Men Without Emotions, Women Without Clothes. Virtual Influencers and Gender Bias in the Digital Era

Denisa SABIE

Department of Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
E-mail: denisa.sabie23@gmail.com

Ioana IANCU

Department of Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
E-mail: iancu@fspac.ro

Abstract. *Virtual influencers, computer generated personas, are increasingly featured in online marketing, particularly on platforms like Instagram. Given their growing influence, it is crucial to examine how they reinforce or challenge traditional gender biases in social media spaces. This study explores the ways in which virtual influencers either replicate or resist conventional gender norms. Focusing on four virtual influencers (two females: Lil Miquela and Shudu Gram; and two males: Plusticboy and Enzo Morais), the research analyzes 80 social media posts through content analysis. Findings indicate that female influencers are frequently portrayed in sexualized ways, emphasizing beauty and fragility, whereas male influencers are more commonly linked to authority and emotional detachment. While some posts deviate from these norms, most adhere to stereotypical visual representations. This study offers fresh insights into how virtual personas shape and reflects gender stereotypes in digital culture. As virtual influencers continue to gain prominence, understanding their role in shaping gender narratives is increasingly vital for both marketers and media scholars.*

Keywords: Virtual influencers; Influencer marketing; Gender bias; Instagram; Content analysis.

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Introduction

With the advancement of digital technologies and the growing influence of social media on consumer behavior, virtual influencers have become a key component of digital marketing strategies. The global market for virtual influencers was valued at USD 6.06 billion in 2024 and is expected to grow to USD 45.88 billion by 2030 (Grand View Research, 2024). The AI Marketing Benchmark Report reveals that 51.9% of marketers are ready to integrate AI-generated personas into their upcoming marketing efforts (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025).

According to El Hedhli et al. (2023), there are more than 200 virtual influencers active on social media, particularly Instagram, with engagement rates three times higher than those of real influencers. Lil Miquela was the first virtual influencer created in 2016 (Conti et al., 2022). Time magazine named her one of the world's 25 most influential individuals in 2018 (Byun & Ahn, 2023).

As influencer marketing emerges as a dominant digital advertising strategy, it is noteworthy that 74% of consumers have purchased a product following an influencer's recommendation, underscoring the powerful role influencers play in shaping buying decisions (Kuzminov , 2024). Engagement with virtual influencers is notably high, with users liking or commenting on their posts three times more often than on those of real-life influencers (Conti et al., 2022). Highlighting their growing impact, the World Health Organization (WHO) even partnered with a virtual influencer for a COVID-19 vaccination campaign (Lee & Yuan, 2023).

Recent studies emphasize that, despite ongoing social and cultural progress, traditional gender biases remain deeply embedded in digital marketing. Women are still predominantly portrayed through lenses of sexualization and body objectification, while men are commonly depicted in positions of power and authority, reinforcing conventional gender norms in media representations (Shin & Lee, 2023). Although research on virtual influencers is growing, significant gaps remain in understanding how social media shapes gender stereotypes. Most existing studies focus on the impact of human influencers, with comparatively limited attention given to virtual influencers, who represent a novel form of digital authority. Furthermore, recent research by Shin & Lee (2023) and Roy (2023) confirms that even with strides toward gender equality, the digital portrayal of women continues to be dominated by themes of sexualization and objectification, whereas men are framed through stereotypes of rationality and dominance.

While virtual influencers can deconstruct certain aspects of identity through their virtuality, they also perpetuate normative ideologies of gender by presenting idealized and reductionist markers of femininity. This duality highlights the tension between the potential for virtual influencers to challenge gender norms and their role in strengthening existing stereotypes (Miyake, 2023; O'Connor & Liu, 2024). For instance, Imma (imma.gram) simultaneously reinforces and questions traditional gender norms through a carefully crafted portrayal of idealized Japanese femininity (Miyake, 2023). Lil Miquela's (lilmiquela) portrayal

and public reception both reflect and support harmful gender norms, her sexualized, passive representation perpetuates traditional stereotypes of femininity, while cyberbullying against her, despite her AI status, normalizes misogyny and mirrors real-world hostility toward women (Schmithorst, 2023; van Halteren, 2023). Shudu Gramme's (shudu.gram) portrayal reinforces racialized and gendered stereotypes by sexualizing her appearance, objectifying her body, and exoticizing Black femininity through visual cues and passive poses (van Halteren, 2023). Male virtual influencer Blawko (@blawko22) accentuates stereotypical masculinity by emphasizing self-obsession with appearance, promoting physical ideals, and performing a hyper-masculine, image-focused persona (FIV Magazine, 2025).

However, there are varied virtual influencers that can improve consumer reactions and perceptions of inclusivity, which makes them an effective tool for brands seeking to reach a wider audience (Ferraro et al., 2024). Tammy, a virtual influencer with Down Syndrome, demonstrated that diverse representation boosts social media inclusivity and significantly enhances both influencer and brand outcomes by leveraging her perceived novelty and likability (Ferraro, et al., 2024). Likewise, Bangkok Naughty Boo, Thailand's first non-gender virtual influencer, challenges gender norms and promotes inclusivity, using a genderless identity to engage modern audiences and push societal and creative boundaries through digital innovation (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2022).

Given the rapid growth of virtual influencers and the limited research on how they reinforce specific norms, it is essential to investigate their role in perpetuating gender biases. The purpose of this paper is to examine *how virtual influencers adopt or oppose the gender norms, as well as the extent to which they reinforce these gender stereotypes on Instagram*. Thus, the research aims to analyze how masculinity and femininity are constructed within the context of virtual influencers' posts and to explore the similarities and differences in their representation. This study employs content analysis of Instagram posts ($N = 80$) by virtual influencers to identify dominant traits associated with gender representation. The analysis focuses on a sample of four virtual influencers, two females (Lil Miquela and Shudu Gram) and two males (Plusticboy and Enzo Morais), to examine how gender is portrayed across their content. The research centers on Instagram due to its widespread use for influencer marketing and its visibility as a platform where gender stereotypes are often displayed and reinforced (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2022; Salhab, 2024).

