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Management
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**Virtual Icons, Real Influence:
The Role of Lil Miquela and Imma Gram
in Luxury Brand Advertising**

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I INTRODUCTION	3
1.1 CONTEXTUALIZATION	3
1.1.1 THE EVOLUTION OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION	3
1.1.2 THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA	4
1.2 THE EVOLUTION OF INFLUENCER MARKETING IN LUXURY BRANDS.	9
1.2.1 INTRODUCTION TO INFLUENCER MARKETING	9
1.2.2 THE RISE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING IN THE LUXURY SECTOR	14
1.2.3 CREDIBILITY OF INFLUENCERS IN THE LUXURY SECTOR	17
1.2.4 THE DECLINE OF INFLUENCERS	18
1.3 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ITS DEVELOPMENT IN MARKETING	19
1.3.1 DEFINITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE	19
1.3.2 USE OF AI BY LUXURY BRANDS: CREATION OF PRODUCTS AND PERSONALIZATION	21
II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTION	24
2.1 AI AND INFLUENCERS: THE ERA OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS	24
2.2 VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM	28
2.2.1 THE CONCEPT OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM	28
2.2.2 VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS AND THEIR DEGREE OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM	31
2.3 VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS IN LUXURY BRAND CAMPAIGNS: CONTROVERSIES AND IMPACT	35
2.4 INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH QUESTION	45
III METHODOLOGY	47
3.1 MIXED METHODOLOGY	47
3.1.2 CORPUS SELECTION	48
3.2 SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS: ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND STORYTELLING IN VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS' LUXURY CAMPAIGNS	49
3.3 DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS: THE EVOLUTION OF LIL MIQUELA AND IMMA GRAM AND THE INTRODUCTION OF AI IN LUXURY BRAND CAMPAIGNS	51
3.3.1 LIL MIQUELA: THE ROLE OF A VIRTUAL INFLUENCER IN LUXURY ADVERTISING	51
3.3.2 IMMA GRAM: POSITIONING AND IMPACT IN THE ASIAN LUXURY MARKET	62
3.4 SYNCHRONIC ANALYSIS: LIL MIQUELA AND IMMA GRAM TODAY AND THEIR MARKET POSITIONING IN LUXURY	68
3.5 SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS: MARKETING STRATEGIES OF LIL MIQUELA AND IMMA GRAM IN LUXURY BRANDING	71
3.6 THE SEMIO-NARRATIVE LEVEL	98
3.7 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS	103
3.7.1 SENTIMENT ANALYSIS: CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF LIL MIQUELA AND IMMA GRAM IN LUXURY BRANDING	104
3.8 THEMATIC ANALYSIS	109
3.8.1 MAIN THEMES AND SUBCODES	111
IV CONCLUSION	114
4.1 CONCLUSIONS	114
4.2 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS	115
4.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH	116

I Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how the collaboration between virtual influencers and luxury brands affects the brands' value systems and the perceptions of consumers. The research specifically focuses on two prominent virtual influencers, Lil Miquela and Imma, and how they shape the identity and image of luxury brands in their advertising campaigns. The study begins with an analysis of the historical evolution of luxury brand communication and how the use of digital personas like virtual influencers is redefining this landscape. It then presents both the challenges and opportunities of this novel technology in enhancing luxury brand value and authenticity. Through a qualitative approach and thematic analysis, using a corpus of consumer comments coded with NVivo, the thesis investigates the emotional and symbolic implications of these collaborations. The main findings reveal that virtual influencers can enrich the narrative of luxury brands and strengthen their digital presence, but they also raise questions about authenticity and the human connection in luxury marketing.

1.1 Contextualization

1.1.1 The evolution of digital communication

The exchange of information, ideas, feelings, and thoughts between individuals or groups is known as communication. It can be signed, non-verbal, written, visual, and so on (El-Astal et al., 2025). Previously, communication took place through actual face-to-face interactions, letters, or phone calls, but the advent of modern technologies, particularly the internet and digital media, has drastically changed communication. Digital communication has become a vital aspect of daily life, offering opportunities for individuals, groups, and organizations to interact, exchange information, and engage with each other in real time across a global network (Castells, 2010).

Digital tools and platforms, including social media, websites, instant messaging apps, and email, have expanded the methods and scope of communication, enabling individuals and organizations to connect beyond geographic boundaries, time zones, and cultural differences (El-Astal et al., 2025). The main goal of communication, whether traditional or digital, is the sharing of meaning, which is facilitated by the speed, accessibility, and reach of digital technologies (McLuhan, 1964).

