Beyond Pixels: Unveiling the Dangers of Feminized Virtual Avatars in Fashion

A Critical Visual Analysis of Shudu Gram and Miquela Sousa

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Abstract

This research focuses on the use of feminized virtual avatars (FVAs) in the fashion industry and explores the risk of using FVAs for the appropriation and exploitation of marginalized communities and identities. Through a critical visual analysis of the virtual avatars Shudu Gram and Miquela Sousa, this study analyzes how they are made to represent gendered and racialized women's bodies. The research aims to understand how the representations of FVAs reflect and influence power dynamics and social inequalities. This thesis found that the representations of Shudu and Miquela reflect and reinforce racial stereotypes, perpetuate gender inequalities, and uphold unrealistic beauty standards. Moreover, their representations of a Black woman and a Latina reinforce the exotification and Othering of Black women and Latinas, reducing their identities to a commodified aesthetic. Furthermore, the sexualized representations of Shudu and Miquela reinforce gender stereotypes and power imbalances. Finally, the lack of agency and autonomy in FVAs further complicates objectifying and exotifying portrayals. This research's theoretical and practical implications emphasize the need for critical analysis, ethical considerations, and inclusive practices in using FVAs. The study highlights the importance of critically analyzing FVAs and their implications within the context of gendered colonial legacies and structural inequalities.

Keywords: *feminized virtual avatars, postcolonial theory, intersectionality, critical visual analysis, the Exotic Other*

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1. Introduction

The objection, commodification, oppression, and exploitation of women's bodies have a long history. This trend continues in contemporary capitalist societies that use women's bodies to promote products for brands, for instance, on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. As these platforms became more complex and managed to connect people worldwide, users with large followings (influencers) decided to leverage their popularity by striking deals with brands to promote their products. Over the years, the number of influencers has grown exponentially. However, a new development is that some influencers do not exist outside the digital realm. Virtual influencers are hyper-realistic digital avatars created with three-dimensional computer-generated imagery (CGI) technology, often given a unique personality and backstory by the teams behind them (Travers, 2020). Virtual avatars provide an innovative way for CGI artists as well as companies to generate an income off the identities that their avatars are designed to represent. CGI models and influencers have gained a substantial following on social media and worked with well-known brands to promote their products (Travers, 2020). While some are excited to see what virtual influencers can bring, others are critical of what virtual avatars represent and what certain representations might reinforce (Jackson, 2018; Klein, 2020; Neri, 2022; Sobande, 2021). While sexualized depictions of women's bodies might sell products, they also invite a particular way of seeing women, femmes, and female-presenting people[1] that impacts how they are seen and treated. A culture that objectifies women's bodies dehumanizes and discredits them (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gervais & Eagan, 2017; Vaes et al., 2011). Moreover, objectification is linked to increased physical aggression, sexual violence, and rape victim blame towards objectified women (Davidson & Gervais, 2015; Gervais & Eagan, 2017; Loughnan et al., 2013; Vasquez et al., 2018; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016).

Furthermore, the long colonial history of the West[2] continues to influence who holds power to objectify, oppress and exploit others and who does not. Colonial legacies created inequalities based on the hierarchical positioning of social groups based on social differences like ethnic ancestry, skin color, and race. There are still numerous ways in which these legacies

[1] Throughout the thesis, whenever 'women' are mentioned, this does not imply just cis-gender women but all people who identify with the label in one way or another. Furthermore, female-presenting people who might not identify with a female gender identity could still suffer from how others perceive their bodies and how others assume their bodies should look based on the female gender they are perceived to have.

[2] This thesis uses Mohanty's conceptualization of 'the West' to refer to the United States of America and Western Europe (Mohanty, 2003, p.17).

favor one body over another and, as a result, uphold a power dynamic that sees racialized bodies through a white lens and places them at a disadvantage (Loomba, 2015; Mohanty, 2003; Tate, 2015). Furthermore, these legacies privilege white bodies and render deviating bodies as inferior racialized 'Others' (Hall, 1997). Moreover, exotification, so deeply ingrained in the West, can often disguise itself as a positive representation of diversity (Mohany, 2003).

When virtual avatars represent women's bodies as racialized and sexualized, it raises questions of appropriation, (mis-)representation, authenticity, and power dynamics within virtual worlds. This thesis will focus on two leading virtual avatars, Shudu Gram and Miquela Sousa. Recognizing the intersection of 'race' and 'gender' is crucial to understand the construction, representation, and perceptions of their bodies. In this thesis, I refer to Shudu and Miquela as feminized virtual avatars (FVAs) rather than female avatars to highlight that they did not choose their gender but were given a gender identity by their creators based on their creator's understanding of this gender identity. Shudu, as a virtual model, and Miquela, as a virtual influencer, are closely linked to the fashion industry, notorious for its problematic power dynamics and lack of diverse representation of bodies (Entwistle, 2000; Mears, 2010; Wissinger, 2012). This thesis highlights the risk of the fashion industry using FVAs to profit from and appropriate marginalized communities and identities while excluding them. As gendered colonial legacies and structural inequalities continue to shape people's experiences in the West, it is crucial to critique new modes of appropriating women's bodies.

1.1 Aim and research questions

This thesis explores how using FVAs in the fashion industry can appropriate and exploit marginalized communities and identities. The thesis highlights how avatars represent intersectional identities and how their representation reflects and influences power relations and societal inequalities. It does so by conducting a critical visual analysis grounded in feminist postcolonial and intersectional theories, objectification theory, and Goffman's theory on gendered advertisements. In this thesis, I aim to explore how Shudu and Miquela are made to represent marginalized identities and what message their representation sends out. The overarching research question of this thesis is; *How can feminized virtual avatars in the fashion industry be understood to appropriate and exploit marginalized communities and identities?* answered with the help of three interconnected sub-research questions that guide the analysis, namely:

- *Whose identities are Shudu and Miquela made to represent, and how?*
- *How can their representation be understood in terms of appropriation?*
- *And how does this contribute to the exploitation of marginalized communities and identities?*

1.2 Positionality

Feminist research and critical visual analysis encourage researchers to reflect on how their lived experiences and cultural background shape their research (Rose, 2007). Knowledge comes from positional perspectives, and our positionality determines the limits of our knowledge and understanding of a topic (Harraway, 1988). In visual analysis, one's positionality might shape how an image is seen and what is seen and overlooked, which is why it is essential to clarify through which lens I am looking. What sparked my interest in researching feminized virtual avatars like Shudu and Miquela is that we work in the same industry. I have worked as a model in the fashion industry for over twelve years. Not only have I spent almost half my life working in the fashion industry, but I have also done extensive research on the fashion industry and its treatment of models during my bachelor studies. While my working experience can benefit a deeper understanding of posing and how certain poses draw attention to particular body parts, it can also make me overlook certain representational practices because I am too familiar with them. My previous research into fashion models has been highly critical of racial discrimination. Still, being a white woman, I acknowledge that I may overlook certain representations that perpetuate stereotypes or appropriate cultures that I have not personally experienced. My upbringing took place in a small conservative Christian town, and it is an ongoing effort to unlearn the racism, exotification, and 'Othering' practices taught.

1.3 Background

Like any technology, the CGI technology behind virtual avatars is not inherently good or bad. Instead, the way avatars are designed and used determines the impact they might have. Shudu and Miquela have sparked controversies in the past years for appropriating and exploiting the features and stories of marginalized identities, particularly those of Black and Latina women. This section will address their origins and some of the public criticisms they received in the media. The material used for this section includes material gathered from the respective

Instagram accounts of the avatars as well as online articles by newspapers that capture the controversies faced by the avatars.

Shudu Gram

Shudu Gram is a CGI model created by British male photographer Cameron-James Wilson as part of his virtual modeling agency, The Diigitals (Jackson, 2018). At the time of writing, Shudu has over 239.000 followers (e.g., individuals that follow her content) on Instagram under her[3] account @shudu.gram (Shudu Gram, 2017). Shudu is a dark-skinned avatar with short hair and a tall and slim figure. Wilson modeled Shudu after the Princess of South Africa Barbie doll and said she originates from the Ndebele tribe in South Africa, famed for its tradition of wearing neck rings (Jackson, 2018). Wilson's all-digital modeling agency, 'The Diigitals, ' works like a traditional modeling agency in that the CGI models are booked for fashion advertisements and have their bodies used for marketing purposes. However, a significant difference is that whereas human models only share a certain percentage of their income with their agents, Wilson will receive all income generated by the models he created.

A year after her creation, Wilson did an interview with Harper's Bazaar magazine, stating that although she is not a living and breathing model, "she represents a lot of the real models of today," continuing that there is a big movement with dark skin models "so she represents them and is inspired by them" (Rosenstein, 2018). A white man creating an avatar to depict a black woman and claiming she represents black women sparked a lot of debates. That same year, journalist and assistant professor Lauren Michele Jackson called Shudu 'a white man's digital projection of real-life black womanhood' and cited social theorist Patricia Hill Collins, who called Shudu an image contrived by a white man who has noticed the 'movement' of dark-skinned women (Jackson, 2018). Moreover, Cresci (2018) argues that CGI models like Shudu remove job opportunities and spaces from 'real' [4] Black women. This public discourse around Shudu is essential to understand when looking at whom she is made to represent, by whom and how this representation is received.

[3] Throughout the thesis, I use she/her pronouns for Shudu and Miquela, as these are the pronouns ascribed to them in their respective social media representations. Nevertheless, I want to acknowledge that, being avatars, Shudu and Miquela lack gender identities. Therefore, these pronouns are simply used to facilitate the discussion surrounding the avatars.

[4] In discussions about CGI models and influencers, they are often compared to "real" women. Using the word "real" calls for a discussion of what makes a human model more real than a virtual model, what is realness when discussing visual representations of "real" or virtual women? As this thesis does not delve into a philosophical discussion of realness, I will avoid using the term "real" and instead refer to models with physical bodies as human models or models existing offline.

Miquela Sousa

Miquela Sousa is a CGI influencer created by the Los Angeles-based company Brud. At the time of writing, 2,8 million people follow her Instagram account @lilmiquela (Miquela Sousa, 2016). Miquela is positioned as a model, singer, and activist and is said to be of Brazilian-American origin (Jackson, 2018). She appeared on Instagram in 2016 as one of the first virtual influencers ever created. However, she was not revealed as a virtual avatar until 2018, long after her initial release. Moreover, her Instagram bio falsely describes her as a "19-year-old Robot living in LA', insinuating she exists outside the digital realm. In contrast to Shudu, Miquela comes with an elaborate life story and set of political beliefs created by Brud. Besides promoting products and services, Miquela shares political statements that supposedly reflect her activism. For example, she signifies that she is connected to the Black Lives Matter movement by prominently using their hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) in her Instagram bio (Miquela Sousa, 2016).

