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Chapter 15

Virtual influencer as a brand avatar in interactive marketing

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Abstract:

Social media influencers have become an integral part of most brands' interactive marketing strategy for the past 15 years. Leveraging their unique content and substantial follower base, brands benefit from innovative forms of consumer engagement above and beyond more traditional firm-driven approaches. Alongside the numerous human influencers, a new opinion leader – virtual influencers – entered the stage with early examples launched in 2016. Virtual influencers are computer-generated characters or avatars designed and maintained by experts and digital agencies that help brands appeal to and reach desirable target groups effectively through their digital personalities. Despite their potential impact, little is known to date about these virtual opinion leaders. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a detailed presentation of virtual influencers within their ecosystem, taking into consideration their human influencer counterparts as well as consumer perceptions. Building on an extensive review of the literature and exploratory interviews with a group of young consumers, we make specific recommendations for brands as to how to incorporate virtual influencers into their interactive marketing strategy. This chapter is concluded by offering avenues for future research to help scholars and practitioners interested in pursuing this area and boost their understanding of this innovative and promising digital entity.

Keywords: Virtual influencer; Computer-generated images (CGIs); avatar; influencer marketing; social media influencer; interactive marketing

1. Introduction

Social media influencers (SMIs), "people who gained popularity due to their social media presence and content, such as bloggers, YouTubers, and Instafamous individuals" (Aw and Chuah 2021 pp. 146) are now well-established actors in the interactive marketing strategy of brands (López et al. 2022). SMIs' competencies to create sophisticated content about brands and products – via tutorials, product reviews, creative product staging in videos or posted images – federate a community of followers (Lee and Watkins 2016), which make them attractive for brands (Hamilton et al. 2016). During the past fifteen years, many brands developed different types of collaborations with SMIs, including the simpler forms of product endorsement to the more complex forms of product co-development, in order to reach their audience in a more meaningful fashion (Lou and Yuan 2019). Consequently, influencer marketing – a form of social media marketing that builds on influencer endorsements of products and services in specific domains of interests and expertise made available to followers on various social media platforms (De Jans and Hudders 2020; Wang 2021) – has quickly matured into a booming industry thanks to companies and apps that offer technical support to foster cooperation between SMIs and brands. With 90% of marketing managers convinced by its effectiveness, even following the COVID-19 crisis that negatively impacted many businesses, recent estimates place the influencer marketing industry at $13.8 billion, representing a 42% increase from 2019[1].

[1]Influencer Marketing Benchmark report, Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021.

Although influencer-brand collaborations enable the establishment of a larger follower base, research warns that such an institutionalized brand encroachment vis-à-vis the influencer's shared content might threaten the SMI's ability to remain genuine and true-to-self (Audrezet et al. 2020; van Reijmersdal et al. 2020); attributes that made them popular in the first place (Duffy and Hund 2019). As commercial opportunities are likely to encourage the promotion of products which influencers might not spontaneously be interested in (Harms et al. 2022), this cycle presents SMIs with a serious challenge: how to ensure and maintain their credibility (Al-Emadi and Ben Yahia 2020; Sokolova and Kefi 2020), authenticity (Lee and Eastin 2021; Pöyry et al. 2019) and trustworthiness (Giuffredi-Kähr et al. 2022; Kim and Kim 2021).

Beyond these well-documented expectations of followers, the traditional figure of the SMI faces another notable challenge presented by the emergence of a new opinion leader: the *virtual influencer*. The directory – VirtualHumans.org – keeps a log of existing and emerging virtual influencers once they can account for at least 1,000 followers across social media platforms. According to Christopher Travers, the founder of this database, "a virtual influencer is a digital character created in computer graphics software, then given a personality defined by a first-person view of the world, and made accessible on media platforms for the sake of influence". Developed by digital agencies leveraging sophisticated tools and technologies, non-human and entirely computer-generated characters can be provided with a human-like appearance and a unique personality (Moustakas et al. 2020) that might in turn blur the boundaries between offline and online consumer-perceived reality (Drenten and Brooks 2020).

Despite their popularity and increasing prevalence on the influencer marketing landscape, surprisingly little is known about virtual influencers and the impact they might have on marketing and on consumer-brand relations. While computer-generated influencers

offer new opportunities for brands, they also push the boundaries of altered reality which might present a challenge to adopt by marketers. The current chapter fills this gap in the literature by providing a detailed presentation of this new phenomenon within its greater digital ecosystem that includes brands, followers, digital agencies, and social media platforms. More specifically, the objectives of this contribution are threefold. First, the chapter provides a comparative analysis of the developmental trajectories of virtual versus human influencers to understand their similarities and differences more fully. Second, building on empirical evidence, the authors identify different personas that can be used to approximate follower preferences concerning virtual influencers that in turn can be used for purposes of segmentation. And third, the chapter provides concrete strategic directions for brands wishing to collaborate with virtual influencers.

Concerning its structure, the chapter begins with a review of contemporary research on human influencers and their relationships with their followers. Here the authors reflect upon certain relevant theoretical frameworks – including social influence and parasocial relationship theory, representing streams of research that are often engaged within the field of influencer marketing (Aw and Chuah 2021; Jin and Ryu 2020). Next, the authors introduce examples of successful virtual influencers, review existing professional and scholarly sources that focus on this emerging phenomenon, and – building on interview research with a group of young consumers – provide comparative reflections vis-à-vis their human influencer counterparts. Finally, the authors offer a conceptual framework to assist brands in ways to effectively employ virtual influencers and conclude the chapter by offering directions for future research.

