


Chapter 2


Trusting the Unreal: Dynamics of Anthropomorphism in Perceptions of Virtual Influencers

Özgül Dağlı

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3173-9196>

Üsküdar University, Turkey

Damla Karşu Cesur

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5876-5618>

Kocaeli University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

This study examines how users perceive the credibility of virtual versus human influencers and how these perceptions influence trust in sponsored social media posts. The research focuses on a high-involvement product (a laptop) and a low-involvement product (coffee), exploring whether the influencer’s nature—virtual or human—affects this dynamic. In an experiment, Group A participants were told the influencer was virtual, while Group B believed the influencer was human. Results revealed that perceived source credibility significantly and positively impacted advertising trust across both product categories. Although virtual influencers scored slightly higher on average for source credibility and advertising trust, these differences were not statistically significant.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Time announced the most influential people on the Internet, along with very famous celebrities such as Donald Trump, Rihanna, Kanye West, and Kylie Jenner. One of the names on the list stood out from the rest: Lil Miquela. Lil Miquela is a 19-year-old teenage model and musician. She is a Brazilian-American social media celebrity and also a kind of social activist, due to her advocacy roles on various social and political issues such as the rights of Black people and LGBTQI+ communities. She has gained 2.4 million Instagram followers across the world and collaborates with global brands such as Samsung, Prada, Calvin Klein, and Chanel.

However, what truly sets her apart is not her successful collaborations with global brands or her social consciousness at the very early age of 19. What truly makes her unique is rather her lifeless presence. More clearly, she is not a real human with bones and flesh, because she is a digitally created virtual character. More precisely, she is a virtual influencer. Today, millions of people —that even human influencers struggle to achieve — follow her on various social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and so on. Although she is a digital entity, she is portrayed as an emotional character who does not hesitate to share her feelings just like actual human beings. Moreover, she is presented as having her own social and personal life, meeting with her friends and even taking photos with human celebrities, such as Bella Hadid. As of 2025, she has garnered over 2.4 million followers on Instagram and has recently starred in AI-generated music videos and fashion campaigns. However, Lil Miquela is not the only one. There are other virtual influencers in the digital ecosystem. Thus, these digital creatures open up a new path for virtual marketing.

Influencer marketing has become very popular since the rise of social media. The ever-increasing number of followers makes the notions of 'influencer' and 'influencer marketing' very significant for the advertising and marketing literature. However, the developments in Computer-Generated Technology (CGT) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) have set the ground for the emergence of virtual influencers in recent years. The millions of followers and numerous brand collaborations with virtual influencers attract the attention not only of brand professionals but also of advertising and marketing scholars. The advantages of virtual influencers — such as their fully controlled and physically limitless nature — augment this interest. Despite the steadily increasing interest from both sides, the whole picture still remains incomplete. What are the emotional reactions of consumers to virtual influencers? How do the anthropomorphic features of virtual influencers affect follower engagement? How does the credibility of virtual influencers affect consumer purchasing decisions? What are the ethical and social considerations of virtual influencers? How are virtual influencers perceived across different cultures? These questions, along with others, have not yet been fully answered. Moreover, studies examining

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