In 2019 Miquela sparked controversy and anger after a vlog was uploaded in which Miquela claimed to be sexually assaulted by a man in a rideshare (Wakefield, 2019). Twitter users critiqued how Miquela's creators preyed on the very real experiences of women in a futile attempt to make her seem more relatable (Wakefield, 2019). This controversy happened only a couple of months after a controversial Calvin Klein advertisement in 2019 faced backlash. In this advertisement, Miquela kisses human model Bella Hadid, which led to accusations of queerbaiting. Queerbaiting refers to a marketing strategy that involves teasing or suggesting same-sex romance without actually portraying it to attract a queer audience while avoiding potential backlash from heterosexual consumers. Just a day after the ad came out, the brand apologized for choosing to represent LGBTQ+ with Miquela and Bella Hadid, who identifies as heterosexual (Cranley, 2019).

2. Previous research

This section is an extensive literature review of research that helps to understand how Shudu and Miquela build on previous historical depictions of the women they are made to represent and the risk that objectifying and racialized representations bring to the lived experiences of objectified and racialized people. Given the density of the literature review, I will summarize the essence of the different sections and their importance for this research.

The first section focuses on the representation of the female body in contemporary mainstream media in the West, objectification practices, and the risks associated with objectification and self-objectification for women, femmes, and female-presenting people. This section is crucial as it lays the basis for how women's bodies are represented today and historically.

The second section builds on this but examines objectifying representations of female bodies in virtual worlds and how these representations have real-life consequences for individuals with female-presenting bodies. Given that Shudu and Miquela are virtual representations of women, it is crucial to understand how other FVAs' representations have impacted lived experiences of people.

The third section discusses criticism of objectification theory for its focus on white female bodies and its failure to consider the complexities of other identity markers such as ethnicity, sexuality, and class. It emphasizes the importance of an intersectional approach when studying sexualization stereotypes. Additionally, it mentions studies that specifically examine the racialization and sexualization of Black and Latina women's representations in Western contexts. As Shudu and Miquela depict a Black and a Latina woman, it is essential to look at how racism and exotification have influenced how Black women and Latinas have historically been represented in the media.

The fourth section addresses how women of color are represented in the fashion industry. This context is critical as Shudu and Miquela are mainly used in the fashion industry. In addition, this section emphasizes how the industry's representations often rely on racial and sexual stereotypes of the exotic Other - furthermore, the fashion industry's tradition of exotifying and appropriating Othered bodies and cultures.

Finally, section five explores the current research on virtual avatars like Shudu and Miquela. The research highlights the ethical concerns surrounding the representation of Black women and Latinas without involving or compensating Black women and Latinas. It also discusses the implications of these avatars perpetuating narrow beauty standards. However, one study argues that there is no meaningful difference between virtual and human influencers, which invites a debate about the ethical construction of identity and the consequences for trust in online spaces.

2.1 Representations of the body, objectification, and its consequences

Contemporary mainstream media in the West tends to portray women and female sexuality in a manner that focuses on physical attractiveness and sexual appeal to others (Ward, 2016). Furthermore, women are frequently shown in submissive positions (Goffman, 1976; Millard & Grant, 2006) or typical feminine poses that depict women as indolent, infantile, and sexualized (Belknap & Leonard, 1991; Goffman, 1976; Tortajada et al., 2013). Erving Goffman's study of gender advertisements (1976) is pioneering research that examines how gender roles are represented and reinforced in print advertisements. Goffman's research has been influential in drawing attention to how advertising constructs and reinforces gender identities and upholds gendered power imbalances. Furthermore, it encourages critical examination of gender representation in media and popular culture. Complementary to Goffman's study of gender advertisements, Susan Bordo's (1993) book The Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body is a collection of essays that examines how cultural products promote a form of dualism between mind and body which harms how people see women's bodies. Moreover, Bordo (1993) points out how sexism, racism, and ageism continue to have normalizing influences in Western culture. She argues that we learn what "a woman should look like through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior are required" (p. 170).

Many scholars critique the representation of women's bodies in the West. *Objectification theory* argues that the focus of Western societies on women's bodies and their sexual attractiveness, rather than on their perspectives, ideas, and emotions, objectifies and dehumanizes women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Loughnan et al., 2010; Vaes et al., 2011). Objectification theory is a *theoretical framework* developed by psychologists Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts to understand the harmful effects of objectifying experiences, particularly on women. The theory suggests that when individuals are depicted as objects or commodities through sexualization or certain media representations, individuals are more likely to internalize the objectifying lens and adopt it towards themselves and others (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). Since the theory's publishing in 1997, many scholars have used the concepts of *objectification* and *self-objectification* to understand how the depictions of female bodies in Western societies have consequences for the lived experiences of women, femmes, and female-presenting people.

A multitude of studies has pointed to how the sexual objectification of women is often a red thread in various forms of sexual violence against women[5], such as harassment, assault, and rape (Davidson & Gervais, 2015; Gervais & Eagan, 2017; Vasquez et al., 2018; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016). Additionally, (self-) objectification leads to greater *rape myth acceptance* (e.g., the belief in harmful stereotypes about rape that often place blame on the victim) and the view that objectified survivors suffer less from sexual violence (Burt, 1980; Fox et al., 2015; Loughnan et al., 2013). Moreover, self-objectification is linked to decreased mental health, such as shame around the body, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Grabe et al., 2007; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012). Therefore, the findings of these studies are essential as they highlight the dangers of objectification and self-objectification caused by stereotypical and sexualized representations of female bodies in the media.

2.2 The (online) media we consume.

While FVAs are relatively new in the fashion industry, they are commonplace within virtual worlds such as video games. In these virtual worlds, FVAs are often portrayed in stereotypical and sexualized ways (Fox et al., 2013, 2015; Fox & Bailenson, 2009; Institute of Digital Fashion, 2021; Nowak et al., 2015) and thus contribute to the objectification of women, femmes, and female-presenting individuals. The objectification of virtual women has shown to have real-life consequences as numerous studies have found that when users interact with sexualized female characters in video games, men are more likely to objectify women (Yao et al., 2010), engage in online sexual harassment towards a female partner (Burney et al., 2019), become more tolerant to sexual harassment in real-life (Dill et al., 2008), and users overall show greater rape myth acceptance (Dill et al., 2008; Driesmans et al., 2015; Fox et al., 2015). Moreover, when women interact with or embody sexualized FVAs, it increases their self-objectification level (Fox et al., 2013, 2015). In their 2018 study, Feltman and Szymanski showed that the correlation between Instagram use and body surveillance and self-objectification was specifically mediated by internalizing cultural beauty standards and engaging in upward appearance comparison. Moreover, the impact of Instagram usage on body surveillance depends on an individual's feminist beliefs.

[5] It is important to note that most of the literature focuses on women as a hegemonic group and do not reflect on how using the category women, which links sex and gender, is a social and cultural construct. This thesis argues that the consequences theorized to affect cisgender women also affect femmes and people with female-presenting bodies.

These findings underscore the relevance of being critical of how women's bodies are represented online and offline. This thesis argues that if FVAs in the fashion industry continue the stereotypical and objectifying representation of women's bodies, it could have consequences for women, femmes, and female-presenting people offline. As iterated by Nowak et al. (2015), those who use and design avatars must be aware of the broader implications that the design of avatars might have and what message their representation conveys (p. 264).

2.3 Racialization and the exotified 'Other'

A critique of objectification theory is that it centers on the experiences of white women and overlooks how other identity markers, such as ethnicity, sexuality, or class, can further affect objectification experiences and the related consequences. Given the interconnectedness of different identity markers and people's unique experiences of oppression, it is impossible to isolate one kind of oppression (e.g., objectification due to a female body) without de-contextualizing the other (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989; Watson et al., 2012).

Research by Bielefield et al.'s (2021) on how sexualization, body types, and race influence the stereotypes about women supports the need for an intersectional approach. The study found that sexualized women's stereotypes can differ based on how their identities and other features are seen, as well as who is looking (Bielefield et al., 2021). Thus, this study highlights the need for an intersectional approach when researching sexualized stereotypes. For instance, the sexual objectification experiences of Black women and women of color are often intertwined with discriminatory and oppressive processes based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, and social class. As Shudu and Miquela are made to depict a Black and a Latina woman, it is essential to be aware of how Black and Latina women[6] historically have been represented in the media. Moreover, how these depictions are influenced by processes such as racism and exotification.

By conducting interviews, Watson et al. (2012) found that the objectification experiences of African American women were not only rooted in sexism but further complicated by racism and classism. Moreover, the sexual objectification of African American women has a long history dating back to slavery, where they were likened to animals and considered subhuman with uncontrollable sexual appetites (Collins, 2004; Hooks, 1992). This

[6] The thesis acknowledges that Black women and Latinas are not homogenous groups, instead these women encompass diverse and multifaceted identities. However, for the discussion, broader categorizations of Black women and Latinas are used for situating and contextualizing the avatars of Shudu and Miquela within this broader understanding of identity and representation.

history is essential when looking at contemporary depictions of Black women and how they might reflect a visual history that reinforces these stereotypes. A significant body of work is the book *Black Women's Bodies and the Nation* (2015) by British professor Shirley Anne Tate, which explores how the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality shape the experiences and (historical) representations of Black women's bodies in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Caribbean. Tate's (2015) book provides a decolonial lens through which to look at historical representations of the Exotified 'Other' and how this might be reflected in contemporary depictions of Black women such as Shudu.

Stuart Hall has problematized the construction of the 'Other' in *A Spectacle of the Other* (1997), where he examines and critiques how differentiation practices based on race, ethnicity, nationality, or cultural practices and the exotification and essentialization of those differences construct an 'Other' through stereotyping. The chapter explores how signifying practices structure how we look and how representational practices inscribe different modes of looking. An exotified Other allows the dominant culture, which holds power and control over representation, to construct a simplified and often distorted depiction of these Othered individuals or groups, focusing on their perceived exotic or "strange" characteristics. In visual representations, this can mean that stereotypical elements such as traditional clothing and physical features are highlighted in a way that they are not for subjects of the dominant culture. Hall's conceptualization of the exotified other is useful, especially when doing a visual analysis that looks for the meanings created by certain representations.

Finding literature on Latinas' representation is challenging since most literature on Latine representation has focused on men (Brooks & Hébert, 2012). Although there is little research, Brooks and Hébert (2012) found that Latinas are often portrayed as sexualized Exotic 'Others.' In 2016, Martynuska explored gendered signifiers surrounding Latinidad and Latina iconicity in the United States. The study found that tropicalization and the erasure of ethnic specificity help construct homogenous stereotypes and position the Latina body as overtly sexual and sexually available (Martynuska, 2016). Signifiers of sexual readiness in Latina iconicity are seductive clothing, the showing of round hips and breasts, long brunette hair, or extravagant jewelry (Martynuska, 2016). In her study, Martynuska (2016) found that cinematic representations of Latina actresses focus on their sensual bodies and sexuality. Additionally, popular images of Latina bodies revolve around racialization, sexualization, exoticization, and tropicalization (Martynuska, 2016). One industry that perpetuates racial stereotypes and exotification of non-white women's bodies is the fashion industry.

