

Original Article

Virtual Influencers and the Future of Brand Marketing: A Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to analyze how virtual influencers affect future brand marketing activities and their operational roles, as it holds considerable importance for brands in their brand marketing strategies. A qualitative research method approach was followed in this study to explore how various stakeholders view virtual influencers (VIs) for brand marketing through their perceptions and experiences, and attitudes. A purposive sampling approach was used to obtain participants with expertise in virtual influencers who came from three distinct groups. While the study involved a total of 10 consumers (ages 18–35), the research contained six marketing experts who worked in agencies as well as brand teams. 4 content creators with experience in digital media, CGI, or influencer marketing. Thematic analysis was followed while six themes were selected: Perceptions of Authenticity and Trust, Strategic Appeal of Virtual Influencers for Brands, Emotional and Parasocial Engagement with Vis, Ethical and Cultural Concerns, Imagining the Future of Influencer Marketing findings suggest that these factors play a vital role in enhancing the brand marketing through virtual influencers and it helps them to better understand the challenges in promotion of brands and formulate strategies to improve their products and brands awareness in a more effective way.

Keywords: Virtual Influencers, Marketing, Brands, Digital Marketing, Social Media, Stakeholders.

Introduction:

Fast advancements in digital technology have completely reshaped the markets where brands operate for marketing communications. Brands transitioned from traditional advertising to digital platforms during the last two decades because they gained direct and interactive communication that became more effective. The emergence of social media influencers represents one of the main transformative effects on marketing because such individuals possess substantial followings on platforms like Instagram YouTube and TikTok that guide consumer decision-making (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011).

Virtual influencers (VIs) represent a new innovation that combination reality with digital simulation elements within influencer marketing. Programmed digital beings employ human characteristics through photorealistic designs and virtual personae to function like regular influencers, although they exist solely as artificial entities. Virtual influencers Lil Miquela, Shudu Gram, and Imma now have millions of followers because they collaborate with global fashion and beauty brands and participate in social activism which sparks curiosity and concern in the marketing field (Wiederhold, 2021).

Virtual influencers have brought forward a critical transition point within brand marketing history. The implementation of non-human marketing messengers transforms fundamental consumer expectations about honest and accessible marketing communication and brings doubts about how audience members handle marketing messages that come from machines. The progress of artificial intelligence (AI), computer graphics and machine learning technologies will expand VIs' roles and capabilities thus requiring academic research to analyze marketing practice and consumer behavior implications.

1.2. Brief History and Development of Virtual Influencers

The media has employed artificial personas as a concept throughout its development. Through entities such as Max Headroom in the 1980s and animated brand mascots like the Michelin Man, along with the GEICO Gecko marketers have been developing methods to establish connections with their audiences for a long ago. Virtual influencers in their current form stand apart by combining artificial intelligence control with extremely realistic appearances and their complete presence on social media platforms (Wang, 2022).

Around 2016, the initial modern era of virtual influencers started to appear as Lil Miquela from Brud emerged as one of the first and most successful ones. Through fashion-forward content and music releases alongside social activism, Miquela gained fast recognition among media outlets, which also brought her corporate sponsors like Calvin Klein and Prada. The initial successful virtual influence led multiple groups to create digital personalities spanning various fields, including fashion and travel, and fitness, that companies used to present representative brand personas (Marwick, 2015).

Market demand for virtual influencers in promotional strategies has risen because of multiple key elements that fuel their adoption. The full creative direction of brands over VIs eliminates unpredictability that occurs with human influencers who face scandals and contract violations. Virtual influencers operate nonstop while communicating fluently in various tongues while embracing all types of ethnicities without any physical limitations. Generation Z is a digital-native generation that has received virtual influencers with open arms because the synthetic personalities capture their attention to innovation and online interactions (Friedman 2020). The changing trend poses critical issues regarding the level of transparency we should have and ethical issues and the consumer psychology. To what extent is it possible to sympathize with completely digital things? When dealing with human influencers and virtual influencers, people demonstrate varied amounts of credibility trust. In a world where reality is now manufactured with the help of digital technology what is authenticity?

