

From Digital Personas to Human Connections: Advancing Human-Centric Marketing Through Virtual Influencers

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Abstract: *Purpose of this paper:* This paper aims to explore the evolution of human-centric marketing through the rise of virtual influencers. It investigates how these digital personas reshape consumer engagement, brand authenticity, and emotional connections in the marketing landscape. *Design/methodology/approach* The study adopts a qualitative approach, analysing case studies of successful virtual influencer campaigns, consumer trust dynamics, and ethical concerns surrounding their use. It reviews relevant literature and industry examples to understand the impact of virtual influencers on human-centric marketing. *Findings:* Virtual influencers have revolutionised digital marketing by providing brands with controlled, consistent personas that can evoke strong emotional responses. They offer a unique opportunity for personalisation and engagement, but they also challenge traditional notions of authenticity and trust. Transparency and ethical considerations are crucial in the effective use of virtual influencers. *Research limitations/implications:* This study focuses primarily on virtual influencers within the marketing sector, and further research is needed to explore their long-term impact on broader societal and cultural aspects. The implications for data privacy and consumer protection remain an area requiring more attention. *Practical implications:* Brands can use virtual influencers to humanise their identities, create personalised experiences, and engage with consumers on a deeper emotional level. However, clear communication and transparency are essential to maintaining consumer trust and avoiding ethical pitfalls. *Social implications:* The rise of virtual influencers may alter consumer expectations, pushing for more inclusive, personalised, and transparent marketing strategies. It raises questions about the authenticity of digital connections in an increasingly virtual world. *Value of this paper:* This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of virtual influencers within the context of human-centric marketing, offering insights into the evolving role of AI-driven personas in shaping consumer-brand relationships.

Keywords— Virtual influencers; Human-centric marketing; Digital personas; Consumer trust; Authenticity; AI-Driven Marketing.

INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic and data-driven digital environment, the nature of marketing is undergoing a profound transformation. Traditional approaches that prioritised mass outreach are gradually being replaced by more nuanced strategies that centre on individual consumer needs, emotional connections, and brand authenticity (Kotler et al., 2017). This paradigm shift toward human-centric marketing emphasises empathy, personalisation, and co-creation. At the forefront of this evolution is the emergence of virtual influencers—computer-generated personas designed to engage audiences on digital platforms with the realism and relatability of human influencers (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021).

Virtual influencers combine cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), computer-generated imagery (CGI), motion capture, and machine learning to create highly customised digital characters. These entities operate across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and even virtual reality spaces, bridging the gap between technological innovation and emotional storytelling. Virtual Influencers like Lil Miquela, Shudu, and Imma

have become digital celebrities, collaborating with globally renowned brands, sparking conversations about identity, authenticity, and representation in marketing (Feng et al., 2020; Jhavar et al., 2023).

The rise of virtual influencers has not occurred in isolation. It is closely tied to broader shifts in consumer expectations, the influencer economy, and the integration of immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and the metaverse (Shahriar, 2023). With human influencers often scrutinized for authenticity, inconsistency, or controversy, virtual influencers offer a consistent, scalable, and brand-aligned alternative. However, their use also raises critical questions about transparency, trust, and ethical practice (Pushparaj & Kushwaha, 2023).

Despite the growing interest in virtual influencers, the existing body of research remains scattered across different streams such as artificial intelligence, influencer marketing, consumer behaviour, and digital branding. While these studies have generated valuable insights, they often examine technological capabilities or marketing outcomes in isolation. Comparatively less attention has been given to understanding how virtual influencers can contribute to a

more human-centric approach to marketing by strengthening trust, authenticity, and meaningful consumer relationships. Bringing these perspectives together is important because the long-term success of virtual influencers depends not only on technological sophistication but also on their ability to create genuine connections with consumers.

Against this backdrop, the present study brings together the emerging literature on virtual influencers and human-centric marketing to provide a comprehensive understanding of this evolving area. It identifies the key themes that have shaped current knowledge, discusses the opportunities and challenges associated with the adoption of virtual influencers, and highlights areas that require further scholarly attention. By integrating insights from

recent research, the study seeks to offer a balanced perspective that is useful for both researchers and marketing practitioners navigating an increasingly AI-driven marketplace.

This study explores the evolving role of virtual influencers within the human-centric marketing paradigm. It investigates how these digital personas influence consumer engagement, challenge traditional understandings of trust and authenticity, and enable inclusive, emotionally resonant brand experiences. By examining case studies, academic research, and current industry practices, this study provides insights into the transformative potential and limitations of virtual influencers as strategic assets in contemporary marketing.

