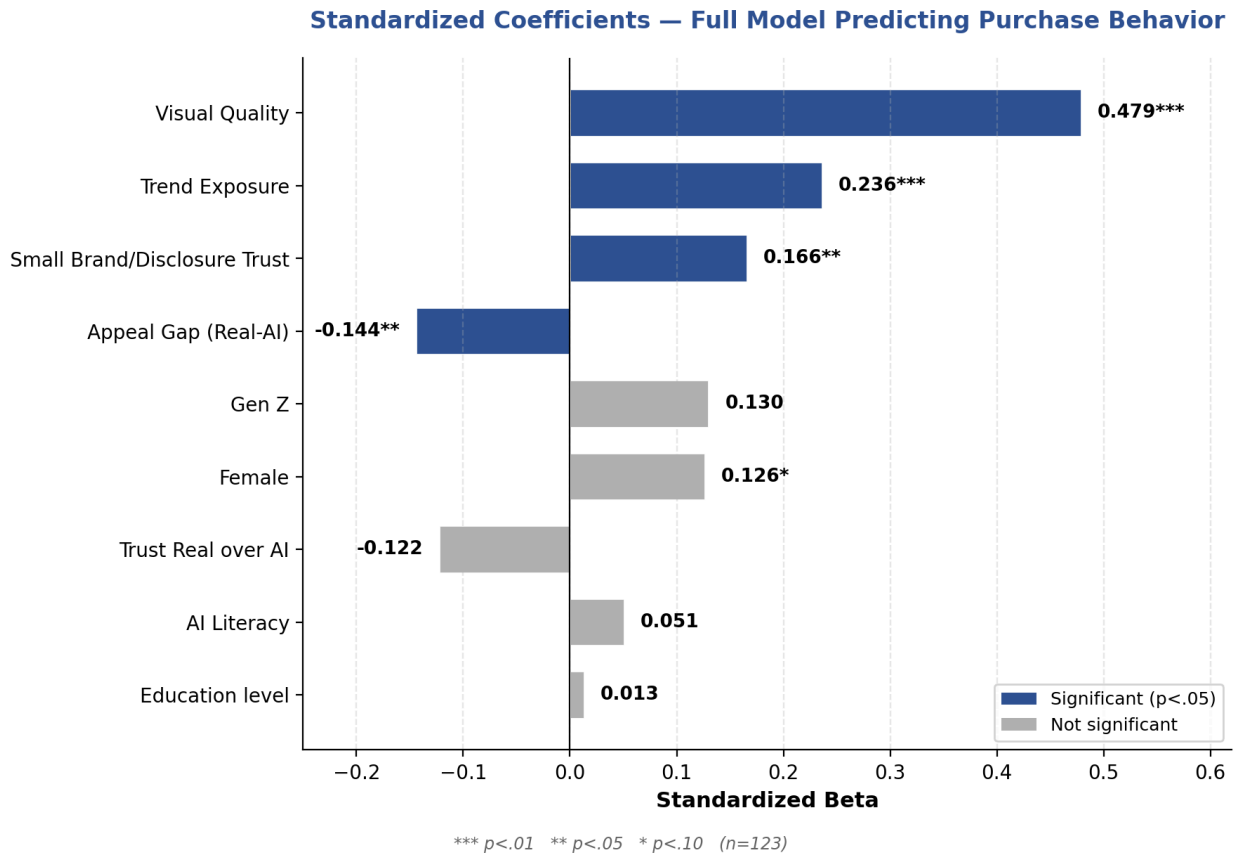
This result supports the alternative hypothesis. Purchase behavior is predicted by a combination of factors, with visual quality and trend exposure emerging as the most influential. It answers Baryshkov et al.'s call for research on behavior. The health consciousness model doesn't explain wellness buying; small brands should consider algorithms and production quality.

