Chapter 1
Human(oid):
Virtual Social Media Influencers

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ABSTRACT

Traditional influencer marketing occurs when people have a profile on social media with a number of followers that distinguishes them from other 'common' users. Virtual influencers, however, have made quite an impact on social media platforms as they are CGI (computer-generated images) characters whose profiles resemble the ones produced and posted by human influencers. This research aims to explore which factors contribute to stronger emotions and feelings towards a humanoid virtual influencer and a doll virtual influencer. To achieve this purpose, the authors implemented a mixed methods approach, based on the literature review theories and concepts, as well as an implicit association test (IAT). This chapter introduces and contributes to the knowledge of virtual influencers on the implicit attitudes and behaviors of consumers of generation Z. Additionally, the authors also point out some gaps, directions for future research, and implications on these topics.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, businesses must understand consumers' online behavior and how they engage with content posted on social media (Borges-Tiago, Santiago, & Tiago, 2023). Some authors have already started to analyze which type of influencers can achieve better metrics, engaging the consumers and increasing the brand equity of endorsed brands (Borges-Tiago, Santiago, & Tiago, 2023). This research intends to contribute to that field of research by extending the understanding of who promotes brands better – the human influencer or the humanoid virtual influencer using indirect measures such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

Social media has changed how individuals communicate, connect, and influence each other (Jacobson, Gruzd, & Hernández-García, 2022), as it is seen as a channel where anyone can share their thoughts, feeling, and emotions, create content and be acknowledged by that (Nikolinakou & Phua, 2020). Virtual technologies present advantages over traditional forms of interpersonal communication, namely, in sensory capacities, situational context, and self-representation of the individual (Bailenson, Beall, Loomis, Blascovich, & Turk, 2004). Transformed social interaction (TSI) helps users of virtual technologies modify and enhance their senses due to more information gathered compared to real, face-to-face interaction (Bailenson et al., 2004).

With the evolution of science, technology, and marketing trends, social media influencers have an overall assumed and accepted role when it comes to marketing strategy (Deng & Jiang, 2023). In this context, influencer marketing occurs when people have a profile on social media with several followers that distinguishes them from other 'common' users (Jin, Muqddam, & Ryu, 2019). However, the ambivalence in ontological status is reflected in people's interaction with virtual influencers. A survey of 534 Gen Z and Generation Y respondents found that 22% of respondents follow virtual influencers on social media, and 42% were unaware that virtual influencers had no real existence.

Virtual influencers, however, have impacted social media platforms as they are CGI (computer-generated images) characters whose profiles resemble those produced and posted by human influencers (Mrad, Ramadan, & Nasr, 2022). These influencers are thoughtfully designed and developed to overcome any human flaws and limitations. Consequently, virtual influencers have had a more prominent and noticeable online presence when compared to human influencers on social media (Conti, Gathani, & Tricomi, 2022). This may be explained by two main reasons (De Brito Silva, de Oliveira Ramos Delfino, Alves Cerqueira, & de Oliveira Campos, 2022):

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