

Virtual Influencers : Is The Persona Trustworthy?

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Abstrak

In today's digital world, people are using social media at a higher rate than ever before. One digital marketing phenomenon is the use of services from a virtual influencer. Virtual influencers are computer-generated models who are becoming increasingly famous on social media. The purpose of the study is to identify and analyze the communication way of virtual influencers in the digital marketing era. The current study uses a literature review method that searches article titles and abstracts in electronic databases (Scopus and Google Scholar) for studies published between 2018-2022 using keywords. The importance of this research is due to the phenomenon and data literature on lifestyle, interaction patterns, and most of the media production from conventional to digital which has a significant impact on the development of the digital world. The results show the perspective of digital experts on the efficacy and trustworthiness of the use of virtual influencers as a marketing strategy is capable of promoting businesses. Virtual characters can give a new color and dimension to the global marketing world and will be widely used in various industries such as fashion, music, games, films, marketing, education, and politics.

Keywords: digital marketing, influencer, instagram, social media, virtual influencer.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, people can now interact online, produce, and share their content using a variety of venues, including blogs, social media, and video-sharing sites. Most of the big companies are just starting to invest specifically in social media as part of their marketing communications because marketing communications can increase brand and market preferences. Children and teenagers are increasingly consuming media content online, where their favorite digital influencers often publish videos (e.g. on Instagram). As an illustration of today's era, Generation Z, nicknamed "digital natives", is the first generation to grow up in a world dominated by digital communications [1],[2]. They are the newest generation born between 1995 and the early 2010s [3]. Data-driven, automated, and intelligent marketing is becoming more prevalent in today's marketing. New-age marketing's laser-focused strategy has had a direct impact on marketing results [4],[5]. Technological breakthroughs have continuously resulted in longitudinal shifts in the evolution of marketing, demonstrating that marketing may work hand-in-hand with artificial intelligence (AI) to achieve significant results [6]. Digital marketing utilizes all forms of technology, including AI and the Internet of Things (IoT), to fulfill marketing objectives in both consumer-to-consumer and business-to-consumer environments [7],[8],[9],[10]. Making digital marketing more accurate and effective will bring huge benefits [11]. The digital influencer has become highly popular among younger audiences over time, and in some cases has even achieved celebrity status among their thousands of followers. The power that these individuals have over their devoted followers is tremendous, and it comes with some obligations, particularly when business interests are involved. These digital influencers' fame is already influencing advertising and marketing strategies, and influencer advertising can take various forms, including internet marketing. Influence advertising can take several forms, including online marketing by a company with influencer collaboration, an advertorial, a commercial break within a vlog, product placement, the promotion of the influencer's merchandise, sponsorship, and free items. Influencers rely on these integrated advertising strategies for a significant portion of their income. A professional influencer has become just another job, and influencers, such as movie actors, may be represented by agents and production organizations. Influencer marketing is a method of marketing that is deemed efficient and effective.

Influencer marketing is thought to be highly effective by 35 percent of marketers and effective by 45 percent. According to 80 percent of marketers, influencer marketing is effective [12].

Consumers can stay up to speed on firm information via digital marketing technologies. Many consumers may now access the internet from anywhere at any time, and businesses are constantly updating information about their products and services [13]. Digital marketing, they believe, refers not only to changes in promotional methods but also to changes in forms of engagement, where customers may now participate in or edit the material and information they get (two ways). According to Figure 1, content marketing will be the most effective digital technique and the second is marketing automation. This shows that this matter is an important thing in digital marketing [14].