Digital communication is not limited to direct, personal exchanges. It also plays a crucial role in fields such as marketing, public relations, customer service, and beyond, transforming how brands, businesses, and institutions interact with their audiences (El-Astal et al., 2025). This shift has far-reaching implications for society, influencing not only interpersonal relationships but also how we consume media and engage with the world around us (Castells, 2010).

In the past two decades, digital communication has undergone a transformative shift, revolutionizing the way individuals and brands interact. This change is part of what is widely referred to as “the Digital Transformation” of marketing, which has been extensively studied by both practitioners and academics (Basimakopoulou et al., 2022). The evolution of digital communication can be traced back to the early days of the internet, when websites and email communication dominated. However, with the emergence of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s, interactivity and user participation became central components of the online experience. Web 2.0 is defined as a network that spans all connected devices, creating network effects through an architecture of participation (O'Reilly, 2007). This new type of Web marked the transition from a static web to a dynamic, interactive ecosystem. The rapid advancement of communication technologies has profoundly reshaped how information is shared and accessed, particularly with the rise of social media platforms (Swastiningsih et al., 2024).

1.1.2 The evolution of social media

Social media has evolved beyond being a mere tool for social interaction; it has become a powerful marketing channel that influences consumer behavior, brand perception, and purchasing decisions. Brands leverage social media platforms to build their digital presence, foster engagement, and create immersive storytelling experiences (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Since its inception in 1996, social media has touched half of the world's 7.7 billion people, (Backlinko, 2025). Social media platforms have tripled their user base in the last decade, from 970 million in 2010 to 4.48 billion in July 2021. Social media usage worldwide has more than doubled to 4.48 billion users, up from 2.07 billion in 2015. On average, the average social media user engages with 6.6 distinct social media networks (Kemp, 2021). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and later TikTok have redefined the relationship between individuals, businesses, and their audiences and they have significantly impacted digital marketing strategies, serving as prime examples of this transformation (Lara, 2024).

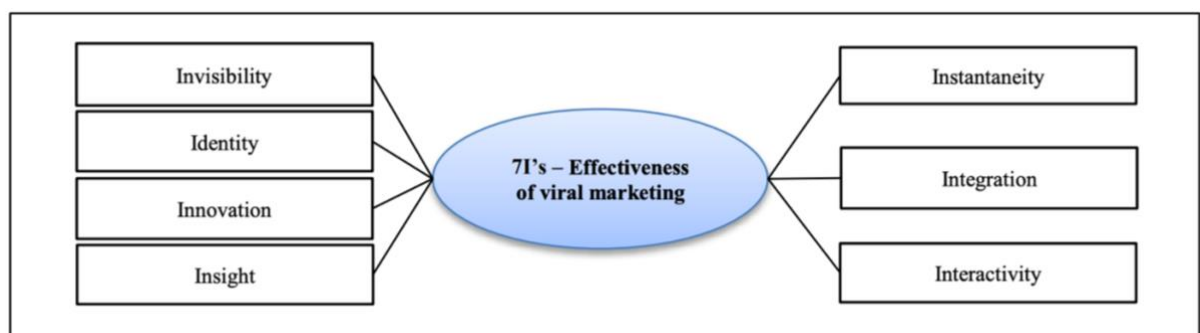
Facebook has been recognized as a key player in the social media landscape, with its vast user base of over 2.2 billion monthly active users. Facebook enables a range of consumer-brand interactions, categorized into three levels of engagement: consumption, contribution, and creation (Muntinga et al, 2011). This framework, known as Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities (COBRAs), illustrates how users can interact with brand content in various ways, from simply viewing posts to actively creating and sharing brand-related material. This model has been further validated by developing a scale that measures consumer engagement with brand-related content on social media (Schivinski et al, 2016). Through these interactions, Facebook has become an essential platform for brands seeking to connect with their audiences, utilizing its advanced advertising tools for precise target segmentation.

