


# Chapter 1


## From Human to Posthuman: The Strategic Role of Virtual Influencers in Contemporary Marketing

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter explores the growing phenomenon of Virtual Influencers (VIs) in digital advertising and their transformative impact on brand communication. As artificial intelligence and computer-generated imagery enable the creation of lifelike digital personas, VIs offer marketers a new set of tools to engage consumers across global markets. The chapter examines the theoretical foundations of parasocial interaction and source credibility to understand how audiences respond to these non-human figures.*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has reshaped the advertising landscape, catalyzing novel forms of consumer engagement and communication. One of the most significant developments in this digital transformation is the emergence of virtual influencers (VIs), computer-generated characters powered by artificial intelligence and designed to emulate human behavior across social media platforms. While influencer marketing has traditionally relied on human influencers to promote brands through authentic, relatable content (Lou & Yuan, 2019), the rise of virtual influencers marks a paradigm shift in how brands conceptualize identity, trust, and communication in digital environments.

Historically, human influencers have dominated the social media marketing domain, capitalizing on their ability to form parasocial relationships with followers, foster emotional resonance, and provide relatable narratives rooted in real-life experiences (Venciute et al., 2023). However, recent advances in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and computer-generated imagery have facilitated the rise of virtual influencers. These digital characters, ranging from hyper-realistic avatars to stylized figures, are increasingly deployed by global brands across industries such as fashion, technology, automotive, and entertainment (Shin & Lee, 2023).

Unlike their human counterparts, virtual influencers offer marketers complete creative control over appearance, messaging, and behavior. They do not age, fatigue, or face reputational risks associated with personal scandals or erratic behavior, making them a stable and scalable marketing asset (Ju et al., 2024). Their content is meticulously designed to align with brand identity, maintain aesthetic coherence, and engage target audiences in culturally and linguistically diverse markets. Furthermore, VIs can be programmed to interact with audiences in real-time, allowing brands to maintain a 24/7 online presence and responsiveness.

The increasing prevalence of VIs is also reflective of shifting consumer behavior, particularly among younger digital-native cohorts such as Generation Z and Millennials. These generations exhibit a heightened openness to AI-driven interactions and are habituated to engaging with virtual environments and gamified digital experiences. In this context, VIs serve as culturally resonant figures capable of curating aspirational lifestyles, championing brand values, and driving curiosity and engagement through their novelty and artificiality (Ameen et al., 2023; Appel et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the integration of virtual influencers in advertising raises critical questions about authenticity, trust, and ethical responsibility. While some consumers perceive VIs as engaging and aesthetically appealing, others critique their artificial nature, limited emotional depth, and lack of spontaneity. Concerns have also emerged regarding consumer deception, transparency in disclosure, and the potential rein-

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