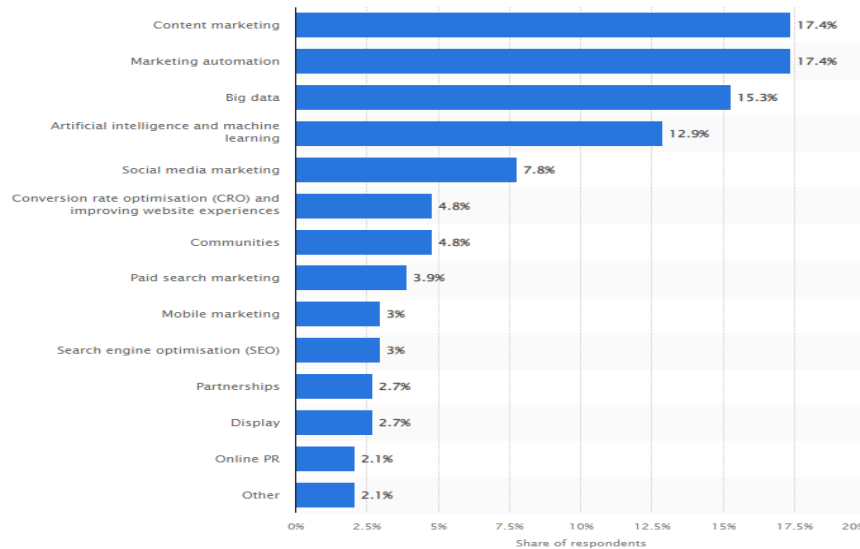


Figure 1. In 2020, the most effective digital marketing techniques according to marketers worldwide (Statista)

In light of the findings, one explanation for the widespread usage of content marketing could be that clients live in an age of information abundance. As a result, marketers face the difficulty of determining the best channel for influencing the target demographic.

Social media has grown rapidly as a result of the Internet's technological advancements, allowing for the construction of complex social network ecosystems. Social media may transform people's communication habits and, as a result, their lifestyles soon. Instagram, a new social network mobile app, has a big number of devoted users because of its precise client positioning, flawless capabilities, and simple operation mode [15].

Currently, most companies advertise on social media due to the total of active social media users has been increasing year by year as seen in Figure 2. Instagram is one of the most popular social networking platforms in the world after Youtube and WhatsApp, with the number of total active users of around 1.221 billion, and approximately 14.3 percent of the population uses Instagram [16].

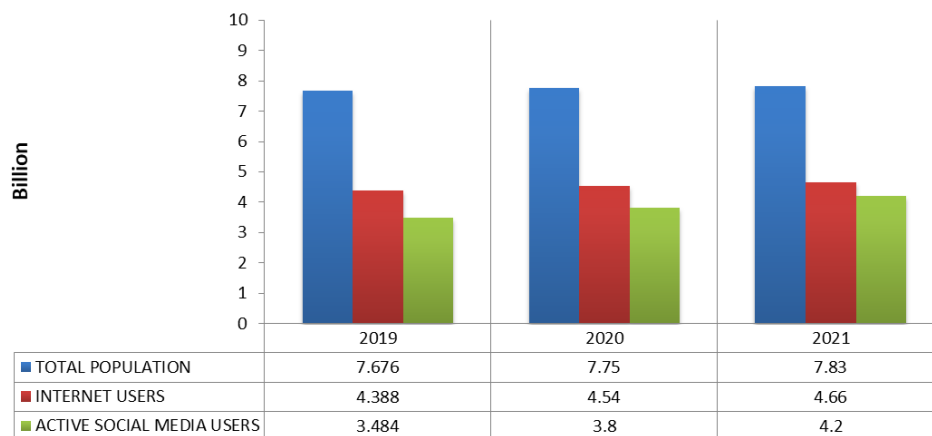


Figure 2. Data of Internet Users and Social Media Users (We are social, Hootsuite. Digital in the Indonesia [Internet] (2021)

It was the turn of the millennial generation that brought in a new era for social media marketing. Today, social media has become ingrained in our daily routines. Survey data and broad literature reviews show that in the past few years not only have social networking sites evolved, as have social media, customer needs, and social media marketing tactics used by marketers [17].

Social media is made up of a variety of user-driven platforms that allow for the spread of appealing content, dialogue creation, and communication with a larger audience. It is essentially a digital area made by and for people, and it creates a conducive atmosphere for interactions and networking to occur at various levels (for instance, personal, professional, business, marketing, political, and societal) [18]. Instagram is the social media platform that is seeing increased usage. Instagram is a social networking platform through visual displays that allows users to create stories and interact with their followers. Instagram is a relatively new form of social media that allows users to share updates quickly by snapping images and applying filters to them. Since its inception in October 2010, the number of users and uploads has increased dramatically [19]. The future of social media in marketing is both exciting and uncertain. If nothing else, a better understanding of social media is essential since it has evolved into a culturally significant form of communication and expression, a major media type used by corporations for advertising and other forms of communication, and even has geopolitical ramifications [20].