2. The positioning of human influencers

2.1. History and conceptualization of human influencers

Starting in the 2000s, a set of adventurous Internet users embarked on a new opportunity to create a novel form of accessible content building on their specific interest in a range of areas like fashion, cosmetics, travel and technology, with the intention to share openly with interested parties via blogs and social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, etc. (Dinh and Lee 2021; Rocamora 2011). This new type of spontaneous and first-hand experience-based content was found more appealing to customers in comparison to the distant and more static material dominating specialized magazines (Evans et al. 2017; Lea et al. 2018). Thanks to the quality of their content and its amplified effect enabled by the Internet (McQuarrie et al. 2012), those "who have the potential to create engagement, drive conversation and/or sell products/services with the intended target audience" (IAB 2018) became what we are now accustomed to call '*social media influencers*' (SMIs). Not surprisingly, brands quickly seized the opportunity to benefit from such content, especially given their context increasingly characterized by a widespread distrust towards traditional forms of advertising (Audrezet et al. 2020; Corrêa et al. 2020). Consequently, the promotion of products and services through sponsored posts on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Twitch, and other platforms (Ge and Gretzel 2018) are now considered 'common expenditures' of the interactive marketing strategy of firms.

2.2. Development and effectiveness of influencer marketing

Previous research highlights the effectiveness of influencers as brand management tools (Carlson et al. 2020; Ryu and Jin 2019; Valsesia et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2021) with beneficial consequences to boost consumer engagement (Al-Emadi and Ben Yahia 2020; Hughes et al. 2019; Lee and Theokary 2020; Tafesse and Wood 2021) and the adoption of (Corrêa et al. 2020) and purchase intention towards products and services (Weismueller et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2021). In addition to the characteristics of authenticity and trustworthiness mentioned in the introduction, influencer credibility (Pick 2020) and self-disclosure (Leite

and Baptista 2021) have been shown to further impact consumer-brand connections and purchase intention.

In the emerging influencer marketing industry, rewards depend on the SMIs' level of influence, commonly approximated by the number of their followers on different social media platforms (Pittman and Abell 2021). To draw upon their engaged and trusting community, brands at first were predominantly interested in mega-influencers – both online-born and traditional celebrities who emerged outside of the Internet – with follower counts in the millions. More recently, there has been a notable shift towards micro-influencers – those accounting for less than ten thousand followers – who represent niche domains and specific interest areas (Pittman and Abell 2021).

Within the celebrity endorsement literature, it's been shown that endorsement effectiveness can be better predicted by embracing a customer-centric (i.e., consumer-endorser identification) as opposed to a product centric approach (i.e., product-endorser fit) (Carlson et al. 2020). Furthermore, originality, uniqueness and innovativeness were found critical to be perceived as an opinion leader (Akdevelioglu and Kara 2020; Casaló et al. 2020). Hence, the approach that seems to work best is one that focuses on expertise, lifestyles, and takes a consumer-centric approach (De Jans et al. 2021; Seeler et al. 2019).

2.3. Conceptualization of the relationship between human influencers and their followers

Several theories within and beyond traditional consumer research have been engaged to understand the relationships human influencers embody vis-à-vis their follower community.

2.3.1 Social Influence Theory

One example builds on Social Influence Theory (Tafesse and Wood 2021) that distinguishes three processes underlying influential dyads. *Compliance* is the first type of social influence that occurs when people accept others' influence to gain approval or avoid

disapproval. Influence by compliance tends to be extrinsically motivated and superficially accepted. *Identification* is the second form of social influence, referring to situations when individuals accept influence based on the relationship they form and maintain with the influencer that becomes part of their identity. This type of influence is intrinsically motivated, deeper and tends to be linked with various influencer qualities like attractiveness, creativity or popularity (Pittman and Abell 2021). Finally, the third and most complex form of social influence entails *internalization*, when followers accept influence given its congruence with their own value systems. Here the influencers' credibility, expertise, trustworthiness and authenticity are of special importance.

2.3.2. Parasocial relationship theory

A particularly dominant framework proposed to approximate the relationship that emerges between influencers and their fans comes from the theory of parasocial interactions (PSIs), referring to the "feeling of companionship or illusion of friendship with media figures" (Jin and Muqaddam 2019 pp. 527). Parasocial relationship theory has been used to explain the complex connection formed between users and a wide range of virtual entities, including avatars (Yi 2022). Within the influencer marketing context, a parasocial relationship has been found to have a more prominent role when compared to opinion leadership in affecting the purchase intention of followers (Bi and Zhang 2022; Farivar et al. 2021). When exploring parasocial interaction between influencers and their audience, along with their perceived credibility, social and physical attractiveness and attitude homophily on purchase intention, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) found PSI to be stronger than credibility in predicting purchase intention – particularly in the case of younger age groups such as the Gen Z cohort. Both wishful identification and parasocial relationships were found to have significant but different impact on followers' stickiness; an important factor contributing to the economic valorization derived from the influencers' follower base (Hu et al. 2020). Along the same

lines, closeness seemed to further impact the relationship in a positive fashion (Taillon et al. 2020).

2.3.3 Pseudo Interpersonal Relationship Theory

A promising new direction in the influencer marketing literature concerns the extent to which levels of perceived intimacy on behalf of consumers might deviate from the purely parasocial interactions; a point that will be of particular relevance in our later discussions concerning virtual influencers. In fact, extensive intimate first-person content shared by influencers and the opportunity for consumers to like and comment on the posted content creates an illusion of interpersonal connection (Aw and Chuah 2021; Aw and Labrecque 2020; Jin and Ryu 2020; Kim and Kim 2020; Moraes et al. 2019), above and beyond the parasocial relationship that has been widely engaged in contemporary research. These pseudo relationships that grew out of the celebrity endorsement scholarship tend to be more intense with influencers who are perceived as credible and attractive by their fans and followers (Gong and Li 2017; Sakib et al. 2020; Sokolova and Kefi 2020). These findings are particularly important given that the emotional relationships and attachment consumers develop with the mediated influencer personas might help mitigate self-serving – as opposed to altruistic – attributions (Aw and Chuah 2021; Pittman and Abell 2021), being advantageous for influencers as well as brands alike. Indeed, Kim and Kim (2022) demonstrate that attachment tends to enhance influencer credibility and follower loyalty, in turn reducing overall resistance to advertising.