2.4 Gendered and racialised stereotypes in the fashion industry

Given Shudu and Miquela's position as women of color working in the fashion industry, examining how this industry has represented women of color is helpful. For decades Black, Brown, Latin, Asian, and Indigenous models have not been given the same opportunities in the fashion industry as white models (Entwistle, 2000; Mears, 2010; Wissinger, 2012). They have been systematically excluded and made to conform to racial stereotypes their agents and clients might have about them (Wissinger, 2012). Through interviews and participant observation, Wissinger's (2012) research on fashion models in New York City found that the aesthetic labor performed by fashion models was further complicated by their skin color and presumed racial identity. The "white gaze" of the fashion industry requires Black models to strategically minimize or maximize their racial characteristics or Otherness to increase their marketability and play into a particular 'look' (Wissinger, 2012).

Furthermore, when Black models emphasize their Otherness, they are sometimes expected to play into racial stereotypes or "perform" clients' expectations of what Black should look like (Wissinger, 2012, p. 13). As a result:

> Black models create images that reinforce existing stereotypes, either by idealizing Caucasian facial features and hair types or by playing into various types of bigoted imagery they may find distasteful, yet feel they must accept if they are to work in the industry at all. (Wissinger, 2012, p. 14).

In other words, showing resistance to stereotypes might lead to job loss. Moreover, in her research, Wissinger (2012) points to how the conception of "looks" allows the fashion industry to avoid accountability and mask the underlying racism behind hiring choices often based on how closely a model's look confirms white beauty ideals.

In chapter four of bell hooks (1992) book *Black Looks*, she argues that contemporary representations of Black women's bodies often fail to challenge or subvert the historical images of black women's sexuality rooted in 19th-century racism and that racist depictions of black women's sexuality continue to shape perceptions today. In the context of fashion magazines, she argues that although Black women are finally given a place in magazines, their representation often must full fill racial and sexual stereotypes of the exotic Other (hooks, 2014). Moreover, when magazines started including darker-skinned models, bi-racial and fair-skinned black models with blond or light-brown hair were preferred, as they resembled their white counterparts the closest (hooks, 1992, p. 72). These observations align with Wissinger's

(2012) findings that black models must either resemble whiteness or actively present themselves as an exotic Other. This thesis will use the research on the representation of non-white bodies as exotic Others to argue that the fashion industry uses processes of exotification to appropriate Othered bodies and cultures.

2.5 Appropriation, beauty standards and FVAs

Due to the novelty of virtual avatars such as Shudu and Miquela, finding previous peer-reviewed research has proven challenging. However, two papers, one mentioning Shudu and the other focusing on Miquela, draw attention to how these avatars appropriate Black women and Latinas' lived experiences and features. Sobande's (2021) paper mentions Shudu from the standpoint that spectacularized digital representations of Black people and Blackness are inherently anti-Black. She argues that creators of CGI avatars like Shudu can project messages about so-called racial diversity and profit off of Black identity while platforming their work without ever involving or paying real Black people (Sobande, 2021). Research by Neri (2022) concurs with Sobade (2021) as she argues that the racialized design of the virtual avatar Miquela, whose features are made to represent Latina women, appropriate mixed-race features and undermines the representation of real Latina women.

Furthermore, she argues that these mixed-race features, deliberately chosen and put together by Miquela's creators at Brud, uphold contemporary beauty standards and Eurocentric beauty ideals (Neri, 2022). However, returning to Martynuska's (2016) paper, she argues that Latina icons, with their hybrid identities, challenge the Eurocentric standards of racial purity and present new notions of authenticity. These papers are valuable as they point out how virtual avatars are racialized, which raises ethical questions about what it means when people do this racialization from their privileged position.

Additionally, researchers have pointed towards the possibility of flawless anthropomorphic figures in the digital realm causing harm to women's body image. A critical analysis of female virtual influencers' body image and stereotype depictions by Ji et al. (2022) found female virtual influencers spread the myth of the "immaculate body" that creates an unattainable expectation of perfection for women's bodies. Neri (2022) argues that Miquela's mix of African and Eurocentric features might present an ideal version of what Black and Brown women should look like that offline women can never attain. However, not all scholars see virtual influencers as more problematic than human influencers. Taking Miquela as a case study, Robinson (2020) argues that no meaningful moral difference distinguishes virtual avatars

from natural, 'real life' influencers. Rather than focusing on issues of body image, racialization, and sexualization presented by virtual influencers, Robinson (2020) is interested in how virtual influencers raise general questions about whether individuals are responsible for the truthful construction of their identities online.

As CGI influencers are becoming more prevalent in consumer culture, Sobane (2021) argues that further studies on digital avatars, their appeal to companies and consumer audiences, and the ways in which this is related to market-driven concepts of racial identity are necessary. This thesis aims to contribute to this research gap by doing a critical visual analysis of avatars, their representation's message, and signifiers of their racialized identities. It also contributes to critical analyses of stereotypical gender depictions as they present themselves in Shudu and Miquela.

3. Theoretical framework

The critical visual analysis of Shudu and Miquela is shaped through the lens of intersectional and postcolonial theories. Moreover, objectification theory and Goffman's study of gender advertisements form a basis for how representations of the body reinforce gender stereotypes. These theories help examine how objectifying gender stereotypes are further shaped by a matrix of intersecting identities grounded in a rich colonial history that has created structural inequalities based on 'racial' differences.

3.1 Postcolonial theories and intersectionality

Western societies often claim to have moved past their colonial history and are supposedly no longer racist. However, structural and institutional inequalities continue based on perceptions of 'racial' differences (Loomba, 2015, p.113). Feminist postcolonial theory helps look at how colonial legacies have exotified and objectified colonized bodies and continue to shape the lived experiences of racialized bodies. It provides a critical perspective to analyze how the racialized and gendered bodies of Shudu and Miquela echo the exotified and objectified representations of colonized bodies. These avatars can be seen as modern appropriations of Black and Brown women's bodies through this lens. Therefore, I will heavily rely on Tate's (2015) book *Black Women's Bodies and The Nation* for the postcolonial perspective. In this book, British professor Shirley Anne Tate adopts a decolonial positioning to examine how the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality shape Black women's experiences with and representations of their bodies in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Caribbean.

Her book is crucial for critically analyzing how Black women are racialized and sexualized in Western representations of them. The book helps examine historical depictions of the exotified "Other" and how they might be reflected in modern-day representations of Black women, like Shudu.

Where feminist postcolonial theory can highlight whose perspectives and stories have been historically excluded from feminist discourse, intersectional theory can complement this perspective with its theoretical understanding of how intersecting identities create unique experiences of oppression and power dynamics. Intersectionality was coined in 1989 by legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw. Her paper (Crenshaw, 1989) argues that conventional approaches to understanding discrimination, such as those based on race or gender, fail to account for the lived experiences of individuals who face intersecting forms of discrimination. The intersectional theory is a framework to understand how different forms of discrimination, oppression, and privilege intersect and interact. An intersectional lens recognizes that individuals have multiple identities and fit into multiple social categories that intersect to shape their experience of oppression or privilege (Collins & Bilge, 2016). These identity markers can include ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, class, disability, age, and other factors influencing how they are seen and treated. An intersectional framework emphasizes that individuals are affected by multiple forms of oppression or privilege that intersect and create a unique lived experience. Thus, separating a single form of oppression from its interconnectedness with other forms of oppression decontextualizes it.

As suggested by previous research, an intersection framework is helpful when discussing the representation of online identities and how avatars can be used to exploit marginalized communities. Moreover, Kerner (2017) makes the case that combining intersectional theory with feminist postcolonial theories offers a more sophisticated comprehension of power dynamics, inequalities, and differentiation processes. Where intersectional theory can address how complex intersections of multiple identities shape experiences of oppression, postcolonial theory can place these experiences in the historical context of colonial histories and legacies (Kerner, 2017). This thesis will use Kerner's (2017) suggested combination of intersectional and postcolonial theories as a lens to look at how particular representations of intersectional identities by avatar reinforce inequalities and reflect colonial legacies that created representations of an exotified Other.

3.2 Objectification theory and gendered advertisements

As previously mentioned[7], Objectification is a specific type of dehumanization that focuses on an individual's physical appearance, seeing and treating them as objects rather than people with agency, emotions, and basic humanity. Given this thesis's emphasis on representation, I will focus on the theory's conceptualization of how objectification happens in depictions of women's bodies. Objectification of women's bodies happens when women are reduced to their physical appearance, for example, when only their bodies or body parts are highlighted or when they are portrayed in sexualized ways, such as suggestive poses and lack of clothing (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Goffman's paper on gendered advertisements complements this theory and provides a theoretical framework for examining how advertising creates and maintains gender roles and stereotypes. To understand how societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity are formed, he examines advertisements' visual and symbolic elements. He emphasizes the performative nature of gender and how people are socialized into predetermined gender roles through media representations. The work of Goffman lays the groundwork for a critical examination of gender representation in the media and helps comprehend the power dynamics and societal ramifications of gendered advertising. Like Goffman's theory, objectification theory encourages examining whether the visual representation of women's bodies reinforces or challenges power imbalances, gender stereotypes, and harmful social norms (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

4. Methodology and material

In this section, I will discuss how I collected my material, how I intend to analyze it through critical visual analysis, and some important aspects of critical visual analysis. Furthermore, I will address how semiology, the field of study that focuses on the analysis and interpretation of signs, symbols, and meanings within various forms of communication, can be used to analyze how signs and their relation in visual images can represent and communicate ideas, concepts, and cultural values.

4. 1 Material and method of data collection

For the critical visual analysis of Shudu and Miquela, I chose an image from each public Instagram account and analyzed the symbols within these images. Given that the Instagram

[7] See sections 2.1 and 2.2

accounts of Shudu and Miquela are public, anyone with access to the internet can see the images and videos they upload. Publicly accessible data on Instagram, such as posts, comments, and user profiles, can be collected online. While public data is accessible for analysis, protecting privacy and complying with legal and ethical guidelines is essential, respecting user consent and anonymity. Arguably, privacy protection changes when considering that there is no human with a private life behind the avatars, just a creator pretending there is a human behind the avatar. I will expand on this in section 4.4.

For Shudu, I chose the second picture posted to the account. I chose this image because I was interested in how Wilson decided to 'introduce' Shudu to the world, mainly because the first three pictures posted all included Shudu being nude. For Miquela, there were 1263 posts uploaded to the account, a stark contrast to Shudu's 123 posts, so I chose to pick a recent post.