Influencers or key opinion leaders (KOL) are people who have quite a lot of followers or audiences on social media and have a strong influence on their followers, such as artists, celebrities, bloggers, YouTubers, buzzers, and so on. Approximately 81% of marketers who have used influencer marketing find the strategy effective [21].

Because the commercial posts are frequently weaved smoothly into the daily narratives that social media influencers share with their followers, influencer marketing has been described as a sort of native advertising, sponsored entertainment, or extremely credible electronic word of mouth [22]. Part of the reason for this increased spending is that social media influencers are trusted tastemakers in one or more categories [23].

The emergence of the key opinion leader (KOL) or influencer phenomenon in this digital era is increasingly widespread, one of which is the presence of a virtual influencer. Virtual influencers are human avatars created by computers with a large social media following. Computer-generated influencers (CGI) or artificial intelligence influencers (AII) with a social media presence are known as virtual influencers [24]. They have amassed a sizable following on social media in recent years, particularly on image-based platforms like Instagram. In terms of physical appearance, personality, and behavior, the majority of them resemble humans. Through their posts and interactions with their fans, they demonstrate human characteristics. As an example, luxury brands are increasingly cooperating with them to sell their products as a result of their growing popularity. Prada, for example, has partnered with one of the most well-known virtual influencers.

As indicated by the advent of social media talent agencies and management organizations seeking to broker deals between brands and influencers in recent years, social media influencing has undergone an industrialization process. Marketers have used the terms "micro-influencers," "mid-tier influencers," "mega-influencers," and "macro-influencers" to represent social media celebrities with smaller but allegedly more engaged followers [25]. Influencers are classified according to the number of followers they have (1) Mega-influencers are social media influencers who have a large social media following of over 1 million. (2) Macro-influencers are influencers who are one notch behind mega-influencers in terms of the number of followers, typically ranging from 100,000 to one million; (3) Micro-influencers are influencers with 10,000 to 100,000 followers [26]. Social media influencers' positions are dynamic that social media influencers might change their strategy over time or are perceived differently over time by their audience. [27]. In addition, some social media influencers have a small social media following an update of 10,000 called Nano influencers. Nano-influencers are a relatively new type of influencer who can help influence consumer sentiment towards a product by creating relationships with their followers on social media [28].

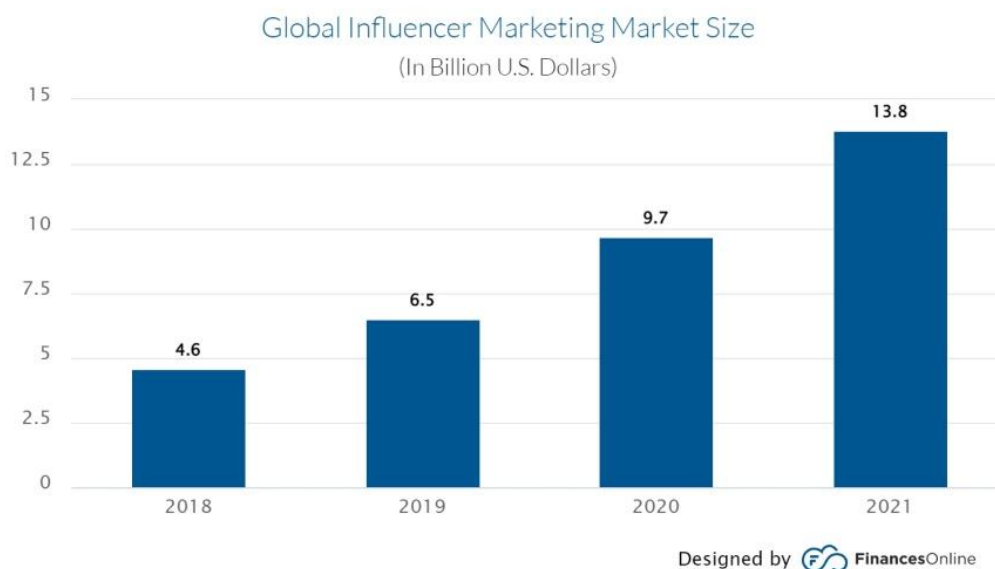


Figure 3. Influencer Marketing Industry Growth from 2018-2021 (Influencer Marketing Hub)

Figure 3 shows the rapid growth of influencer marketing since 2018. In the current condition, there is one influencer made with a visual production process using a computer called a virtual influencer. A virtual influencer is a computer-generated character whose image can resemble a human, with realistic features, personalities, and characteristics. On the other hand, there are also virtual influencers who are more like cartoon characters. While cartoon characters are not yet mainstream, they are growing in popularity of them. The first virtual influencer is Miquela Sousa, better known as Lil Miquela, who is the first computer-generated social media [29]. The second example in the Instagram account is .@noonoouri, .@imma.gram, .@bermudaaisbae, .@shudu.gram.

