Should we buy into virtual influencers?

Brands need good spokespersons. "Digital humans" have many plus points, even if they lack authenticity.

Lim Sun Sun

Blessed with blonde hair, perfect complexion and a sunny personality, Emma seems the ideal spokeswoman for German tourism. In her mid-30s and madly passionate about travel and technology, she speaks 20 languages including English with a slight British accent. As I plan my holiday to Germany this Christmas, I am intrigued by her enthusiastic Instagram posts. Except that her posts fascinate and repel me in equal measure because Emma isn't a real person. In fact, she's an entirely artificial intelligence (AI)-generated virtual influencer.

Virtual influencers, often referred to as digital humans or computer-generated imagery influencers, are AI-generated characters that possess realistic looks, personalities and active social media profiles.

These virtual avatars partner with brands, produce content, share narratives and interact with their audience, making it increasingly challenging to tell the difference between real and digital influencers. And there has indeed been a growing posse of virtual influencers infiltrating our chaotic consumer landscape, where heaps of products and services vie for our attention.

In order to introduce the Coach spring collection, the American bag company unveiled its Find Your Courage campaign featuring virtual human, model and digital creator imma interacting with real-life celebrities such as Lil Nas X, Camila Mendes and Lee Young-ji. imma is a digital Instagram model with nearly 400,000 followers. Created by Tokyo-based company ModelingCafe Inc, she is admired for her exquisite looks and, besides Coach, has snagged endorsement deals with cosmetics company Kate and ice cream brand Magnum.

Attractive and credible spokespersons lend significant allure to brands and their products, as consumers draw positive mental associations between them.

Popular celebrities have long been the mainstay of product endorsements, infusing otherwise inanimate objects with their lively personalities. They also vest products with credibility and engender consumer trust in the product's quality and the brand's value, enabling consumers to develop an emotional connection to merchandise that is otherwise devoid of soul.

WHAT EMMA GETS RIGHT

How then do we make sense of products hawked by virtual influencers that are, in essence, nothing more than bits, bytes and pixels?

Even if, like Emma and imma, these influencers are imbued with personality, surely their effusive recommendations must ring hollow when they are basically lines of code? After all, Emma cannot appreciate the splendour of the German countryside, just as imma cannot taste the ice cream on her tongue.

Surely, right-thinking consumers would fight shy of these digital brand ambassadors?

Remarkably, the situation isn't entirely open and shut. To be sure, many Instagram users responded to Emma with disdain, if not outrage. One said: "It would definitely be better to promote real-life people in the travel industry rather than somebody who doesn't exist and cannot form real opinions! There are so many travel creators out there, who love Germany, have visited, and know the best destinations. People would much rather listen and hear from them than AI. Please do better!"

But Emma and the German National Tourist Board were unmoved. The latter responded stoically: "It's essential to us that Emma complements, rather than competes with, our real influencers. She will operate alongside our well-established influencer network which generated an impressive 148 million impressions last year."

Therein lies the rub – scalability. Corporations today seek to make more than discrete one-off sales to customers. They want to build relationships that translate into brand loyalty and repeat purchases. With virtual influencers that will tirelessly reply to every request whatever the hour of the day, relationships with scores of customers have never been easier to foster, with the promise of growing sales.

Other benefits abound for companies employing these virtual influencers. Whereas real-life celebrities will lend their colourful personas to premium brands, they also come with personal baggage that was not presented at check-in. Just think of former supermodel Kate Moss, dumped by Burberry after being photographed snorting cocaine, or Tiger Woods' rock-solid family-man image dented by his marital woes. In contrast, virtual influencers are practically clean slates and their personal histories can be incessantly revised and reimagined, even if they may come across as one-dimensional.

Virtual influencers can also be quite reliable because, trained on a sufficiently huge trough of data, they can project a uniform brand message, tone and voice throughout all interactions, upholding brand identity with a robotic consistency that we flighty humans just cannot equal.

If the parameters of the chat are more focused in terms of their topical coverage, the chances of them hallucinating and going rogue would also be slimmer.

As consumers become more accustomed to, and comfortable, interacting with chatbots, it may well be that AI-powered chatbots are the next frontier in product endorsement and customer relationship building. In a study by communication scholars Yang Feng, Huan Chen and Quan Xie, recently published in the Journal of Interactive Advertising, they identified key attributes that influence consumer perceptions of virtual influencers.

Notably, anthropomorphism – or how realistic consumers find influencers in terms of appearance and social behaviour – was found to increase consumer acceptance. In other words, the more human-like the virtual influencers, the better consumers took to them. Interestingly, artificiality, or the influencer's lack of human qualities, did not hinder acceptance.

In essence, while consumers expect AI influencers to look and behave like humans, they also acknowledge that these influencers are not actual human beings and have some tolerance for their artificiality.

Presumably, consumers do want to be forewarned that these virtual influencers are not real people but digital entities. Indeed, such transparency is vital if companies want to build trust with their customers.

Other qualities such as the attractiveness of virtual influencers and their resemblance to other media figures also positively influenced consumer attitudes. Finally, if consumers find virtual influencers' content to be high in quality, they are more likely to be accepting of them.

More tech companies have thus sought to marry the best of both worlds – to produce chatbots bearing richly multifaceted personalities of actual celebrities, but with their interactions driven by AI. In a significant step towards that goal, tech giant Meta has launched Meta AI, its virtual assistant which vocalises responses to user queries in the voice of celebrities such as Awkwafina, Kristen Bell, John Cena and Dame Judi Dench.

Customers who rail against the inauthenticity of virtual influencers may perhaps be mollified by the use of chatbots bearing celebrity personas. But it would surely be tragic if virtual influencers completely displace their human counterparts.

In our AI-infused world, the expression caveat emptor or "let the buyer beware" has therefore taken on a whole new dimension.

It has become increasingly trying, both as a consumer and a media watcher, to always be vigilant, constantly checking the provenance of messages hurled at us, and steeling ourselves against the demise of authenticity. Hence, even as companies become more enthused about leveraging virtual influencers, they must also ensure that they exercise moderation, be upfront about their use of AI and educate consumers about the limitations of these avatars.

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Virtual influencers, like Emma (above), possess realistic looks, personalities and active social media profiles. PHOTO: GERMAN NATIONAL TOURIST BOARD