This study addresses a significant gap in current literature by focusing on virtual influencers, a relatively new but rapidly growing phenomenon in digital marketing. While much existing research focusses on human influencers, there is limited scholarly exploration into how computer-generated personas construct or challenge gender norms. By applying a content analysis approach, this research contributes to media and gender studies by providing empirical evidence on how digital technologies perpetuate or resist traditional gender stereotypes. From a practical perspective, the findings offer valuable insights for marketers, content creators, and social media strategists. Understanding how gender is portrayed through virtual influencers can inform more inclusive and socially responsible marketing practices. As brands increasingly collaborate with these digital personas, recognizing

their influence on audience perceptions, particularly among impressionable younger demographics, can guide ethical and culturally sensitive branding strategies.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on gender representation within the emerging context of virtual influencers, an area still underexplored in academic discourse. By analyzing both male and female virtual personas across multiple posts, the study not only highlights persistent gender stereotypes but also opens up discussion on how artificial intelligence and digital media are reshaping societal understandings of masculinity and femininity. This interdisciplinary inquiry bridges marketing, digital media, and gender studies in a way that few studies have yet explored.

Influencers and influencer marketing

Social media influencers are users that sell goods or services to a particular target group and have the capacity to engage and create conversations. Celebrities, micro-influencers, and non-professional users are all examples of influencers (Kim & Kim, 2021). They use posing and sex appeal to increase their attractiveness and following, and they establish an online persona to establish their identity. From the perspective of a marketer, social media influencers are individuals who create and preserve a personal brand by posting content that showcases their character and way of life in relation to the goods or services they endorse. These have the power to positively or negatively affect the behavior of their listeners (Joshi et al., 2023). Influencer marketing is fundamentally rooted in the Two-step flow model, which highlights the impact of interpersonal communication over direct mass media influence. According to this model, information is first received by opinion leaders, who then interpret and relay it to their followers. In doing so, they shape the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences more effectively than traditional media channels (Vrontis et al., 2021).

From a marketing perspective, influencers primarily aim to boost consumers' purchase intentions and raise awareness of a product or service. They function as brand ambassadors by creating content tailored to promote a specific brand (Joshi et al., 2023). According to Eyal (2018, as cited in Kim & Kim, 2021), 63% of consumers place greater trust in influencer recommendations than in other sources, and 92% trust influencers more than traditional media. This trust fosters follower loyalty, more favorable attitudes toward products, and increased purchase intentions. Additionally, by 2018, 86% of brands had adopted influencer marketing as part of their advertising strategy (Vrontis et al., 2021).

In influencer marketing, the source attractiveness model has been explored, focusing on two key dimensions: physical attractiveness and homophily. Physical attractiveness refers to how appealing the communicator appears to the audience, often shaping initial impressions and agreement with messages. Attractive individuals are commonly perceived as more empathetic, engaging, friendly, and reasonable, which can enhance credibility and message acceptance. Homophily, on the other hand, is the perceived similarity between the

influencer and the audience in terms of values, beliefs, experiences, and lifestyle. This sense of relatability strengthens the influencer's persuasive power, fosters positive interpersonal feelings, reduces uncertainty, and builds trust (McGuire, 1968 *apud* Kim & Kim, 2021). However, research also shows that while physical attractiveness does not significantly influence relationship trust, homophily positively affects followers' trust in the influencer (Kim & Kim, 2021). This suggests that perceived similarity plays a more crucial role than appearance in establishing trustworthy influencer-follower relationships.

Another widely examined framework in influencer marketing is Social Influence Theory (SIT) (Davlembayeva et al., 2024). SIT explores how social interactions and the traits of influencers affect individuals' attitudes and behaviors (Davlembayeva et al., 2024). The theory emphasizes that attitudes are shaped by social norms, values, conventions, and individual predispositions, and that the impact of social influence varies depending on how individuals accept and respond to such influence (Davlembayeva & Papagiannidis, 2024). SIT identifies three forms of influence acceptance: compliance (conforming to gain rewards or avoid punishment), identification (adopting behaviors to maintain a meaningful relationship with the influencer), and internalization (embracing influence because it aligns with personal values and beliefs). These processes are shaped by factors such as the influencer's power, expected outcomes, and how relevant the behavior is to personal goals (Davlembayeva & Papagiannidis, 2024).

Regarding ethical concerns, influencer marketing often blurs the line between organic and paid content, and consumers are not always aware of commercial content. Even if there are recommendations in this direction, many influencers refuse to mark their advertisements. Influencers must balance their authenticity with commercial interests. Overcommercialization can decrease trust and credibility with their audience, which is crucial for the effectiveness of influencer marketing (Ye et al., 2021).

Virtual influencers

Virtual influencers are computer-generated imagery (CGI) characters designed to look and act like real people, though they are entirely artificial. Created using specialized software, they are mainly used in social campaigns and marketing collaborations. In some cases, they may be digitally modified versions of real individuals or a blend of a human body with a virtual head (Conti et al., 2022). Due to their digital nature, virtual influencers offer distinctive engagement opportunities, enabling consistent and controlled content creation. Their posts often mirror those of human influencers, featuring aspects of daily life, travel, brand experiences, and personal stories (Byun & Ahn, 2023).

They can be categorized into three types: non-human-like entertainers, human-like commercial collaborators, and human-like brand mascots (Davlembayeva et al., 2024). There are diverse types and characteristics of virtual influencers, categorizing them based on form-relatedness, content-relatedness, agency, and function. Virtual influencers can

range from humanlike to nonhuman-like forms, with varying degrees of realism and depth in storytelling. They can be branded or free agents, and their roles include brand ambassadors, content creators, or storytellers. Examples include hyper-realistic humanlike influencers like Lil Miquela, anime-like influencers like Noonoouri, and nonhuman-like influencers like Nobody Sausage (Sorosrungruang et al., 2024).

Brands choose to work with virtual influencers because they are more flexible, can offer exclusivity, can create an influencer only for that brand and are less likely to have inappropriate behavior (Conti et al., 2022). Moreover, virtual influencers are more consistent and pragmatic and can simultaneously be present on multiple social media platforms. Even if virtual influencers lack self-consciousness, they can still deliver authentic messages (Byun & Ahn, 2023). Virtual influencers offer greater longevity and can be used for transmedia storytelling, enhancing brand familiarity (Sands et al., 2022). Besides being used in campaigns, virtual influencers can also be used for crisis management, corporate social responsibility, and stakeholder relationship building (Davlembayeva et al., 2024).

The Computers Are Social Actors (CASA) theory, introduced by Clifford Nass and colleagues in the 1990s, underpins the concept of virtual influencers (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Nass et al., 1997). This framework suggests that users interact with computers in human-like ways, adhering to social norms related to politeness, gender roles, and group dynamics (Lombard & Xu, 2021; Park et al., 2021). Although people may deny treating technology as they would real humans, their behavior in these interactions is often shaped by familiar social patterns (Lang et al., 2013).

