

Chapter 5

Virtual Influencers: The Irruption of Artificial Intelligence in Digital Influencers

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ABSTRACT

The digital revolution has fueled the rise of influencers who shape opinions and behaviors online. However, the arrival of virtual influencers, avatars generated by artificial intelligence, is transforming advertising. These avatars, like Lil Miquela, are run by brands and agencies, offer customization and flexibility, and pose fewer ethical risks. Although they are not always as effective as humans, they can be valuable in rational campaigns. In a world where artificial intelligence is growing, these virtual influencers are emerging as a powerful tool in marketing. This chapter explores its importance and evolution in society and marketing.

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has undergone a significant upheaval in recent years, and the role of the influencer has proven to be an extraordinary phenomenon. According to recent data (Smith, 2021), the number of people consuming and creating online content has seen a substantial increase, with over 3.6 billion active users on social media worldwide. Furthermore, it has been observed that many of these influencers are capable

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of profoundly impacting the opinions, purchasing decisions, and even the behavior of their followers. According to a market study (Johnson et al., 2022), 72% of consumers trust product recommendations made by influencers they follow. These influencers have become experts in shaping trends and influencing societal opinions through their loyal follower communities. This phenomenon has transformed the dynamics of digital communication and marketing.

In the last decade, with the growth of social networks such as Facebook or Instagram, these content creators have become very popular among companies to promote their brands (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). They give credibility to the message that the company wants to convey (Kamins, 1989) and improve its appearance thanks to the image that these influencers have in the eyes of their followers (Louie & Obermiller, 2002; McCracken, 1989).

However, in recent times, technology has continued to evolve and part of the market has been changing. Specifically, these popular influencers that we have been getting to know could be overshadowed by the arrival of those already known as Virtual Influencers. These are avatars with the appearance or features of human beings that are generated by a computer and are turning the advertising industry upside down (Franke, C., et al. 2022).

These digital characters are assigned to profiles on social networks and can be directed by digital agencies or brands (Guthrie, 2020). They are able to create communities of loyal followers, just like human influencers, and brands are increasingly interested in them (Hugh & Leung, 2022). These avatars can take on a variety of appearances, from beings that appear to be mere caricatures to characters that are almost impossible to distinguish if they are human beings. Virtual influencers can range from imaginary cartoon-like beings to incredibly realistic characters that are almost impossible to distinguish from real humans in everyday life (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Delbaere, 2011).

An example of this is the influencer Lil Miquela, who has been able to reach almost 3 million followers on Instagram, and has managed to collaborate with such important brands as Bershka, Prada or Alexander McQueen. It has been generated by Brud, a company dedicated to artificial intelligence located in Los Angeles that has also created other virtual influencers such as Bermuda or Blawko.

If brands want to collaborate with these influencers, they must carefully evaluate their characteristics, especially taking into account ethical and social issues.

Virtual influencers have numerous advantages that make them so special and unique: first of all, one of the aspects to highlight about this type of influencer is personalization. What do we mean by this? Virtual influencers have a peculiarity. What distinguishes them from the influencers that we are used to seeing on networks and is the ease of adaptation of these to the target audience that we want to attract. For example: we can create a virtual influencer with a certain appearance, with a specific skin color, their height and clothing, in addition to their location and behavior (Guthrie, 2020; Sands, 2022). However, it must be taken into account that a representation that is too fictitious or unrealistic of the standards we are used to seeing can achieve the opposite result (Franke, C., et al. 2022).

On the other hand, another of the advantages of having a virtual influencer is flexibility, this means that by working with this type of influencer we avoid concerns such as fatigue, hunger, location problems, etc. (Appel, 2020).

Comparing working with real influencers (Pradhan, 2023), collaborations with virtual influencers take on lower risks related to involvement in scandals and unethical behavior (Guthrie, 2020).

The novel concept of virtual influencers also raises concerns about the transparency and authenticity of the recommendations and opinions promoted by these influencers. It is essential to always make it clear that they are fictional entities. Lack of authenticity is the main issue that brands may encounter.

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