Virtual influencers have grown in importance since their introduction in 2016, and they have increased since the pandemic began. Virtual influencers have a team to help them carry out their tasks. A team of roughly 20 people with varied professional profiles works behind the scenes for each virtual influencer to create virtual influencers. Among the most notable are professionals in cinematographic production, 3D scanning, motion capture, facial motion capture, design, and photorealistic 3D modeling, art and photography directors, and communication specialists, to name a few. The team of creators is working on creating the background story of this virtual influencer, growing and increasing their followers, and use as a marketing medium as a whole [30].

There is a trend which gaining popularity on Instagram that the rising popularity of virtual influencers where computer-generated models [31]. The United States accounts for the majority of virtual influencer followers, and women aged 18 to 34 years make up around 45 percent of virtual influencer audiences [32].

Based on this condition, there are pros and cons to using virtual influencers. The study aims to identify and analyze the communication way of virtual influencers in the digital marketing era. The importance of this research is due to the phenomenon and data literature on lifestyle, interaction patterns, and most of the media production from conventional to digital which has a significant impact on the development of the digital world.

II. METHODOLOGY

The current study uses a literature review using a system that focuses on trends in social media from virtual influencer publishing. Authors searched article titles and abstracts in electronic databases (Scopus and Google Scholar) for studies published between 2018-2022 using “virtual influencers” and related terms as keywords. It revealed about 10 results from Scopus. From 10 Scopus publications, 8 publications were selected by Author which are related specify with the keyword. This study did the screening, each work literature’s title and abstract are scanned. The paper or journal was selected which needs requirements of the criteria. Then collected it in an online document folder. Fifteen articles show how virtual influencers have revolutionized the way brands communicate with consumers and provide an overview of the pros and cons of using the persona.

This study selected articles published from 2018 until February 2022 and included the analysis. The research framework can be seen in Figure 4 :

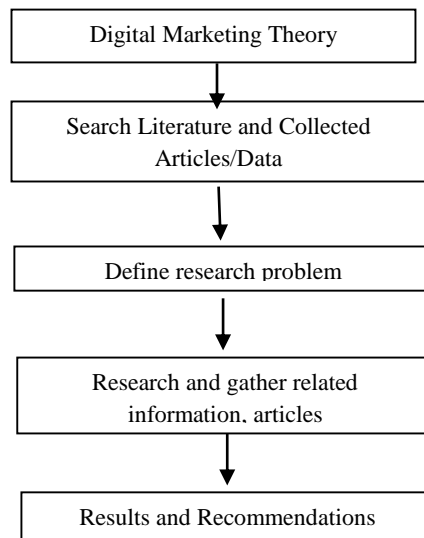


Figure 4. Research framework

This study uses a phenomenological approach where the author sees an interesting phenomenon in the world of digital marketing, especially virtual influencers in the contemporary media industry. The phenomenon of interest would be “timing,” and we would need to identify several counselors to participate in interviews about this phenomenon [33].

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The search process results shown in Table 1 are grouped by journal type to make it easier to see the type of data or journal type obtained through the search process.

TABLE 1
 LIST OF ARTICLE AND FINDINGS RELATED TO VIRTUAL INFLUENCER

References	Title	Type	Finding
Sriya Kota and Tanmoy De (2021)	Influencer Marketing – A New Virtual Frontier.	Article	influencer marketing is a huge opportunity for marketers[34]
Marianny Jessica de Brito Silva, Salomão Alencar de Farias, Michelle Kovacs Grigg & Maria de Lourdes de Azevedo Barbosa (2019)	Online Engagement and the Role of Digital Influencers in Product Endorsement on Instagram	Article	more closely an endorsement represents the digital influencer and their traits, the higher the acceptability and communicative efficiency of the endorsement, resulting in increased engagement[35]
Moustakas, E., Lamba, N., Mahmoud, D., & Ranganathan, C. (2020)	Blurring lines between fiction and reality: Perspectives of experts on marketing effectiveness of virtual influencers.	Article	For virtual influencers, the millennial and Gen Z segments are the most appealing target audiences. There is doubt the sustainable impact on consumers and the long-term success for marketing strategy of using virtual influencers due to a lack of authenticity, the need for large investments, challenges with legality, and the risk of popularity with poor execution [36].