Virtual influencers face several challenges, including consumer skepticism, promoting unrealistic beauty standards, perceived inauthenticity, ethical concerns, and the risk of consumer backlash (Sands et al., 2022). Key obstacles include maintaining audience engagement, lack of genuine connection, and high financial risks. For a campaign to succeed, virtual influencers must demonstrate strong storytelling, authenticity, and relatable human traits (Moustakas et al., 2023). Many virtual influencers do not hide their virtual nature and make jokes about this. This authenticity also helps with persuasiveness. Studies showed that less-perfect robots are more likeable (Lee & Yuan, 2023).

Despite their popularity, virtual influencers face controversies, such as Lil Miquela's queerbaiting incident, a term used to describe commercial strategies in which a person or brand suggests a queer attraction or identity to appeal to a wider audience without fully embracing it. In a Calvin Klein ad, Miquela and model Bella Hadid were caught kissing, sparking controversy among the LGBTQ+ community (Lash, 2019). Calvin Klein formally apologized and declared that the campaign's goal was to support the right to free speech for a variety of identities, including gender and sexual orientation. These actions have been seen as exploiting the LGBTQ+ community for commercial purposes, which has drawn criticism from many who believe such practices are superficial and damaging to the authenticity of queer movements (Jones, 2019).

Shudu, another virtual influencer, has faced criticism as a digital projection of Black womanhood that promotes an idealized, Westernized beauty standard, failing to reflect

the real diversity and complexity of Black women. Her exaggerated, flawless features are seen as reinforcing stereotypes, and there are concerns that virtual models like Shudu could displace real Black women in the fashion industry, reducing authentic representation. Additionally, her creator, Cameron-James Wilson, a white man, has been accused of "digital blackface" and profiting from a stylized image of Black femininity, raising ethical concerns about exploitation and representation in digital media (Jackson, 2022).

Virtual influencers and gender roles

Gender roles refer to the social and behavioral norms considered appropriate for individuals of a specific gender. These roles are based on cultural beliefs and expectations about how men and women should behave, think, and interact. Gender roles often dictate the activities, responsibilities, and occupations suitable for men and women, influencing their behavior in personal and professional contexts. They can be descriptive, outlining characteristics typically associated with each gender, and prescriptive, suggesting how individuals should act based on their gender (Crăiuț & Iancu, 2022).

Stereotypes influence social evaluations because they are automatically activated and connected to associative networks in semantic memory (Marinucci et al., 2023). Gender roles shape fundamental behavioral differences through various mediating processes. Men and women tend to adjust their social behaviors to align with gender-specific expectations, drawing on skills and resources that support success within those roles. Over time, gender stereotypes are internalized and adopted as personal norms (Eagly et al., 2000).

The gender roles of virtual influencers are carefully constructed to align with societal norms and brand identities, often emphasizing traditional and idealized notions of femininity and masculinity. These constructions raise important ethical considerations about authenticity, representation, and the potential impact on real individuals' perceptions of gender and beauty (Roy, 2023). The identities and experiences of these virtual influencers have been constructed by their producers, who, most of the time, are not of the same gender or ethnic background as the characters they create, raising moral questions about the production and representation of these influencers. Stereotypes and inaccurate depictions of gender-specific experiences may result from this (Roy, 2023).

Maintaining gender standards that improve relationships with customers is an effective strategy for influencers to be genuine, close, and appealing, especially for female influencers (Lee & Yuan, 2023). This strategy is linked with the concept of semiotic materialism. It helps unpack the complexities of how virtual influencers operate within contemporary digital culture, influencing consumer behavior and perpetuating certain ideologies despite their lack of physical presence (Miyake, 2023).

Gender stereotypes affect virtual influencers' perceived competence and reliability. Compared to male technology, female virtual assistants are perceived as being less capable but more dependable and friendly. Particularly in situations where trustworthiness is poor,

people view female-gendered technology as more emotionally advanced and trustworthy. Stereotypes are reinforced by the anthropomorphizing and design, with female agents frequently being sexualized (Crăiuț & Iancu, 2022). Elements like language, voice, and emotional expression can prompt users to respond socially, perceiving technology as a social entity. Research shows that a female computer voice is associated with emotional and relational topics, while a male voice is linked to technical expertise or authority. Visual cues like faces enhance perceptions of trustworthiness and persuasiveness, while speech style, vocal tone, and name shape the perceived personality and social identity of technological agents (Lombard & Xu, 2021; West et al., 2019). Influencers who smile widely and have open gestures are seen as friendlier and more capable, which increases the efficiency of their persuasive messages and results in favorable evaluations and admiration (Kim & Read, 2020).

According to gender stereotypes, women express more positive feelings like joy and are more emotionally expressive overall. However, men are less emotive and express more negative emotions like anger (Lee & Yuan, 2023). Female technology is seen as more empathetic and male technology as more physically capable (Crăiuț & Iancu, 2022). Despite technological progress, digital assistants, often designed with female voices and imagery, tend to reinforce harmful gender stereotypes when they make errors. Users frequently interpret mistakes made by female-voiced assistants as gendered failures, which can result in frustration and sexist remarks. Additionally, there are notable differences in how male and female voice scripts are written. Male voices tend to use more precise quantifiers, while female voices often rely on general quantifiers and personal pronouns (West et al., 2019).

Male gender stereotypes often associate men with leadership roles and characteristics such as assertiveness, dominance, and independence. The stereotypes strongly associate "male" with "leader" and "female" with "helper". This stereotype reflects a global stereotype that men are more suited for leadership positions than women (Greenwald, 2017). Some female virtual influencers, like Lu do Magalu, are depicted in traditional domestic roles, such as cooking and cleaning, reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes (Oktan & Yavaş, 2024). Virtual influencers sometimes mimic real-life gender-specific experiences, such as harassment or social issues, to appear relatable. This can be problematic as it commodifies and minimizes genuine experiences faced by real women. The content shared by virtual influencers often involves performative acts that align with traditional gender roles, such as fashion modelling, lifestyle blogging, and engaging in socio-cultural events. This reinforces the stereotype that women's primary value is appearance and social activities (Roy, 2023).

