


Chapter 4

Human vs. Virtual Influencers in the Context of Influencer Marketing: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The advent of social media has ushered in a new age of communication, information sharing and marketing. The recent phenomenon of influencers, both human and virtual, on social media has transformed our modern society. Human influencers have led the way in using their power of influence on social platforms, providing brands with a powerful way to reach their target audience in a precise, authentic and engaging way. Virtual influencers, created digitally, are also gaining prominence on online platforms, mainly on Instagram. Created for brands, these characters generated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) have the realistic characteristics, personalities, thoughts and feelings of real human beings. This chapter explores the similarities and differences between human influencers (HI) and virtual influencers (VI) in the context of influencer marketing, in order to understand the reasons for the success of these new imaginary characters. We will present the evolution and current context of marketing, including the appearance of human influencers and then that of virtual influencers,

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INTRODUCTION

While artificial intelligence is disrupting many sectors such as healthcare diagnosis (Abdel-Basset et al., 2021), customer relationship management (Baabdullah et al., 2022), tourism and heritage preservation (Allal-Chérif et al., 2021), environmental protection (Yuen et al., 2022), and talent attraction and recruitment (Allal-Chérif et al., 2021; Suen and Hung, 2024), influencer marketing is no exception. The latter is a marketing strategy in which companies rely on influential figures and opinion leaders to encourage consumers to purchase their services or products (Allal-Chérif et al., 2021).

In this domain, a new category of influencers known as virtual influencers has recently emerged (Lee et al, 2024). Virtual influencers are computer-generated characters or avatars, designed and maintained by digital agencies and experts, which help brands appeal and reach to desirable target groups effectively through their digital personalities (Audrezet & Koles, 2023). They are computer-generated celebrities that are primarily found on social media and other digital platforms (Belanche et al, 2024). These digital avatars are increasingly employed by brands to promote their products, blurring the lines between virtuality and reality.

In light of developments in digital marketing, the role of influencers, both human and virtual, is becoming increasingly decisive in shaping consumer behavior (Juiher et al, 2024). Their success often relies on complex exchanges between consumer perceptions and the specificities of each influencer. Research has indicated that there are significant similarities between human and virtual influencers. First, similar to virtual influencers, human influencers can establish relationships and engage with a large number of consumers on social media (Hugh et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022). Then, virtual influencers are computer-generated characters that interact with their environment similar to human influencers (Lamping, 2024). Many of these virtual characters are gaining traction by producing content in a variety of fields like fashion, music, sports, games, art, and mental health. They are increasingly being used by corporations and marketing organizations to capitalize on their millions of followers (Choudhry, et al., 2022). Finally, with their own public identities and stories, virtual influencers are seemingly similar to human influencers, allowing for more engagement between influencers and users in the virtual world (Hanus and Fox, 2015). Based on these findings, managers should understand human and virtual influencers and how they collaborate with brands in order to make the best decisions for future influencer marketing strategies.

With the soaring interest in using virtual humans for influencer marketing on social media, scholars have started to explore how and whether virtual influencers could replace the traditional role of human influencers (e.g., Audrezet & Koles, Citation2023; Deng & Jiang, Citation2023; Wan & Jiang, Citation2023).

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