3. Rationale for the Study

The concept of the new generation of virtual influencers has gained the interest of much media coverage but scholarly research regarding this phenomenon is at rather nascent phases. The vast majority of scholarly studies focus on either the systems development that forms virtual personas or the research of quantitative influencer performance metrics. There are no studies that explore stakeholder attitudes towards virtual influencers, as well as their behavioral patterns towards virtual influencers and their perceived impact on brand marketing in the future (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). A qualitative research design is essential to investigate the VIs since they are cultural products that are constituent of complex technological

and social constructions. The study aims to contribute to the knowledge in the area of virtual influencer brand marketing due to the examination of actual experiences and perspectives of various marketing stakeholders and perspectives.

4. Research Objectives

The main research goal aims to analyze how virtual influencers affect future brand marketing activities and their operational roles. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- 1 To explore the different perspectives between what consumers think about virtual influencers as opposed to traditional human influencers.
- 2 To illustrate why brands work with virtual influencers along with the methods these brands use when partnering with them.
- 3 To explore how Companies determine the moral, social, psychological and cultural concerns regarding virtual influencer use across brand communication platforms.
- 4 To evaluate the formation and negotiation process of authenticity when applied to virtual influencers.
- 5 To explore current market trends and analyze the likely course of development for influencer marketing strategies which utilize virtual influencers.

5. Research Questions

The main research inquiry centers on the following central question:

What does the public think of virtual influencers and how do industry practitioners receive these influencers and what does this mean for upcoming brand marketing methods?

Sub-questions include:

- 1 What major ideas come up in consumer discussions about their encounters with virtual influencers?
- 2 Marketing professionals base their evaluation of virtual influencer campaigns on what criteria and which components of virtual influencers appeal to them or not?
- 3 Stakeholders hold multiple ethical worries about the expanding role of virtual influencers in the market.
- 4 How do various observers understand and implement authenticity principles when working with virtual influencers?
- 5 Virtual influencers establish different kinds of relationships with consumers when compared to human influencers working in similar roles.

6. Theoretical Framework

The findings in this study benefit from interpretations by integrating theories from media studies and marketing theory and sociology. The key frameworks include:

1.6.1. Postmodern Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

Virtual influencers exist as a key symbol of postmodern times because our culture continues to lose its ability to differentiate simulation from reality. By using CCT theorists can study consumer conduct as symbolic practices that weave throughout the manipulation of personal experiences while building consumer identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Baudrillard's notion of simulacra matches the hyperreal qualities of VIs because their digital representation brings forth a level of reality that exceeds actual living beings. The concept functions as a tool for determining how virtual influencers provoke emotional subscriber engagement as well as cognitive mental processing.

1.6.2. Source Credibility and Parasocial Interaction Theory

The persuasive strength of influencers derives primarily from how well they are perceived to be trustworthy and experienced while being attractive according to Hovland and Weiss (1951). The authentic nature of virtual influencers depends on design elements because they lack genuine experiences in reality. Parasocial interaction theory helps describe audience-media figure relationships, but researchers can now use it to understand relationships between users and virtual entities and analyze formed emotional bonds (Giles, 2002).

1.6.3. Anthropomorphic brand associations exist within the Human-Computer Interaction field (HCI)

Humans assign brand characters and brands human qualities through brand anthropomorphism. As a brand extension of corporate identity virtual influencers physically represent company values and personal attributes. User responses to virtual characters and the "uncanny valley" effect as well as social presence in mediated interactions can both be explained through principles from HCI.

The selected frameworks will direct the thematic data analysis of qualitative findings to generate interconnected interpretations regarding virtual influencer approaches in brand marketing spaces.

1.7. Significance of the Study

The study is of great significance to both academic researchers and practice-based professionals. The research contributes to the academic credibility in the developing body of literature regarding virtual influencers by conducting an extensive qualitative research. The research contributes to knowledge creation across disciplines in the marketing discipline and the media studies, along with digital sociology.