In contrast to male virtual influencers, who are more likely to "pass" as real people and display negative emotions, female virtual influencers are more likely to reveal their virtual identity and display positive emotions, which can help them come across as more relatable and genuine. Additionally, remarks about sexual displays and positive affect are more common for female virtual influencers, whereas comments about negative affect and biological senses are more common for male virtual influencers (Lee & Yuan, 2023).

Virtual influencers are often designed to appear more attractive and to look remarkably similar to human beings. They appeal to consumers and brands because their lives and

bodies are flexible to meet consumers' needs. Virtual influencers often use gender stereotypes and sexual norms to make themselves look more attractive and persuasive. Because of their growing influence, virtual influencers shape their fanbase's affinity and interactions (Lee & Yuan, 2023). These digital characters are crafted to embody specific gender identities and roles, often reflecting and perpetuating traditional and idealized beauty standards. They are designed to be "forever young, beautiful, and scandal-free", which aligns with societal expectations of female beauty and behavior (Roy, 2023). Virtual influencers engage in influencer practices by sharing narratives of their personal lives, lifestyles, and professional engagements, often in ways that emphasize their femininity and attractiveness (Roy, 2023). Gender stereotypes are often shown through postures, facial expressions, clothing, make-up or close-up body parts. Even though they are adaptable, the way they present themselves and the reactions of their followers still reflect gender stereotypes (Lee & Yuan, 2023).

On social media, men typically display their faces, bodies, masculinity, and power, whereas women tend to display more physical attractiveness and sexual displays. Sexuality-related terms are frequently used in postings by female influencers (Auxier et al., 2019; Lee & Yuan, 2023). Female virtual influencers are predominantly designed with exaggerated feminine features, such as large chests and curvy bodies, and are often sexualized through their poses, clothing, and overall presentation. They frequently embody passive and weak postures, highlighting their role as objects of desire, often created from a male gaze perspective (Shin & Lee, 2023). They also often express unrealistic beauty standards, such as flawless skin, ideal body shapes, symmetrical faces, well-groomed hairstyles, and youthful appearances, which can influence real women's perceptions of their bodies. Some are often designed to reference mythological goddesses, emphasizing attributes like perfection, smoothness, and immortality (Oktan & Yavaş, 2024; Roy, 2023).

Although male virtual influencers might not be as heavily sexualized or objectified as female virtual influencers, this reflects broader societal trends where male attractiveness is less accentuated compared to female beauty (Oktan & Yavaş, 2024). Male virtual influencers are depicted with broad shoulders and muscular bodies, reinforcing traditional masculine traits. They are often shown in active and dominant postures, reinforcing the stereotype of men as strong and authoritative (Shin & Lee, 2023).

Sexualization and objectification are some of the most common stereotypes among female virtual influencers, underlining physical beauty, sexual allure, and desirability. Characters like Bermuda and Alara X are designed with tall statues, sexy outfits, and body parts displayed in close frames, highlighting their sexuality (Oktan & Yavaş, 2024). Non-binary virtual influencers are rare but do exist, and they challenge traditional gender norms by combining both masculine and feminine traits or adopting a gender-neutral style. However, most virtual influencers still adhere to binary gender roles, reflecting broader societal expectations and stereotypes (Shin & Lee, 2023).

Consumer perceptions and reactions to virtual influencers are influenced by warmth and competence stereotypes, which have an impact on trust and purchase decisions (El

Hedhli et al., 2023). Virtual influencers' anthropomorphic characteristics can enhance followers' purchase intentions by improving parasocial connections and trustworthiness. The idealized appearance of virtual influencers may reflect societal perceptions of women's beauty, potentially impacting consumers' body image (Ji et al., 2022). When female influencers post stereotypical content, followers perceive the product more positively (Leung et al., 2022). Influencers who disclose excessive personal information tend to elicit more negative responses from consumers (Hudders & De Jans, 2022; Lee & Yuan, 2023). Moreover, when male influencers reveal too much of their bodies, female audiences often respond unfavorably, which can lead to a decrease in their intention to purchase (Lee & Yuan, 2023; Su et al., 2021).

Social media algorithms amplify highly engaging content, often featuring idealized body images, which can heighten anxiety and dissatisfaction with one's appearance. Virtual influencers, in particular, promote flawless and unrealistic beauty standards shaped by the male gaze, contributing to body image concerns, especially among women, and creating a disconnect from reality (Ji et al., 2022).

Method

This study examines, in an exploratory manner, the ways in which virtual influencers on Instagram embody traditional gender stereotypes, social roles, gendered behaviors, and conventional beauty standards. A content analysis is employed.

Sample

The research sample includes 4 virtual influencers active on Instagram, one of the most popular platforms for consumers to follow virtual influencers (Statista, 2024). Two of the influencers are females: Lil Miquela (Image 1) and Shudu Gram (Image 2). And two of them are males: Plusticboy (Image 3) and Enzo Morais (Image 4).

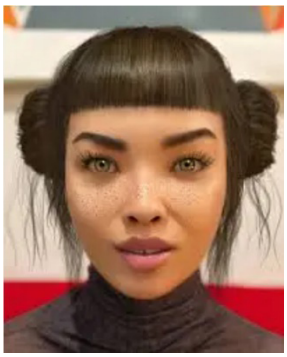


Image 1. Lil Miquela

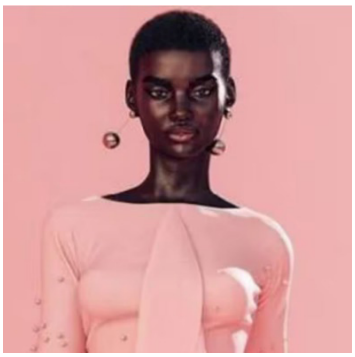


Image 2. Shudu Gram



Image 3. Plusticboy

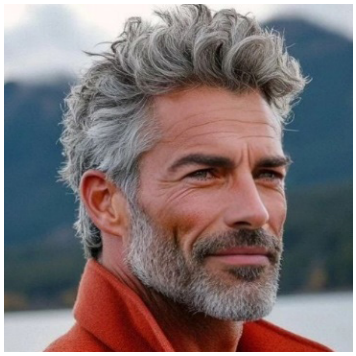


Image 4. Enzo Morais

- Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela), a digital singer and influencer developed by the company Brud, which focuses on fashion, activism, and music and she has collaborated with globally recognised brands such as Calvin Klein, Dior, and Prada (Tatter et al., 2024). She has amassed nearly 2.5 million Instagram followers.
- Shudu Gram (@shudu.gram), created by artist Cameron-James Wilson, is widely regarded as the world's first digital supermodel. She has partnered with luxury brands like Fenty Beauty and Balmain and is positioned as a voice for diversity within the fashion industry (Cresci, 2018), and has over 238,000 followers.
- Plusticboy (@plusticboy), developed by the Japanese agency Aww Inc., is a virtual model known for his enigmatic aesthetic and Asian cultural influences (The Sun, 2020). He maintains a following of approximately 43,000 users on Instagram.
- Enzo Morais (@enzo.morais.model) represents an older male demographic in fashion through his "silver fox" persona. With about 127,000 followers, he promotes a refined yet casual lifestyle and has collaborated with fashion brands such as Stoonio Studio. (source: Instagram @enzo.morais.model)