The Emergence of Virtual Influencers

Virtual influencers are digital personas designed using advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), computer-generated imagery (CGI), motion capture, and deep learning algorithms to resemble and behave like human beings. These computer-generated characters engage with audiences through social media platforms, often creating content that mimics the style and tone of human influencers (Jhawar et al., 2023). They possess carefully curated aesthetics and personalities tailored to specific audience segments, allowing brands to maintain total creative control over their narratives, actions, and public image.

The rise of virtual influencers is largely attributed to the growing demand for novelty and precision in influencer marketing. Unlike human influencers who may be prone to scandals, fatigue, or inconsistent messaging, virtual influencers offer brands a reliable and programmable alternative (Mrad et al., 2022). For instance, Lil Miquela, who boasts millions of Instagram followers, has collaborated with high-profile brands like Prada and Calvin Klein, and Shudu, the first digital supermodel, has represented luxury fashion lines such as Balmain and Fenty Beauty (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021).

Virtual influencers thrive in a digitally immersive world where realism and artificiality intersect. Their social media presence includes everything from fashion shoots and travel vlogs to advocacy on social issues, often leading followers to emotionally engage with them as if they were real (Feng et al., 2020). This phenomenon, known as parasocial interaction, explains why followers may develop meaningful connections with these characters despite their artificial origins (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

Moreover, brands are leveraging virtual influencers not only for their novelty but also for their adaptability across global markets. These digital personas can be reprogrammed to reflect different cultural values, languages, and social trends, enabling hyper-localised marketing strategies (Lee et al., 2022). In countries like Japan and South Korea, the seamless integration of digital personas with pop culture and entertainment has accelerated their mainstream adoption (Kim, 2020).

As technologies like AR, VR, and the metaverse continue to evolve, the line between virtual and human interaction will blur further, solidifying virtual influencers as long-term assets in digital branding strategies (Shahriar, 2023).

Table 1: Comparison Table: Virtual vs. Human Influencers

Criteria	Human Influencers	Virtual Influencers
Control over content	Limited	Full control
Emotional relatability	High (organic experiences)	Moderate (scripted experiences)
Scalability	Limited	High
Ethical concerns	Less prevalent	Emerging (disclosure, realism)
Risk (reputation/image)	Higher	Lower

Why Human-Centric Marketing

Human-centric marketing is a philosophy and strategic approach that prioritises the individual needs, experiences, and emotions of consumers in designing brand communication and value offerings. As traditional marketing paradigms shift under the pressure of digital transformation, consumers increasingly expect brands to demonstrate empathy, authenticity, and shared values (Kotler et al., 2017). Human-centric marketing moves beyond transactional relationships and seeks to build long-term emotional connections by aligning business goals with consumer well-being.

This approach involves more than simply using technology to reach people; it involves using technology to understand and relate to them. Emerging tools such as AI, machine learning, big data analytics, and sentiment analysis enable marketers to gather deep insights into customer behaviour and preferences, which in turn allow for highly personalised engagement strategies. In this context, virtual influencers emerge as an ideal medium as they can adapt their narratives and emotional expressions to simulate empathy, relatability, and cultural resonance (Feng et al., 2020).

Studies have shown that empathetic and responsive communication significantly enhances consumer trust and brand loyalty. Virtual influencers, equipped with AI-driven natural language processing and real-time feedback capabilities, are uniquely positioned to deliver this kind of interaction at scale. These interactions can feel authentic even though they are algorithmically generated, contributing to a compelling brand narrative (Watkins, 2022).

Additionally, human-centric marketing is deeply tied to inclusivity and social representation. Virtual influencers can be intentionally designed to reflect underrepresented identities, such as gender-fluid personas, multicultural aesthetics, and advocacy for causes like mental health and sustainability. CodeMiko, for instance, is a Twitch-based virtual influencer who openly discusses issues like online harassment and mental health, resonating with digitally native audiences (Duffy & Hund, 2021). Virtual influencers have increasingly been used to communicate social values such as sustainability, diversity, and inclusion, thereby strengthening emotional connections with digitally native audiences (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Jhavar et al., 2023).

Ultimately, human-centric marketing in the era of virtual influencers is about evoking human emotion through technological design. It shifts the focus from merely appearing “human” to meaningfully engaging with the human experience, thereby fostering deeper consumer-brand relationships through narrative, empathy, and ethical alignment.