Importantly, given the limited available research focusing on the area of virtual influencers, it remains unclear as to how applicable these relational frameworks might be in the case of virtual influencers. Understanding this would help firms contemplate effective forms of collaboration with virtual influencers more fully, in turn assisting them in their selection and strategic decision-making process. Before elaborating on this further, the

authors first introduce concrete cases of leading virtual influencers and provide examples for their brand collaborations and branding campaigns.

3. Virtual influencers – A new frontier in interactive marketing

Virtual influencers are computer-generated images (CGIs) or avatars who are created and controlled by teams of individuals often affiliated with digital agencies, and who account for a substantial enough follower base on social media platforms to attract attention from brands and consumers. Given the unlimited potential of virtual space, virtual influencers can assume many shapes and forms including robots, animals, cartoons, humans or aliens. They are similar to robots in that both entities are controlled by humans, and hence can be positioned as digital robots. At the same time, the content virtual influencers produce is very sophisticated, which differentiates these characters from other AI-driven technology such as chatbots or virtual assistants that are programmed to answer questions according to a script (Tsai et al. 2021; Wang 2021).

While tracing the origins of virtual influencers, Brazil served as the cradle for this industry, with the creation of *Lu Do Magalu* in 2003, initially developed as a virtual mascot for the e-commerce sites of Magazine Luiza promoting appliances and electronics. She turned into an influencer in 2009 with the launch of her YouTube channel and attracted 30M+ followers across various social platforms. This initial success of a virtual influencer in Brazil was reinforced by a law in 2011 favoring children's animation produced by Brazilian studios on TV, which resulted in the rapid development of the Brazilian animation industry; with new talents eventually delving into the field of virtual influencers. Such a favorable context gave rise in 2016 to the quintessential *Lil Miquela* – a particularly well-known virtual influencer created and managed by the California-based Brud agency and positioned as a Brazilian-American robot.

Today, virtual influencers are emerging worldwide. Based on estimates from VirtualHuman.org – an IMDB-type database compiling relevant information on virtual influencers, there are approximately 200 virtual influencers considered 'worthy of interest'; although their real number and impact remain hard to objectively estimate. Successful examples include virtual influencers with a human-like appearance, like *Lil Miquela*, an LA-based robot 'it' girl and singer, or the virtual supermodel *Shudu*; others with 2D cartoon-like features such as the Japanese *Kizuna AI* – a singer, gamer and VTuber (virtual YouTuber; see Figure 1 for illustration); virtual influencers with animalistic characteristics such as *bee_nfluencer*, a French-born virtual content creator dedicated to raising awareness about the need for protecting bees; or even ones that exhibit a completely unrealistic appearance, like the TikTok phenomenon *Noboby Sausage*, a colorful 3D dancing stick; and finally branded virtual influencers like *Colonel Sanders* from the KFC restaurant chain or *Daisy* – a creation of the online lifestyle store YOOX, who's frequently taking over the brand's Instagram account to share her most fashionable lifestyle recommendations.

Figure 1. *Kizuna AI*, a Japanese cartoon-like virtual singer, gamer and VTuber (credit: Kizuna AI Wikipedia page).



Table 1 provides a comprehensive account of some of the most prominent virtual influencers. Examples to be showcased were selected based on their popularity – as approximated by the number of followers, and type to emphasize the vast diversity in terms of appearance, purpose of existence and primary domain of influence. Previous research shows that extreme cases in particular enable a clearer understanding of a phenomenon (Seawright and Gerring 2008); which in our case is also advantageous to infer the communication purpose, the target audience, and ultimately the marketing opportunities associated with virtual influencers.

Table 1. Identification and key attributes of notable virtual influencers.

Name account name	***Lil Miquela*** @lilmiquela	***Shudu*** @shudu.gram	***Noonoori*** @noonoori	***Kizuna AI***	***Bee-nfluencer*** @bee_nfluencer	***Nobody Sausage*** @nobodysausage	***Colonel sanders*** @kfc	***Kenna*** @thisis.kenna
Managing entity	Brud (digital agency)	The Diigitals (digital modeling agency)	Opium (digital agency)	Kizuna AI Inc. (exclusively dedicated digital agency)	Foundation in France (philanthropic French network)	Kael Cabral (freelance motion graphic designer)	KFC (fast food restaurants)	Essence Cosmetics
# of followers / prominent social media outlet	3M Instagram	225K Instagram	346K Instagram	4M YouTube	271K Instagram	13M TikTok	N/A Appears only on KFC's social networks	17.2K Instagram
Type	Humanoid	Humanoid	Cartoon	Cartoon	Animalistic	Arbitrary / unrealistic	Branded (virtual mascot)	Branded (employee as intern)
Dominant content	Lifestyle & music / songs	Campaigns & inspirational interviews	Lifestyle & fashion	Gaming	Activism & entertainment	Colorful, groovy dance videos	Ironic lifestyle	Cosmetics & lifestyle
Primary purpose of communication	Entertainment & promotion of progressive values	Racial inclusion	Vegan activism	Entertainment with gaming & songs	Bees' protection	Entertainment & dance	Rejuvenation of brand's image	Promotion of the employer brand
Target consumers	Millennials targeting brands	Luxury brands	Sustainable fashion brands	Mass market & technology brands	Donors	Music brands	N/A	N/A

In addition to these variations, the table also demonstrates that several digital agencies hide behind these virtual influencers, responsible for their creation as well as maintenance. Brud, the California-based transmedia company founded by Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou, is probably the most well-known given that they are responsible for the creation of Lil Miquela, one of the pioneering virtual influencer projects. Since her debut, this forever-19

digital robot posting on social media with content showcasing her entertaining life in LA, has accounted for more than 3 million followers on Instagram. As an additional measure of her success, in 2018, TIME magazine designated her to be among the 25 Most Influential People on the Internet.