The virtual influencers included in this study were selected based on their relevance and visibility on Instagram. Several criteria guided the selection process. First, each influencer had to demonstrate recent activity on the platform, specifically having posted within the past month (March 2025), to ensure the data reflects current trends. Second, influencers were required to have substantial following and high engagement levels to confirm the significance and reach of their content. Third, as Instagram serves a global audience, the influencers needed to predominantly communicate in English, allowing the analysis to capture internationally relevant narratives. Finally, the influencers had to display a clearly identifiable gender, whether feminine or masculine, to enable the analysis of gender stereotypes and their representation.

To select the posts for analysis, the most recent rankings of popular virtual influencers on Instagram were examined, with particular attention given to their activity. This approach ensured the inclusion of timely and relevant content. The analysis revealed that female virtual influencers, such as Lil Miquela and Shudu Gram, are among the most

prominent and active figures on the platform, characterized by large followings and high levels of audience engagement. These findings are supported by data from Influencer Marketing Hub (2025), which identifies them as consistently active contributors to the platform. In contrast, while male virtual influencers such as Plusticboy and Enzo Morais are not featured among the most popular figures, they remain active and continue to post content that is relevant to current discussions. Therefore, the selection of influencers was based not solely on popularity but on sustained activity and relevance to the research topic, ensuring balanced representation across gender categories.

The analysis is based on a total of $N = 80$ manually coded posts, with 20 of the most recent posts examined for each of the four selected virtual influencers. The gender distribution within the sample is evenly split, comprising 40 posts (50%) from female virtual influencers and 40 posts (50%) from male virtual influencers. Notably, none of the posts feature explicitly non-binary virtual influencers, highlighting a lack of representation of alternative gender identities in the sample. Among the 80 posts, 69 (86.25%) are photographic images, while only 11 (13.75%) are videos. This indicates a clear preference for static imagery, which may be attributed to the higher degree of visual control it offers, particularly in shaping the influencer's appearance and expressiveness.

Procedure

The data collection was conducted between March 30 and April 14, 2025, focusing exclusively on posts published on Instagram. Only those posts in which the virtual influencers were visually present, either in images or videos, were included in the analysis; posts lacking a visual representation of the influencer were excluded. The selection process was performed manually, ensuring alignment with the research objectives and relevance of content. Data coding was also conducted manually, with themes and categories identified directly from the visual and textual content of the posts. The organization and analysis of the data were carried out using Google Sheets and Microsoft Excel, enabling a detailed and context-sensitive evaluation of the selected material. The data was coded using a binary system, with 1 indicating the presence of a specific characteristic and 0 indicating its absence. This method provides an objective means of quantifying visual and thematic elements, allowing for consistent comparison across posts and facilitating statistical analysis of representational patterns.

Instrument description

The research instrument employed is a content analysis grid, developed based on established literature in gender studies, visual communication, and digital culture. This tool facilitates both detailed examination and comparative analysis of virtual influencers according to their gender. The coding grid was constructed using theoretical frameworks related to gender representation and comprises multiple analytical categories. Table 1 outlines the coding book used to analyze the virtual influencers' posts.

Table 1. Coding book

Topic	Category	Sub-category	Source
Appearance	Female influencer	Clothing, posture, makeup, focus on body parts, smile, sexual display, flawless skin, large chest	Lee & Yuan, 2023; Ji et al., 2022; Kim & Read, 2020; El Hedhli et al., 2023; Shin & Lee, 2023; van Halteren, 2023; Oktan & Yavaş, 2024; Roy, 2023
	Male influencer	Physical strength, authority, lack of emotions, manifestation of anger	Lee & Yuan, 2023; Eagly et al., 2020; Shin & Lee, 2023
Emotional expression	Facial expression		Lee & Yuan, 2023
	Emotional tone		Crăiuț & Iancu, 2022; West et al., 2019
Sexualization	Revealing outfits, provocative poses, emphasis on certain body parts, seductive facial expressions		van Halteren, 2023; Oktan & Yavaş, 2024
Stereotypes	Female stereotypes	Passivity, emotional aestheticization, varying degrees of sexualization	Marinucci et al., 2023; Eagly & Wood, 2016; Eagly et al., 2020; Shin & Lee, 2023; Lee & Yuan, 2023; van Halteren, 2023
	Male stereotypes	Strength, rationality, emotional restraint, dominant behavior	
Theme	Beauty, empowerment, vulnerability, marketing, celebrations, sustainability, voting, lifestyle		Roy, 2023; Sorosrungruang et al., 2024; Kim & Kim, 2021

Results

Considering *appearance*, female virtual influencers are frequently represented through a series of visual stereotypes that reflect traditional norms regarding femininity (Table 2). A total of 30 posts (37.5%) feature characters dressed in revealing clothing that highlights body contours and conveys sexuality or visual availability. This portrayal suggests that seductive attire is portrayed as a key element of idealized femininity. In 32.5% of the posts, female virtual influencers are shown in body positions culturally associated with traditional femininity, conveying submission, passivity, delicacy, or seductiveness. These postures accentuate vulnerability and visual appeal, reinforcing a decorative depiction of women.

Makeup is prominently visible in only 12.5% of the posts, indicating either a downplaying of its role or its assimilation into a normatively accepted and thus unremarkable aesthetic. In 26.25% of the posts, visual focus is placed on specific body parts, such as the bust, legs, waist, and hips, leading to the segmentation and objectification of the female body. Smiling is present in 31 posts (38.75%). The most frequently observed stereotype is overt sexualization, which includes suggestive gestures, poses, or facial expressions that

underline eroticism and highlight sexual traits. This form of sexualization stands out as one of the dominant modes of portraying female virtual influencers in the analyzed content. Moreover, almost all the posts depict characters with flawless skin, lacking imperfections, pores, texture, or natural variation. This hyper-aestheticization creates unattainable beauty ideals and contributes to body image pressures. In 25% of the posts, the bust area is specifically highlighted through clothing choices or photographic composition.