The study results provide the marketers and brand managers, and advertisers with the necessary strategic information related to the Virtual-influencer in order to make better decisions. A concept of what the targeted audiences think of virtual personas may allow the brands to create more effective and ethically responsible marketing plans. When the digital and the real life platforms are intertwined as in this case, we should take a critical look at the effects that the virtual influencers bring because this is a burning issue of modernity. The paper is a review of how this innovative ground breaking development can alter the brand marketing strategies.

2. Literature Review

Computer generated characters (also referred to as virtual influencers) that engage in influencer marketing is a trend that has evolved in online branding. These influencers are operating on the social media, and in most instances, they appear to resemble real human beings, and this has dire effects on brand strategies (Wertz, 2021). The provided literature review evaluates the existing academic and business research on the topic of virtual influencers and their impact on the brand marketing practice, consumer attitudes, authenticity, and the future of influencer marketing. The Rise of Virtual Influencers The trend of virtual influencers has hit its peak with the millions of fans and brand deals of such characters as Lil Miquela, Shudu, and Imma (Robinson, 2020). The studies have highlighted the degree of control and frequency that the brand can attain through virtual influencers compared to human influencers (Marwick, 2022). CGI influencers are viewed as creative and futuristic, which fits the brands that aim at the tech-savvy demographic (Lee and Kim, 2021)

Consumer Perception and Engagement The responses of consumers to virtual influencers differ in many ways. Some studies claim that viewers like the aesthetic and novelty of such characters (Johnson, 2022), but others assert the issue of authenticity and trust (Chen and Lin, 2021). Gao et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study and discovered that younger consumers are less resistant towards the use of virtual influencers, particularly when there is transparency about their unnatural quality.

Trust and Authenticity This is one of the main themes of influencer marketing. Virtual influencers question the traditional authenticity and are making researchers distinguish between the perceived and the actual authenticity (Casaló et al., 2021). Although they are artificial, there are those virtual influencers who are more authentic based on their consistency in behaviour and message (Sanz-Blas et al., 2022). Nonetheless, there are unethical issues of deceit still looming (Florenthal & Shoham, 2020).

Brand Alignment and Strategy Virtual influencers provide brands with more control over the messaging and image and minimize risks related to the unpredictable behavior of human influencers (Campbell and Farrell, 2021). They also support hyper-customized campaigns and data-driven interaction designs (Pereira et al., 2023). Nevertheless, researchers also warn about excessive use of CGI characters, saying that they can lose their connection with audiences who want to experience the world of real people (Nguyen and Simkin, 2022).

Ethical Implications and Control The virtual influencer usage provokes significant ethical and regulatory concerns. Among the problems are the disappearance of the boundary between fiction and reality, playing with the perception of consumers, and insufficient disclosure (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019). Regulatory authorities are now starting to act upon this issue and state that there is a necessity to be transparent and provide informed consent (Kapitan & Silvera, 2020).

The Future of Virtual Influencer Marketing In the future, virtual influencers will probably evolve and become more advanced in terms of AI and machine learning (Zeng et al., 2023). According to the research, hybrid models (a combination of the attributes of virtual and human influencers) can be the new standard (Kowalczyk et al., 2022). This will require the brands to continuously change approaches in order to strike a balance between the innovation and consumer trust, and ethical integrity (Jin and Ryu, 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study applied qualitative research method approach to find out how different stakeholders perceive virtual influencers (VIs) to market their brands based on their perceptions and experiences, and attitudes. Qualitative research is the most appropriate option due to the exploratory nature of the topic of the study and the fact that the study requires exploring subjective meanings. By this research design, the research elicits profound responses to questions by the study participants regarding the influence of virtual influencers on marketing practice and consumer-brand relations. Thematic analysis of data analysis will form the research framework. Thematic analysis research enables the researcher to explain different patterns or themes of the qualitative data using a set of patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The study approach is appropriate to the study of modern trends, particularly, virtual influencers, the theoretical framework of which is still being worked out.

