Chapter 8
Virtual Influencers:
A Bibliometric Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Virtual influencers are rapidly gaining significance in the digital marketing realm. This study offers an overview of the fragmented landscape of virtual influencer research, addressing key contributions, themes, methodologies, and future directions. Employing a bibliometric analysis approach, the research examined 52 articles from the Scopus database, shedding light on the evolving field. Findings underscore a dispersed literature landscape that began in 2020, spanning 44 distinct outlets and involving 138 authors. The prevailing research primarily centers on general social media users' perceptions of virtual influencers, leaving substantial gaps in the study of actual followers. Many pieces of research exhibit a lack of methodological rigor and theoretical framework. As the discipline progresses, there is an emergent need for enhanced methodologies that focus on genuine followers and encompass broader managerial objectives. The prospects for subsequent research in this domain are vast and promising.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the integration of virtual and augmented reality technologies with social media platforms has catalyzed the rise of virtual influencers, which can be defined as "computer-generated characters or avatars designed and maintained by experts and digital agencies that help brands appeal to and reach desirable target groups effectively through their digital personalities" (Audrezet & Koles, 2023, p. 353). In the literature, the term "virtual influencers" is frequently used interchangeably with related concepts such as "computer-generated influencer" (e.g., Block & Lovegrove, 2021; Mrad et al., 2022), "virtual avatar" (e.g., de Brito Silva et al., 2022), and "social bot" (e.g., Choong & Wang, 2023). However, "virtual influencer" seems to be the most accepted terminology. Robinson (2020) stresses that virtual influencers are neither humans nor robots; rather, they are fictional characters whose representations are computer-generated. They are controlled by artificial intelligence (Sands et al., 2022) and often mimic

the appearance, actions, and behaviors of human beings (Choudhry et al., 2022; da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021; Franke et al., 2023; Ham, Li, et al., 2023; Mirowska & Arsenyan, 2023). Moustakas et al. (2020) stress that, even when their virtual nature is disclosed, virtual influencers frequently exhibit human emotions in their posts and interactions with social media users.

According to Lou et al. (2022), there are six motivations for following virtual influencers: novelty, information, entertainment, surveillance, esthetics, and integration and social interaction. Available data underscores consumers' interest in virtual influencers. For instance, in the US, it was estimated that over half of the consumers had followed a virtual influencer in 2022 (Dencheva, 2023b). Notably, Adult Gen Z exhibited the most pronounced affinity, with 75% of them following these digital influencers (Dencheva, 2023b). The primary reason behind following these influencers was content and storytelling (Dencheva, 2023a), with platforms like YouTube and Instagram emerging as the primary hubs for such engagements.

Ham, Li, et al. (2023) stress that the advertising and entertainment sectors are pioneering the use of virtual humans in the digital realm. However, and like their human counterparts, the most popular virtual influencers frequently advertise a myriad of product categories, from fashion and beauty items, to automobiles, food, and tourism experiences. Interestingly, there are diverse strategies employed within virtual influencers. Some are owned directly by brands, such as Lu do Magalu, created for Magazine Luiza in 2009, who boasts millions of followers on both Instagram and TikTok. In contrast, there are virtual influencers like Miquela Sousa (@lilmiquela), created by Brud, who collaborate with major brands and also have millions of followers on Instagram and TikTok. Furthermore, certain virtual influencers have carved out niche positions aligned with specific consumer values; for instance, Noonoouri promotes veganism and sustainable fashion and maintains a notable online presence.

Collaborating with virtual influencers offers companies several advantages. Virtual influencers are customizable (de Brito Silva et al., 2022; Mouritzen et al., 2023) and provide enhanced control over their digital presence (Conti et al., 2022; da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021; de Brito Silva et al., 2022; Franke et al., 2023; Mouritzen et al., 2023; Moustakas et al., 2020). While deceptive practices among traditional influencers pose reputational risks for collaborating brands, virtual influencers mitigate these risks. Additionally, virtual influencers provide more flexibility that human influencers (Conti et al., 2022; Mouritzen et al., 2023). Their absence of physical constraints allows for versatile brand representations in diverse scenarios. It can also reduce costs (de Brito Silva et al., 2022; Franke et al., 2023), including related to logistics and campaign preparation. Virtual influencers also offer automation and ownership advantages (Mouritzen et al., 2023). Moreover, they are especially appealing to the younger audiences (Audrezet & Koles, 2023; Bringé, 2023; Jhawar et al., 2023) and can enable companies to engage with those segments more effectively. According to Statista, virtual influencers provide relevant engagement rates, as for example Lu of Magalu, who has over 6 million followers, 0.26 percent of which interacted with her posts on average. Lil Miquela had in 2022 an engagement rate of 1.4%.

Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021) argue that virtual influencers have the potential to cater to the same user engagement needs as human influencers on social media platforms. Virtual influencers can assist users in forming and displaying their personal identity, particularly in the context of social media's public nature. Furthermore, they offer a unique diversion, presenting an alternate yet familiar reality, enhancing the immersive experience. Interactions with virtual influencers can simulate genuine social interactions, potentially leading to perceived intimate or parasocial relationships. This interaction can also fulfill the need for autonomy, as users consciously choose to engage with virtual content, thereby ensuring a genuine interaction experience.

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