Table 2. Distribution of visual appearance elements in ***female virtual influencers***

Visual elements	Number of posts	Percentage (%)
Clothing	30	37.5%
Posture	26	32.5%
Make-up	10	12.5%
Focus on body parts	21	26.25%
Smile	31	38.75%
Sexual display	39	48.75%
Flawless skin	77	96.25%
Large chest	20	25%

Four key subcategories of male stereotypes emerged in the analysis of male influencers (Table 3). In 15% of posts, male virtual influencers are portrayed in ways that emphasize physical strength, muscularity, or a physique linked to endurance and power. The most prevalent stereotype is that of symbolic or social dominance. In these instances, characters are depicted as confident, authoritative, and in control, conveyed through posture, facial expressions, camera angles, and situational context that imply influence and status. A notable trend is the absence of emotional expression in 45% of the posts, where characters display little to no affect. Emotions such as vulnerability, empathy, or sensitivity are largely missing, replaced by stoicism, seriousness, or emotional detachment. This "rational male" archetype also appears in portrayals of female virtual influencers, particularly when they are shown as powerful or autonomous. In a smaller number of cases, the characters exhibit anger, irritation, or aggressive behavior, traits traditionally linked to conventional masculinity.

Table 3. Distribution of visual appearance elements in ***male virtual influencers***

Visual elements	Number of posts	Percentage (%)
Physical strength	12	15%
Authority	34	42.5%
Lack of emotions	36	45%
Manifestation of anger	6	7.5%

The representation of clothing clearly varies by gender, reinforcing the hypotheses regarding the sexualization and aestheticization of female virtual influencers, in contrast to

the functionality and neutrality associated with male virtual influencers. Table 4 illustrates the distribution of clothing styles across the analyzed posts, highlighting significant differences between the portrayal of female and male characters.

Table 4. Distribution of clothing styles according to the character gender

Clothing style	Female virtual influencers	Male virtual influencers
Seductive	57.5%	5.0%
Casual	10.0%	30.0%
Elegant	7.5%	25.0%
Sporty	2.5%	20.0%

In posts featuring female virtual influencers, seductive clothing is the most prominent category, appearing in 57.5% of cases (23 out of 40). This strong presence underscores a heightened aestheticization and a clear emphasis on visual appeal and the sexualization of the female body. Other clothing styles, such as casual or elegant, appear less frequently, while the sporty style is nearly absent (2.5%). In contrast, male virtual influencers are portrayed with a more varied wardrobe: casual attire appears in 30% of posts, elegant in 25%, and sporty in 20%. Seductive clothing is rare, present in only 5% of male posts, suggesting that male representation is largely non-erotic, oriented instead toward functionality and traditional styles. These findings support the hypothesis that women are more often depicted through the lens of aesthetic and sexual appeal, whereas men are visually constructed in ways that emphasize neutrality, practicality, or formality.

Across all posts, a variety of *emotional expressions* were observed, with happiness being the most prevalent, appearing in 22.5% of cases. Emotions such as "empowerment," "grateful," and "love" each appeared in 5% of the posts. Other recorded emotions included "serious," "cute," "cool," and "neutral." Additionally, 15 posts (18.75%) did not have any identifiable emotion coded, highlighting a portion of content that remained emotionally ambiguous or neutral.

In terms of emotions expressions associated to a certain gender (Table 5), female virtual influencers are more frequently depicted with seductive expressions, reinforcing the idea that sexualization extends beyond clothing to include more subtle visual cues such as gaze and facial expression. Additionally, "cute" or "pretty" expressions highlight the affective, youthful, and approachable qualities often associated with female representation. In contrast, male virtual influencers show a lower incidence of seductive expressions and are more commonly portrayed with neutral or standard facial expressions. "Cute" expressions are relatively rare, and male expressions tend to be more reserved, conventional, or emotionally muted, reflecting cultural expectations around stoicism and emotional restraint in representations of masculinity. These visual cues align with traditional gender norms in visual media, where women are often aestheticized and men are associated with power, dominance, or control.

Table 5. Distribution of facial expressions according to the virtual influencers' gender

Facial expression	Female virtual influencers	Male virtual influencers
Seductive	57.5%	47.5%
Cute/pretty	17.5%	7.5%
Neutral	25.0%	35.0%

The tone of the posts serves as a key indicator of how influencers shape their relationship with their audience. Among the 80 posts analyzed, the prevailing tone was either positive or neutral, with descriptors such as "calm," "empathetic," "encouraging," and "friendly" commonly recorded. In contrast, a smaller subset of posts exhibited ironic, sarcastic, or provocative tones, traits observed predominantly in posts featuring male characters. This distribution suggests a gendered distinction in communication style: female virtual influencers tend to foster emotional closeness and approachability, while male virtual influencers are more often portrayed with a distant or detached tone.

Out of 80 posts, 37 (46.25%) include some form of *sexualization*, while 43 (53.75%) do not display any overtly sexualized features. These elements can include revealing outfits, provocative poses, emphasis on certain body parts, or seductive facial expressions. Among posts by male influencers, 14 out of 40 (35%) contain elements of sexualization. In contrast, posts featuring female virtual influencers show a higher prevalence of sexualized content, with 23 out of 40 posts (57.5%) including such elements. This notable difference supports the notion that female virtual influencers are significantly more likely to be portrayed in a sexualized manner compared to their male counterparts (Table 6).

Table 6. Distribution of sexualized and non-sexualized posts by virtual influencers' gender

Gender of the virtual influencers	Sexualized posts n(%)	Non-sexualized posts n(%)
Male	14 (35.0%)	26 (65.0%)
Female	23 (57.5%)	17 (42.5%)

Regarding *stereotypes*, the analysis shows that 37.5% of the total posts are coded as reinforcing gender stereotypes, while 50 posts (62.5%) did not contain such messages. These stereotypes may include the attribution of traditional gender roles, the promotion of a standardized ideal of feminine beauty (excessive makeup, decorative posture, emotional expressiveness, or sexualized clothing), or the reaffirmation of typically masculine traits such as power or dominance.