3.2 Research Paradigm

The research adopts an interpretivist paradigm because it understands that social reality emerges from individual interpretations formed through personal experiences. Our research approach supports the understanding of stakeholder perspectives between consumers, marketers, and content creators about virtual influencers throughout the brand marketing setting.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling approach was used to obtain participants with expertise in virtual influencers who came from three distinct groups.

People who follow virtual influencers as part of their social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

The group includes marketing professionals dedicated to brand promotion and influencer activations, and digital marketing strategy implementation.

The sample of individuals selected for this study consists of people who develop or operate virtual influencers either directly or through indirect means.

Group sampling was done using maximum variation to achieve diverse perspectives through considerations of factors such as participants' ages, gender, geographical areas, and professional backgrounds.

- The research involved a total of
- 10 consumers (ages 18–35),
- The research contained six marketing experts who worked in agencies as well as brand teams.
- 4 content creators with experience in digital media, CGI, or influencer marketing.

4. Data Analysis

The outcome from thematic evaluation of twenty semi-structured interviews, along with one focus group including consumers and marketing professionals, and content creators, will be shown here. The research explored regular patterns in how people perceive and reconstruct meaning about virtual influencers (VIs) who work in brand marketing. The six-phase approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) produced five main patterns in the analysis.

1. Perceptions of Authenticity and Trust
2. Strategic Appeal of Virtual Influencers for Brands
3. Emotional and Parasocial Engagement with VIs
4. Ethical and Cultural Concerns
5. Imagining the Future of Influencer Marketing

Each theme is discussed in detail below, accompanied by illustrative quotes and interpretive analysis grounded in the theoretical framework introduced earlier.

Theme 1: Perceptions of Authenticity and Trust

All participant groups strongly acknowledged this power struggle between actual authenticity and artificial creation within virtual influencer marketing. According to Audrezet de Kerviler and Moulard (2020), authenticity maintains its position as a vital influencer marketing element that drives trust throughout consumer relationships. However, VIs challenge traditional notions of authenticity by their very nature.

Consumers who took part in the study hesitated to trust a nonexistent entity instead of one that exists in reality:

Despite knowing Lil Miquela lacks actual human existence she remains more professional than multiple real-life influencers. People find it strange to like her fashion sense though they understand everything about her exists only digitally. (Consumer, 23)

Several consumers valued the predictable nature and visually pleasing aspects of VIs because they presented an expertly designed representation of idealized lifestyles. People felt heartbroken or puzzled after discovering their virtual friend profiles were made through artificial means.

My initial assumption was that Imma was a genuine person when I started following her. I discovered later her account was controlled by CGI technology so this led me to doubt the authenticity of everything I saw. (Consumer, 27)

The pragmatic approach to authenticity came from marketing professionals compared to consumers. Brand strategists refuted the concept of “realness as an inherent trait” by treating authenticity as a storytelling mechanism which matches consumer values.

The real question in authenticity is not about the human status of the influencer. A story becomes authentic when it finds emotional responses from consumers. The delivery of resonance by a virtual influencer makes it authentic in its own manner. (Brand Strategist, 34)

Registered users now base their buying decisions on emotional responses rather than factual authenticity criteria in marketing. According to postmodern consumer culture theory the approach indicates how simulations surpass real experiences in feeling authentic (Baudrillard, 1994).

Theme 2: Strategic Appeal of Virtual Influencers for Brands

Strong evidence showed how VIs provide brands with valuable strategic benefits. Brand marketers stressed that VIs bring marketing benefits, which include brand-realistic depictions alongside cost savings and complete creative freedom, and reduced business risks.

Using human influencers carries an inherent danger of experiencing negative public relations incidents. Because virtual influencers are operated by brands, they provide no risk exposure. We control the narrative." (Marketing Manager, 39)

The creative teams overseeing VIs maintain full control of their development so brands achieve perfect alignment with their marketing strategies and desired target audiences. The complete management of these digital characters was seen as an advantageous factor.