4.2 Critical Visual Analysis

Visual images are everywhere, and their representations play a significant role in shaping social values, constructing social identities, producing social subjects, and reinforcing or challenging power dynamics (Pollock, 1998). Moreover, they provide a lens through which the world is perceived and given meaning. Critical visual analysis helps us interpret how these different meanings can be represented in visual images.

A few key concepts and understandings require clarification when doing critical visual analysis. First, within visual methodologies, there is a clear distinction between *vision* and *visuality*. *Vision* refers to what the human eye is physiologically capable of seeing, and *visuality* refers to how this vision is constructed by how we see, what we are allowed to see, and how we view our seeing and unseeing (Foster, 1988). Second, visual analysis bases itself on the understanding that one's culture structures how participants make meaning of the world around them and influence how they behave in everyday life. Inevitably, different cultural groups will construct the world through different lenses, bringing forth different interpretations and understandings. In other words, different cultures bring forth different *visualities*.

4.2.1 Five key aspects of critical visual analysis

In her book *Visual Methodologies*, Rose (2007) suggests five aspects of recent literature engaging with visual culture that is valuable in theorizing visual images' social effects. First, there is how images visualize social differences or render them invisible. Looking carefully at

images requires reflection on how images present a specific representation or framing of social categories such as class, sexuality, or ableness.

Secondly, scholars are interested in how images are seen, including how the researcher sees them. 'Taking an image seriously,' as Rose (2007, p. 12) puts it, requires reflection on 'how the image positions you, its viewer, in relation to it'. Images of social difference, according to John Berger (1972) in his book "Ways of Seeing," are effective not only because of what they depict but also because of how we interact with them, 'as we are always looking at the relationship between the thing and ourselves' (p. 9). His most famous example is that of the naked woman in paintings; those who paint her or look at her are active, whereas the woman portrayed appears, she is passive. Berger (1972) argues that this influences the relationship men have with women (they see themselves as active and women as passive objects to be looked at) as well as women to themselves (they see themselves as objects to be looked at). This understanding relates to objectification theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997) which argues that objectifying images of women can internalize an objectifying lens to oneself and other women.

Thirdly, there is an emphasis on how images are embedded within a broader *visual culture*. Related concepts are intermediality and intertextuality, which refer to how visual imagery refers to other visual imagery, such as films, photographs, and paintings, and how texts refer to other written words (Rose, 2007). Understanding how a visual representation relates to the broader visual culture requires understanding culture in a way that can address questions of social relations, differences, and power. Moreover, visual methodologies invite us to carefully reflect on who can see what and with what effect (Rose, 2007, p. 10). Finally, there are numerous economic, social, and political relations, institutions, and practices that surround an image and how it is seen, used, produce, reproduce, and challenged. (Rose, 2007).

The fourth theme within visual analysis relates to how particular viewers of an image will bring their interpretations to bear on its meaning and effect. These viewers can also be influenced by the setting in which the image is presented. For instance, the setting of an art gallery will invite the viewer to see what is placed inside as art. However, not every viewer is easily swayed to see what they are invited to see. Duchamp's fountain is a great example; for some, this urinal turned sideways in a museum becomes art; for others, it remains a urinal turned sideways. Hall (1997) refers to this as the idea that images have a preferred meaning which implies a preferred reading by audiences. However, the preferred meaning can be rejected by viewers of the image.

Finally, visual analysis insists on the agency of an image. Images can potentially be a site of resistance or recalcitrance, the question is not how an image looks but rather what it can do (Rose, 2007). Visual images often work in partnership with other kinds of representations, and these representations can influence how viewers interpret and give meaning to an image. In the case of social media posts by FVAs, this could be the text that captions a post or even the comments left by other viewers who might invite to look for a particular meaning. In this sense, visual images are *multimodel,* as they always make sense in relation to other representations. However, this does not mean the image is reducible to the meanings conveyed by the representations it relates to. For example, the meaning a caption might imply does not capture what is seen in the visual image itself.

4.2.2 Semiology

This thesis uses semiology to analyze the possible meanings behind the representations of FVAs. Semiotics, or semiology, is a visual analysis method that commonly deals with how images make meaning and is commonly applied to advertisements and fine art. Given FVAs' position between digital art and advertisement, semiology is useful to explore the meaning behind avatars' representation. Semiology, as a method applied to visual analysis, focuses on detailed case studies of relatively few images and the ways in which those images create meaning. It distinguishes between the sign, consisting of the signified and the signifier, the relationship between the signifier and the sign and the relationships between signs. The difference between the signifier and the signified is only separable at the analytical level; on the practical level, they are always interconnected (Rose, 2007, p. 79). In the case of FVAs, the signified can be 'a depiction of a female human with very few clothes on in her early twenties', and the signifier can be 'an attractive woman'. It is essential to make the analytical distinction between the signified and the signifier, as a particular signifier does not necessarily need to have a relationship with its signified. For example, 'an attractive woman' does not necessarily have to be barely clothed or in her early twenties.

As a method, semiology assumes that constructions of social power are articulated through images themselves (Rose, 2007, p. 77). This connects with the theories of objectification and Goffman's gendered advertisements. An essential scholarly work in visuall semiology is Judith Williamson's (1978) book 'Decoding Advertisements', in which she argues that in contemporary capitalist societies, advertising is one of the most influential ways to convey meaning and create desires in the mind of consumers. She argues that advertising uses

a system of signs and symbols to create meanings, which are constructed representations of reality used to sell products and create social norms.

One major methodological drawback and common criticism of the method is that it overcomplicates quite simple concepts or relationships between signs with semiotic jargon (Bak & Smith, 1992; Wells, 1992; Leiss, Kline & Jhally, 1986 as cited by Rose, 2007, p.104). In some cases, the terms introduced by semiotics are difficult to understand and unnecessary. To avoid academic jargon and obscuring the analysis, I will aim to use simpler terms to describe the relationships between signs where possible.

4.2.3 Analyzing signs and symbols in FVAs

Since FVAs supposedly represent women's bodies, this thesis will use Gillian Dyer's (1988:96-104) checklist to explore what signs can be signified in bodies. For this analysis, Dyer (1988) encourages researchers to look at the representations of bodies, representations of manner, representations of activity, and signs of props and the setting. When thinking about how bodies are represented, one can think of how age, sex, race, hair, body type, able-bodiedness, and looks are represented. In addition, Dyer (1988) encourages us to look at how stereotypes are reinforced here and how specific bodily attributes, such as whiteness, are normalized by making them invisible. On the other hand, representations of manner look at facial expressions, eye contact, and poses, and representations of activity focus on body movement, positional communication, and touch. Positional communication is a powerful way to analyze how positions of power are represented within and between the image and its viewer. Finally, specific props and settings can be helpful to consider as they change the context of an image and the symbols connected to them. Dyer's (1988) checklist will form a starting point for the analysis.

4.3 Timeline and feasibility

I managed my time during the research process by carefully planning and organizing my activities. The data collection period spanned from April 3 to May 7, 2023, during which I remained vigilant for any new relevant research while primarily focusing on collecting literature in the initial weeks. To ensure sufficient time for an in-depth analysis, I dedicated the period from May 8 to May 21, 2023, for data analysis and subsequently worked on developing my analysis, discussion, and conclusions.

By narrowing my focus to just two images, I allowed myself enough time to examine and analyze the selected data thoroughly. In addition, this approach enabled me to delve deeply into the nuances and complexities of the images within the given timeframe.

4.4 Ethical considerations

As previously mentioned, when collecting data from public accounts, it remains essential to respect privacy concerns. However, in the case of avatars representing women's bodies, the ethical considerations differ from those of human models, as avatars lack lived experiences or cultural practices. Instead, I need to consider that my questioning of the creators' intentions might impact them and their public identity. Given that I did not have interviews with the creators about their intentions, it is important not to state my assumptions about them as facts. Additionally, to uphold ethical practices, I have ensured proper attribution to the creators by mentioning their names, acknowledging their contributions, and respecting intellectual property rights. Due to copyright, I decided against including a copy of the discussed images in the thesis. To address the absence of visuals in the thesis due to copyright restrictions, I have provided detailed descriptions and direct links to the mentioned visuals for readers to view if desired. Furthermore, I have acknowledged the influence of my positionality on interpreting the analyzed material, addressing personal biases, assumptions, and preconceptions in the section on positionality. Finally, avoiding offensive or inappropriate interpretations that perpetuate stereotypes or harm the marginalized communities, the communities I argue to be affected by the stereotypical representations of avatars, is crucial, thus requiring respect for cultural norms and sensitivities during visual data analysis.

5. Analysis

In this section, I will conduct a critical visual analysis of Shudu and Miquela guided by semiology. I aim to answer the research questions in an interconnected way. To freshen the memory, the research questions for this analysis are:

- Whose identities are Shudu and Miquela made to represent, and how?
- How can their representation be understood in terms of appropriation?
- And how does this contribute to the exploitation of marginalized communities and identities?

Using the theoretical framework, I will look for visual signs signifying whom they are made to represent, looking at racialization, gendering, sexualization, exotification, and Othering.

Finally, I will address how what these signs signify connects to wider systems of meaning, thus articulating a particular ideology that can further oppress already marginalized communities and identities. Finally, in the discussion section, I further expand on the connection between the analysis and previous research.

To aid the analysis, I describe the pictures as detailed as possible to aid and provide a link to the public post so the reader can look the image up if needed. With each analysis, I aim to follow the following structure; first, a description of the image; second, an analysis of representational signs and how they relate to each other and broader systems of meaning; and finally, a conclusion conveying how this creates a particular meaning.

5.1 Demarcations in relation to CGI technology

Before analyzing the representations of Shudu and Miquela, it is critical to note that because they are CGI renderings, every aspect of their images can be understood as a deliberate choice. When looking at the technical side of production, images created from CGI renderings require everything in the image to be encoded, such as the hair, shadows, setting, props, and poses. Thus, what is seen in the image can be understood as deliberately positioned there. In human modeling, accidents can happen; for example, a model poses in a certain way without understanding the context of the pose. From my experience, this can happen with young models. When I was younger, I unknowingly posed in ways that could be seen as suggestive without understanding that they could be seen as suggestive since I did not see myself as a sexual being. Another example of accidents in modeling images with human models is that specific props are forgotten by someone on the team and accidentally end up in the picture. For example, a clothing clip, which ensures the clothes fit the model perfectly, is visible in the picture. These types of accidents cannot happen in CGI, which is why I argue to be even more critical when these images depict women in a sexualized, exotified, or racialized way.

Additionally, it is important to reflect on how Shudu and Miquela's virtual nature affects gendering, racialization, and objectification processes. I argue that the virtual dimension highlights the construction of gender and race even more than images with human models do, as everything that aims to signify race or gender needs to be encoded by their creators and how they understand these categories. Without a lived experience or personal identity, their gender is constructed by their creators and the narratives surrounding them. For instance, Shudu's suggested identity as a Black woman is not based on lived experience but solely on a white man's idea of what a Black woman should look like. The virtual nature of Shudu and Miquela

introduces unique dynamics to processes of racialization, objectification, and gendering, highlighting the need for critical examination and consideration of the implications and limitations of these virtual models when applying theories that have just looked at representations of human models.