Human-Centric Marketing in the Era of Virtual Influencers

Virtual influencers can embody brand personas with unparalleled precision, offering a consistent and controlled narrative that appeals to targeted consumer segments. Through sophisticated design and strategic content curation, they enable brands to maintain high levels of consistency in voice, tone, and values, contributing to a stable and recognisable brand identity (Watkins, 2022). Their ability to engage in two-way communication, like responding to comments, initiating discussions, and participating in cultural or social trends, supports the formation of parasocial relationships with their followers which fosters emotional bonds thereby driving consumer loyalty (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

One of the most compelling aspects of virtual influencers is their capacity to create emotionally resonant experiences through narrative storytelling. Lil Miquela’s social media content weaves in socially relevant themes which include identity struggles, activism, and personal dilemmas, thereby making her seem relatable despite her digital origins (Feng et al., 2020). Similarly, Noonouri, another popular CGI influencer, promotes veganism, sustainability, and ethical fashion, positioning herself as a value-driven persona aligned with the expectations of conscious consumers.

These capabilities closely align with the goals of human-centric marketing, which emphasises emotional engagement, representation, and meaningful connections. Virtual influencers can be purposefully designed to reflect diverse ethnicities, body types, gender identities, and abilities, promoting inclusivity and enabling brands to connect with underrepresented audiences in ways that traditional marketing may overlook (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021). Their narratives can be customised to reflect various cultural contexts, making them particularly effective for international campaigns that require local relevance without sacrificing global brand coherence (Lee et al., 2022).

Table 2: Human-Centric Marketing Using Virtual Influencers

Step	Action	Outcome
Brand Values	Define core brand identity	Authentic messaging
AI Persona Design	Develop digital personas	Emotional resonance with the target audience
Consumer Engagement	Create interactive campaigns	Increased trust and loyalty
Ethical Transparency	Clearly disclose AI nature	Maintained consumer trust

Furthermore, their digital architecture allows for seamless localization. A single virtual influencer can be adapted to communicate in multiple languages, incorporate culturally relevant symbolism, and engage with region-specific issues, enabling both hyper-personalized and scalable marketing outreach (Kim, 2020). As consumers increasingly seek authenticity, brands must ensure that virtual influencers’ stories remain ethically grounded and socially aware to sustain credibility.

In this way, virtual influencers become channels for delivering human-centric experiences, thereby blending artificial design with emotional depth, inclusivity, and strategic relevance to forge stronger and meaningful consumer relationships.

Consumer Engagement and Trust

One of the critical challenges in using virtual influencers lies in fostering and sustaining trust. While these digital personas can generate high levels of engagement, their artificial nature can lead to scepticism among consumers, particularly when transparency is lacking (Mrad et al., 2022). Research indicates that when consumers are informed about the virtual identity of influencers and perceive them as sincere and consistent in communication, trust levels remain comparable to those of human influencers (Ding, 2024).

Trust in marketing is closely tied to authenticity (Hwang et al., 2023). For virtual influencers to succeed, they must balance their fantastical origins with emotionally realistic and relatable behaviours (Kim et al., 2023 et al., 2021). This includes consistent messaging, alignment with brand values, and maintaining transparency about their artificial identity. Studies emphasise that perceived authenticity plays a pivotal role in developing parasocial relationships, which, in turn, influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Ding, 2024).

Interestingly, younger generations, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, display a greater willingness to engage with virtual influencers. These cohorts are digital natives who appreciate innovation and creativity in brand communication. They are more likely to form emotional connections with virtual influencers, especially when these personas align with social values or advocate for meaningful causes (Hudders et al., 2020). Virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela, who actively participate in conversations on social justice and identity, are perceived as more trustworthy and relevant by younger audiences (Feng et al., 2020).

Moreover, the predictability and curated nature of virtual influencers make them attractive to brands seeking to avoid the volatility often associated with human influencers. Unlike their human counterparts, virtual influencers do not age, have scandals, or deviate from brand guidelines. This consistency contributes to perceptions of reliability and makes them “a safer” choice for long-term partnerships (Ding, 2024).

