

## Are Virtual Influencers in Luxury Fashion Marketing Uncanny and Deceiving?

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*Introduction and Argument.* In recent years the emergence of virtual influencers has reshaped the landscape of marketing, prompting researchers to reassess their authenticity, and impact on consumer behavior. A virtual influencer, also known as a computer-generated influencer, is defined as a “digitally created artificial human who is associated with internet fame” (Thomas & Fowler, 2021; Franke et al., 2023). With a growing emphasis on resource conservation and eco-consciousness, more brands are embracing virtual options that save time and resources such as artificial intelligence (AI) avatars as part of their branding strategies (Shin & Lee, 2023). Furthermore, a 2022 survey revealed that 58% of the respondents reported following at least one virtual influencer and 35% indicated that they purchased a product promoted by a virtual influencer (Guttman, 2022). Virtual Influencers (VI) offer distinct advantages over human influencers that include adaptable personas, lower costs, no physical or geographical limitations, greater control over the marketing messages, and increased consistency (Edwards, 2023). However, there are issues concerning VI such as the reproduction of standardized stereotypes, appeal to all age groups beyond Gen Z, perceived authenticity, the scripted nature of the posts, and high initial investment costs (Moustakas et. al., 2020). This paper explores the role of virtual influencers in fashion marketing specifically within the luxury industry, argues the limitations of VI in their marketing campaigns, and proposes recommendations.

*Virtual Influencers in Luxury Marketing.* Luxury fashion brands are drawn to virtual influencers for their novelty, ability to reach a global audience, and reinforcing exclusivity and prestige while maintaining cost-effectiveness in their marketing efforts (Baudier et.al.2023). Several luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Chanel, and Balmain have launched marketing campaigns using renowned virtual influencers with impressive media impact outcomes among consumers or developed a VI that aligns with their marketing campaign. For instance, Hauli, a VI developed for Ralph & Russo Fall/Winter 20/21 collection had 19.4 million views worldwide with a media impact value of 65.1 million USD (“Virtual Models meet Luxury Brands”, 2022). Noonouri, a VI with big doll eyes, has become so popular that it has been endorsed by luxury brands, and high-end magazines such as Vogue magazine (Baudier et.al., 2023). Additionally, virtual fashion shows and presentations decrease the environmental impact because they do not require expenses for makeup and styling teams, exotic travel, and accommodation during photoshoots (Seo & Jin, 2023).

*Argument and Directions for Future Research.* Given the evidence of limitations of Virtual Influencers in luxury fashion marketing such as untrustworthiness and authenticity, it is important to study the long-term consumer impact and the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. A study exploring VI in fashion marketing reported challenges related to authenticity, reliability, and sustained interest among followers (Park & Sung, 2023). In fact, some consumers may question the authenticity of their endorsements as they lack human connections (Moustakas, 2020). An online survey revealed that virtual influencers were less effective than human influencers due to a lack of perceived credibility leading to lower positive attitudes towards the endorsed brands (Ozdemir et al., 2023). Virtual influencers are unable to wear or use the products promoted by them hence unable to share real experiences which might lead consumers to perceive marketing messages by VI as untrustworthy and not candid (Seo & Jin, 2023). Several authors reported the ‘uncanny valley’ effect, a freaky supernatural feel experienced by respondents owing to unrealistic posts by virtual influencers (Park & Sung, 2023; Shukla, 2024). The perceived congruence between virtual influencers and the product category varies, with technical products exhibiting greater congruence compared to cosmetic products, consequently resulting in enhanced advertising effectiveness (Franke et al., 2023). Thus, luxury brands should reassess the adoption of virtual influencers over human influencers, considering their potential misalignment with the intrinsic nature of luxury items that typically require genuine personal experiences.

Ethical implications concerning privacy, transparency, and manipulation of digital personas are inevitable digital challenges in VI (Shukla, 2024). A case study analysis of a popular VI model Miquela described her as a culture jammer, and social disruptor who appeals both to luxury brands that appear to be daring and to disaffected Gen Z audiences who belong to gimmicky and emancipatory communities (Block & LoveGrove, 2021). Given the social disruptive characteristics of virtual influencers, marketing campaigns using VI may be limited to Gen Z consumers. Although VI transcends physical limitations, they still conform to societal beauty standards such as youthfulness and slimness which are prevalent in the luxury brand marketing communications that portray authenticity and seek media attention (Brachtendorf, 2022).

In conclusion, the multifaceted challenges associated with virtual influencers in luxury fashion marketing such as perceived untrustworthiness, authenticity concerns, and the inability to provide genuine personal experiences pose significant hurdles to the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. Moreover, ethical considerations surrounding privacy, transparency, and the manipulation of digital personas further complicate their adoption. While virtual influencers may resonate with Gen Z consumers, luxury brands could develop inclusive VI that connect with other consumer segments. Moving forward, a critical reassessment of the role of virtual influencers is significant, with a focus on balancing innovation with authenticity and prioritizing brand storytelling over appearance-centric approaches to foster long-term consumer engagement and trust in the ever-evolving digital media.

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