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The ethics of virtuality: navigating the complexities of human-like virtual influencers in the social media marketing realm

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Introduction

Over the past few years, brands have shown a growing interest in virtual influencers due to the amplified control they present over the content and behavior of these influencers (Ham et al., 2023; Kim and Park, 2023; Um, 2023). Furthermore, employing virtual influencers can effectively mitigate the risks associated with human errors in marketing campaigns. Unlike their human counterparts, whose personal decisions may adversely affect the brand image they represent (Bartz et al., 2013), virtual influencers are ageless, digital avatars devoid of an offline existence that could potentially jeopardize their online persona. This seemingly advantageous proposition does, however, lack a consumer-oriented perspective.

It is worth noting that the lack of transparency around the creators of these virtual influencers and the concept of audiences following artificial entities have sparked debates around marketing ethics. Critics argue that this practice primarily benefits the brands, with the potential advantages for consumers or the public interest remaining elusive. In response to these concerns, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC, 2022) recently proposed expanding the definition of "endorsers" to encompass virtual influencers, highlighting the current lack of standardized ethical guidelines governing this emerging phenomenon.

Moreover, when we compare the controllability and risk mitigation offered by virtual influencers for brands with the FTC's concerns about deception and lack of transparency, it becomes clear that the latter hold substantial weight. These concerns embody elements of public interest, including the need for truthful advertising and consumer protection. Thus, while the use of virtual influencers may seem an attractive option for brands, its ethical implications for consumers and the public, in general, warrant serious consideration. Therefore, it's crucial to address the issues related to deceit, transparency, and trust in the context of virtual influencers, acknowledging that any progress in this field should be balanced and aligned with the public interest.

The current paper aims to outline the notion of virtual influencers and delve into core ontological queries. These include whether the digital existence of these influencers can be considered equivalent to a physical, offline presence, and crucially, whether this virtual existence could grant them any form of agency. In this context, the concept of agency refers to the ability of these virtual influencers to make decisions, initiate actions, and potentially influence behavior online, mirroring the agency typically associated with their human counterparts. Furthermore, this research delves into the ethical implications tied to the utilization of virtual influencers. These encompass assigning moral responsibility, akin to human influencers, and the need to bolster transparency in their operations.

Rise of virtual influencers

Influencer marketing has experienced a surge in popularity, with expenditures projected to reach $15 billion in 2022 (Forbes, 2022). Social media influencers are defined as individuals who possess substantial followings across one or more social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, or personal blogs), driving discourse and influencing the attitudes of their target audiences (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou and Yuan, 2019). These influencers range from celebrities to non-professional individuals (Kim and Kim, 2021a). Given their prominent role in disseminating information and fostering engagement through the trust they garner from their followers (Kim and Kim, 2021b), social media influencers are increasingly collaborating with businesses for product endorsements. Consequently, influencer marketing can be characterized as remunerating influencers for publishing brand-related content (Vrontis et al., 2021; Ki et al., 2022).

Virtual influencers, digital personalities existing solely in virtual realms, are endowed with first-person perspectives and made accessible on social media platforms for influencing purposes (Virtual Humans, 2020). Utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) and computer-generated imagery (CGI), virtual influencers—also referred to as AI influencers or CGI influencers—may amass considerable followings on social media platforms and achieve engagement rates up to 3.5 times higher than human influencers (Medium, 2022). This heightened engagement can be attributed to several factors, including the novelty and uniqueness of virtual influencers, the tailored and data-driven content they can produce, and their ability to be active without having the human influencers' physical and mental constraints. Lil Miquela, one of the most renowned virtual influencers boasting ∼3 million Instagram followers, has successfully collaborated with brands such as Prada (Medium, 2022), illustrating the potential of this nascent influencer marketing tool.

Some research posits that virtual influencers could serve as viable alternatives to human influencers (Block and Lovegrove, 2021). They are particularly enticing to younger demographics, specifically Generation Z, who demonstrate heightened intentions to follow them. This enhanced interest can be ascribed to a few unique attributes that set virtual influencers apart. Unlike human influencers, who are bound by real-world limitations and societal expectations, virtual influencers offer a novel and immersive experience. While fresh and unique, their content often includes elements of fantasy, escapism, and technological innovation that appeal to Gen Z's digital-first orientation (Choudhry et al., 2022).

Moreover, virtual influencers range from having animated to hyper-realistic appearances, personalities, and characteristics. Some are crafted to be almost indistinguishable from actual humans, blurring the line between the virtual and physical worlds. This unique blend of realism and fantasy, combined with their seamless integration of technology, sets virtual influencers apart from human influencers. These distinctive characteristics appeal to Generation Z, a cohort born during rapid technological advancement, and are more receptive to such digital phenomena. In general, virtual influencers can be categorized into three distinct classifications (Kim et al., 2023): human-like virtual influencers (HVIs), anime-like virtual influencers (AVIs), and non-human virtual influencers (NVIs).