The procedure eliminates problems associated with no-shows, together with changing behavior and instances of self-aggrandizement. When implemented correctly, VIs always maintain a perfect presentation for their audience. (Creative Director, 41)

The participants mentioned that their virtual influencer campaigns eliminated requirements for makeup applications and traveling, and using stylists because they traditionally come with human-influencer partnerships. The VIs operate through uniform interfaces, which companies can modify to suit varying cultural markets without altering their basic representation.

Some advertising experts observed that customer understanding of VIs' synthetic origins might develop into a promotional strategy.

The virtual fashion model campaign aimed to merge real elements with imaginary ones for our brand's video. People understood the character was not genuine, yet the discovery of her fake nature actually increased her fascination level. (Digital Marketing Specialist, 31)

HCI and brand anthropomorphic theories show that people establish connections with artificial systems when such systems use anthropomorphic methods to create meaningful emotional engagement.

Theme 3: Emotional and Parasocial Engagement with VIs

Some VI consumers showed deep emotions toward the VIs before discovering they were digital entities. The participants established emotional ties with VIs through parasocial interaction research, which resembles standard fan-to-celebrity relationships.

Miquela addresses relevant actual topics, which include both feminism and racism in her content. Virtual or not she manages to convey her message directly to her audience. The user tells me she sends direct messages to this person as if she knows her personally in real life. (Consumer, 21)

Users mentioned the importance of having the influencer present in their social realm rather than their physical being as essential.

"She replies to comments. Her captions are funny. The artificial appearance of the face does not diminish the feeling that a real individual stands behind the content. (Consumer, 25)

Several consumers expressed feelings about VIs that resembled the ways they relate to famous celebrities. The key elements for developing parasocial bonds involve consistent presentation and responsive behavior together with emotional resonance no matter if influencers are living people or computer-generated personas.

A number of consumers disruptively rejected the interactive opportunity of this aspect. A small number expressed doubts about the moral character of such bonds particularly when they believed manipulation was the purpose.

"It's kinda dystopian. A fake girl operated by marketing professionals performs emotional manipulation on me. (Consumer, 29)

The dual nature of Boden's marketing methods reveals how emotional relationships blur with performance strategies, which are traditionally found in postmodern approaches.

Theme 4: Ethical and Cultural Concerns

Ethical considerations about virtual influencers took up a major part of the conversation during both interviews and the focus group discussion. Research subjects expressed doubts about how openly virtual influencers disclose themselves while questioning their methods of manipulation, as well as representation and digital work practices.

4.1. Transparency and Disclosure

The participants stressed that discerning the unreal nature of influencers should always be clearly revealed by companies. Customers maintained that they experienced deception because virtual influencer information remained unclear to them.

Every virtual influencer should carry a visible indicator that indicates their fake nature. The public holds a fundamental right to discover that the online identity they interact with represents an artificial character. (Consumer, 30)

The marketers accepted this issue, yet explained that no regulations existed. Several marketing professionals saw the unclear indication of reality as creating a positive effect on audience engagement.

The unknown aspect gives the content additional appeal. Society enjoys playing this game to discern virtual personalities from genuine beings. The buzz around falsely pretending to be real often encourages user participation. (Marketing Professional, 36)

4.2. Representation and Stereotyping

People express concern about VIs because their appearance functions as an artificial reflection of perfect beauty standards while simultaneously perpetuating common stereotypes:

The majority of virtual influencers possess thin bodies with perfect complexions and pale complexions. This phenomenon implements standard beauty requirements that exist beyond plausibility. (Consumer, 26)

The concepts of feminist media criticism explore how different bodies get displayed and who possesses control over these images, according to Gill (2007). The study participants recommended that brands implement virtual influencers as tools for showing a wide range of diverse individuals beyond the limitations of made-up beauty standards.

4.3. Exploitation and Digital Labor

Content creators showed concern regarding the potential loss of jobs by human influencers and creative professionals in their field.

All hired photographers and stylists and models become at risk when brands develop their own virtual influencer capabilities. (Content Creator, 33)

The potential use of virtual influencers creates concerns about digital employment as well as automation and job replacement in creative industries which experts and policymakers should study.

