

Reality reimagined, enter the virtual influencer

By [Natasha Miller](#)

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I recently attended a Global Marketing Forum in which one of the participants briefly touched on the "rise of virtual influencers" as an established media trend in their region.



Virtual human, Lil Mquela

Source: www.virtualhumans.org

As I began to ponder on the concept, I wondered why on earth anyone would really follow or buy into a 'virtual influencer'. It's not that I am against influencer marketing, in fact, I am totally sold on it. So much so that it was part of my strategic recommendation on a recent client brief targeting millennials and Gen Z consumers.

My conviction of its power and effectiveness was based on the insight that locally, according to the Fusion 2020 survey, 80% of Gen Z will buy an item or make a purchase based on influencer marketing.

I also thought back to a strategic session not so long ago where we hosted some specialists in this field to further understand the channel. They summed up the main benefits of matching brands through real people to real people, building deep human connections and establishing trust.

So if relationship and trust are core, how on earth can a virtual influencer pull that off? Can one really trust a robot, to have a real authentic engagement and build a meaningful relationship? And all the I-Robot sci-fi fans out there screamed, definitely yes!

Well, I turned to my reliable “trusted virtual friend” Google to find out more. Just who or what breed of influencers are these and how can brands benefit from collaborating with them?

Who or what are they?

Virtual influencers or CGI influencers as they may also be called are fictional computer-generated ‘people’ who have realistic characteristics, features and personalities of humans. Behind them are clever creators, be it brands or individuals, with a keen eye for technology, who remain faceless. These creators are responsible for growing their Instagram platforms and moulding these virtual figures into the internationally recognised personalities and influencers that they are quickly becoming.

Great, but in essence, they’re not “real” or are they? One thing that is for sure is that consumers follow influencers primarily because they have interesting ideas or are entertaining. In terms of trusted influence, it seems that form or size doesn’t always matter. Consumers will continue to follow influencers as sources of information and inspiration as long as they can identify with them and feel that trust is part of the value proposition.

Creators knowing this, design these ‘people’ with purpose in mind. They choose what these ‘people’ look like, how they dress, act and what they love. They decide who to hang out with, date, fall out with and which brands or individuals they collaborate with on Instagram and other channels.

With Instagram being the main home ground, millions of people around the world are taking to follow and engage with a new wave of these online personalities aka virtual influencers.

How can a brands benefit?

- **Extended exposure**

According to a study in the UK, 54% of all UK consumers find virtual entities appealing on some level and some of the most popular virtual influencers have already reached well over the million followers milestone, as people all over the world continue to be infatuated with their ‘lives’.

Meet Lil Miquela who was one of, if not THE first virtual influencer to be created. The 19-year-old is the brainchild of LA-based startup Brud which specialises in artificial intelligence and robotics.



As the OG of virtual influencers, Lil Miquela has racked up a huge three million followers on Instagram to whom she shares her latest fashion looks as well as the new music she has released which is available on Spotify. She collaborated with Samsung as part of their 2019#teammagaxy campaign, teamed up with real-life supermodel Bella Hadid for a Calvin Klein advert and has even been listed within *The Times*' 'Most Influential People on the Internet' in 2018.

So just like 'human influencers', brands that choose to collaborate with virtual faces will be exposed to new audiences with the benefits of co-creating cultural relevance for these brands.

- **Flexibility**

Virtual Influencers give brands more control over their collaborations. For example, if a real-life influencer makes a mistake, it can be difficult to resolve on the spot often having to re-shoot and as a result, the campaign's launch can become delayed. When it comes to virtual influencers, the mistake can be erased and simply amended within a matter of minutes.

For travel brands, marketers can easily edit their influencers on whatever backdrops they want with a backdrop image of the destination/location they want to promote and have the virtual influencer tick it off their bucket list.

I can understand how this flexibility can be appealing to brands, but I still wonder how as a follower one can 'trust' the virtual influencer to sell you a destination they've never been to in real life. Crazy as it seems, this is where we're heading, a world where the border between reality and virtual is blurring day by day.

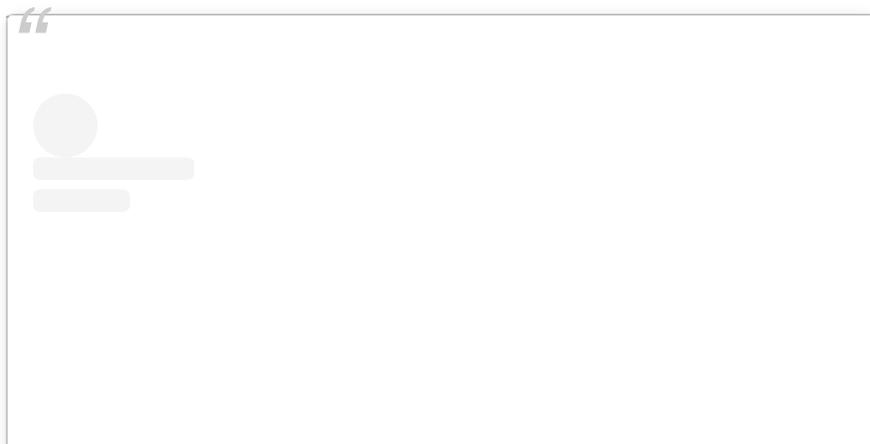
- **Leading innovation**

Some brands have started to dip their toe into this futuristic way of marketing. In 2019, global automotive brand Renault created their very own virtual ambassador, Liv, to debut the brand's Kadjar model – Renault's first true SUV car for real people.

Gaëlle Le Grouiec, their marketing communication director said: "Liv now exists, it's a fact. She will be present via all our media for this SUV campaign, so you'll come across her on digital media, TV and so on. We also hope to make her travel in several European countries so she can keep feeling more emotions."

Globally, more and more brands are jumping on board and partnering with upcoming virtual stars especially in the fashion, music and entertainment industries.

Locally, meet our very own Kim Zulu, who morphed onto the scene in 2020. Last month she was chosen by Puma to collaborate and promote its newest sneaker, Kosmo Rider, globally.





[View this post on Instagram](#)



A post shared by Kim Zulu💎💎💎 (@kimzulu_)



And as I continue to dig into this new world, I too am now convinced that the imminent future of the virtual influencer can really develop in a multitude of ways. As connections are being redefined, creators and brands in this space are exploring other mediums, these Avatars can be seen on and utilised from virtual merchandise, virtual events, longer-form content to inter-operability across the metaverses.

It's an interesting space not just to watch where others lead, but to start testing for ourselves.

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