

Chapter 6

Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman: A Critical Case Study on Social Media, Deception, and Lil Miquela

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ABSTRACT

This chapter takes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of deception from the critical perspectives of rhetoric, communication, and media studies. The primary objective is to interrogate the interrelationship of communication, identity, and technology relevant to social media in order to confront issues related to online deception. To that end, this case study is centrally focused on social media sensation Miquela Sosa, also known as Lil Miquela, and the implications of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and social media influencers to contribute to a more robust critical consciousness regarding misinformation online.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the authors seek to provide some perspective and satisfactory answers to the growing questions and concerns regarding misinformation in business, politics, religion and everyday life. More precisely, using the critical perspectives of rhetoric, communication, and media studies, the authors' objective is to interrogate the interrelationship of communication, identity, and technology relevant to the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and social media influencers, focusing specifically on Instagram sensation Miquela Sosa, also known as Lil Miquela. In short, these objectives serve the larger purpose of broadening our understanding of online deception patterns and emboldening students, scholars, and professionals with strategies to confront these challenges.

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What makes this case study peculiar, and all the more compelling, is that Lil Miquela is not a real person but rather an AI technology that promotes various products and social causes. *Time* recently named Miquela as one of the 25 most influential people on the Internet (Chan, 2018); *V Magazine*, devoted to fashion, music, and culture, has hailed her as the “face of new-age logomania” (Mischianti, 2018); and *Wonderland*, devoted to fashion, music, beauty, art, and culture, has featured an in-depth interview and photo spread with Miquela (Walker, 2018). On Instagram, Miquela identifies as a robot from Los Angeles; a musician, with a music video inspired by her single, “Hate Me”; and as a social advocate for Black Lives Matter, the LGBTQ+ community, the Downtown Women’s Center of Los Angeles, and the Campaign for Youth Justice. In short, Miquela is a substantial social media influencer—an emblem for both style and social justice causes.

In sum, we contend that Miquela serves as an ideal representative anecdote through which to interrogate misinformation and online deception. Moreover, we further argue that this phenomenon has brought us to a cultural crossroad where critical consciousness and reality converges with varying degrees of misdirection and deception. Put differently, it is representative of a significant turning point in advertising and mass consumer culture, where AI technologies have become social media influencers. As such, this chapter makes for an important study in online deception with significant implications for intellectual and media ethics. To this end, the authors consider the rhetorical dimensions of communication, identity, and technology related to deception before confronting the case study of Lil Miquela and concluding with recommendations and future research considerations.

THE STORY OF US: COMMUNICATION, IDENTITY, AND TECHNOLOGY

In situating the significance and importance of this study, the authors rely on the theoretical foundations of rhetoric, communication, and media. Altogether, these disciplines, most especially in our present moment, confront a vast array of human communication issues and challenges, namely, misinformation and online deception on social media. Given that technology has become one of the preeminent ways through which we communicate in order to constitute our sense of identity and secure our physiological and emotional needs, the authors focus on themes of belonging. For instance, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs has belonging centered in the pyramid between our basic physiological and safety needs and the higher needs of esteem and self-actualization. In this sense, belonging is foundational to our sense of self and community. Yet our times are indicative of increased separation, as though it is coming apart at the seams (Ross, 2018, p. 1). Across this chasm, social media has given rise to new ways of finding and manufacturing belonging. Howard J. Ross, in *Our Sense of Belonging: How Our Need to Connect Is Tearing Us Apart* (2018), has argued, “things need to get real before they can get better” (p. 175). Indeed, the authors argue an interrogation of Miquela and trends in AI technology help us get both real and better, promoting more critically conscious awareness of misinformation issues and stimulating awareness of human needs for personal connection, vulnerability, and consciousness.

Theoretical Considerations

As the authors contemplate the implications of online deception in the case study of Lil Miquela, it is important to establish some theoretical considerations. In its simplest form, theory is much more than a rote tool for erudition. Rather, theory is a way of understanding and seeing the world derived from some

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