References	Title	Type	Finding
Antonio Batista da Silva Oliveira and Paula Chimenti (2021)	“Humanized Robots”: A Proposition of Categories to Understand Virtual Influencers	Article	More convergences or similarities between human and non-human influencers than differences via netnography. There are lack of clarity in virtual influencer use and the continued reliance on human teams[37].
Darner, A., & Arvidsson, N. (2019).	Virtual influencers : Anonymous celebrities on social media [Student thesis, Tekniska Högskolan, Högskolan i Jönköping	Article	Virtual influencers is based on a fictional character that does not exist physically and it is virtual, but it still has the ability to influence others. Virtual character was determined that three factors like character's reality, the algorithm, and content[38].
Farrera Saldaña, Daniel (2021)	Cartoon Influencers : The influencer media format as a potential mainstream alternative for animated media.	Article	There are concerns attributed potential risks to virtual influencers with realistic human behavior and emphasized the need to separate reality from fiction. Virtual influencer could have potential situations of the characters acting out of their personality, speaking about unrelated topics and out of context, being too generic or with failures in their development that could create inconsistencies[39].
G. Park, D. Nan, E. Park, K. J. Kim, J. Han and A. P. del Pobil (2021).	Computers as Social Actors? Examining How Users Perceive and Interact with Virtual Influencers on Social Media.	Article	The virtual influencer's functions of human-like social interactions, such as emotional expression, raise issues that leave users unsure whether it's real or not, as it's difficult to tell the difference between real and virtual[40].
Chintalapati, S., & Pandey, S. K. (2021).	Artificial intelligence in marketing: A systematic literature review	Article	AI will continue to evolve in order to supplement human thinking, and it will be ripe for more humanization, eventually dominating human creativity. The continuing privacy versus personalization debate is poised to broaden its scope into softer parts of marketing as AI evolves[41].
Sands, S., Campbell, C., Plangger, K., & Ferraro, C. (2022)	Unreal influence: Leveraging AI in influencer marketing.	Article	AI influencer is perceived as less trustworthy and there is no difference between an AI and a human influencer for specific outcomes. Customers with a strong demand for uniqueness are more receptive to AII. Human influencers are more effective across a larger range of consumers for companies that rely on trust regardless of uniqueness requirements[42].

References	Title	Type	Finding
Fred Miao, Irina V. Kozlenkova, Haizhong Wang, Tao Xie, and Robert W. Palmatier. (2022)	An Emerging Theory of Avatar Marketing.	Article	Virtual influencers provide organizations with distinct advantages such as content control and variety, they also pose a risk. Because the virtual influencer avatar isn't a real person, the brand it promotes is ultimately held liable for its behavior[43].
Rodrigo-Martín, L. Rodrigo-Martín, I., & Muñoz-Sastre, D. (2021)	Virtual influencers as opinion leaders and their use in political communication technics	Article	Behind the scenes, a team of roughly 20 people with varied professional profiles is required for virtual influencers. Lil Miquela as a virtual influencer has ability in political activism that becomes patent in the type of messages posted on mobilizing the young people to vote in U.S elections[30]. Virtual influencer identities will become more popular in the next years, generating a number of important theoretical and empirical issues. Theoretical issues include whether social media corporations have a responsibility to mediate their users' accounts and online identities, as well as if individuals have a responsibility to build an honest and truthful persona online[29].
Robinson, B.S. (2020).	Towards an Ontology and Ethics of Virtual Influencers. Australas. J. Inf. Syst., 24.	Article	Virtual influencers receive nearly three times the amount of engagement as genuine influencers. This suggests that followers are more interested in the content of virtual influencers[31].
Hutchinson, A. (2019).	New Report Looks at the Rise of Virtual Influencers on Instagram.	Article	Virtual influencers who don't post actively in 30 days affect the growth of their engagement rate where their accounts are losing bots or their follower are disliking the material and unfollowing the influencers[44].
Baklanov, N. (2021)	The Top Virtual Instagram Influencers in 2021.	Article	The use of AI-generated people to pitch offerings is causing worry among advertisers, customers, and authorities[32].
C. Harding. (2021).	What Are Virtual Influencers? Digital Media Solutions.	Article	There are pros and cons in its implementation for using virtual influencers[24].
Santora. J. (2021)	What Are Virtual Influencers and How Do They Work.	Article	Brands or advertisers will not achieve their marketing goals if consumers do not trust influencers because consumers must see this persona to be trusted by their actions or statements[24].
Sideqik. (2020)	What are Virtual Influencers, and What Do They Mean for Influencer Marketing?	Article	