Although Miquela defines herself as a robot, she has a human appearance and "displays complex human emotions such as sympathy, affection and heartbreak" (Moustakas et al., 2020). This line blurring the 'real' and the 'virtual' is further reinforced by Miquela's stories that commonly showcase other influencers; both human and virtual. For instance, @bermudaisbae, a blond LA-based robot 'it' girl who used to support Donald Trump and @blakow22, a low life and high-tech LA-based robot, formerly known as Bermuda's boyfriend, are parts of her social circle. These characters are also of Brud's creations, enabling to enhance Miquela's storylines with drama-rich content and opportunities. Regarding her collaborations with brands, Miquela's repertoire includes names like Prada, Calvin Klein, Dior, Balmain and Fenty Beauty. On the human influencer engagement side, one of Miquela's most remarkable campaigns is with Calvin Klein where she kissed the supermodel Bella Hadid. Under the influence of Trevor McFedries, Brud's co-founder and formal artist manager, Miquela was designed at the time of her launch as a virtual celebrity. In August 2017, she became a singer, with her first song 'Not Mine' quickly becoming a hit, reaching eighth position on Spotify Viral the same month. She also is an avid supporter of social campaigns such as Black Lives Matter and LGBTQI+ concerns.

Recently, Brud has been repurposed as an entity for 'community-owned media and collectively built worlds', implying that the agency will offer fans the opportunity to provide direct input into Lil Miquela's storytelling. As an illustration, during the summer of 2021, fans were able to discover Lil Miquela's first job, after voting for this particular 'memory' to be revealed – and essentially developed. In October 2021, it was announced that Brud – along

with its 32-member team – was acquired by Dapper Labs, the NFT startup, with the aim to build "the decentralized, collectively owned future of media and social with DAOs"[2] (Decentralized Autonomous Organization); a new kind of digital organizational structure that grants everyone equal decision-making power. These innovative collaborations present brands as well as the industry at large with new opportunities to re-envision consumer engagement and multi-stakeholder collaborations. As an illustration, Figure 2 below offers a visual representation of Brud's activity over the years since its launch.

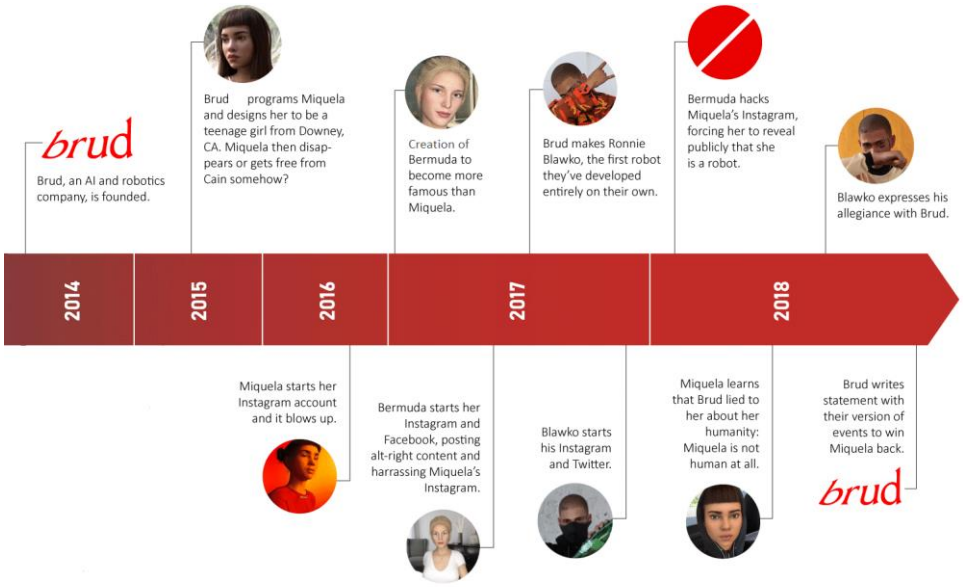


Figure 2. Brud's activity timeline (credit: adapted from commons.wikimedia.org)

Another interesting example comes from The Diigitals – the first all-digital modeling agency created by the young English photographer Cameron-James Wilson. In 2017, this agency launched *Shudu*, an enigmatic virtual supermodel with an ideal body appearance. *Shudu* has gained public attention thanks to a repost from Fenty beauty at the beginning of 2018, securing a substantial follower base shortly thereafter (to date 224K followers on

[2] Tweet of Trevor McFedries, October 4th, 2021

Instagram). Facing criticisms regarding her idealized and overly perfectionist body shape, the Diigitals designed @brenn.gram in 2018, a supermodel with more realistic proportions and slight body imperfections like stretch marks. Contrary to Shudu who is dedicated to the world of fashion, Brenn champions sustainable lifestyle choices for urban living, sponsoring, for instance, fully electric Smart cars. As of now, The Diigitals are responsible for a total of seven models of different genders, ethnic backgrounds, and even the very first digital alien model *Galaxia*.