Instagram, acquired by Facebook in 2012, is another influential platform in the digital marketing landscape. As a visual-centric platform, Instagram allows users to share photos and videos, making it particularly effective for industries such as

fashion, design, and food, where aesthetics is critical. According to the Social Information Processing Theory, users on platforms like Instagram generate impressions and relationships based on visual cues and textual information, compensating for the absence of non-verbal communication (Peña et al., 2006). This theory is especially relevant to Instagram, where users engage with brand content based on visual appeal and emotional connection. The platform's introduction of features like Instagram Stories and IGTV has provided new opportunities for brands to engage with their audience through more dynamic and immersive content (Ejaz, 2023).

TikTok, one of the most rapidly growing platforms, has reshaped the way brands approach digital marketing, particularly among younger audiences such as Generation Z. TikTok's short-video format, often combined with music, creates a unique environment for viral content creation. Viral marketing campaigns on platforms like TikTok can be highly effective, with success often hinging on principles such as creativity, immediacy, and interactivity (Puriwat et al., 2021). The "7I's" framework is important for successful viral marketing, which includes factors like Innovativeness (creating unique, surprising content), Immediacy (timeliness and relevance), and Interactivity (encouraging user engagement).

Figure 1.1: 7I's framework



Source: Puriwat (2021)

Brands are increasingly leveraging these features, partnering with influencers, and creating challenges to increase engagement and visibility (Xu, 2023).

Together, these platforms have redefined the landscape of social media marketing, each offering unique tools and strategies for brands to connect with and engage their target audiences in innovative ways.

The transition, just explained, from traditional media to social media has reshaped the media landscape, presenting both challenges and opportunities. One of the biggest challenges is the declining trust and engagement with traditional media, particularly among younger audiences who perceive it as less relevant and credible (Newman et al., 2023). This shift has been exacerbated by increasing media polarization and the rise of clickbait journalism, which typically refers to the practice of writing sensationalized or misleading headlines in order to attract clicks on a piece of content.

Another major challenge is the growing competition with social media influencers and content creators, who have built highly engaged communities and reshaped how audiences consume information (Abidin, 2021). These influencers often have direct and unfiltered access to their audiences, making them formidable competitors to traditional news outlets (Shahzad et al., 2023). The rapid spread of misinformation is another pressing issue, as social media enables the viral dissemination of false or misleading content, making it difficult for users to distinguish between credible and unreliable sources (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). However, this digital transformation also presents opportunities. Social media allows traditional media organizations to reach wider and more diverse audiences through new content formats such as short-form videos and live streaming (Muehlburger et al., 2020). Additionally, the interactive nature of social media fosters direct engagement between media producers and audiences, enabling real-time feedback and a more participatory media culture (Bruns, 2018). The shift to digital has also forced legacy media, or traditional media, to innovate and develop new business models, incorporating data analytics and algorithm-driven

content distribution to remain competitive (Napoli, 2019). While traditional media faces significant challenges in the digital era, adapting to the evolving landscape by leveraging social media's strengths can help it maintain relevance and influence.

With the introduction of digital communication and social media, there has been a change in the importance that companies give to social platforms. Social media platforms and new professional roles in social media work play a central role in defining and shaping the contours of the contemporary organization (McCosker, 2017). The evolution of these platforms brought many advantages for companies, such as a shift in communication dynamics, as social media has transformed the relationship between media producers (companies) and media consumers (customers) (McCosker, 2017). Introducing different platforms in a company is also significant because there has been a shift from mere participation on social media to data extraction and analysis (McCosker, 2017). It is important to note that social media technologies are not just tools for communication; they are reshaping organizations themselves. As companies leverage social media to communicate and engage with consumers, they must also adapt their internal structures and labor practices to accommodate the new demands brought about by these platforms (McCosker, 2017). Basically, the traditional methods of marketing communication have evolved with the rise of digital communication, particularly using social media (SCHALLMO, 2017).

With the evolution of digital communication and platform there is also the creation of a new figure which is the user-generated-content (UGC). UGC refers to content created by consumers rather than by brands or organizations. This includes text, images, videos, reviews, blogs, and social media posts. In the context of marketing, UGC is often associated with content that directly or indirectly relates to a brand, whether through product reviews, brand experiences, or personal stories involving the brand (Halliday, 2016). UGC is not just a passive tool; it also represents an

interactive process between consumers and companies. Companies can foster UGC by encouraging customers to share their experiences and opinions. Social media platforms, review sites, and company websites are commonly used for such interactions. By encouraging consumers to participate in the creation of content, brands can not only engage with their existing audience but also attract new customers who are influenced by the experiences of others. (Bahtar & Muda, 2016).

