

MARKETING

How virtual influencers are gaining a foothold in digital marketing

By Daniel Dodt | 27.01.2020

Virtual influencers are opening up new ways for brands to present themselves and generate attention. The use of virtual brand ambassadors offers many advantages – but also poses some risks.

InfluencerVR / AR / XRAI



With more than 1.8 million followers on Instagram, Lil Miquela is the most successful virtual influencer. (Screenshot: [instagram/@lilmiquela](https://www.instagram.com/lilmiquela))
Virtual fictional characters with real marketing potential

Their names are Lil Miquela, Shudu Gram, Noonouri or Brenn, they're active on Instagram etc. and they let hundreds of thousands of fans and followers share in their everyday lives. What is special about them: The social media personalities are not real people, but computer-generated characters. Nevertheless, they have a huge community – and thus a lot of influence. Dismissed as a gimmick just a few years ago, virtual influencers are gaining more and more attention today and are seen as a new, interesting trend in digital marketing.

Just how great virtual influencers' potential for success as brand ambassadors is estimated to be is demonstrated by the latest investment round at Californian AI and robotics company Brud of over 20 million dollars. The small start-up is behind the most successful virtual influencer, Lil Miquela, and is currently valued at around 125 million dollars – and rising.

What advantages do virtual influencers offer for marketing?

With the growing importance of influencers in advertising and marketing, marketers now also have their artificial siblings on their radars. Compared to real advertising media, virtual influencers even have some advantages that make them interesting for digital marketing. For example, their appearance and digital personality can be tailored precisely to industry-specific circumstances (fashion, sports, cars, energy, etc.), brand identity and the specifics of the target group. And since the complete life story of virtual influencers is controlled by their developers, they

are easier to control in product tests, and don't cause any unwanted scandals or undergo any negative image transformations.

And in terms of the production of images and videos, we can already guess what possibilities computer-generated characters open up for product presentation and the representation of companies' brand identities. For example, the so-called CGI figures can be combined much easier with virtual objects and 3D product data and can be positioned in front of any background at all. Italian luxury fashion retailer Yoox is demonstrating just how effectively this technology is already being used and how it can be innovatively enhanced further: digital model Daisy – a virtual dress-up doll, as it were – models the fashion and accessories that customers choose for her in the company's app.

High development and production costs

But a lot of time goes into developing the computer-generated fictional characters and creating content. Extensive forward planning is also necessary. Simply creating the picture for one post can often take several days. More complex formats, such as animated stories, require several weeks of preparation.

stories they have to reflect a human-like development to inspire their audience, reach them emotionally and hold on to them for the long term.

Who is behind the virtual influencers?

Behind the development of virtual influencers there are often small digital and creative agencies. These have been able to gain a huge number of fans in recent years with their characters. Besides Lil Miquela, the best-known virtual influencer with more than 1.8 million Instagram followers, Californian start-up Brud has created two more characters: Bermuda and Blawko. The creators have interwoven the stories of the digital characters. British fashion photographer Cameron-James Wilson is the creator of the world's first digital supermodel, Shudu. In early 2018, he created the world's first digital modeling agency, The Diigitals, which has since grown to seven virtual models.

The path to the digital model business: In our podcast, Cameron-James Wilson talks about his creative ideas behind the virtual modeling agency The Digitals, about beauty in a virtual context and about the potential of digital models.

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Noonoouri is a successful virtual influencer who comes from Munich. The fashion avatar was created by graphic designer Joerg Zuber with his creative agency Opium Effect and has been active since 2017. Even real supermodels like Naomi Campbell and Alessandra Ambrosio are among Noonoouri's loyal fans. The first brands and companies are also following the trend and creating their own virtual influencers. In 2018, fashion label Balmain ran a successful advertising campaign with virtual brand ambassadors specially created by Creative Director Olivier Rousteing in collaboration with Cameron-James Wilson.

Successful marketing beyond the fashion industry

The fictional characters owe their success as virtual influencers to the fashion industry first and foremost. Lil Miquela, for instance, has already been the face of global brands such as Prada, Gucci, Diesel, Chanel and Calvin Klein. Marc Jacobs, Versace and Dior, among others, have so far opted for a collaboration with Noonoouri. Shudu has advertised as a virtual influencer for campaigns by Oscar de la Renta and Soulsky.



Alex Hunter  @MrAlexHunter · 22. Nov. 2017
The beast is back. #Predator   @adidasfootball



 185

 1.130

 9.962



Successful combination of sports, gaming and marketing: Alex Hunter, virtual star of the FIFA series by EA SPORTS, is advertising a new adidas product alongside real soccer greats like Paul Pogba. (Screenshot: Twitter/@MrAlexHunter)

Brands from other industries are increasingly using virtual influencers for their marketing activities as well now. One example is Alex Hunter, a protagonist from the FIFA game series by EA SPORTS. He was the face of several campaigns by sporting goods manufacturer adidas. At the South by Southwest (SXSW) festival, smart was accompanied by virtual influencer Brenn from the modeling agency The Diigitals, and both Porsche and Samsung have already taken advantage of the advertising impact of Lil Miquela.

Virtual influencers – more than just short-lived hype

Will virtual influencers overtake their human counterparts?

That doesn't seem likely just yet. The number of relevant fictional characters is still rather small and virtual brand ambassadors still only account for a tiny fraction of the billion-dollar sales of the whole industry. However, the seven-digit investment round in tech start-up Brud shows that virtual influencers are more than just short-lived hype. The tempting possibility of being able to tailor a digital character precisely to a company's brand profile should ensure that more fictional characters from a wide array of sectors will populate social media in future.

About the author Daniel Dodt

Daniel Dodt spent many years as a press officer in the digital economy before moving to agency work. He is now a content marketer at textbest GmbH in Berlin. As a politics graduate and number nerd, Daniel is responsible for complex stories that delve into digital KPIs, tools and channels.