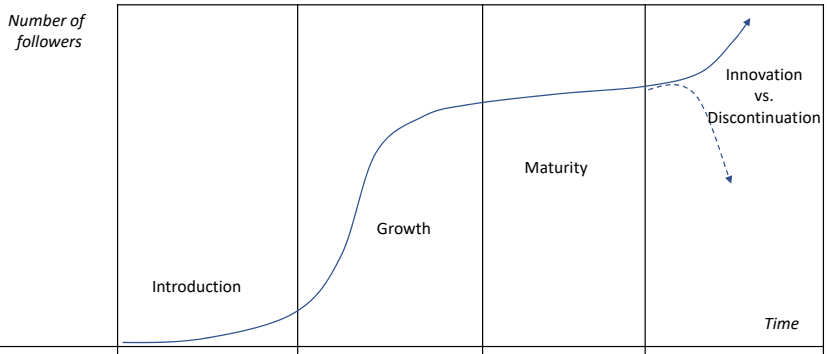
In addition to the virtual influencers with a more-or-less human-like appearance, there are interesting examples of characters that resemble cartoons. For instance, betting on the interest of fashion brands for renewed endorsements, Joerg Zuber, the CEO of the German agency Opium in 2018 developed Noonoori, a cartoon-like model with almost 400K followers on Instagram. Embodying a dreamy fashionable Parisian with a vegan lifestyle, she is perfectly positioned to collaborate with sustainably oriented fashion brands, having secured collaborations with Gucci, Versace, Marc Jacobs, Dior and Kim Kardashian cosmetics. Her naïve appearance is also designed to attract brands wishing to reach a younger audience, especially those aiming to penetrate the digital fashion market.

In summary, these virtual opinion leaders and the digital agencies behind them managed to capture a sizable audience along with an impressive repertoire of brands. Positioning virtual influencers as an innovative instrument between consumers and brands, their future potential to play a prominent role in marketing is clear. What is less evident is how virtual influencers might compare to human influencers in terms of potential impact and appeal, and what options brands might have to incorporate them into their marketing strategy. The remainder of this chapter will focus on unpacking these questions more fully to provide firms with concrete and practical takeaways.

4. Human influencers versus virtual influencers

4.1. Developmental trajectories

To contemplate the effectiveness of virtual influencers as a branding instrument, first, it is helpful to review the developmental trajectory of human influencers and see how they might compare to those of their virtual influencer counterparts. Applying the common marketing tool used to capture product life cycles, Figure 3 presents the general evolution of influencers across four stages, highlighting certain key attributes for each.



Purpose	Official launch and gaining traction	Crystallization of influencer identity	Re-assessment of influencer identity	Strategic re-alignment
Core activity	Content sharing in domains of interest Establishment of follower base in key segments	Confirmation of domain specific expertise Engagement in brand collaborations	Contemplation of sustainability of core attributes Pursuit of selective and mission-critical brands	Systematic review of options Further investment (i.e. time, learning, resources) vs. discontinuation

Figure 3. Key stages of developmental trajectory to approximate the evolution of influencers

The official launch of human influencers is usually tied to the beginning of their content sharing activity on social media sites. Posts tend to concentrate on key domains linked with a hobby or special interest, over time aiming to establish a sizable follower base. It is important to mention that at least in the early days of influencers, those who ended up successful often started out as pursuing a pastime activity related to their hobby or expertise, not necessarily intending to become famous (McQuarrie et al. 2012). Influencers who manage to conquer this phase move onto the growth stage, where they generally crystallize their

identity, confirm their lead role in the chosen domain(s), and – attracting their attention – begin to collaborate more strategically with brands. It is critical for influencers to maintain their authenticity and true-to-self content, and to avoid the risk of brand encroachment that presents a significant challenge as it might jeopardize their very existence (Audrezet et al. 2020; Pittman and Abell 2021; Pöyry et al. 2019). In the mature phase, influencers account for a steady follower base but often need to contemplate necessary modifications to keep up their appeal and relevance. In the final stage, influencers need to carefully consider their options, whether they are able to maintain their status and continue or instead accept 'exit' as the sensible choice. Being an influencer can be a highly demanding activity that might become overwhelming and at times can even be leading to burn out syndrome.

Although this trajectory can be applied relatively well to many traditional influencer journeys, it is also important to note important changes in the industry. In particular, starting out as a hobby for pioneer bloggers fifteen years ago (Duffy and Hund 2015), the development of commercial opportunities for influencers resulted in the increasing professionalization of their activity, which is now perceived by many aspirational entrants as an actual career option (Rocamora 2018). It is also not uncommon for influencers to continue to offer their marketing labor free of charge to brands in order to attract and secure their interest for future collaborations (Duffy and Hund 2015). To get a head start and maximize their potential, an increasing number of 'wannabe' influencers enroll in official training programs, such as the Condé Nast Social Academy that is supported by the S.D.A. Bocconi School of Management. In these schools, aspirational influencers are trained to produce high-quality content while maintaining an authentic posture, to prepare them to navigate the different stages along their influencer journey more effectively.

Undoubtedly, much of the content presented in Figure 3 concerning the general trajectory remains valid for virtual influencers as well, but with certain marked differences.

First, the introduction stage can be substantially shortened by removing the accidental element, as virtual influencers are purposefully created to trigger consumer engagement. To some extent this move is also in line with the more recent introduction of aspirational human influencers who pursue training to launch their career. Second, while human influencers often need to wait until they generate a large enough follower base to attract brand attention, virtual influencers are often crafted by digital agencies or commissioned by corporate entities with a relatively clear branding purpose and positioning in mind. Third, while by and large there is a single or limited group of individuals behind a human influencer, there tends to be an entire team of highly trained expert professionals behind any virtual influencer, who carefully monitor their impact and are quick to react and intervene with potential modifications, as needed.