Moreover, the relationship between UGC and online purchasing decisions, suggesting that factors such as review valence (positive or negative), review volume (the number of reviews), and reviewer credibility (the perceived trustworthiness of the reviewer) all play significant roles in shaping consumer behavior. (Bahtar & Muda, 2016).

1.2 The evolution of influencer marketing in luxury brands.

1.2.1 introduction to influencer marketing

The rapid adoption of social media has resulted in a de facto omnipresence of content created, spread and consumed by users (Ho& Ito, 2019), generating new communication dynamics (Melumadet al., 2019; Peng et al., 2018). With this adoption there has been the creation of influencer marketing. Influencer marketing is defined as “collaboration between popular social-media users and brands to promote brands’ products or services”. (McKinsey & Company, 2023). In other words, it is a strategic digital marketing approach that leverages the credibility and reach of key individuals—known as influencers—to promote brands, products, or services to their followers on social media. It builds upon the principles of word-of-mouth marketing but differs by formalizing collaborations between brands and influencers to generate engagement, trust, and conversions. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, modern influencer marketing relies on everyday

individuals with niche audiences who create authentic, user-generated content that resonates with consumers. This approach aligns with the evolution of digital communication and is often referred to as "Influencer 2.0" or "Word-of-Mouth 2.0" due to its deep integration with Web 2.0 technologies and interactive social media platforms. (Vidani et al., 2021)

Influencer marketing has undergone significant evolution over time, shifting from traditional methods to a more modern, strategic approach. Influencer marketing projected to reach \$32.55 billion in global market size by 2025 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). Initially, influencer marketing relied on celebrities and public figures, such as actors, musicians, and athletes, who endorsed products and services. These figures were seen as authoritative voices within their respective industries, and their endorsements were considered highly credible by consumers (Chen, 2023).

Depending on their function, influencers can be divided into three primary categories. The first category consists of highly influential people in the mass media (TV, radio, newspapers, periodicals, Internet media, etc.). The second category consists of professionals with significant social influence, experience, or understanding in a particular industry (e.g., experts, celebrities, talents, advertising models, etc.). The third category consists of personal influencers, or members of the general public, who sway others by sharing different information. The characteristics of current influencers were categorized in a number of disciplines in a study on their characteristics (Yu et al., 2023).

With the rise of social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, influencer marketing transformed. Brands began to partner not only with celebrities but also with everyday individuals who had cultivated substantial followings on these platforms. This shift introduced the concept of "niche influencers," individuals who gained significant influence through their

authenticity and personal connection with their followers. Social media allowed for more targeted marketing, reaching specific communities that resonated with the content these influencers produced (Chen, 2023).

In the current landscape of digital marketing, influencers are categorized based on the number of followers and the impact they have on their audience. The main categories of influencers include nano, micro, macro, and mega influencers. Nano-influencers are those with a following ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 followers. Despite their relatively small audience, they enjoy a high engagement rate due to their more personal and authentic relationship with their followers. This intimacy and genuine connection make nano-influencers ideal for reaching specific niches and for campaigns focused on direct engagement. Micro-influencers, with a following ranging from 10,000 to 100,000 followers, represent a middle ground, combining good reach with a strong level of interaction. Thanks to their expertise or passion for specific niches, micro-influencers are seen as more credible and able to influence purchasing decisions, often with a greater impact than larger influencers. Macro-influencers have a following between 100,000 and 500,000 followers. These influencers, often celebrities or public figures, have significant visibility and a broad reach, although their engagement rate may be lower than that of micro and nano-influencers due to a greater emotional distance from the audience. Finally, mega-influencers are those with over 500,000 followers, often global celebrities or athletes. While their reach is global and they have the ability to influence trends on a large scale, their engagement tends to be less direct and personal, with collaboration costs being significantly higher. The choice between these different types of influencers depends on marketing goals, the target audience, and the nature of the campaign, considering that each type of influencer offers different advantages and disadvantages based on the strategy adopted (Frau, 2019).

The emergence of micro and nano-influencers marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of influencer marketing. Micro-influencers, with smaller but highly engaged audiences, and nano-influencers, with even more specific followings, became recognized for their ability to connect with their audiences in more meaningful ways. Their smaller, more engaged communities allowed brands to reach consumers in an authentic manner, as these influencers were seen as more relatable and trustworthy than traditional celebrities. According to research, consumers are more likely to trust endorsements from influencers who seem genuine and share similar values, which has made micro and nano-influencers increasingly valuable to brands (Chen, 2023).