Table 2: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	**Test Used**	**Test Statistic**	**p-value**	**Key Coefficients**	**Supported?**
H1	Pearson correlation	$r = 0.479$	$< .0001$	-	Yes
H2	Paired t-test	$t = -10.75$	$< .0001$	M(AI)=2.75, M(Real)=3.88	Yes
H3	Chi-square goodness of fit	$\chi^2 = 160.59$ (df=2)	$< .0001$	87.0% Real / 2.4% AI / 10.6% No diff	Yes
H4	Multiple regression (OLS)	$F(9,113) = 12.10$	$< .0001$	Visual Quality β=.479, Trend Exposure β=.236, Small Brand Trust β=.166	Yes

In Table 2, these four hypotheses were supported at $p < .0001$. In Hypothesis 1, trend exposure did predict purchase behavior, and the real image was more appealing than the AI image, which was Hypothesis 2. The consumers had an overwhelming trust in the real image when choosing brand trust, resulting in hypothesis 3, $\chi^2 = 160.59$. In Hypothesis 4, there is a combined regression model that includes predictors of purchase behavior, led by visual quality and trend exposure.

Figure 9: Standardized Coefficients on Full Model



"Standardized regression coefficients for nine predictors of purchase behavior from the full model (Hypothesis 4); bars represent beta weights."

The chart shows 9 predictors, ranked by strength and standardized so they can be compared on the same scale. The two strongest drivers were Visual Quality (β = .479) and Trend Exposure (β = .236). What is not as notable is that Trust Real over AI and AI literacy. Although the numbers looked large in hypothesis 3, preference does not predict actual buying once quality and exposure are accounted for.

DISCUSSION

Small wellness brands should prioritize their visual representation over AI investment and lean into authenticity, because statistically, 78% will pay more. Across the findings from regression, correlation, and content analysis, it was found that exposure predicts behavior, authenticity beats AI in trust, and trust translates into a willingness to pay more. Previous research was on credibility driven purchasing, but

extends it to AI- and wellness specific content (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). The strength of the Visual Quality and Trend Exposure effects suggests that production quality builds credibility fast, before trust is evaluated. Unlike a health-consciousness model, the study shows that algorithmic push and visual factors matter separately, extending previous models (Ali & Ali, 2020). The negative Appeal Gap is possibly related to visually discerning shoppers rather than AI skeptical purchasers. The stakeholders are small brand owners or marketing consultants for small businesses.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

Acknowledging limitations helps future researchers improve their writing to fill in the gaps. The study provides readers with context and honesty about the scope. Specific studies need this section because it presents an original combination of algorithmic exposure, wellness, and small brand strategy. The three categories to come include methodological, scope, and data limitations. The methodological limitation was the use of snowball sampling for the survey, which means it was not a random sample. Smaller sample sizes were used (n = 123). Also, the age question used generation brackets instead of exact ages. There was no dedicated participation pool. The study used connections and word of mouth to share the survey. Using networks to share the survey, such as Women in Business, DECA, SurveySample, and SurveyCircle, could skew the sample toward similar people. A neutral cross section of young adults was not used. The composite scores, such as Trend Exposure, Purchase Behavior, and Small Brand Trust, were created from survey items and a previously validated psychological scale. Future research should use random sampling and exact age brackets. Additionally, the survey measures passive and repeated exposure to wellness content but does not verify that this exposure was algorithmically generated as opposed to arising from followed accounts, advertisements, or peer sharing. The scope of the study was limited to the U.S. wellness industry, so my findings might not align with other categories. The sample was mainly Gen Z (77%), and 69% were female. The content analysis was limited to TikTok and Instagram, with a 3 to 6 month window. This was not a drawn out view of AI driven wellness marketing. The content analysis was also heavily centered on skincare and beauty content, with less from fitness, nutrition, or other wellness categories. Future research could test this with different countries, categories, or demographic groups. They could also examine other platforms, such as YouTube, for content analysis, with more wellness categories and trend tracking over a longer period. Regarding data limitations, all data are self-reported and may be subject to social desirability or recall bias. The purchase behavior was measured through self-report and not verified by purchase receipts or records. The survey respondents could not accurately report their buying behavior. Then, question 13 relied on a single question rather than a multi scale question. This could lead to a more complicated attitude. The content analysis also assumed that cartoon-style posts were AI-generated based on hashtag and stylistic cues; this classification could not be independently verified. The other gap is a cross sectional design that can't establish causation and only correlation. For future research, they could use self-reports combined with purchase data. They could also use a longitudinal design to test causation over time. In addition to the design, they could combine self-report with behavioral data. Finding accurate purchase records or published data could significantly improve the results. Platform analytics is also a way for future researchers to make other accurate data improvements.