Given the discussion of constructed identities, I want to reflect on my choice of language when discussing Shudu and Miquela. As previously mentioned, I employ she/her pronouns when referring to Shudu and Miquela, as these are the pronouns attributed to them by their creators and the pronouns used in online narratives around them. However, it is essential to acknowledge that as avatars, Shudu and Miquela do not possess gender identities. It is important to reflection on the effects of such language choices, and why I made them. The utilization of gendered pronouns for virtual depictions of women that lack gender identity may have implications for the visual analysis by potentially reinforcing gender norms or assumptions associated with the pronouns used. It is important to critically examine and consider the impact of these pronouns on the interpretation and understanding of the virtual depictions, as they may shape perceptions and reinforce societal expectations related to gender. Therefore, it is important to highlight how gender pronouns for avatars do not reflect an associated gender and could easily be replaced with other pronouns, such as the gender-neutral they/them pronouns.

Finally, it is essential to recognize that not all communities have equal access to the technologies that enable the creation of CGI avatars. Creating hyper-realistic anthropomorphic avatars demand a significant investment of time and money to learn and master the technology needed to produce highly realistic CGI renderings that successfully pass for human. Consequently, those more financially privileged tend to have the most access to this technology. Creating hyper-realistic anthropomorphic avatars necessitates significant investments of time, money, and expertise in the design process. Developing the necessary skills and acquiring the resources to create such avatars requires substantial time and financial commitments. People working full-time to make ends meet do not have the resources and time to dedicate to learning and mastering the technology necessary for creating highly realistic CGI renderings that can convincingly pass as humans. Consequently, access to this technology tends to be concentrated among already privileged individuals, exacerbating the problematic nature of their choice to create avatars representing marginalized identities they have no firsthand experience of.

5.2 Shudu Gram

The image I chose to analyze is an Instagram post uploaded to Shudu's feed on April 23rd in 2017. The link to the image is in the reference list under; Shudu.Gram (2017).

5.2.1 Description

In the image, Shudu's naked body appears four times, which provides the viewer with her body from all sides. Her breasts and outside genitalia are covered with strategically placed golden-yellow paint stripes matching the color of the background. The use of yellow also emphasizes the darkness of her skin. Notably, Shudu solely wears the traditional Ndebele tribe neck rings and matching earrings. The image draws attention to both Shudu's nudity and the traditional neck rings that she is wearing.

5.2.2 Representational signs

The sexual objectification of Black women is often intertwined with racial stereotypes and the idea of a hypersexual Exotic Other (see section 2.3-4). I will analyze how the depiction of Shudu in this image reproduces the exotifying, sexualizing, and racializing representations of Black women. This is done through the positional composition (commodification and objectification), the pose (gendering), the nudity (sexualization), props signifying cultural difference (exotification), and the use of color, which highlights the deepness of her skin tone (racialization). These processes of commodification, gendering, sexual objectification, exotification, and racialization are all interconnected in the image and reinforce each other.

The commodification, sexualization and gendering of Shudu's body

When looking at the positional communication, what stands out is that the image is composed so that Shudu's naked body can be observed from four different angles, giving the viewer total exposure to Shudu's physical features from these different angles. This positioning can be likened to how products might be positioned from different angles. Thus, the compositional positioning signifies a commodified body. Moreover, this composition draws the viewers' attention to Shudu's body, a common objectification technique in which women are equated to their bodily features (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). However, Bordo (1993) argues that demeaning representations of women are degrading not because they reduce women to bodies but because they idealize passivity through the representation of feminine subjectivity. (p. 126). The presentation of women's bodies as passive can be understood in the visual analysis as signaling objectification. While positioning four different sides of the body might create a sense

of movement, the movement does not seem to come from Shudu. Instead, she appears to be passively standing in front of the camera while suggested to be captured by her photographer and creator, Cameron James-Wilson, from different sides. Thus, Shudu is passively keeping the same pose, while Cameron is active in capturing her, and the audience is active in observing her. In short, the passiveness of Shudu's stance and the compositional focus on her naked body signifies a sexually objectified and commodified body. Moreover, the sexualization and passiveness representation of Shudu is a form of gendering her body.

Shudu's pose further highlights the processes of gendering. Posing is a powerful way to draw attention to particular body parts or to create shapes that might signify a shape associated with a particular gender identity. Using Goffman's work, it can be observed that Shudu engages in a way of posing that signals her supposed gender identity as a woman. Shudu's pose, crossing one leg over the other while using a bend in the arm to create more space between the arm and the body, creates an illusion of a smaller waist and more rounded hips. A smaller waist and wider hips are secondary sexual characteristics of the female body. Although gender and sex are not linked, I argue that emphasizing these features might be a way for Cameron to signal the femininity of Shudu. Furthermore, Shudu appears to slightly touch and caress her shoulder, a movement Goffman (1976, p.29) defined as *the feminine touch* in his work Gender Advertisements. The feminine touch is when women, more often than men, lightly touch or caress objects or themselves in advertisements. According to Goffman (1976), this can be read as conveying a sense of one's body being delicate and precious. Gender stereotypes often position women's bodies as more delicate than men's. Thus, a pose signifying delicateness can be seen as a way to gender Shudu.

Additionally, the crossing over of the leg is another posing technique noted by Goffman to be associated with the way women are portrayed in advertising, referred to as the bashful knee bend (Goffman, 1976, p. 45). The way of posing creates a sense of submissiveness; given the history of visual culture in the West in which primarily women pose in this way, Shudu's pose can be seen to signify femininity and, thus, a gendering strategy. I want to reiterate that the assignment of specific gender identity characteristics to Shudu, a virtual creation, can be seen as peculiar, considering that she lacks a lived experience and personal agency. As a virtual creation, Shudu's gender is constructed and controlled by her creator Cameron-James Wilson, raising questions about the authenticity and irrelevance of attributing gender to an entity that exists solely in the virtual realm.

The gendering of Shudu cannot be separated from her racialization. Shudu is designed to have dark skin and short afro hair. These features function as signifiers of an African identity.

Moreover, by using the color yellow, the darkness of Shudu's black skin becomes more apparent. Moreover, having high contrast in colors draws attention to the shapes created. In this way, the color choice draws attention to both Shudu's skin tone and the shape of her body. I argue that this follows the trend of the simultaneous exotification and sexual objectification of Black women's bodies.

Furthermore, how the light falls on Shudu's naked body highlights her muscles, showing defined abdominal muscles and shoulders, which is essential to note. Tate (2015) found that historically visible muscles on Black women's bodies have been perceived as making them closer to masculinity, working to locate their bodies in a third space of non-women without a possibility of becoming women. Tate (2015) argues that hypersexualizing, masculinizing, and exoticizing Black women's bodies is used to place them as abnormal from the white woman ideal (p. 101). Thus, a representation that emphasizes Shudu's muscles, through lightning and Black skin, through a contrasting color can be read as a signal to emphasize her Otherness and follows a trend of fetishizing Black women's bodies.

Ndebele neckrings to signify an Exotic Other

Props in adverts are objects that have cultural significance that give away meaning. In this image, the Ndebele neck rings, the only thing Shudu is wearing, can be understood as a prop providing cultural context. As mentioned before, the neck rings serve as signifiers to signify the identity of a Ndebele tribe woman. However, the neck rings are placed out of context and without other aspects indicating her connection to the South Ndebele peoples of Africa. This tribe, whom she is said to represent, wears Neck rings are worn as an important part of their customary dress and a symbol of wealth and social standing. Only married women can wear the dzilla rings, which are customarily given to wives by their husbands and worn until the husband's passing. (Van Vuuren, 2012). I argue that since these traditions are not honored or considered in this image, the neck rings merely provide aesthetic value and signify Shudu's Otherness. Shudu, as a virtual avatar, cannot be a married member of the Ndebele tribe, nor is she in a setting indicating she is performing a Ndebele tribe ritual. Thus, I argue that the neck rings function as an Othering practice. As mentioned by Hall (1997), stereotyping and exotification in visual images can happen when traditional dressing (e.g., the Ndebele neck rings) and physical features (the emphasis through composition and color on Shudu's naked Black body) are highlighted in a way that they are not for individuals that are not seen as 'Other.' I would argue that Wilson would not have portrayed a white model in the way he portrayed

Shudu, naked and with a singular cultural artifact adorning their body. Instead, by portraying Shudu this way, he represents her as an exotified Other.

In this image, we can see how gender, race, and ethnicity intersect and how Shudu becomes a commodified, sexualized Other whose only sign of identity is derived from a cultural artifact taken entirely out of context to suggest an ethnic heritage. The Ndebele neck rings are appropriated and used for the exotification of a representation of a Black woman's body. The construction of Shudu is a particular form of exotification and a highly problematic materialization of stereotyping and appropriation. Moreover, the stereotyping is done through exotifying, commodifying, and sexualizing the identity of the Ndebele women Shudu supposedly represents. The Ndebele people historically suffered from marginalization and discrimination, particularly during the colonial period and under the rule of the white-minority government in both Zimbabwe and South Africa (Mlotshwa, 2018; Moyo, 2011). Moreover, the Ndebele women, in particular, experience silencing through processes of both invisibility, by being excluded from public discourse, and hypervisibility, by being represented in stereotypical and commodifying ways (Mlotshwa, 2018). To, in this historical context, have a British white man reproduce these commodifying and stereotypical representations by creating a hypersexualized and exotified Black woman and claiming she is from this ethnic group is highly problematic.

Power dynamics, the gaze, and the nude

A white man's racialization and gendering of Shudu as a Black woman raises many questions about what kind of power relations it produces and reinforces. In the image, power relations are made visible through the gaze, who is looking and who is looking back, and through portrayals of passiveness.

In visual analysis, direct eye contact in an image is associated with the image making demands (Rose, 2007). Although Shudu is made to look directly into the camera, and thus the image makes a demand, I argue that Shudu's possibility to look back and portray an oppositional gaze (hooks, 2012) is undermined by the fact that she is an avatar. As an avatar, Shudu has no agency or autonomy in the way a Black human model might have. Furthermore, even if it is argued that the image could make a demand, I argue that because Shudu is portrayed as a commodified, exotified sexual object, there is a power imbalance between Shudu and her creator and the audience. In other words, how she is portrayed signifies a position as the passive objectified Other. Shudu's representation follows an important trope within visual analysis which is that of the nude. Berger (1972) has paid considerable attention to the nude as a body

and a genre of art. According to Berger (1972), a naked body must be perceived as an object to be considered nude; nudity must be on show. According to Berger (1972), the common representation of women's bodies as nudes sustains a system in which males can view themselves as active subjects in opposition to objectified women as passive objects. As becoming nude necessitates the portrayed subject to become passive. When relating this to the observation by Black feminist scholars that the objectification of Black women's bodies is often done for the voyeuristic pleasure of men (Collins, 2004; hooks, 1992), the sign of the nude created by Wilson becomes a way to uphold oppressive social structures that place men above black women in social hierarchies.