Empirical studies indicate that virtual influencers can generate high levels of consumer engagement when their content is perceived as emotionally expressive, anthropomorphic, and authentic, although engagement effectiveness depends on the characteristics of the influencer and campaign design (Shen, 2024; Akhtar & Nagvanshi, 2025). Lil Miquela has collaborated with brands including Prada and Calvin Klein while simultaneously developing a carefully curated digital identity through storytelling and influencer practices (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Bitencourt et al., 2021; Elyamany et al., 2025). These metrics suggest that well-executed virtual influencer strategies, reinforced by clear disclosure and consistent storytelling, can foster deep emotional engagement and trust, even in the absence of human authenticity.

By integrating transparency, ethical considerations, and value alignment, brands can harness the full potential of virtual influencers to drive meaningful and trustworthy consumer engagement.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a structured narrative review approach to examine the emerging role of virtual influencers in advancing human-centric marketing. A narrative review was considered appropriate because the objective of the study is to synthesise and interpret the existing body of knowledge, identify recurring themes, and present an integrated understanding of the subject rather than to statistically analyse previous findings.

The review draws upon peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, book chapters, and selected industry reports published primarily between 2018 and 2026. Relevant literature was identified through academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and Emerald Insight. The search was guided by keywords such as *virtual influencers*, *AI influencers*, *computer-generated influencers*, *human-centric marketing*, *consumer trust*, *authenticity*, *digital branding*, and *artificial intelligence in marketing*. Additional studies were identified through backward and forward citation tracking to ensure adequate coverage of the topic.

To maintain the quality and relevance of the review, only publications that directly examined virtual influencers, artificial intelligence-driven marketing, consumer engagement, trust, authenticity, or related aspects of human-centric marketing were included. Studies that focused solely on technical aspects of artificial intelligence without a marketing perspective or lacked sufficient academic relevance were excluded.

The selected literature was analysed using thematic synthesis. During the review process, recurring concepts and patterns were identified and organised into key themes including the evolution of virtual influencers, consumer trust and authenticity, ethical considerations, managerial implications, and future research opportunities. These themes form the basis of the discussion presented in this paper and provide an integrated perspective on the growing intersection of virtual influencers and human-centric marketing. Table 3 summarises the cases of virtual influencers considered for this study.

Table 3: Illustrative Case Studies of Virtual Influencers

Virtual Influencer	Brand Campaign	Key Features	Observed Brand Effect
Lil Miquela	Prada	AI-driven storytelling and fashion	Increased brand visibility
Shudu	Balmain	Virtual fashion model	Promoted inclusivity in marketing
Noonoouri	Dior, Versace	Advocacy for veganism and sustainability	Enhanced brand values and ethical positioning

Note: The cases are presented as illustrative examples drawn from the existing literature and public brand campaigns.

This study’s methodological approach enables an in-depth exploration of the strategic, psychological, technological, and ethical dimensions of virtual influencers. It not only draws connections between theory and practice but also offers actionable insights into how brands can responsibly leverage AI-driven personas to foster meaningful and authentic consumer engagement in a digitally mediated environment.

Ethical Considerations and Brand Transparency

The use of virtual influencers introduces a complex array of ethical challenges that marketers and content creators must address with diligence. Chief among these concerns are issues related to misinformation, manipulation, and the erosion of human authenticity. Because virtual influencers can be programmed to represent any personality or promote any product, there is a risk of presenting biased or overly idealised narratives that may mislead consumers, particularly if there is no clear disclosure of their synthetic origins (Pushparaj & Kushwaha, 2023).

Transparency is fundamental in mitigating such ethical risks. Consumers deserve to know whether they are interacting with a real human or a computer-generated persona. Regulatory bodies such as the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) have increasingly emphasised the need for clear disclosures in digital advertising, including the use of hashtags like #VirtualInfluencer or #CGICharacter (Federal Trade Commission, 2019). Brands must ensure that disclosures are not only present but also conspicuous and comprehensible to the average consumer.

Additionally, virtual influencers may contribute to the endurance of unrealistic beauty standards. These digital personas are often designed to embody idealised aesthetics that may be unattainable or harmful, especially to impressionable audiences. When audiences are unaware that these appearances are digitally constructed, it can exacerbate body image issues and contribute to social pressure (Rungruangjit et al., 2024). To combat this, ethical marketing frameworks advocate for transparency in design and representation, promoting inclusive body types, racial diversity, and realistic portrayals in virtual characters.

There is also a labour-related ethical concern: the potential displacement of human influencers and creatives. As virtual influencers offer scalability, control, and reduced risk, brands might increasingly opt for CGI personas over real content creators, threatening employment and diminishing the value of human creativity in the digital economy (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Bitencourt et al., 2021).

