

The Beauty Myth of Virtual Influencers: A Reflection of Real-World Female Body Image Stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

Brands embrace virtual influencers owing to their high degree of controllability and malleability, which is gaining momentum on social media. However, although flawless virtual influencers with great attention may provide considerable commercial advantages to marketers, they may have a detrimental impact on female consumers' perceptions of their body image. In an attempt to identify further social ramifications linked with virtual influencers, the study conducts a critical analysis of the female virtual influencers' body image and stereotype depiction. We discover that the immaculate body myth propagated by female virtual influencers is rife with ideals that the female audience cannot accomplish in reality. In the meanwhile, as a depiction of body image, a too perfect anthropomorphic figure in the digital realm may cause female audiences' concern and distress over their body image. Nevertheless, being a product of the male gaze, the virtual influencer may not be compatible with pluralistic aesthetics.

Keywords: virtual influencers, body image, beauty myth, simulacra

1. INTRODUCTION

The existence of virtual influencers on social media is facilitated by computer animation or artificial intelligence technologies. The majority of them resemble humans in look, behavior, and personality. They communicate with fans on social media to show their humanity. [1] Virtual influencers are highly controllable by the production company and appeal to a youthful audience, especially Generations Y and Z, through constant engagement and interaction.[2] [3] The first computer-generated social media influencer, Lil Miquela, has more than three million Instagram followers. She has an exceptional personality, being a young fashionista who supports transgender rights and also published several hit tracks. In 2018, TIME ranked her among the 25 most influential 'people' on the internet. [4] According to HypeAuditor, virtual influencers have almost three times the interaction rate of human influencers, indicating that followers are more likely to engage with virtual influencers. [5] In addition, due to their human-controllable nature, bad news such as drunk driving and all-night partying would seldom appear in the media; thus, more firms seek to use virtual influencers as their

endorsers or spokesmen. Moreover, the technical aspect of virtual influencer offers marketers greater chance for innovation in design and concepts, therefore matching the endorsement marketing of virtual influencers with the brand's objective. [2] In April 2022, Magnum announced that Imma, a popular social media virtual Influencer, would become the world's first virtual pleasure ambassador, and the two parties launched the "Never Stop Having Fun, Show Fun" theme marketing campaign together. Imma, the spokesperson of Magnum, would appear on fashion posters and in advertising campaigns, which not only meets the aesthetic requirements of the target demographic, but also interacts with young consumers, creating a fashionable sense of brand trendiness, and offering new products with a particular fashionable style. [6]

The strong commercial success of virtual influencers has also piqued the interest of academics, especially focusing on commercial application of virtual influencers on consumers' perceptions and attitudes mainly through quantitative methods. For example, Dabiran et al. discovered that four anthropomorphic characteristics of virtual influencers, including appearance, moral virtue, cognitive experience, and conscious emotionality, impact followers' purchase intention via improving parasocial

connection and trustworthiness based on experiments. [7] Cheung et al. find that consumers perceive cartoon character celebrities are more popular than human-like celebrities through online survey. [8] Hofeditz et al. reveal that consumers consistently evaluated perceived trust, social presence, and humanity better for actual persons than virtual influencer when they cannot determine whether the given influencer was a real human or not via experiments. [10]

Nevertheless, high-tech virtual influencers have attractive bodies and faces that continue to capture and encourage others to join their followers. Various sorts of virtual influencers are now active on social media platforms, such as the enchanting Japan girl Imma, the Barbie-like Noonouri, and the beautiful Shudu. Individuals might readily recognize their favored virtual influencer. People's aesthetic viewpoints grow increasingly varied as society evolves, yet the appearance of the ideal virtual influencer may reflect people's perceptions of women's beauty. On one hand, ideal virtual influencers could give financial benefits for businesses. On the other hand, virtual influencers may have a negative impact on consumers' perceptions of women's body image. No existing research analyzes the body image representation of female virtual influencers. In an effort to discover further societal implications associated with virtual influencers, we will first undertake a critical examination of how the image of virtual influencers represents the female body aesthetics and stereotypes.

2. VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS' MIMICRY AND FEMALE BODY IMAGE

Alongside postmodern thought, the idea of simulacra has arisen as a critical one. Jean Baudrillard identifies three phases in the evolution of symbols in capitalist societies: "Counterfeit - Production - Simulation." During the time of counterfeit, symbols are primarily mimetic depictions of nature, and symbols and reality correlate. From the stage of production forward, the social goal of symbol formation is increasingly lost to seriality, and mimesis starts to eclipse reality. At the simulation stage, symbols no longer participate in production and reproduction and become solely symbolic. [11] Therefore, body mimicry should be the result of the evolution of mimesis to the stage of simulation; it is the recreation of the material body in the code re-networking space, and although it is not directly related to the material body, it serves as a bridge between the material body and the network universe. [12]

Through the use of technology and social media, companies create idealized pictures of the human body that go beyond reality, therefore industrializing bodies with uniqueness. Virtual influencers, as technologically synthesized industrial goods, tend to be depicted more in accordance with public standards of outer look and

demeanor, as opposed to the currently promoted variety of femininity. This tendency has resulted in a higher emphasis on the ideal physical symbols shown by virtual influencers and less emphasis on their spiritual meaning. [13] In actuality, the body mimicking of virtual influencers is really a purposeful effort at perfection; the flawless body mimicry we see depicts a hyper-realistic physical attractiveness. It is attractive and manipulative for a huge audience, and extended immersion in the world of the avatar may quickly lead to alienation from the actual world, altering how individuals see, think, and conduct. [14]

As the majority of businesses using virtual influencers are largely female brands, the idealized body image portrayed by virtual influencers may have two implications. First, it suggests that customers who utilize the brand's goods would have the same flawless beauty as the virtual influencer; Second, the audience, particularly the female audience, will be able to self-evaluate and compare themselves; if they discover that their body image is far from the so-called ideal picture, they will experience worry and other unpleasant feelings. The virtual influencer's body imitation enables the audience to view their own aspirations by using a variety of creative techniques to build a flawless body myth replete with visions that the audience cannot attain in reality.

In the meanwhile, research indicates that social media usage is related to body image problems, particularly when users engage in specific types of activities on social media platforms, such as comparing their appearances to those of others. [15] In today's digital environment, social media use is more prevalent than ever before. The software's algorithm will often propose material with a significant number of followers or likes, and virtual influencers typically have a strong social media presence. Consequently, the high intensity of information exposure on social media will keep female audiences fixated on the ideal figure, which may increase women's worry and anguish over their body image.

3. AESTHETIC STEREOTYPES OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS

Computer media can go one step further than traditional media such as television, video, and magazines in portraying the ideal – the perfect face, body, and behavior – by presenting stereotypes that never actually occur in reality, such as biologically contradictory female bodies with large breasts and small waists. [16] Currently, the advertising of several firms' goods is coupled with the promotion of virtual influencers with perfect lifestyles, physique, and looks. In addition, we have seen and read about them in social media and publications. In a time when there is already a tremendous need for physical perfection, this may bring about a feeling of aesthetic simplification.

The appeal of advertising, a ubiquitous social phenomenon that supports and manipulates the ideal of the feminine, is a function of beauty, which is one of the first philosophical principles. [17] In her book *The Beauty Myth*, American feminist Naomi Wolf describes the myth of beauty as a weapon developed by the patriarchal “male gaze” and global capitalism for the purpose of manipulating women. [18] Feminists are especially concerned with aesthetic variety, while virtual influencers remain a product of the masculine gaze from an aesthetic standpoint. The image of the virtual influencers conforms to a general expectation and picture of femininity, hence meeting the demand of consumers to consume ideal femininity.

In a sense, virtual influencers have exaggerated society's stereotypical aesthetics of the female image using technological means to create an image of the perfect woman in a male-dominated society that satisfies mainstream expectations, but cements the pluralistic aesthetics of women into a single perfection. However, as trend-setters, it is even more crucial that well-known businesses are supposed to lead the way in visual variety.

The presence and communication practices of virtual influencers are blurring the line between the real and the virtual, a tendency that not only impacts our everyday lives and conceptual awareness, but also has a substantial effect on our aesthetic paradigms. Enabled by artificial intelligence technology, immaterial, symbolic hyper-real pictures produce symbolic consumption based on a consumerist framework, in which makers and viewers co-create an aesthetic illusion that is far from society, culture, and history. As a matter of fact, technological advancement inevitably results in a shift in aesthetic paradigms and lifestyles, and we should maintain our rationality while experiencing this. [19]

4. CONCLUSION

As virtual influencers gain popularity on social media, prominent corporations have begun to establish their own virtual influencers. However, since their primary target is the female demographic, virtual influencers might have detrimental effects on the consumer environment due to the image they create. As a representation of the body image, a too flawless anthropomorphic figure in the digital world might give women worry and grief with their body image. Nevertheless, being a creation of the masculine gaze, the contemporary virtual influencer may not be consistent with the pluralistic aesthetics. We analyze the virtual influencers in terms of their aesthetic representations, addressing gaps in the great majority of current research on the impact of virtual influencers in the business sector and paving the way for future research.

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