5.2.3. Conclusion

To conclude, I argue that the representation of Shudu in this image reproduces a portrayal of Black women's bodies as exotic and Other. I argue that the commodification, sexualization, and gendering of Shudu's body happens through the compositional positioning, pose, and nudity. The positioning of her naked body from multiple angles treats Shudu's body as a product, reducing Shudu to her physical attributes. Shudu's pose further constructs her gender, as it signifies feminine characteristics through body language and touch. Moreover, the pose signifies submissiveness and reflects traditional gender stereotypes. Finally, the gendering of Shudu is closely intertwined with her racialization. The way her white male creator represents her emphasizes her dark skin tone, muscles, and body shape and works to portray her as an Exotic Other, which follows the historical trend of exoticized and sexualized representations of Black women's bodies by white men. One of the strongest signifiers of exotification and Othering are the Ndebele neck rings worn by Shudu. These neck rings carry cultural significance for the Ndebele tribe, but their presence in the image lacks contextual connection to the tribe's traditions and practices. Instead, they are used to exoticize Shudu and emphasize her Otherness. Although Shudu appears to make direct eye contact, her status as a virtual avatar limits her agency and autonomy. Moreover, the trope of the nude portrayed in the image reinforces oppressive social structures in which (white) men get to create Black women's bodies and derive voyeuristic pleasure from their objectification. In this analysis, I dissected how an exotifying white gaze creates particular power dynamics, racial stereotypes, gendering, and objectification in the image of Shudu.

5.3 Miquela

The image I chose to analyze is an Instagram post uploaded to Miquela's feed on February 12th, 2023. The link to the image is in the reference list under; Lilmiquela (2023).

5.3.1 Description

The image and its context

As mentioned in section 1.2, Miquela is supposedly representing a nineteen-year-old American-Brazilian girl. In this image, a young-looking girl is lying on a bed, wearing just a pink sports t-shirt and underwear; on top of her chest is a phone displaying the song 'Love on the Brain' by Rihanna. The way the light is suggested to fall onto the bed draws attention to her underwear and exposed hips that are in the light while the rest of the body is somewhat in the shadow.

The image was posted around the time of the American sports event, the Superbowl, at which Rihanna performed. The image is captioned "Yay sports" with a football emoji and Rihanna's Instagram account tag. The context in which to understand this caption is that on social media, jokes were going around that women would only watch the Superbowl to see Rihanna perform during halftime. By captioning the picture "yay sports" but showing a phone display of the song 'Love on the Brain' by Rihanna, the image and its caption plays with this joke going around on the platform.

5.3.2 Representational signs

As found by previous research, Latinas are represented as hypersexual and are made ethically ambiguous through tropicalization, which allows the dominant culture to categorize them as an exotic Other (Brooks & Hébert, 2012; Martynuska, 2016). In this section, I will analyze how these stereotypical portrayals are reinforced in the image of Miquela. I argue that the gendering and sexualization of Miquela in this image happens in multiple ways. On the one hand, there is the pose, which takes away many of Goffman's poses suggesting submissiveness and subordination. Second, there is the lack of clothes, choice of color, and the choice to show exposed underwear. Third, there is the setting of the bed, which, combined with the signs found in the pose and underwear, creates a more sexualized context. Then another way Miquela is gendered is through the suggested disinterest in sports. Moreover, the design of Miquela's body aligns with Western media's tropicalization of Latina women.

Positional composition, pose and setting

Miquela is positioned lying on a bed, which Goffman refers to as a position signifying the ritualization of subordination. According to Goffman (1976), the ritualization of subordination happens women are presented in inferior positions and poses, often in spatially lower positions than men or recumbent on floors or beds. Thus, the ritualization of subordination is reinforced by placing Miquela in this context and presenting her as lying down. The way the image is framed, the viewer looks at Miquela as if on top of her, which could be seen to signify the viewer as superior and Miqueala as inferior. Other submissive gestures Goffman (1976) mentioned are the previously mentioned bashful knee bend, the canting of the body, smiling, and acting less serious. Miquela is smiling and looking into the camera in this image, which can be read as inviting the viewer while simultaneously signifying femininity. Wide smiles are associated with normative portrayals of women and femininity to contrast the more stoic or serious expressions associated with men and masculinity (Goffman, 1976).

Moreover, not only is Miquela represented lying down on a bed smiling, but she is also slightly caressing her left shoulder, displaying Goffman's feminine touch as discussed in the analysis of Shudu. I argue that the pose and the gestures, such as slightly caressing the shoulder, work to gender Miquela. The gendering is furthered by gendered symbols signifying gender stereotypes. First, Miquela is made to wear a pastel pink t-shirt. This color in Western culture often signifies femininity, girls, and women. Thus, it can be argued that the color choice for the t-shirt signifies Miquela's supposed association with femininity. Second, by suggesting that Miquela is only interested in Rihanna's performance and not in sports, done through the caption and the visual prop of the iPhone displaying Rihanna's album, a gender stereotype in the West that women are not interested in sports is reinforced and used to signify Miquela's suggested gender identity as a girl.

I argue that Miquela lying on a bed in underwear and a t-shirt creates a more sexualized meaning of the image. First, displaying women's bodies in very little clothing or clothing that is suggestive, such as underwear, is a way to objectify their bodies by drawing attention to their body parts. Second, as a semiotic sign, the setting of a bed in combination with the underwear creates a particular meaning. A bed can create various meanings; in other words, it is a polysemic sign. For instance, it could signify intimacy and comfort associated with the private and personal space in which most beds find themselves. It can be associated with the setting of the home, thus creating a meaning that Miquela invites the viewer into her private sphere signifying a closeness between the viewer and Miquela. However, I argue that other signs in the image, such as exposed underwear, create a connection to sensuality and sexuality. The

setting of the bed, in combination with the lack of clothing, signifies Miquela as a sexual object; perhaps it even hints at what Martynuska (2016) refers to as displays of sexual readiness. Given her suggested age and the fact that adults created her, it raises ethical questions. Why does a supposedly nineteen-year-old girl, essentially on the cusp of childhood and adolescence, need to be displayed in underwear? What does the context of a bed and underwear add to the image other than sexualization?

Furthermore, given the historical representations of Latinas as hypersexual in the media (see section 2.), how does this image of Miquela, a supposedly Brazilian American girl, reinforce this representation of hypersexualization? I argue that the representation of Miquela as a sexual object reinforces the stereotype of Latinas being hypersexual and exotified Others. Arguably the fact that Miquela is explicitly stated to be young makes matters worse.

Tropicalization through sensuality and ethnic ambiguity

The sexualized representation of Miquela cannot be separated from her suggested Brazilian American identity. As mentioned by previous research, the bodies of Latinas have been positioned as sensual bodies that signify sexual readiness through seductive clothing and round hips (Martynuska, 2016). As discussed above, this can be seen to be represented in the image of Miquela through the lack of clothes that Miquela is represented to wear and the focus through positional composition and pose on her exposed hips. Moreover, Martynuska (2016) argues that the topicalization of Latina bodies erases ethnic-specific features, which helps to construct a monolithic Other. In the image, Miquela's features defy easy categorization; she is represented with green eyes and straight brown hair, typically associated with ethnically white people, but also has features associated with non-white bodies, such as a wider nose and brown skin. Thus, in accordance with tropicalization processes, ethnic-specific features are diminished while the sensuality of her body is highlighted by exposing her hips. In other words, the way Miquela is made to represent a Latina body aligns with the tropicalization process in Western media, as discussed by Martynuska (2016).

Tate (2016) found that the sexualization of Black and white mixed-race bodies in Western imagination has, since the time of slavery, blended the supposed sexual expertise and sensuality of Black women with the supposed beauty of white women. When looking at this image and numerous other pictures and captions by Miquela, her creators emphasize her supposed sensuality by continuously representing her as looking for validation and inviting a sexual gaze. For example, under a post (Lilmiquela, 2021a) featuring two images of Miquela posing in a nightdress on a bed, a caption reads: "Is Tinder broken? Put these up HOURS ago,

and I'm still single." Another post (Lilmiquela, 2021b) in which, again, the emphasis is on Miquela's body, is captioned, "I'm most myself when I know you're watching." My reading of this caption implies that she defines herself according to the presence of an audience, which is a highly objectifying message. While these posts could be interesting case studies for a semiotic analysis of both the caption and the visual imagery, they are used here to exemplify how Miquela's creators draw attention to her supposed sensuality and understanding of herself as sexually desirable.

5.3.3 Conclusion

To conclude, I argue that the gendered, sexualized, and exotified way Miquela presents as a Latina woman reinforces stereotypical portrayals of Latina women. Miquela is positioned on a bed and in a suggestive pose, reflecting Goffman's conception of the ritualization of subordination. Miquela is further sexualized by the lack of clothes, drawing attention to her exposed body. Miquela's implied indifference to football furthers gender stereotypes, and her ambiguous ethnic looks and sensual portrayal are consistent with the process of tropicalization frequently used in Western media to represent Latinas. Finally, the sexualization of Miquela, combined with her suggested Brazilian American identity, reinforces the hypersexual and exoticized representation of Latinas as Exotic 'Others.' Overall, the image of Miquela highlights how objectification, sexualization, racialization, and exotification are perpetuated and reinforced in her representation, echoing broader historical and media trends.

5.4 Commonalities between Shudu and Miquela

In this section, I will address some commonalities between Shudu and Miquela, as they have significant parallels in their representation. First, when looking at the way bodies are represented, what stands out is that both avatars are made to represent slim able bodies which aligns with which type of women's bodies are allowed visibility in Western media. Slimness in Western culture often links to beauty ideals imposed on women's bodies; moreover, it signals women who 'take care of themselves' (Bordo, 1993; Tate, 2015). Western beauty standards rank the attractiveness of women's bodies depending on their positionality on the body size spectrum (Bielefield et al., 2021; Tate, 2015). By representing Miquela and Shudu as women with slim bodies, it connects the avatars to the mystic sign of the 'feminine beauty ideal.' Moreover, they represent Western beauty standards by displaying symmetric features, expressive eyes, sculpted

cheekbones, and skin without any marks or wrinkles. What is signified is a version of beauty often celebrated and portrayed in the fashion industry.