Moreover, the advancement of deepfake and generative AI technologies raises questions about identity, consent, and intellectual property (Table 4). Unauthorised replication of real individuals’ likenesses without consent could lead to legal and reputational ramifications. Gunkel (2023) warns that marketers must respect personal rights and avoid crafting digital avatars that too closely resemble real people, especially public figures, without proper authorisation.

Table 4: Ethical Concerns and Mitigation Strategies in Virtual Influencer Marketing

Ethical Concern	Example	Mitigation Strategy
Unrealistic beauty standards	Over-polished CGI influencers	Promote inclusivity in design
Lack of transparency	Misleading content	Explicit disclaimers
Displacement of human content creators	Preference for scalable virtual entities	Balance virtual and human partnerships

Note. The table summarises key ethical concerns associated with virtual influencers and suggests broad mitigation strategies based on the discussion in the paper.

In response, industry professionals and regulators must collaborate to establish comprehensive ethical guidelines. These should

encompass transparency, inclusivity, labour equity, and data governance to ensure that the use of virtual influencers supports, rather than undermines, the principles of responsible marketing.

The Future of Virtual Influencers in Human-Centric Marketing

The future of virtual influencers is deeply entwined with the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and immersive digital environments such as the metaverse. As these technologies mature, virtual influencers are poised to become more sophisticated, emotionally intelligent, and seamlessly integrated into consumers' digital lives. This progression represents both an opportunity and a challenge for human-centric marketing, which seeks to build authentic, empathetic, and meaningful relationships with consumers.

One of the most promising developments is the enhancement of interactivity. Future virtual influencers are likely to possess advanced natural language processing capabilities and real-time emotional recognition, enabling them to hold dynamic conversations and respond empathetically to users' emotions (Watkins, 2022). By incorporating sentiment analysis and adaptive AI, virtual influencers could offer personalised responses and tailored brand experiences that feel increasingly human (Floridi, 2023).

Moreover, virtual influencers are expected to play a prominent role in the metaverse, an immersive, persistent virtual world where consumers can shop, socialise, and explore brand ecosystems. Within this context, virtual influencers may serve as brand ambassadors, customer service representatives, or interactive hosts guiding users through branded experiences in virtual malls, digital fashion shows, or gamified campaigns (Shahriar, 2023). Their ability to transcend physical limitations makes them ideal for engaging diverse audiences in real-time, globally distributed digital environments.

Machine learning advancements are expected to make virtual influencers increasingly autonomous in the near future. These AI-driven entities may evolve to independently generate content, analyse user interactions, and continuously adapt their personas based on changing consumer preferences and behavioural patterns. By leveraging predictive analytics and real-time data, virtual influencers can anticipate customer needs, deliver culturally contextualised content, and provide highly personalised brand experiences, thereby enhancing consumer engagement and marketing effectiveness (Sharma & Kumar, 2026; Nguyen & Wu, 2026).

In hybrid retail environments where augmented reality (AR) and social commerce intersect, virtual influencers may act as stylists, shopping assistants, or educational guides. Their integration into mobile apps and smart mirrors could allow consumers to receive fashion advice, product demonstrations, or tutorials in real time (Kozinets et al., 2014). This not only enhances the customer journey but also strengthens brand-consumer connections by creating a seamless blend of utility, entertainment, and emotional engagement.

Despite the optimism surrounding these innovations, the long-term success of virtual influencers will hinge on ethical design, regulatory compliance, and a commitment to human-centric values. Transparency regarding their artificial nature, data privacy, and algorithmic decision-making must be maintained. Consumers may become increasingly wary of synthetic content if these principles are violated (Pushparaj & Kushwaha, 2023).

Furthermore, societal concerns regarding identity manipulation, cultural appropriation, and the deepening of digital divides require careful consideration. If virtual influencers are to serve as inclusive and empathetic brand representatives, their development must involve diverse perspectives and ethical oversight (Rungruangjit et al., 2024; Gunkel, 2023).

Future research should explore how persistent exposure to AI-generated personas influences consumer psychology, trust, and perception of reality. Additionally, studies are needed to assess the long-term cultural impact of replacing human touchpoints with synthetic alternatives in marketing and social interaction.