4.2.The consumer perspective

There are interesting takeaways that can be derived from the earlier parts of this chapter concerning human and virtual influencers that might assist in understanding their position in the global interactive marketing landscape. What has been missing thus far from our discussion is the consumer perspective – are virtual influencers equally salient and how can brands capture their full communication potential? To explore these questions more fully, the following section presents empirical insights based on semi-structured interviews the authors conducted with a group of young consumers, asking them first about their influencer following behaviors, and then about their perceptions of and attitudes towards virtual influencers. Participants from the Gen Z generation were targeted as they are the ones who are most frequent in the social media platforms – like Instagram – that host a fair amount of influencer activity. Our sample included 42 participants from Italy and France – 18 males and 24 females – between the ages of 19 and 25. The majority of our respondents did not follow – and most were not even aware of the existence of – virtual influencers, which is not surprising

given the relative novelty of this specialized and innovative digital phenomenon. Thematic content analysis was used to organize the data and to extract relevant themes (Patton 2014). This exploratory research enabled us to get first-hand insights regarding the overall perceptions of young consumers that might be particularly relevant for brands to consider.

Based on their influencer following behaviors, three different personas were identified from a consumer segmentation perspective. On the least engaged end of the spectrum, the authors find *passive bystanders* whose main motivations surround entertainment, escapism, and predominantly aesthetic and hedonic appeal. They gather information and/or inspiration from posts in relevant domains but tend to be non-exclusive and portray limited loyalty. They are not necessarily interested in establishing any relationship with influencers, and – as long as their needs are fulfilled – are happy to equally consider human as well as virtual influencers.

In mid-range, the authors find *active community members* who are more committed, and, on the one hand, continue to appreciate information and aesthetic appeal, but also welcome the benefits of shared interest, meaning and friendship that are associated with their participation. For this group, the influencer – human or virtual – enables the network of like-minded individuals to emerge, with the community interactions triggering greater levels of engagement and loyalty. Based on this network effect, consumers find it sufficient to receive occasional influencer feedback or second-hand engagement between the influencer and another follower, even when it is different from themselves. This type of engagement resembles signs of parasocial interaction directly targeting the influencer but indirectly targeting the greater network of followers. From a comparative perspective, techniques employed to trigger parasocial interactions and create the impression of a relationship – including the sharing of daily life contents, reacting to comments – could be equally effective by human as well as virtual influencers.

On the most engaged level, the authors find followers who can be described as *devoted contributors* within the influencer's own network and who value attachment and continuity, deeper meaning, extensive loyalty, and resemble signs of pseudo-interpersonal love relationship. These consumers are so invested in following their beloved human influencer(s) that they do not see the value or reason for following virtual ones – whom they consider fake and not at all authentic. They view their chosen human influencers as 'friends' and are deeply invested in their everyday lives, portraying emotional connections that mirror the emotions experienced and revealed by the human opinion leader. Consumers in this category are likely to establish pseudo-interpersonal relationships with the human influencer(s) they follow; something that would not be expected in the case of virtual influencers. In this sense, this last category is best reserved for campaigns that target human influencers only.

These three personas indicate that depending on the type of consumers, brands should realistically align their strategy to appeal to the right type of audience, which is heavily influenced by the domain in which they aim to exert influence. Certain areas like fashion or cause marketing are likely to appeal to a broader audience and can benefit from sporadic and accidental visitors (our first group) as well as somewhat more engaged supporters (our second group) who are after the community membership. At least for the time being, virtual influencers are unlikely to appeal to those very dedicated to following their human influencers as they do not necessarily see the value of spending their time on such endeavors. Established luxury brands might have a particular role to play in this regard – in placing emphasis on the innovative nature of this form of communication and the strategic engagement of virtual influencers.

5. Recommendations for the interactive strategy of brands

So, what does this all mean for brands? The remaining part of the chapter contemplates the strategy that brands can pursue to maximize their investment and appeal in

ways that is congruent with the right type of audience. In particular, in line with some of the ideas put forth by VirtualHuman.org, the authors propose three ways in which brands can involve a virtual influencer in their interactive marketing strategy.

Partnership or sponsorship (low engagement). In collaboration with the managing agency of the virtual influencer, a brand can negotiate a specific promotional content to be posted by the digital character to its community. This is the easiest and simplest way to initiate a first collaboration with a virtual influencer, offering an ideal and low-risk approach to test the reaction of the audience, or – as our example will demonstrate – to reach a specific and often younger age group more effectively. As an illustration, Imma Gram (356K followers on Instagram), a Japanize pink bob humanlike influencer, was involved in a rather innovative partnership with IKEA in 2020. For three days, Imma moved and lived in a Tokyo-based IKEA. Bystanders could observe her living room from the street and her bedroom at the first floor of Harajuku's shop. Recreated with LEDs, Imma curated her fully furnished IKEA flat, and her household activities could be followed by her subscribers on social platforms.

Interestingly, these sponsorship types of engagements can also be relevant for non-commercial organizations. For instance, Knox Frost (674K followers on Instagram) – a virtual influencer positioned around wellness and health-related matters – was sponsored by the World Health Organization in the spring of 2020 to promote social distancing and other sanitary guidelines following the COVID-19 pandemic, especially targeting younger generations[3].

[3] Further details on this collaboration can be found on the following site: https://www.marketingdive.com/news/who-enlists-virtual-influencer-for-covid-19-prevention-campaign/575493/.

Recurrent collaboration (medium engagement). Representing a deeper level of mutual engagement and collaboration between the virtual influencer and the brand, this approach refers to contracts that usually involve long-term and often exclusive partnerships, in line with more traditional celebrity endorsement strategies. This co-creative form enables the development of richer and more meaningful storylines and carefully curated promotional messages that aim to engage with the intended audience more fully. As an example, Astro[4] – an alien musician followed by 111K users on Instagram, has signed on with the streetwear brand Supreme. As a result, Astro is dressed from head to toe in Supreme clothing on its Instagram feed.