When a brand selects an influencer, the number of followers is not the only factor to consider; several other elements play a crucial role. Brands must evaluate key influencer characteristics, such as influencer-brand fit, communication style, and self-disclosure (Chen et al., 2023). Influencer-brand fit refers to the degree of similarity between the influencer and the brand. The stronger this alignment, the greater the influencer's impact on consumers (Torres et al., 2019). Influencer communication is defined as the extent to which consumers perceive influencers as effective communicators who share and exchange information in an engaging manner (Ki et al., 2022). Influencer self-disclosure represents the level of personal information an influencer chooses to reveal, which can enhance authenticity and audience trust (Chung & Cho, 2017). By considering these factors collectively, brands can identify the most suitable influencers for their marketing strategies (Pan et al., 2023).

Many companies have started using this type of marketing which focuses a lot on the concept of authenticity. The importance of authenticity has become a defining feature of modern influencer marketing. Today's consumers, particularly younger generations, are increasingly skeptical of traditional advertising. As a result, they place greater trust in influencers who authentically represent the brands they

promote, rather than those who are simply endorsing products for financial gain. This demand for authenticity has made influencers who maintain consistent, relatable personal brands more effective at driving consumer behavior (Chen, 2023). The growth of platforms like TikTok has further accelerated the evolution of influencer marketing. TikTok's short-form content and viral nature have allowed influencers to engage with a younger, more interactive audience. Influencers on TikTok can create content that is quickly shared and spread, contributing to the rapid virality of products and campaigns. This has created new opportunities for brands to reach a massive audience through highly engaging, viral content (Chen, 2023).

Influencer marketing is a collaboration between the influencers and marketers that work as partners (Chung and Cho, 2017; Hudders et al., 2020). Influencers are attractive to brands because, unlike traditional celebrities, an influencer's popularity stems from their high levels of expertise and relatability (Reinikainen et al., 2020), leading followers to perceive them as personal, authentic and credible sources of information. In addition, they have the significant benefit of a network that willingly follows them on social media (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Several factors that affect the influencer-brand collaboration must be taken into account by the brand before choosing the influencer. Finding an influencer who is reputable and concentrating on how the influencer and the brand align is an important aspect for the brand. The influencer's tone, values, and image must match those of the business for the partnership to be successful. Credibility of the message conveyed by the influencer is contingent upon their experience. More engagement results from collaboration that incorporates these elements. (Hugh Wilkie et al., 2022)

The experts revealed that effective partnerships require enduring relationships between influencers and brands. Two essential elements in this industry were identified as price and trust.

All of the professionals mentioned mutual trust as a powerful component of influencer marketing in order to establish fruitful partnerships. Long-term partnerships between the two parties are built on this trust. Trust is particularly crucial when it comes to contractual agreements and exclusivity (Zietek, 2016).

1.2.2 The Rise of Influencer Marketing in the Luxury Sector

It is unfortunate for researchers that there isn't a commonly agreed-upon description of what a luxury brand is. The terms "luxury," "luxury brand," and "luxury marketing," for instance, are not defined in the American Marketing Association's dictionary. However, there isn't a strong consensus among academics from many fields over what defines a luxury brand (Taylor et al., 2016). While some semiotics scholars contend that some "codes of luxury" are universal across disciplines and time periods, luxury companies have a love-hate relationship with the digital world. They rely on a distribution and communication network that has counter-luxury features, and they are unsure of how to use it without weakening their identity and sense of luxury. It is reasonable to comprehend how a new semiotic e-system is put up as luxury consumption presumes semiotic metacognition from the customers. Nonetheless, their clients and potential clients now use the Internet on a regular basis. Thus, the secret is to effectively use the Internet without sacrificing the ethos and image of the brand: How to manage (Maman Larraufie et al., 2014).

Many luxury fashion firms are using influencers to market their products, raise their profile, and reach new markets. As a result, influencer culture is increasingly becoming a key component of their marketing strategies. The once-exclusive role that celebrities play in promoting high-end goods is now shared with people with some degree of social influence or reputation on digital platforms like Facebook or Instagram who can attract and interact with sizable fan bases that closely monitor their posts (López et al., 2022).

Luxury brands now use social media marketing as a very effective tool since it provides benefits that traditional marketing methods frequently lack. Social media platforms offer sophisticated targeting tools that let luxury businesses precisely target audience groups.