Eventually, the future of virtual influencers in human-centric marketing is not about replacing humans but about augmenting digital engagement with empathy, creativity, and innovation. By aligning technological advancements with ethical standards and emotional resonance, virtual influencers can redefine how brands communicate, connect, and co-create with their audiences in an increasingly digitised world.

The Future of Virtual Influencers revolves around three pivotal advancements: Metaverse Integration, where these digital personalities seamlessly exist within immersive virtual worlds; Real-Time Interaction, enabling instant and dynamic engagement with users; and AI-Driven Emotional Intelligence, allowing them to understand and respond to human emotions for more authentic connections.

Findings

Virtual influencers have significantly transformed the landscape of digital marketing by offering brands innovative avenues for audience engagement. Their primary value lies in the ability to provide controlled, curated personas that consistently reflect brand values and aesthetics. Unlike human influencers who may display erratic behaviour or become involved in controversies, virtual influencers can be fully designed and managed by marketers, ensuring precision in messaging and alignment with brand identity. This reliability enhances strategic planning and facilitates long-term brand storytelling.

Another key finding is the emotional resonance that virtual influencers can evoke. Despite being computer-generated, many virtual influencers have built strong emotional connections with audiences by engaging in authentic conversations, supporting social causes, and revealing

“personal” challenges. Their fictional narratives and interactions often mirror real-life concerns, helping consumers relate to them as they would with human influencers.

However, these benefits come with trade-offs. Virtual influencers challenge traditional notions of authenticity and trust. Consumers, particularly digital natives, are increasingly willing to engage with virtual personas, but this acceptance is contingent upon transparent disclosure of their digital identity. Deceptive practices such as presenting virtual influencers as real humans without disclosure risk loss of consumer trust and damage to brand credibility.

Moreover, the findings reveal that transparency and ethical considerations are not just optional but essential. Brands that disclose the artificial nature of their influencers and emphasise responsible digital practices are more likely to retain consumer trust and foster deeper engagement. Thereby, suggesting ethical design and communication as integral components to the success of virtual influencer strategies.

Finally, the adaptability of virtual influencers presents an opportunity for global and culturally sensitive marketing. Their appearances, language, and messaging can be localised, allowing brands to tailor campaigns for diverse audiences while maintaining a consistent global identity. This flexibility aligns well with the goals of human-centric marketing, thus fostering empathy, inclusivity, and personalisation.

Research Limitations and Implications

This study is subject to a few limitations. Firstly, the research is primarily conceptual and qualitative, focusing on secondary data sources such as published literature, campaign analysis, and industry commentary. While this provides a rich theoretical and contextual understanding, empirical validation through primary research would enhance the robustness of the findings.

Additionally, the scope of this study is largely confined to the marketing sector, particularly the use of virtual influencers in branding, consumer engagement, and trust-building strategies. It does not extensively examine the broader societal or psychological consequences of long-term exposure to virtual personas. Future studies should consider how continuous interaction with AI-generated influencers might affect consumer identity, social relationships, and perceptions of reality.

Furthermore, while the study touches on global marketing applications, there is limited discussion on regional or cultural variations in consumer responses. Different cultures may exhibit varying levels of acceptance toward virtual influencers, influenced by local norms, technological familiarity, and trust in digital media. Future cross-cultural studies could uncover important insights into how virtual influencers are received worldwide. As these digital personas become increasingly sophisticated and integrated into everyday life, interdisciplinary research involving psychology, sociology, and media studies will be

critical in understanding their full societal impact.

Practical Implications

From a managerial perspective, the use of virtual influencers offers several practical advantages for brands aiming to enhance customer engagement and personalisation. These digital personas allow for the creation of consistent and scalable brand ambassadors who can interact with audiences across various platforms without the unpredictability often associated with human influencers. Their design and messaging can be meticulously controlled, reducing risks related to reputational damage or brand misalignment.

Moreover, virtual influencers provide brands with the flexibility to engage in real-time storytelling. Through AI-driven algorithms, they can be programmed to respond to current events, reflect audience sentiment, and participate in trending conversations, thus creating timely, relevant, and emotionally resonant content. This responsiveness enhances consumer connection and strengthens brand loyalty.

Another significant practical implication is cost efficiency. Although the initial development of a virtual influencer may involve high investment, long-term costs are often lower than those associated with high-profile human influencers. Virtual influencers do not age, require travel, or demand contractual negotiations, making them a more sustainable and manageable asset in long-term campaigns. However, successful implementation depends heavily on transparency. Brands must clearly communicate the artificial nature of their virtual influencers to avoid misleading consumers. This disclosure not only fulfils ethical requirements but also enhances brand credibility and trustworthiness.