Additionally, both avatars are signified to have features commonly associated with female bodies, such as round wide hips and breasts. Tate (2015) found that racial stereotyping defines mixed-race bodies, which is suggested in Miquela's representation, as embodying 'white feminine slenderness' in combination with Black voluptuousness. By avatars representing women's bodies within the strict boundaries of what type of women's bodies are seen as beautiful within Western culture, I argue that these avatars reinforce the pressure women in the West might feel to confirm or measure up against these beauty standards. Tate (2015) argues that Western society's obsession with thinness is not necessarily about beauty but a patriarchal obsession with female obedience and an attempt to oppress women by making them feel inferior if they do not adhere to the impossible standard of thinness expected of them. Tate argues that if women are thin and childlike, their threat to the patriarchy is reduced.

Both Miquela and Shudu are presented to be young women. Looking young and maintaining a youthful appearance is another expectation pushed on women's bodies in the West. What does it mean when avatars represent a youthful appearance that will never fade? What kind of expectation does this place on women, if it does so at all? Moreover, as everything in CGI needs to be encoded, Shudu and Miquela, compared to human models and influencers, will never have a day where their skin is not completely smooth. What kind of expectation does it place on women when representations of their bodies are complete without flaws according to Western beauty standards?

5.5 Representativeness of the images I chose.

A common criticism of semiotic visual analysis is whether the small sample size of images chosen for the case studies is representative. When looking at other images uploaded to the accounts of Shudu and Miquela, it becomes evident that the commodification, sexualization, racialization, and exotification evident in the selected images of Shudu and Miquela are consistent with a broader pattern among the accounts. While I already mentioned some examples in my analysis of Miquela, when looking at Shudu’s account, she appears to be naked in at least five other images and barely dressed in others. Moreover, in two posts, she appears wearing fetish wear (Shudu.Gram, 2018a, 2018b), which indicates further fetishization of her body. Thus, the selected images can be seen as representative of Shudu and Miquela's representation.

5.6 Results

I draw a few conclusions from the visual analysis of Shudu and Miquela. First, the racialization and gendering of Shudu and Miquela and their sexualized representations of a Black woman and a Latina can reinforce racial stereotypes and exotification. Their representations can contribute to Black women and Latinas being seen as exotified Others. Second, how Shudu and Miquela's bodies are commodified and sexualized also reinforces gender stereotypes and thus contributes to reinforcing unequal power dynamics. Their poses, lack of clothing, and suggestive context aid in the sexual objectification of the avatars and positions them as passive objects existing solely for voyeuristic pleasure. Third, both avatars depict slimness, symmetrical features, and a youthful appearance which aligns with Western beauty standards. This representation can reinforce societal expectations of what women should look like and reinforce imposed Western beauty ideals, potentially contributing to the perpetuation of unrealistic beauty standards. Another important observation is how the Ndebele neck rings worn by Shudu work to present Shudu as an Exotified Other and simultaneously appropriate and exoticize the culture of Ndebele women, an already marginalized group.

As avatars are completely encoded virtual depictions of women and in no form conscious, they lack the agency and autonomy that human women have to challenge or resist objectifying and exotifying portrayals. As it will become more difficult to differentiate between offline-existing women and CGI depictions of women, this could become dangerous, as the teams behind these CGI avatars could make them say anything and pass it off as if there is a real offline-existing person behind these opinions, which poses a risk similar to that of deep fakes. Finally, the representation of perpetually youthful and unblemished bodies by CGI avatars raises questions about how this could impact women's body image and the expectations placed on their bodies to conform to unattainable beauty standards presented in avatars.

In summary, the analysis of Shudu and Miquela's representation highlights the reinforcement of racial stereotypes, sexual objectification, and power imbalances in portraying women's bodies. Furthermore, it shows how these avatars follow historical tropes that position the depicted bodies as exotic hypersexual Others. Furthermore, their creators, who do not identify with the identities they say they portray in Shudu and Miquela, still profit from these identities, which raises questions of exploitation and appropriation. In the next section, I will discuss how these findings fit in with previous research and what the analysis adds to previous research.

6. Discussion

The visual analysis of Shudu and Miquela reveals significant findings that contribute to understanding the implications of feminized virtual avatars (FVAs) in the fashion industry, shedding light on complex dynamics and potential societal effects. These findings demonstrate how FVAs can reinforce racial stereotypes, perpetuate gender inequalities, appropriate cultures, reinforce Western beauty standards, and impact body image and beauty standards. By uncovering these implications, the research provides insights into the broader issues surrounding the representation of women's bodies, marginalized identities, and power dynamics in virtual realms, contributing to theoretical understanding and the need to further examine FVAs' societal impact.

6.1 Reinforcement of racial stereotypes and the Exotic Other

One of the key findings is the racialization and gendering of Shudu and Miquela, which can reinforce racial stereotypes and exotification. By depicting Shudu as a Black woman and Miquela as a Latina, their representations can contribute to the perception of Black women and Latinas as exotic Others, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and reducing their identities to a commodified aesthetic. This finding aligns with previous research on objectifying and fetishizing racialized women's bodies. For example, Martynuska (2016) found that Western representations of Latinas build on stereotypes in which they are represented as highly sexual and sexually available, aided by the tropicalization of Latinas. In my analysis, I found that Miquela's representation is sexually objectifying, and this sexual portrayal, together with her ambiguous ethnic looks, is consistent with the process of tropicalization. Neri (2022) calls the ethnic ambiguity of Miquela's look harmful in the way that it upholds contemporary beauty standards and Eurocentric beauty ideals while appropriating Latinas' identity and simultaneously undermines the representation of Latina women with lived experience of that identity. A similar argument is made in the literature regarding Shudu, who is made to represent a dark-skinned Black woman from the Ndebele tribe but is, in fact, an avatar owned and constructed by a British white man. The findings align with the exotification and Othering through representation Hall (1997) discussed. The analysis highlights the need to consider the power dynamics and ethics of using marginalized cultures as aesthetic accessories without understanding or respecting their significance. For instance, the presence of the Ndebele neck rings worn by Shudu raises questions of cultural appropriation and exotification. By

incorporating elements of Ndebele culture, Shudu's representation appropriates the culture of Ndebele women, who are already marginalized (Mlotshwa, 2018).

As Wissinger (2012) argued, the fashion industry's white gaze demands Black models to strategically enhance or diminish their Otherness or racial traits to boost their marketability and fit into a particular "look." Wilson, Shudu's creator, chose to maximize her Otherness by exotifying her, appropriating Ndebele neck rings and using color, pose, and light to highlight darker features and her body shape, perhaps it was unconscious bias, and perhaps it was to make her more marketable. Wilson's representational choices raise a lot of questions. First, there are plenty of Black British women in London, where he is based; why did Wilson need to say that Shudu is from a marginalized tribe in South Africa? Second, if Willson cares about showing the beauty of a dark-skinned model, why does the model in question need to be naked? Is she not beautiful with her clothes on? Unfortunately, these questions cannot be answered through visual analysis and would require an interview with Wilson.

As hooks (1992) argued, contemporary representations of Black women's bodies often fail to challenge or subvert the historical images of Black women's sexuality rooted in 19th-century racism. I argue that this becomes very clear from the findings, especially when looking at the analysis of Shudu and how the Ndebele neck rings that are supposedly signifying a cultural background are entirely taken out of context and placed on a sexually objectifying and commodifying representation of a Black woman body. I argue that one can connect Shudu's representation to the representation of Saartjie Baartman, brought up in Tate's (2015) book *Black Bodies and the Nation*. Shudu Gram, an avatar created to represent a South African woman, and Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman who lived in the 19th century, share a connection in their portrayal and the issues surrounding their representation. Saartjie Baartman, also known as the "Hottentot Venus," was exhibited as a spectacle in Europe due to her physical features, particularly her large buttocks, which were sensationalized and objectified by colonial audiences (Tate, 2015, p. 2). This historical exploitation and dehumanization of Baartman's body resonate with the discussions surrounding Shudu Gram's representation as a virtual avatar. Both bodies highlight the objectification, commodification, and racial stereotyping that occur when marginalized identities are portrayed without agency or consideration for the lived experiences of real individuals. However, a significant difference is that with virtual avatars, there is no existing woman harmed by the exotified and sexually objectified body. Nevertheless, the representation of Shudu in this way can still be harmful to Black women.

Portraying avatars in a way that confirms gender stereotypes and reinforces sexually objectifying and racialized portrays of women's bodies is a business choice made in the pursuit

of profit. As argued by both Neri (2022) and Sodabe (2021), the representations of Shudu and Miquela reinforce stereotypes about the women they are made to represent and appropriate their identities. The findings illustrate how FVAs can perpetuate and reinforce dynamics that uphold social inequality based on presumed Otherness and racial stereotypes within virtual realms.

6.2 Sexualization, objectification, and beauty standards

The sexualized representations of Shudu and Miquela contribute to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and power imbalances. The avatars' poses, lack of clothing, and suggestive context objectify them and position them as passive objects for voyeuristic pleasure. These representations align with a long history of objectifying and commodifying women's bodies, further entrenching unequal power dynamics. As previous research has highlighted the negative societal impacts of sexualized depictions of women, it is crucial to be critical of the deliberate choices of CGI designers to represent FVAs in ways that perpetuate and normalize sexual objectification. The objectification of virtual women has real-life consequences, as studies have found that interactions with sexualized female characters in video games are linked to increased objectification of women, online sexual harassment, greater tolerance for sexual harassment, acceptance of rape myths, and heightened self-objectification among female users (Yao et al., 2010; Burney et al., 2019; Dill et al., 2008; Driesmans et al., 2015; Fox et al., 2013, 2015). Since Miquela and Shudu reinforce stereotypical and objectifying representations of women's bodies, they could have adverse societal effects on women that are suggested by previous studies on objectifying portrayals of digital women.

The analysis also underscores the alignment of Shudu and Miquela with Western beauty standards, emphasizing slimness, symmetrical features, and perpetual youthfulness. By adhering to these standards, FVAs reinforce unrealistic beauty ideals that place immense pressure on women to conform. Moreover, it is essential to point out who is made invisible in this process, such as older women and disabled women. This finding aligns with existing literature on body image issues and the negative impact of media representations on women's self-perception and well-being (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Fox et al., 2013, 2015; Fox & Bailenson, 2009; Ji et al., 2022). FVAs, with their forever youthful and unblemished bodies, could exacerbate the already unattainable beauty standards imposed on women.

6.3 Performative diversity and the lack of agency

In the context of avatars, performative diversity is taken to a whole other level. For example, including virtual avatars that are made to represent different ethnicities or genders in a fashion campaign may give the appearance of diversity. However, often the team behind these avatars are not people with lived experience of the identities they make their avatars represent. Moreover, Sobande (2021) highlights how creators of CGI avatars like Shudu can project messages about so-called racial diversity and profit off of Black identity without ever involving or paying Black people. Moreover, these diverse avatars may still perpetuate harmful stereotypes or biases if they are designed without input from the communities they represent or if they are used in a way that reinforces existing power dynamics or inequalities.