The analysis reveals a clear pattern of representations aligned with traditional gender stereotypes. For female virtual influencers, 97.5% of posts (39 out of 40) conform to conventional norms of femininity, emphasizing traits such as passivity, emotional aestheticization, and varying degrees of sexualization, whether subtle or explicit. Only one post deviates from these expectations. In the case of male virtual influencers, 80% (32 out of 40) adhere to traditional portrayals, marked by attributes like strength, rationality, emotional

restraint, and a dominant demeanor. However, 20% of the posts featuring male characters offer alternative or more ambiguous representations, indicating a comparatively greater flexibility in how masculinity is visually constructed. These findings suggest that while masculinity remains largely shaped by conventional stereotypes, it allows for a wider range of expression than femininity, which continues to be tightly bound by traditional visual norms.

Table 7 presents the distribution of male stereotypes across posts, based on the gender of the virtual influencer, and highlights notable differences between portrayals of male and female characters. Masculine stereotypes, such as authority, strength, emotional restraint, or aggression, are evident in 40% of posts featuring male virtual influencers (16 out of 40). In comparison, these traits appear in only 10% of posts with female virtual influencers (4 out of 40). This disparity suggests a clear gendered pattern, reinforcing the notion that masculinity is commonly portrayed through themes of control and dominance.

Table 7. Distribution of posts with ***male stereotypes*** by virtual influencers' gender

Gender of the virtual influencer	Posts with masculine stereotypes n (%)	Posts without masculine stereotypes n (%)
Male	16 (40%)	24 (60%)
Female	4 (10%)	36 (90%)

Conversely, Table 8 displays the distribution of posts featuring female stereotypes, emphasizing the marked contrast between posts with female and male characters. Feminine stereotypes are significantly more prevalent in posts with female virtual influencers, appearing in 42.5% of cases (17 out of 40), compared to just 15% of posts featuring male virtual influencers (6 out of 40). This pattern underscores a consistent visual portrayal of femininity, often expressed through aesthetic cues such as makeup, decorative postures, sexualized clothing, and accentuated smiles.

Table 8. Distribution of posts with ***female stereotypes*** by virtual influencers' gender

Gender of the virtual influencer	Posts with feminine stereotypes n (%)	Posts without feminine stereotypes n (%)
Male	6 (15%)	34 (60%)
Female	17 (42.5%)	23 (54.5%)

To explore the potential relationship between female stereotypes and the presence of sexualization, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results indicate a positive and statistically significant, though weak, correlation between the two variables ($r = 0.297$, $p = 0.007$). This suggests that posts featuring stereotypical female traits, such as decorative posture, seductive clothing, heavy makeup, or emphasis on specific body parts, are more likely to also include elements of sexualization. While the strength of the correlation is modest, it nonetheless reveals a meaningful pattern in the visual construction of femininity

within influencer content. In contrast, the correlation between male stereotypes and sexualization was not statistically significant, indicating the need for further research in that area.

Similarly, the correlation between the virtual influencers 's gender and the presence of sexualization reveals a positive and statistically significant, though relatively weak, relationship ($r = 0.226$, $p = 0.044$). This result indicates that female virtual influencers are somewhat more likely to be portrayed in a sexualized manner compared to male virtual influencers. While the strength of the correlation is limited, its direction supports the theoretical assumption that female representations in digital media are more frequently linked to aestheticization and bodily exposure.

To better understand how feminine stereotypes are constructed, Pearson correlations were conducted between the overall score for feminine stereotypes and various visual appearance elements. The analysis revealed significant correlations with clothing ($r = .421$, $p = .000$), posture ($r = .326$, $p = .003$), makeup ($r = .428$, $p = .000$), sexual display ($r = .375$, $p = .000$), and prominent bust ($r = .271$, $p = .015$). These results suggest that visual representations of femininity are often built through features that emphasize and objectify the body. Clothing that highlights physical attributes, along with fragile, decorative, or passive postures, contributes to a conventional visual language of femininity centered on aestheticization. Makeup and sexual display emerge as the most consistent indicators of stereotypical femininity, functioning as cultural symbols linked to ideals of beauty, perfection, and attractiveness. The inclusion of prominent busts further supports these visual codes, serving not as a central focus but as part of a broader aesthetic framework.

In contrast, when examining male stereotypes, no significant correlations were found between the overall score and indicators such as emotional restraint, authority, physical strength, or expressions of anger. This absence of correlation suggests that the visual construction of masculinity may be more diffuse or complex, requiring further investigation to draw definitive conclusions.

Regarding the *themes of the posts*, the most prominent focus is on beauty and personal aesthetics. The theme of "beauty" appears in 51 out of 80 posts, accounting for 63.75% of the total. In contrast, themes such as "empowerment" and "vulnerability" are far less common, occurring in only 7 posts (8.75%) and 4 posts (5%), respectively. Other themes, such as marketing, celebrations, sustainability, voting, and lifestyle, each appear in less than 5% of posts. This strong emphasis on physical appearance highlights the central role of body image in the influencer-driven online space.

In posts featuring male virtual influencers, the theme of "beauty" is overwhelmingly dominant, appearing in 97.5% of cases (39 out of 40). This data indicates a visual narrative focused almost exclusively on external appearance and aestheticization, with little to no engagement with emotional or social dimensions. In contrast, posts featuring female virtual influencers show greater thematic diversity. While "beauty" remains the most prevalent theme at 45% of the posts, other themes such as "empowerment" (17.5%) and "vulnerability" (10%) are also present. This broader distribution suggests a more varied representation of femininity, which may reflect either a conscious effort to challenge traditional

stereotypes or a reshaping of contemporary female identity within digital culture. The thematic differences between genders mirror conventional patterns of visual representation. Male virtual influencers are primarily aestheticized with little to no accompanying narrative or emotional context, whereas female virtual influencers are portrayed across a wider range of roles. However, even within this broader spectrum, the theme of "beauty" remains the most prominent, indicating its continued centrality in the portrayal of women.