Additionally, brands can leverage virtual influencers to promote diversity and inclusion. Unlike human influencers, these digital personas can be designed to represent a wide range of identities, cultures, and social causes. This enables brands to authentically engage with niche communities and align with values that resonate with today’s socially conscious consumers.

Marketers must also consider the legal and ethical boundaries of using AI-generated personas, particularly regarding data usage, intellectual property, and content authenticity. Establishing guidelines for responsible AI use will help brands navigate these challenges while ensuring long-term success in virtual influencer campaigns.

Social Implications

The emergence of virtual influencers in marketing also carries profound social implications, particularly concerning identity, authenticity, and digital culture. One major shift is the evolving consumer expectation around brand communication. As virtual influencers become normalised, consumers may increasingly anticipate personalised, responsive, and always-available interactions, potentially elevating expectations for human customer service representatives and influencers alike.

Another significant implication is the redefinition of authenticity. Traditional marketing often equated authenticity with human imperfection and relatability. However, virtual influencers challenge this paradigm by offering a different form of constructed authenticity, one that is designed yet capable of emotional resonance. While some consumers appreciate the novelty and consistency of these digital personas, others may struggle with the blurred boundaries between reality and simulation.

This ambiguity has consequences for consumer psychology. Research suggests that parasocial relationships formed with virtual influencers can influence consumer attitudes and behaviours in ways similar to human influencers. However, the psychological effects of sustained interactions with non-human entities, especially among younger audiences, warrant further investigation.

The rise of virtual influencers also intersects with broader conversations about inclusivity and representation. On one hand, digital influencers can be designed to reflect diverse racial, gender, and cultural identities, offering more inclusive visibility than traditional media. On the other hand, their synthetic nature raises concerns about tokenism and authenticity, particularly if their representation is not grounded in real-world experiences.

Socially, virtual influencers may contribute to the deepening of digital immersion and the erosion of offline social interactions. As consumers spend more time engaging with AI-generated personas in digital environments, questions arise about the nature of social connection and community in an increasingly virtual world. Finally, the widespread use of virtual influencers may shift public discourse on trust, ethics, and technology. As these entities take on roles in education, activism, and entertainment, society must grapple with new definitions of influence, responsibility, and truth in the digital age. Promoting digital literacy, ethical guidelines, and cross-sector dialogue will be essential to navigate this evolving landscape.

CONCLUSION

Virtual influencers represent a transformative shift in marketing, merging cutting-edge technological innovation with emotionally resonant storytelling. Their emergence signifies more than just a novel trend; it marks a fundamental reimagining of how brands can engage with consumers. These digital personas enable brands to craft hyper-personalised, emotionally intelligent, and culturally adaptive narratives with elements that align well with the rising demand for human-centric marketing. Unlike traditional marketing approaches focused on one-way communication, virtual influencers thrive on dialogue, empathy, and co-created meaning.

However, their effectiveness is inextricably linked to the values they embody and the transparency with which they operate. As demonstrated throughout this study, while virtual influencers can build trust, evoke emotional responses, and represent inclusive identities, these outcomes are only sustainable when ethical boundaries are

respected. Transparency about their artificial origins, the use of data, and the purpose of their messaging is vital in maintaining consumer trust in an era marked by digital scepticism.

Virtual influencers must be viewed not merely as digital novelties but as integral elements of strategic brand storytelling. Their success hinges on thoughtful integration into broader marketing frameworks, where their actions and personas reflect real consumer values and social concerns. Brands must ensure these entities are equipped to participate authentically in social discourse, promote inclusivity, and adapt to cultural distinctions. When embedded in ethical storytelling and cultural fluency, virtual influencers can elevate consumer-brand relationships to new levels of engagement and trust.

Looking ahead, the role of virtual influencers will likely expand beyond marketing into areas such as education, public health, and entertainment, further blurring the lines between human and digital interaction. As such, interdisciplinary collaboration will be necessary to ensure that the evolution of these digital personas continues to serve the broader goals of human-centric innovation.

Hence, virtual influencers hold vast potential to redefine the future of marketing, not by replacing human connection, but by enhancing it through empathetic design, responsible AI use, and authentic engagement. If harnessed thoughtfully, they can contribute to a marketing paradigm that is as emotionally intelligent as it is technologically advanced.

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