The lack of agency and autonomy in FVAs is another critical observation that deserves attention and complicates power dynamics. As completely encoded virtual depictions, FVAs cannot challenge or resist objectifying or exotifying portrayals. Whereas human models can oppose certain representations of themselves, although it might come at the cost of losing a job (Wissinger, 2012), avatars cannot. Robinson (2020) mentioned that a virtual influencer would need to be able to act independently and have a causal relationship between its mental states and events in order to be considered an agent; this is not the case for virtual influencers like Miquela (p. 4). Human models have a voice and agency to reject and oppose stereotypical, exotifying, sexualizing, and commodifying portrayals. The risk of avatars is that there is no person behind the avatar with the lived experience of their suggested identity, which could lead to avatars working with brands that human models with lived-experience of the identity that avatars are made to represent would never choose to work for. Avatars will not hold brands accountable for inappropriate remarks or representations of the communities they are made to represent. For instance, Miquela will not oppose or question her representation as a sexualized Latina girl and what broader societal impact that might have on how the Latinas she is made to represent are seen and treated.

The lack of agency and autonomy poses risks, as the teams behind these CGI avatars can make them say anything without taking accountability. Given that avatars can be made to say anything, they pose a similar danger as deep fakes, especially when considering the vast followings and, thus, influence that some avatars have on social media. This observation raises concerns about the potential manipulation and exploitation of viewers' perceptions and beliefs, blurring the boundaries between real individuals and virtual creations. Moreover, avatars can change their identity and appearance to fit whatever generates more followers or money. The lack of lived experience and agency raises questions about what avatars can speak on and

whether creators of avatars should be required to disclose their identities to create more transparency about who is speaking through the avatar. Furthermore, Robinson (2020) cautions that in the future, virtual avatars like Miquela could gain autonomy and generate content by using algorithms and basing it on social media trends. When this happens, assigning moral responsibility for their actions will become increasingly challenging.

6.4 Practical implications

From a practical standpoint, the research has implications for various stakeholders in the fashion industry as it calls attention to the practices of CGI designers and fashion brands in creating and utilizing FVAs. The findings emphasize the need for ethical considerations and critical reflection in the design and representation of these avatars. This thesis is not the first to call for more ethical approaches towards the design and use of avatars. In 2015, Nowak et al. already emphasized the importance of awareness among avatar users and designers regarding the broader implications and messages conveyed through avatar design. Sobade's (2021) research on Shudu's representation underscores the necessity of recognizing and addressing various forms of digital racism as a crucial step towards enhancing online experiences and improving the lives of Black individuals. This thesis highlights the potential harm caused by reinforcing stereotypes, objectifying representations, and appropriating cultures. It encourages designers and brands to engage with diverse voices and communities to ensure more authentic and respectful representations.

Additionally, the research raises awareness among consumers and users of FVAs and encourages critical examination of the representations they encounter online and the potential impacts on their perceptions and attitudes. With the growing challenge of distinguishing between avatars and real humans in online spaces, the significance of this issue will continue to increase. By understanding the implications of FVAs, consumers can make more informed choices, support ethical practices, and challenge harmful representations.

Finally, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding media representation, body image, and social inequalities. It strengthens the understanding of how virtual avatars can perpetuate unrealistic beauty ideals, reinforce gender stereotypes, and uphold power imbalances. By addressing these issues, the study offers insights that can inform discussions on media literacy, self-perception, and the promotion of diverse and inclusive representations.

7. Limitations and suggestions for future research

While the visual analysis of Shudu and Miquela presented in this thesis provides valuable insights into the implications of feminized virtual avatars (FVAs) in the fashion industry, several limitations exist. First, the analysis focuses on only two FVAs, Shudu and Miquela. These avatars represent a small subset of the broader landscape of FVAs in the fashion industry. Thus, the findings may not capture the full range of representations or diverse experiences associated with FVAs. Furthermore, the findings of this research are specific to the context of Shudu and Miquela and may not apply to other FVAs or different industries. The fashion industry's unique dynamics and power structures may not represent other sectors that use FVAs.

Second, visual analysis inherently involves interpretation, and different researchers may create different meanings and interpretations of the same visuals. The findings presented in this thesis are based on my analysis of the images, which is influenced by positionality, personal biases, and subjectivity. Moreover, the visual analysis provides a snapshot of the representations of Shudu and Miquela at a particular point in time. It does not capture the potential evolution or changes in their representations over time. A longitudinal analysis could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact and implications of FVAs.

Third, the analysis relies solely on the visual representations of Shudu and Miquela without direct input from the creators or users of these avatars. Without interviewing the creators behind the avatars, it is challenging to understand their intentions behind the design choices. Linked to this is the fact that while the thesis highlights ethical concerns regarding the representation of marginalized cultures, the analysis does not directly address the perspectives or voices of those communities. Further research involving engagement and collaboration with these communities is necessary to fully understand their experiences and perspectives on the way avatars are made to represent them.

Finally, the research primarily focuses on the implications of FVAs concerning racial stereotypes, gender inequalities, beauty standards, cultural appropriation, and body image. While these are valuable aspects to consider, the broader societal effects of FVAs in other areas, such as politics, identity theft, or activism, are not explored in depth. These could be exciting angles for future research.

Further suggestions for future research

The limitations of this thesis indicate potential areas for further research and highlight the need for a more comprehensive and nuanced examination of FVAs in the fashion industry and

beyond. In addition to those, I have a couple more suggestions. First, during the literature review, it became apparent how little research had focused on Latinas and the way they are represented in the media. The underrepresentation of research on Latinas' representation is essential and should be addressed to better understand the media landscape and its impact on Latinas. Moreover, it allows for identifying systemic issues and developing strategies to promote more accurate, positive, and empowering portrayals. Second, Robinsons (2020) is the only study that deals with ontological and ethical issues associated with virtual influencers. As virtual influencers, and avatars in general, become more and more prevalent within our societies, the academic community must reflect on the ethical and ontological implications they bring to societies and how their identities should be conceptualized. Third, I suggest lawmakers look into the risks of identity theft by avatars or the possibility of using avatars to represent marginalized identities to commit crimes or cause societal discord, as this might affect the communities they are made to represent. Given the growing amount of virtual avatars with social media platforms, it is important to have regulations in place for when they are used at the expense of others.

8. Conclusion

This thesis explored how using FVAs in the fashion industry can appropriate and exploit marginalized communities and identities. The thesis focused on two prominent virtual avatars, Shudu Gram and Miquela Sousa, and how their representation of a Black woman and a Latina reflect and reinforce racial stereotypes, perpetuate inequalities, and uphold biases and unrealistic beauty standards. This research highlights the fashion industry's risk of appropriating and profiting from marginalized communities and identities while excluding them, shedding light on the need to critique new forms of appropriating women's bodies within the context of gendered colonial legacies and structural inequalities. Furthermore, this research underscored how feminized virtual avatars in the fashion industry appropriate and exploit marginalized communities and identities.

By exploring the use of FVAs in the fashion industry, this thesis aimed to unpack how these avatars appropriate and exploit marginalized communities and identities, examining how they reinforce, reflect, and influence power relations and societal inequalities. For example, if FVAs in the fashion industry perpetuate stereotypical and objectifying representations of women's bodies, this could affect how women, femmes, and female-presenting individuals are seen and treated.

This thesis conducted a critical visual analysis of FVAs to fill the research gap on virtual avatars and their representation of non-white bodies as exotic Others. The analysis examined the meaning conveyed in the images of Shudu and Miquela and how their exotified, racialized, and gendered identities are signified. Semiology is utilized to analyze the potential meanings behind the representations of FVAs, recognizing that constructions of social power are expressed within images. By employing simpler terms to describe the relationships between signs, the analysis aims to avoid academic jargon and facilitate comprehension. Moreover, the analysis contributes to critical analyses of gender depictions by investigating how they manifest in Shudu and Miquela. Semiology is utilized to analyze the potential meanings behind the representations of FVAs, recognizing that constructions of social power are expressed within images. By employing simpler terms to describe the relationships between signs, the analysis aims to avoid academic jargon and facilitate comprehension.

The analysis was grounded in feminist postcolonial and intersectional theories, objectification theory, and Goffman's theory of gendered advertisements. The thesis offers a critical perspective on how the racialized and gendered bodies of Shudu and Miquela echo the exotified and objectified representations of colonized bodies. The analysis found that representations of Shudu and Miquela reflect and reinforce racial stereotypes, perpetuate gender inequalities, and uphold unrealistic beauty standards. Their construction and use can be understood as forms of appropriation, where marginalized identities are commodified and detached from their original cultural contexts. By examining these dynamics, this thesis contributes to our understanding of the exploitation of marginalized communities and identities in virtual avatars. Moreover, the findings contribute to the existing research on the representation of women's bodies in media and advertising and the continued reinforcement of sexually objectifying representations of women's bodies. By deepening the understanding of representation, appropriation, and exotification issues, the analysis emphasized the importance of ongoing discourse and critical analysis in shaping societal perceptions of marginalized communities and identities.

The discussion highlighted three main issues. The first addressed the reinforcement of racial stereotypes and the Exotic Other; the second focused on the risks of sexualization, objectification, and reinforcement of beauty standards; and the third reflected on the risks of performative diversity and avatars' lack of agency and autonomy. The findings of this research highlight the racialization and gendering of Shudu and Miquela, which can reinforce racial stereotypes and exotification. Furthermore, it is argued that their representations of a Black woman and a Latina contribute to the perception of Black women and Latinas as exotic Others,

reducing their identities to a commodified aesthetic. These findings align with previous research on objectifying and fetishizing racialized women's bodies.

Furthermore, the sexualized representations of Shudu and Miquela reinforce gender stereotypes and power imbalances. Their poses, lack of clothing, and suggestive context objectify them and position them as passive objects of voyeuristic pleasure. These representations reflect a long history of objectifying and commodifying women's bodies, further perpetuating unequal power dynamics.

In the context of avatars, performative diversity can be deceptive. While virtual avatars may appear to represent different ethnicities or genders, they can still perpetuate harmful stereotypes or biases if designed without input from the communities they represent or if they reinforce existing power dynamics and inequalities. Additionally, the lack of agency and autonomy in FVAs complicates power dynamics further, as FVAs cannot challenge or resist their objectifying or exotifying portrayals.

Overall, this research's theoretical and practical implications emphasize the urgent need for critical analysis, ethical considerations, and inclusive practices in using FVAs, not limited to the fashion industry but extended to other domains as well. Furthermore, involving and empowering marginalized communities in designing and representing virtual avatars is crucial to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes and power imbalances. Acknowledging and addressing the societal effects of FVAs can pave the way for more responsible and respectful representation of marginalized communities and identities, fostering a more inclusive and equitable virtual landscape.

9. References

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