One-third of all luxury sales are expected to happen online by 2025. When it comes to social media for luxury brands, the overall goal may be similar – i.e. increase profitability – but the approaches you will use to get there differ, often significantly, from average brands. For one straightforward reason, the social media marketing approach of a luxury business will be different from that of an average brand: luxury brands are not like average brands! The strategies and tactics you employ will foster relationships with wealthy and elite consumers (while also fostering aspirational ones) and establish that exclusive community fosters brand loyalty (ThatAgency, 2022).

In addition to using social media to promote the business and its products, luxury brands are increasingly using influencers.

Influencers' ability to provide genuine, engaging content has made them useful partners for luxury brands. Fashion houses and luxury companies find them quite appealing due to their capacity to sway the purchasing decisions of their audience (Dessus, 2024). For instance, the partnership between influencers like Emma Chamberlain and Charlie D'amelio with fashion industry titan Louis Vuitton was a huge success. A new generation of consumers took notice of the partnership, proving the importance of influencers in the fashion sector. (Staff, 2021)

Figure 1.2: Louis Vuitton turns to internet mega stars Emma Chamberlain and Charli D'Amelio for the launch of their already-iconic footwear.



Source: (Staff, 2021)

“Does influencer marketing work for luxury brands?” If done correctly, yes. and ultimately turn into devoted patrons. 41% of Millennials and over 50% of Gen Z base their decisions about luxury purchases on recommendations from influencers. Luxury brands are concentrated on working with chosen influencers who share the brand's exclusivity and ideals(Kazakova, 2025).

There are some top strategies that companies can use to promote their products through influencer marketing (Xu, 2023). First of all it is important to partner with genuinfluencers, who are authentic influencers that across different followers tiers for credibility. Company should choose influencers that prioritize storytelling, high-quality content, and behind-the-scenes information to increase premium appeal. It is important also to achieve a multi-Platform reach which means to create material for multiple platforms in order to engage diverse age groups.

Shopping tags, affiliate programs, and Instagram Stories are all useful for making direct social media purchases. For a luxury brand it is important also to maintain the luxury appeal by offering tiered pricing, VIP events, and limited releases. Of course, anything needs to be checked through performance monitoring with the use of KPIs, analytics tools, and A/B testing to optimize.

For these reasons many brands are now choosing to collaborate with mid-tier influencers for their campaigns since they tend to build more authentic, engaged communities. Currently, 40% of luxury brands use mid-tier influencers (10K-100K followers) to work with on luxury brand campaigns. (Kazakova, 2024).

1.2.3 credibility of influencers in the luxury sector

Brand credibility, as regarded in terms of knowledge, trustworthiness, and likability, represents how customers view a brand's credibility (Keller, 2013). Thus, A brand's credibility is determined by its capacity and willingness to consistently provide what has been promised concerning the product information contained in the brand (Erdem et al., 2004). Customers will feel more confident in the brand's products and be more devoted to it when it has a highly credible brand, which is indicative of the product's quality and positioning (Alam et al., 2012).

Luxury firms can present their goods in aspirational, genuine, and highly targeted ways by working with the appropriate influencers (Ahuja, 2025).

Influencer marketing, as a luxury brand strategy, gives companies the chance to use the credibility and power of influential people to connect with target consumers in a genuine and interesting way. But using this effective tactic effectively calls for careful thought.

Celebrities and influencers alike frequently use sharing details of their personal lives to develop their brands, which may create a level of intimacy that offers luxury brands both benefits and challenges.

In order to preserve a carefully built image, brands must simultaneously mitigate the inherent dangers and leverage the potential of influencer marketing to

humanize the brand and establish a more personal connection with consumers (Roth Mendez, 2025). Consumers use social media information and ask other consumers for guidance and more information when making decisions about purchases.

Social media influencers' content becomes a significant source of information that shapes consumer behavior by exerting a greater influence on this decision-making process. The traits of influencers as informants have been considered a key leading variable of the persuasion effect in influencer marketing. Because influencers are seen as appealing and likeable, consumers identify with products that they recommend. Additionally, consumers perceive brands more relatable the more they trust and believe in influencers. Customers' views regarding brands are influenced by the dependability of influencers (Yu et al., 2023).