Implications

This new combination of studies creates an AI driven trend in wellness exposure and consumer behavior with a small brand strategy. These three areas have never been connected before. The contribution of the paper is primarily empirical, drawing on content analysis and surveys, with some theoretical insight in testing whether trend exposure is a separate pathway from the health-conscious model. The study is expected to reveal whether AI driven trends and algorithms affect actual consumer behavior and, in the future, will demonstrate what small brands should do. Previous studies have found that including AI in product descriptions reduces purchase intention. Findings suggest that it also negatively affects emotional trust in the relationship between the brand and the consumer. Therefore, stronger for high-risk products than low-risk products (Cicek et al., 2025).

The gap is that no previous research has tested whether algorithmic trends predict consumer spending in the wellness industry, separate from health consciousness, and no one has connected this to small brands. Existing research has studied AI driven marketing and how consumers have reacted, but not brand size specifically, and has studied attitudes, not spending or algorithmic exposure. Previous findings confirm significant positive direct effects of AI and the extent of its growth in the consumer purchasing industry. AI further improves the quality of people's decisions, with marketing technologies explaining 71.2% of the variance in purchasing decisions (Mousa et al, 2026). The study fills this gap and finds that visual quality and trend exposure are the strongest predictors of purchase behavior ($\beta = .479$, $\beta = .236$).
The primary stakeholders are small, without influencer wellness brands. The findings could inform small businesses whether to invest in AI or focus on authentic marketing strategies without AI. Small brands should prioritize authenticity and not spend their budget on AI marketing. 78.3% of respondents were willing to pay more for authenticity, while 22% said they would still trust a brand after AI disclosure.

The broader significance is that small businesses are competing against organizations with big budgets in an algorithmic social media marketing world. There could be significant economic opportunities for small businesses in a marketing landscape increasingly controlled by AI driven marketing and algorithms (Liando & Tumewu, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Algorithmic wellness has significantly shaped how AI trend exposure forms young adults' purchasing behavior. The study uses content analysis, survey questions, and a literature review to ultimately determine whether small brands should follow the path of authenticity and move into AI marketing. No previous studies have tested whether AI driven trend exposure is associated with health consciousness or represents a separate pathway. Previous studies also did not connect this to a small brand strategy or to how they should market their posts. Trend exposure was significantly correlated with self-reported purchase behavior ($r = .479$, $p < .0001$). The real images outperformed AI images in appeal (3.88 vs. 2.75) and trust (87.0% Real, 2.4% AI, 10.6% no difference). The study's findings reveal multiple predictors, with visual quality being the strongest. Then, Trend Exposure explained 49.1% of the variance

in purchase behavior. Content Analysis showed that AI avatar wellness marketing is currently dominated by large brands, with small brands absent. The survey discovered that only 22% said they'd trust a brand after an AI disclosure, while 78% said they'd pay more for authenticity. These findings extend the previous health-consciousness model by adding algorithmic and visual factors (Ali & Ali, 2020). This study addresses the gap in behavioral research (Baryshkov et al., 2026). The authenticity and visual quality outweigh AI versus real preference only in driving purchase behavior. The limitations of this study were self-reported data, a greater number of Gen Z and female respondents, and a design that shows correlation, not causation. For future research, the model should be tested across different categories, rather than just wellness and different countries. Again, there could be a validated psychological model scale instead of a research built one. Future research should also use actual purchase data, combined with self-reports, in a longitudinal design. Small brands should focus on authenticity rather than using AI to market themselves on social media. Even with disclosure, it is discouraged if small brands want high consumer purchases. They should prioritize visual production quality and authentic content. Again, they can not just be honest about using AI, because it still is not a way to get as much attention. The primary stakeholders are small, without influencer wellness brands that operate without large budgets. Due to the growth rate of the wellness industry and AI's prominence in marketing, neither is going away. The main takeaway is that consumers still strongly prefer authenticity over AI driven content. This challenge affects small businesses, and they need to have the knowledge to navigate, since it will not go away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ford Fischer is a junior at Valor Christian High School in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She has a strong interest in business and entrepreneurship. This paper is motivated from her research interests in AI, social media marketing, and business. She combines her curiosity about AI-driven marketing with hands-on experience in small-business strategy to pursue purposeful research. She plans to continue studying business and consumer behavior in college.

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