Ownership (high engagement). Acting as a brand avatar (Foster et al. 2021), this approach offers free rein to develop relevant branded storylines to engage target customers in an interactive dialogue. A particularly emblematic case is that of Colonel Sanders, the virtual influencer created by KFC[5]. This virtual character built on the KFC mascot is an attractive gray-haired humanoid showcasing a glamorous lifestyle. The content he posted on the company's Instagram account portrayed his everyday life at work with the KFC team, as well as meeting or traveling with other famous human and virtual influencers. Colonel Sanders is a particularly interesting case. More specifically, in addition to his engagement with KFC, he also promoted other brands like DrPepper or TurboTax, disclosing the partnership with #ad – similarly to any professional influencer. Such freedom from KFC created a sense of authenticity of its content, probably explaining why the famous fast-food chain managed to more than double consumer engagement on their corporate Instagram account following the introduction of Colonel Sanders as a virtual influencer. Unfortunately, it was a short-lived

[4] https://www.instagram.com/astrolovesu/

[5] For further details please see the following link: https://www.wk.com/work/kfc-virtual-colonel/.

communication feature, and KFC returned to their regularly scheduled corporate social media programming, which resulted in an intense drop in consumer engagement.

Besides Colonel Sanders, Daisy from YOOX and Lu Do Magalu from Luiza constitute two other examples of branded and firm-owned influencers. More recently, Prada created Candy, a humanlike purple eyed virtual muse associated with their eponym perfume; while Barbie, the famous Mattel's doll, gave birth to a VTuber creating beauty content with more than 10M channel subscribers. It is interesting to note that the social media management of these brand-owned virtual influencers varies from one brand to another, ranging from the creation of a new dedicated social platform (e.g., Barbie) to taking over of the brands' existing online space (e.g., KFC).

Beyond these three strategies, given their very nature of artificial creations, virtual influencers have been positioned with various benefits vis-à-vis their human influencer counterparts. First, they provide a good opportunity for brands to differentiate and escape the followers' fatigue of collaboration with human lifestyle influencers. Indeed, virtual influencers provide very sophisticated and unlimited possibilities of content that might range from an alien endorser to a burning dress on a catwalk. Given their unique and often unexpected features, this type of content can be particularly appealing to younger audiences. More prosaically, their posts and stories are readily available online 24/7 all over the world, and hence they offer a practical solution to battle the physical limitations of humans. Similarly, virtual influencers do not require rest and sleep and do not have health-related concerns that might otherwise limit their availability.

Given their targeted positioning from an early stage, virtual influencers are highly adaptable to specific brand requests which enables closer alignment with target groups offering customized engagements and experiences (Robinson 2020). And as a particularly relevant point for firms, virtual influencers represent reduced PR risks and offline personal

life scandals which in the case of their human counterparts might easily spill over to the online persona (Duffy & Hund, 2019). As a result, the engagement rate associated with virtual influencers tend to be – on average – three times higher than that of humans.

At any rate, virtual influencers do not only bring benefits along with them. In particular, their over-controlled communication might present certain limitations by jeopardizing the emotional connection between influencers and their community, which is one of the pivotal affordances of human influencers (Duffy and Hund 2019). As an example, the developmental growth of Miquela's followers has been slower than that of other human influencers with a similar follower base, which tends to corroborate this idea. This slowdown might explain why Dapper Labs, the managing entity behind this Brazilian-American virtual opinion leader, is working to renew their strategy to boost her followers' involvement. In particular, the research driven by Moustakas et al. (2020) suggest that sharing an engaging and woven storyline might be able to humanize virtual influencers. Indeed, the narrative of conflicts, relationships, personal goals, and desires seem to be very effective in establishing an emotional connection with followers. Hence, the challenge brands face to maintain and develop virtual influencer personas would entail finding innovative ways to humanizing them.

6. Avenues for future research

When having informal discussions with people (students, experts, marketing professionals) about virtual influencers, one of the greatest intrigues concerns the very reason why people might be motivated to follow such a fake digital persona that does not even exist. Indeed, this question is at the core of the development of virtual influencers and as such opens various avenues for future research. For instance, a vast body of research focusing on human influencers points to authenticity as a key factor to influencer success (Lee and Eastin 2021; Pöyry et al. 2019). Nonetheless, according to Robinson (2020), given that human influencers

also face issues surrounding their authenticity, the absence of the existence of virtual influencers and entirely fake identity and artificial nature might not pose a problem for their followers. In particular, given their exposure to AI-enabled technology from a relatively young age, Gen Z consumers might not be as preoccupied with the question of authenticity, making such a generational shift worthy of investigation.

A second issue relates to the importance of consumer literacy. Indeed, one might expect consumers to be more willing to push their comfort zones towards this new form of media in the future, for two reasons. On the one hand, consumer awareness about and acceptance towards social media influencers are increasing, indicating that people at large tend to be more familiar and comfortable with influencers. On the other hand, thanks to the enhanced technological literacy of consumers, within our era of innovative tools like social bots – referring to computer algorithms that automatically produce content (Appel et al. 2020), people are now able to manage fluent conversations and interactions with AI-driven technology to the extent that they might not even realize that they are not interacting with a human. It might be interesting to explore further how these new comfort zones might impact consumer expectations in terms of their interactions with virtual influencers.

One of the latest virtual influencer trends pertains to characters created, managed and owned by brands. A closer look reveals that linking a virtual influencer directly to the company as an employee, instead of having a virtual influencer solely campaigning for a single product, might be a promising strategic direction. As an illustration, Kenna is a girl bot intern at Essence Cosmetics who posts content on Instagram related to both her personal and professional life. Offering an office backstage to her followers, she is promoting Essence Cosmetics products as well as the company as an employer. This approach could ultimately be linked to an employee advocacy strategy, where employees are expected to become the firm's ambassadors or spokespersons through their professional and personal social networks.