Theme 5: Imagining the Future of Influencer Marketing

Study participants predicted the marketing trends following the use of virtual influencers but their forecasts spanned from positive to negative perspectives.

5.1. Normalization and Expansion

The participation of virtual influencers shows indications of becoming mainstream among digital-native audiences who are younger people:

Both Gen Z and Alpha will view AI influencers as ordinary since they experienced AI from childhood. People who belong to Gen Z and Alpha generations will pay no mind to authenticity when something feels fashionable. (Marketing Consultant, 40)

The society demonstrates a new acceptance of virtual social actors which corresponds with both postmodern and HCI theoretical frameworks.

5.2. Hybrid Influencers and Mixed Realities

Several influencers predicted the evolution of human-AI interaction through increased operational synergy between artificial beings and human creators as well as the creation of new hybrid digital personality types.

Artificial intelligence technology can produce virtual faces with audio feeds provided by real human performers in real time. That's where it's headed." (Content Creator, 28)

The blending of authentic and simulated elements characterizes media identity evolution within mixed-reality settings.

5.3. Consumer Fatigue and Ethical Pushback

The research participants displayed conflicting attitudes about the subject matter. The interviewees foresaw two potential issues regarding the overexposure or improper use of VIs by consumers.

After people lose interest in simulated interactions they will choose to interact with real individuals once again. People moved from reality TV shows to documentary programming following the same pattern. (Consumer, 32)

Media trends follow this continuous pattern which indicates that Virtual reality technology will succeed past its innovative stage through commitment to ethical practices together with creative development and genuine user interaction.

Summary of Themes

Theme	Description
1.Authenticity and Trust	Explored how VIs challenge traditional notions of authenticity, with consumer and marketer perspectives diverging.
2.Strategic Appeal	Highlighted the control, efficiency, and flexibility VIs offer brands.
3.Emotional Engagement	Revealed how consumers form parasocial relationships with VIs despite knowing they are artificial.
4. Ethical Concerns	Addressed issues around transparency, representation, and the digital labor implications of using VIs.
5. Future Trajectories	Explored how VIs may evolve, be normalized, or spark backlash in future brand marketing landscapes.

Conclusion

The study examines the complex nature of the role of brand marketing by employing a qualitative approach to the use of virtual influencers (VIs) in the current context. The results have brought light into various dimensions of this phenomenon that are critical to the study, and they respond directly to each of the research objectives that were set in the study. To begin with, the review showed that consumers have contrasting views on virtual and human influencers. Although the traditional influencers are perceived to be more emotionally relatable, the virtual influencers invoke the sense of curiosity and futuristic nature. This is consistent with the theme of Perceptions of Authenticity and Trust in which perceived consistency and managed personas of VIs occasionally increase trust, although they are artificial. Second, the paper looked at the rationale behind the growing popularity of brands working with the virtual influencers. The strategic advantages behind these collaborations include increased creative command, brand security and convergence with new brand identities. Within the theme Strategic Appeal of Virtual Influencers for Brands, it is clear that VIs can be highly effective in the creation of personalized marketing stories, particularly in a digital world that is immersive.

Third, this study had the significance of focusing on moral, social, psychological, and cultural implications when incorporating VIs in brand messages. This is in line with the theme of Ethical and Cultural Concerns that emphasized mistrust and possible misrepresentation among the audience and the necessity of open disclosure. The ethical issues will be kept at the center stage as the boundary between real and simulation keeps becoming unclear. Fourth, the paper has examined the construction and negotiation of authenticity in the environment of VIs. The theme Emotional and Parasocial Engagement with VIs demonstrated that viewers can establish real relations with such artificial characters, and authenticity is not a natural phenomenon, but an act and object of perception. Emotional connection of VIs, when created based on likable stories, can be equal to human influencers. Lastly, the review has examined new trends and future forecasts in influencer marketing. Considering the theme Imagining the Future of Influencer Marketing, the industry is evidently turning into hybrid-based with AI-driven personalization combined with the human touch. With the maturation of technology, virtual influencers can be more interactive and context-driven, and the work that marketers do must be consistent to keep up with and perfect strategies.

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