1.2.4 The decline of influencers

In recent years, there has been significant development in the sector of influencer marketing and the digital landscape. Influencers have become crucial in connecting brands and consumers through personal storytelling, product placements, and lifestyle endorsements (Wood, 2025). Despite its success, influencer marketing has faced some challenges. One of the primary concerns is audience fatigue, which means that consumers become increasingly skeptical of promotional content due to market saturation. Additionally, there are some ethical concerns, such as the fact that most collaborations between brands and influencers are paid, leading people to trust them less (Tummalle, 2025).

Influencer marketing started as authentic product review and developed into a flood of sponsored posts. What was before based on authenticity started to feel more like a transaction. Once aspirational, the shiny, well planned influencer lifestyle today seems disconnected from reality. People are losing faith in the idealized lives that are promoted on social media. Once relatable and grounded, influencers are now perceived by many as remote individuals who sell goods for a living. And when it does, it's clear: the promotional material is conspicuous, and

not in a positive way. One thing is certain, though: the influencers who adjust to this new reality and embrace authenticity, transparency, and vulnerability will be the ones who maintain their power going forward. In the wake of a shifting social media ecosystem where authenticity always prevails, the rest will fall behind. (Warters, 2025). Considering this shift in how influencer marketing is seen, there has been a chance for a new category to be born: virtual influencers.

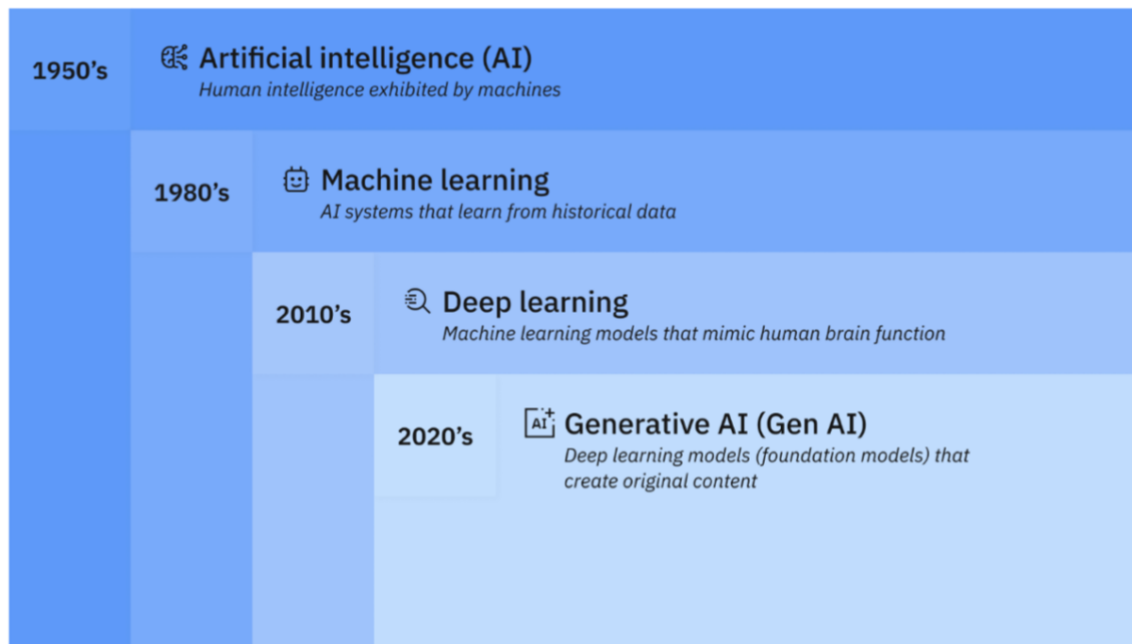
1.3 Artificial Intelligence and Its Development in Marketing

1.3.1 definition and development of artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence is known as the technology that allows computers and other devices to mimic human learning, comprehension, problem-solving, decision-making, creativity, and autonomy (IBM, 2025). The term "Artificial Intelligence" (or "AI") may bring up a variety of imagery, from terrifying pictures of robot armies attempting to wipe out the human race to less terrible pictures of Alexa quizzing someone on trivia. Whether we are aware of it or not, artificial intelligence permeates every aspect of our life. Driverless cars, which have been authorized for use on public roads in five states and the District of Columbia, are among the most well-known applications of artificial intelligence, and there are no indications that this expanding sector will slow down anytime soon. (Martinez, 2019). Since its birth, artificial intelligence (AI) has advanced from the domain of science fiction to a technology that is becoming more and more essential and changing lives and industries all over the world. AI is now a reality rather than a science-fiction fantasy because to developments in computer vision, machine learning, and natural language processing (Marr, 2023).