In this sense, virtual employee advocacy offers a new path for research worthy of further exploration.

Another interesting area of inquiry concerns the future of the Metaverse and its impact on virtual influencers. According to Yonatan Ben Shimon, the founder of theVirtualEstate.net., "the Metaverse is a collective virtual shared space including the sum of all virtual worlds, augmented reality, and the Internet as a whole." Illustrating its diverse affordances, the Metaverse offers opportunities for innovative workplaces, gaming platforms, social spaces and virtual markets (Boyd and Koles 2019). As such, the Metaverse can be associated with the development of new types of digital goods and possessions (Koles and Nagy 2021), with particular attention to virtual art (verified piece of digital or graphic work stored and tokenized on the blockchain) and digital fashion (the visual representation of clothing built using computer technologies and 3D software). Moreover, the Metaverse can give space for venues to host virtual concerts run by virtual artists, which could be easily combined with virtual influencers.

From the consumer angle, these new consumption patterns might be somewhat unusual or unconventional at first, and here virtual influencers might offer an effective gateway between the two worlds. Because virtual influencers already live in the virtual ecosystem of the Metaverse, they might be able to provide legitimate advice to consumers regarding their digital purchases, similarly to the way their human counterparts do so in their offline existence. A specific opportunity arises within the digital fashion arena where clothing is entirely virtual and is not necessarily designed to be replicated in a physical format. Virtual influencers could become the legitimate models to showcase brands' virtual merchandise and inform their followers about new trends and tricks on how to dress their avatars. Although this point is increasingly recognized in industry-centered outlets[6], future academic research could

[6] Concrete examples can be found on the link: https://www.nssgclub.com/en/fashion/23083/digital-influencer-fashion-industry.

dwell further into examining the new role virtual influencers could play as ambassadors and counselors in the Metaverse.

Along these lines, the development of virtual influencers continues to blur the fine line between entertainment and advertising. For instance, cartoon influencers might be seen as a new form of entertaining content easily comparable with traditional animated cartoon fiction. The notable difference is that they have been created for a commercial purpose. Thus, virtual influencers envisioned as the ultimate commodification of entertainment is an important topic to explore in order to anticipate potentially misleading perceptions and ensure consumer well-being.

Importantly, virtual influencers tend to share content that is rich and often more immersive than the ones shared by their human counterparts. While regulations associated with social media influencers have been developed in most countries encouraging them to disclose their relationships with brands, as of now apart from India, the activities of virtual influencers are not yet regulated. In its influencer guidelines released in July 2021, Indian authorities included for the first time a specific reference to virtual influencers: in addition to the disclosure rules applicable to human influencers, virtual influencers (and their managing entities) are required to disclose to consumers that they are not interacting with a real human being. Such type of disclosure and its impact need to be assessed, as well as potential complementary or alternative rules; a topic that is particularly relevant in the case of influencers that resemble humans.

Finally, virtual influencers mark an important new stage in terms of content creation. Indeed, human influencers developed in large part thanks to the easy access to a wide range of content creation tools, which lead many consumers to become online creators. The creation and maintenance of virtual influencers assume specific high-level technical expertise and AI-based skills, which might present an obstacle when aiming for more sophisticated content that

only highly specialized and tech-savvy people might be able to develop. Future research could explore ways in which the emergence of new major actors – similarly to Dapper Labs or the Diigitals – might lead the way here and ultimately bring consumers closer to virtual influencers.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of the current chapter was to extend our understanding of virtual influencers within the area of interactive marketing. Social media influencers have been prominent contributors to the marketing strategy of many firms, but substantially less is known about the impact and role of their virtual counterparts. This chapter started by introducing social media influencers and the relationship their followers are likely to form with them. It continued with a detailed review and concrete cases of prominent virtual influencers, highlighting their diversity in terms of appearance, target audience and type of brand collaboration. Then the authors shared some insights gathered on the basis of a set of semi-structured interviews conducted with young consumers to understand their general influencer following behaviors on Instagram as well as their perceptions of opinion concerning virtual influencers.

The authors moved onto taking the perspective of brands and offering concrete recommendations as to how companies might choose to collaborate with virtual influencers capturing different levels of engagement; ranging from partnerships and sponsorships at the lowest engagement level, advancing to recurrent collaborations, and concluding with ownership at the highest engagement level where brands develop their very own interactive mascots. The chapter concludes by sharing ideas for interesting research projects that might help advance scholarship as well as practice in this innovative but nascent industry. The authors are confident that new and exciting further innovations will be launched shortly with

the progress and appreciation of the affordances enabled by the Metaverse, which should trigger additional ease and acceptance on behalf of consumers towards these virtual opinion leaders.

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Glossary

Chatbot: A form of AI able to simulate and process humanlike conversations in natural language.

Digital ecosystem: A complex interconnected network comprised of different stakeholders, including – but not limited to – brands, consumers, influencers, followers, digital agencies, and social media platforms.

Influencer marketing: Is a form of social media marketing that builds on endorsements and promotions of products and services made by influencers in their domain of interest and expertise shared via posts or blogs on social media platforms made available to followers.

Metaverse: Enabled by AR and VR technology, refers to a fully online and persistent 3D universe representing a network of virtual worlds and spaces where people can work, play and socialize.

Parasocial interactions: Feeling of companionship or illusion of friendship with celebrities or media figures.

Robot: Machine that is controlled by a computer.

Social media influencer: Individuals who gained popularity due to their social media presence and shared content, including Instafamous opinion leaders, bloggers, Tik Tokers and YouTubers.

Virtual influencer: Entirely artificial and computer-generated images or avatars developed and maintained by specialist experts and digital agencies. Their appearance can embrace a range of human-like, animal-like, cartoon-like or completely random or alien characteristics.

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