HVIs are virtual influencers whose visual characteristics are indistinguishable from humans, often leading to misidentification. Their body types, skin textures, and features closely resemble those of humans. Conversely, AVIs are animated or cartoon-like entities created in the likeness of humans. Although designed to represent individuals, it is evident that AVIs are digitally generated, whereas HVIs may be mistaken for actual humans. Finally, NVIs are unequivocally non-human influencers, frequently depicted as animals, objects, or fantastical beings, occasionally incorporating anthropomorphic elements alongside non-human traits.

However, in this study's context, the most relevant category is the HVIs, mainly due to the potential issue of misidentification they bring to the table. When a consumer cannot distinguish between a human and a virtual influencer, it raises ethical questions and poses potential risks of deception. Misidentification can lead to consumers attributing human-like agency, credibility, and authenticity to these HVIs that are, in reality, controlled entities. It can also blur the lines between organic content and paid endorsements, leading to misleading consumer perceptions and posing challenges in maintaining transparency in influencer marketing. Therefore, this study insists on addressing the issue of misidentification, highlighting the importance of transparency and the need for transparent disclosure in marketing activities involving virtual influencers, particularly HVIs.

Ontological issues of virtual influencers

As the endorsement of virtual influencers becomes increasingly prevalent, elucidating their ontological status grows more imperative. Virtual influencers lack a physical existence in the world, distinguishing them from both robots and humans. The images they post are wholly or partially composed of computer-generated imagery (CGI), and no living counterpart corresponds to the fictitious persona depicted on social media. Analogous to traditional celebrities or social media influencers, virtual influencers maintain their accounts through self-promotional characters whose success hinges on their unique identities. The social media content of virtual influencers closely resembles human influencers, leading to the perception of virtual influencers as possessing active identities with distinct personalities within the platform.

Hanus and Fox (2015) demonstrated that the presence of virtual agents in digital spaces significantly influences followers' attitudes and purchase intentions (Kim, 2021). Kim et al. (2023) further revealed the effectiveness of virtual influencers in shaping consumers' perspectives. When assessing the efficacy of virtual influencers, the predetermined nature of their posts and content is inconsequential from the followers' standpoint. In influencer marketing literature, authenticity is often defined as genuine and honest (Hudders and Lou, 2022). It involves consistency between one's actions and values and transparency in communication. Consumers are aware that virtual influencers do not possess authenticity in the traditional sense—given their lack of real-world existence, emotions, and independent decision-making—they continue to engage and interact with them as though they have a bona fide presence. Essentially, even without a physical

existence, the identities of virtual influencers seem as "authentic" in the digital realm as those of human social media influencers. In the context of virtual influencers, this perceived authenticity could be seen as consistency in their digital persona, the transparency of their scripted actions, and their unambiguous representation as virtual beings. As such, virtual influencers challenge and potentially expand our understanding of authenticity within the digital sphere and influencer marketing.

Consequently, virtual influencers underscore the matter of personal identity and the criteria necessary for an entity to be regarded as a "being" within the digital sphere. From a general perspective, the identities of virtual influencers and human influencers seem indistinguishable to social media users, a perception not solely based on their ostensibly unique personalities. Indeed, other factors contribute to this seeming similarity, including consistent online behavior, distinct stylistic choices, and the engagement they maintain with their audience. Each of these factors shapes the "persona" of both human and virtual influencers, making them appear comparable from a user's standpoint.

However, it is essential to note virtual influencers' inherent lack of autonomy. While it might seem obvious given their digital nature, this lack of autonomy plays a significant role in ethical considerations. The actions of virtual influencers are strictly tied to their designers or creators, positioning them as tools through which humans exert influence. Consequently, it is not the autonomy of virtual influencers that needs emphasis, but rather the accountability of their creators, who shape their online personas and guide their interactions with the audience. In light of this, transparency concerning the developers exercising potential influence (Castells, 2013; e.g., controlling an account with a substantial follower base) appears warranted. The controversy surrounding the black virtual supermodel (i.e., Shudu Gram), created and managed by a white male, exemplifies the significance of this issue (Jackson, 2018). Ethical and moral responsibility concerns are inextricably intertwined with the ontology and identity of virtual influencers.