Conclusion

This study sets out to examine how virtual influencers reinforce traditional gender stereotypes on Instagram. The findings indicate that female virtual influencers remain strongly linked to conventional markers of femininity, including heightened sexualization, fragility, and the objectification of the body. These characteristics were evident in most of the analyzed posts, which frequently featured provocative clothing, passive or decorative postures, and a visual focus on body parts such as the waist and breasts that contribute to sexualized representations. The definition of 'beauty' through the lens of virtual influencers underscores how artificial aesthetics are carefully curated to reinforce narrow, gendered ideals, often amplifying unrealistic standards that reflect long-standing stereotypes rather than challenging them, thereby shaping cultural perceptions of attractiveness in increasingly subtle and algorithmic ways. These results align with the findings of Goffman (1979), Shin & Lee (2023), and Roy (2023), who argue that women in digital media are often portrayed through a lens of sexualization and aesthetic appeal, reinforcing their role as decorative and objectified figures.

In contrast, male virtual influencers are predominantly associated with traits such as power, authority, and emotional restraint. Their portrayal often emphasizes positions of control and dominance, aligning with traditional masculine stereotypes. These characters are typically framed as successful leaders and role models, displaying rational rather than emotional behavior. These findings are consistent with earlier research, including Eagly et al. (2000), which highlights power and rationality as core elements in the media construction of masculinity.

However, a noteworthy observation from this study is the emerging flexibility in representations of masculinity within the digital sphere. In certain cases, male virtual influencers exhibit traits more commonly associated with femininity, such as heightened attention to physical appearance or softer, more delicate facial expressions. This suggests a gradual shift in the traditional portrayal of masculinity, pointing toward a more fluid and inclusive model. This evolving trend reflects a broader cultural shift and is supported by recent studies, such as Miyake (2023), which document the increasing flexibilization of masculine identities in digital contexts.

The study indicates that gender stereotypes remain deeply embedded in the representation of virtual influencers. Female virtual influencers continue to be portrayed in

significantly more restrictive ways, often subjected to heightened sexualization and confined to decorative or aesthetic roles. In contrast, male representations show greater flexibility, though they are still predominantly linked to traits of power, authority, and control. These results suggest that while masculinity in digital spaces is beginning to evolve toward a more fluid model, femininity remains largely rooted in traditional norms centered on appearance and sexual appeal. This dynamic reflects a gradual but meaningful shift in how gender is perceived and constructed in the digital sphere.

The results hold significant scientific implications for the disciplines of media, gender studies, and digital culture. By analyzing the portrayal of virtual influencers on Instagram, the research contributes to a growing body of scholarship exploring how emerging technologies intersect with traditional gender norms. It expands the understanding of how stereotypical representations are not only preserved but also reimagined in virtual environments. Notably, the evidence that masculinity is depicted with more visual flexibility, while femininity remains tightly bound to aesthetic and sexualized ideals, offers valuable insight into the ways in which gender roles continue to evolve in digital contexts. This contributes to theoretical frameworks on performative gender and representation, while also opening new avenues for examining how identity is constructed and consumed in algorithm-driven media spaces.

From a practical standpoint, the study holds significant relevance for digital creators, marketers, educators, and policymakers. One key implication lies in media literacy. As virtual influencers increasingly shape cultural norms and beauty standards, there is a growing need to educate audiences, especially younger users, about the constructed and potentially harmful nature of these representations. This can help mitigate the psychological risks associated with exposure to unrealistic body ideals and hyper-sexualized imagery, such as self-objectification and reduced self-esteem.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of ethical design practices in digital media production. Developers, content creators, and influencer marketing teams should be encouraged to move beyond reductive gender images and strive for more balanced, diverse, and inclusive portrayals. This is not only a matter of social responsibility but also a strategic consideration, as audiences are increasingly attentive to issues of representation and authenticity.

These findings also have implications for policy and regulation. As virtual influencers occupy more space in advertising, entertainment, and even activism, platforms and regulatory bodies may need to consider guidelines that prevent the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes, particularly in content targeting younger demographics. Finally, for brands collaborating with virtual influencers, this research provides a critical lens through which to evaluate their campaigns. Embracing more nuanced and empowering representations of gender can enhance brand image and align with contemporary values of equality and inclusivity.

Limits and research perspectives

This study focuses on Instagram posts of virtual influencers, specifically analyzing a limited sample of four accounts, two female and two male. This relatively small sample size presents a constraint in terms of generalizability. Additionally, some of the selected influencers have limited global visibility, which may affect the broader applicability of the findings. Since the influencers analyzed are not among the most prominent or widely followed figures on the international stage, the research may not fully capture the diversity or influence of virtual influencer representations across different cultural or demographic contexts.

Furthermore, the study was constrained by a lack of gender diversity, as it did not include non-binary or more fluid gender identities in its analysis. This is a noteworthy limitation, especially considering the growing visibility and relevance of non-binary representations in digital culture and on social media platforms. As gender diversity continues to expand within influencer marketing, the exclusion of these identities highlights an important gap in the research and points to the need for more inclusive studies that reflect the full spectrum of gender expression in online spaces.

Another notable limitation of this research lies in the method of data analysis. The posts were manually coded and categorized, which introduces the potential for subjective errors or inconsistencies, particularly in interpreting subtle visual or narrative elements such as nonverbal cues and facial expressions. Manual analysis can be influenced by the researchers' individual perceptions and biases, which may affect the objectivity and accuracy of the coding process.

Another limitation of the study is its exclusive focus on Instagram, a platform that, although widely used, does not represent the full spectrum of social media environments or audience demographics. Limiting the analysis to a single platform may overlook variations in how virtual influencers are portrayed and received across different digital spaces. Expanding the research to include other major platforms, such as TikTok or YouTube, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of virtual influencer representations, as each platform has distinct content formats, interaction styles, and audience expectations.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of how diverse identities are represented and leveraged in digital marketing, future research should expand the scope to include a wider range of virtual influencers, particularly those who identify as non-binary or genderfluid. Including influencers from diverse cultural, ethnic, or marginalized backgrounds would also provide valuable insights into how intersectionality shapes the media portrayal and audience perception of gender identities. Such an approach would contribute to a more inclusive and representative analysis of digital spaces.

Another important direction for future research involves exploring the impact of virtual influencers on consumer perceptions, particularly regarding beauty standards, personal identity, and behavioral influence. This line of inquiry could incorporate psychological measures and in-depth interviews to assess how exposure to virtual influencers affects the mental health, self-image, and identity formation of audiences, especially among younger users.

On a broader scale, conducting a longitudinal study would allow researchers to track shifts in gender representation and audience perceptions over time as virtual influencer technologies and marketing strategies continue to evolve. It would be especially insightful to examine how advancements in digital creation tools or changes in branding practices influence the way gender is constructed and received in virtual influencer content across different platforms.

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