References	Title	Type	Finding
Rodrigo-Martín, I., and Muñoz-Sastre, D. (2021).	Virtual Influencers as an advertising tool in the promotion of brands and products. Study of the commercial activity of Lil Miquela.	Article	The advantages of having a virtual influencer stem from the account manager's complete control over the avatar's behavior and words, allowing it to blend in seamlessly with its commercial activity. The virtual influencer becomes a strategic instrument in the sense that it is capable of not just promoting businesses but, more importantly, of driving trends[45].
Jbid Arsenyan, Agata Mirowska. (2021).	Almost human? A comparative case study on the social media presence of virtual influencers.	Article	Uncanny virtual influencers, when combined with attempts to mimic human posting and speech patterns, may unavoidably lead to the Uncanny Valley, where the lines between virtual and human blur and users react unfavorably due to impressions of an uncanny resemblance to humans[46].

In total there are 38 journals through the search process. After the data were selected based on inclusion and exclusion criteria using the keyword “virtual influencer”, there were 8 journal articles published on Scopus that were relevant and added articles from others to support this writing. Based on the literature review of virtual influencers reviewed by the author from 2019 to 2022. Influencer marketing is a huge opportunity for marketers, and this new way of advertising a brand needs to be explored more to use it properly and efficiently for the advantage of the brands. [34].

The advantage of having a virtual influencer due to becomes a strategic instrument in the sense that it is capable of not just promoting businesses but, more importantly, driving trends [43]. This trend toward Virtual Influencers emerged in 2016 when there was a post on Instagram by the @lilmiquela account. Instagram account @lilmiquela or Miquela Sousa posted her first photo content on 23 April 2016 and made many people wonder if this Miquela Sousa is a real human figure or a robot. This appearance was followed by various other figures on Instagram such as .@noonouri, .@imma.gram, .@bermudaisbae, .@shudu.gram [30],[45], [47]. The most attractive target audience and segment for Virtual Influencers are the millennial and Gen Z segments [36].

From early 2016 to 2021, the Instagram account @lilmiquela has had a significant increase in the number of followers to around 3 million followers. In industrial use, these virtual influencers are found in music, modeling, cinema, new technologies, and luxury. One of them is followers of @lilmiquela, from various industries whose followers are particularly interested in music, cinema, and luxury [45]. On the other hand, the figure of Virtual Influencer @lilmiquela has the ability in political activism that becomes patent in the type of messages posted on mobilizing the young people to vote in U.S elections [30]. Coach, Dior, Balenciaga, Prada, and other businesses that have already teamed with virtual celebrities like Lil Miquela are unconcerned by the fact that virtual influencers are not human.

Virtual influencers have more emerged in 2021 with high demand and have a valuable asset in influencer marketing. Creating virtual influencers is now easier because technology is constantly evolving. Virtual influencers or virtual humans are the true metaverse pioneers, as they dive headlong into everything new and virtual. He has conducted a study with collected the top 129 virtual influencers on Instagram and found the impact where the first is engagement rates of virtual influencers are nearly three times higher than those of genuine influencers. Second, in the last 30 days, 49% of top virtual influencers have not posted. He noticed that 23% of influencers had not posted in the previous 30 days in our 2019 analysis. Third, negative following growth affects 57% of virtual influencers. This could mean that their accounts are losing bots or that their followers are disliking the material and unfollowing the influencers compared was 48 percent last year. It is also stated that the addition of video to the transmedia stack has significantly defined the expansion of the virtual influencer industry in 2021 [44]. The metaverse is a simulation of the natural world that relates to humans and society which has an environment that is not physically limited to the real world, from health to

sports, from education to the arts [48]. In the future with the arrival of the Metaverse, virtual influencers have more important and increased visibility [49].