Ethical issues concerning virtual influencers

Issues pertaining to moral responsibility underscore the necessity of differentiating between human and virtual influencers. Superficially, the behavior of human and virtual influencers on social media is indistinguishable, as both post novel content and engage with followers. Nevertheless, social media users and content creators ought to treat these two identities distinctly, and social media platforms should monitor virtual influencer accounts to preserve societal values such as trust.

From a marketing standpoint, virtual influencers serve as instruments to generate revenue and influence brand image for companies (i.e., brands or media agencies managing virtual influencers), as virtual influencers' narratives and identities are strategically crafted to garner popularity. Virtual influencers may even publicly support social movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter; Stop Asian Hate) when such endorsement is anticipated to increase their follower base. If viewed in this light, employing virtual influencers is an extension of social media advertising, analogous

to endorsing human influencers. Social media influencers often portray an idealized version of themselves, exaggerate their accomplishments, and utilize photo editing to enhance their appeal (Kim and Kim, 2023). Both forms of behavior exhibit deceptive motives. Consequently, it leads us to consider that if we deem such behavior acceptable for human influencers, it should be regarded as equally acceptable for virtual influencers.

While the extent of deception between embellishing one's identity and entirely fabricating it may differ, virtual influencers are candid about their artificial nature. For instance, Lil Miquela (a prominent human-like virtual influencer with ~3 million Instagram followers) explicitly identified herself as a robot in one of her posts. Japanese virtual influencer Imma also unambiguously describes herself as a virtual girl in her profile description. In such instances, virtual influencers could be considered the most authentic social media influencers, as they are entirely honest and transparent. However, recognizing the distinction between virtual and human influencers is crucial due to moral responsibility. Ensuring transparency regarding the virtual influencer's identity and disclosing the content's source (i.e., the name of the person or company responsible) is vital. This approach enables the identification of the party most accountable for the consequences. Yet, if virtual influencers evolve into AI-powered entities exhibiting autonomous behavior (i.e., AI influencers; Thomas and Fowler, 2021) and generate content based on algorithms that learn "trending" subjects on Instagram, assigning moral responsibility becomes challenging (Coeckelbergh, 2020). In this context, algorithms for creating AI influencers should also be explainable and human-centered to prevent the production of discriminatory content.

Additional concerns possess a more long-term nature. As virtual influencers become more widespread, parasocial relationships (Chung and Cho, 2017) warrant consideration. A parasocial interaction is a psychological relationship where an audience perceives media personalities as friends despite limited actual interaction. This dynamic evolves into a parasocial relationship when repeated exposure and positive information about the media figure foster an illusion of intimacy and identification akin to genuine friendships. Consequently, media users feel strongly connected to these figures, significantly influencing the audience's perceptions and purchasing habits (Lou, 2022). Prolonged exposure to an influencer's social media posts may lead followers to perceive that they know the influencer, even without direct interaction. Stein et al. (2022) posited that viewers exhibit parasocial responses to virtual influencers similarly to human influencers.

Research has shown that social media can enhance dependence on social acceptance and positive feedback while negatively affecting self-assessment and body image (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016; Stapleton et al., 2017). In this context, virtual influencers can primarily magnify these effects (Moustakas et al., 2020; Sands et al., 2022) by representing idealized and often unattainable beauty standards. Unlike human influencers, virtual influencers' appearances can be perfectly curated and modified at will, exacerbating unrealistic body image aspirations. Recognizing these potential negative impacts, some companies are choosing to utilize AVIs or NVIs over HVIs. These options present fewer

anthropomorphic cues, which could help to alleviate the potential for adverse effects tied to idealized body representations.

Conclusion

This opinion article discusses the potential ethical concerns surrounding the burgeoning phenomenon of virtual influencers. As digital entities, they challenge the traditional notions of authenticity and agency, while their ability to attract a substantial following and influence behavior online underscores their effectiveness as marketing tools. They reevaluate how we perceive authenticity and agency in the digital sphere, paving the way for a broader understanding of these constructs. The rise of HVI raises valid concerns about misidentification and the associated ethical implications, necessitating transparency in their operations and explicit acknowledgment of their virtual nature.

Ethically, the clear differentiation between human and virtual influencers is vital, especially considering the potential for deception and the issues tied to moral responsibility. Transparency about the identity of these influencers and their content sources is paramount, underscoring the need for disclosure about those responsible for their creation and management. As virtual influencers become more prevalent and possibly more autonomous, considerations around parasocial relationships and the potential adverse effects tied to idealized body representations come to the fore. There is a need for continued research into the ethical implications of their usage and the development of guidelines to navigate the evolving landscape of influencer marketing.

Author contributions

DK: study conception, manuscript draft preparation, and final manuscript writing. ZW: final manuscript writing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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