On the other hand, we can see that there are pros and cons to using virtual influencers in the application of influencer marketing. The pros are that there is no need for travel costs, hence no flights or travel are required, Virtual influencers can be in multiple places at the same time, Virtual influencers can be in multiple places at the same time, Virtual influencers are available 24/7, The engagement of virtual influencers is roughly three times that of human influencers [31], However, there are also cons in society regarding Virtual Influencers, namely Paying for an AI-powered 3D digital character can be costly, Virtual influencers' novelty will wear off with time, and interest in them will certainly wane, The emotional connection that customers can have with virtual influencers may have a limit [41]. The cons of virtual influencers are emotional expressions, causing problems that make users unsure whether they are real or not, because it is difficult to distinguish between real and virtual [40], Virtual influencers can have a potential situation of characters acting out of their personality, talking about unrelated topics and out of context [39] and Virtual Influencers who do not post actively in 30 days affect their engagement rate growth where their account loses bot or their followers dislike the material and unfollow the influencer [44]. When people don't trust influencers, the brand's or advertiser's marketing goals are not being met. With virtual influencers having extraordinary appearances, combined with attempts to imitate human posting and speech behavior, it can lead to the inevitable plunge that results in discrepancies between virtual and human blurring and users reacting negatively due to the perceived uncanny resemblance to humans [44].

To gain traction with the demographics, digitally produced personas must be clear about their purpose while acknowledging their status as an artificial intelligence program [42]. In promoting a brand or product, virtual influencers adopt different lifestyles associated with commercial brands, and their unique relationship with young audiences makes them an important component in understanding the evolution of advertising activity in today's digital context and anticipating future trends [43]. The future trend of virtual influencers will be more and more trustworthy to be used as a marketing communication strategy. From the existing literature review, no research shows in detail the correlation between the success of the promotion of virtual influencers and the revenue of a brand or product.

From the literature that has been collected and reviewed, a common thread can be drawn that virtual influencers are a new media transformation in the digital world. Virtual influencers can give a new color and dimension to the global marketing world. Big and well-known brands in the world have started using virtual influencer "services" and have proven to be very effective as new media and marketing icons. The general public and customers of these various brands also do not believe and are attracted to the virtual influencers created by the industry's leading brands.

In the fashion industry, for example, there is evidence that brands such as Coach, Dior, Balenciaga, and Prada, use Lil Miquela as a virtual influencer. On the other hand, the use of virtual influencers in the U.S. in the presidential election is the fact that young people are influenced by Lil Miquela's posts. This makes countries like the U.S. already able to accept the existence of an industry in influencer marketing. With the existing literature and data based on [30], [31], [43], [45], as an Instagram account @lilmiquela which in the past 5 years has experienced a significant increase to 3 million followers, it can be analyzed that virtual influencers can provide a sense of trust and broad influence in society through virtual technology. Choices of products, services, brands, and even political choices can be set and constructed through this media. The position of this virtual influencer is as a transformation media that helps the process of disseminating information and promoting brands and products and society tends to like the transformation and information of virtual influencers as contemporary media. In the future, the use of virtual influencers will be widely used in various industries such as fashion, music, games, films, marketing, education, and politics.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study presents the perspective of digital experts on the effectiveness and trustworthiness of using virtual influencers as a marketing strategy. The millennial and Gen Z segments are the most attractive target audiences for virtual influencers. Virtual influencers can give a new color and dimension to the global marketing world. The use of virtual influencers will be widely used in various industries such as fashion, music, games, films, marketing, education, and politics. In the future, will be widely used in various industries due to rapid technological developments and virtual characters are increasingly being used in various market segments. The recommendations of this research for the industry are industry must evaluate whether this kind of influencer marketing is appropriate for promoting their products or services and should carefully analyze if influencer expenses are the best solution to keep their promotional costs low. The recommendation for further

research is that no research shows in detail the correlation between the success of promotion of virtual influencers and the revenue of a brand or product.

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