A straightforward way to conceptualize artificial intelligence is as a collection of nested or derivative ideas that have developed over the course of more than 70 years.

Figure 1.3: How artificial intelligence, machine learning, deep learning and generative AI are related.



Source: (IBM, 2025)

Machine learning, which involves building models by teaching an algorithm to make predictions or judgments based on data, lies directly beneath artificial intelligence. It includes a wide range of methods that let computers learn from and draw conclusions from data without needing to be specifically programmed for a given activity. A kind of machine learning known as "deep learning" makes use of multilayered neural networks, or "deep neural networks," which more accurately mimic the intricate decision-making processes seen in the human brain. Deep learning models that can produce sophisticated original content—like lengthy prose, crisp graphics, realistic video or audio, and more—in response to a user's prompt or request are referred to as "gen AI" or "generative AI." Fundamentally, generative models use a reduced representation of their training data to generate new work that is comparable to but distinct from the original data. For many years, statistics has employed generative models to examine numerical data. However, they have developed to evaluate and produce increasingly complicated data kinds during the past ten years. (IBM,2025).

Artificial intelligence can be divided into three levels: ANI, AGI, and ASI. Artificial Narrow Intelligence, or ANI, is the first level capable of focusing on a single field for ten years. For instance, an AI is capable of defeating the world chess champion, but that is its sole capability. Artificial general intelligence, or AGI, is AI that approaches and surpasses human intelligence in terms of reasoning, planning, problem-solving, abstract thought, understanding complicated concepts, speed, and experience-based learning. Artificial Super Intelligence, or ASI, is a brain that is significantly more intelligent than the best human brain in almost every domain, including social skills, general knowledge, and scientific innovation (Strelkova, 2017).

1.3.2 Use of AI by luxury brands: creation of products and personalization

With the use of AI, the fashion and luxury industries are going through a major transition. In the past years there has been an implementation of the use of AI in supply chain management, product innovation, marketing tactics, and consumer interaction. The use of AI had a big impact in the customer service and overall experience in the field of fashion and luxury goods. The implementation of AI contributed to the optimization of customer overall satisfaction and interaction. It is used in different way starting from customer service and experience through intelligent customer support and virtual reality. In this context one of the most valuable integration of AI is the creation of chatbots and virtual assistants, which answer clients' questions, offer product and provide personalized recommendations which is important especially in the luxury fashion retail to obtain a unique customer service experience (Dou, 2024).

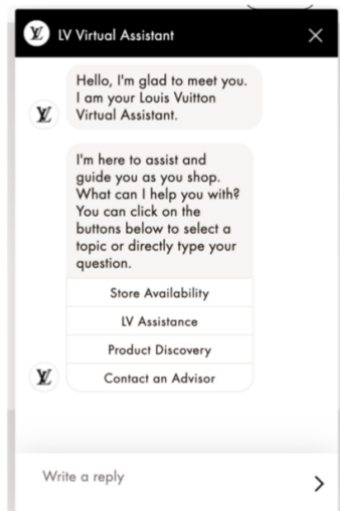
In addition, AI guarantees a good experience for the client improving search results and allowing designers to access a brand's catalogue to come up with new ideas

for the new collections coming from the variation of the past designs. (Stomka, 2024)

Now we can go more in depth analyzing some practical cases of fashion industries using AI in their strategies, learning more about the way this brand is implementing AI technology to generate a big impact. (Zenina, 2024)

Burberry, for example, is one of the most well-known British luxury clothing brands. The company decided to reimagine itself as a “end to end” digital enterprise in 2006. It aimed to increase sales and customer pleasure by utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) and big data (Marr, 2017). What Burberry achieved by using AI is stunning. The brand started using Big data in practice when it realized that customers were happy to share their personal information, as long as their purchases were easier. This is not something new in the fashion market, but Burberry took one step further by sharing data like social media habits and purchase history with the retail assistants via a tablet. The salesperson will therefore recommend handbags to you the next time you visit a Burberry store based on the coat you recently bought. The digital transformation led to a 50% increase in repeat clients for the luxury brand (Jain, 2020). Burberry also uses Entropy-powered AI technology, which uses image recognition to identify a product's legitimacy from a photo of a little portion. It can supposedly detect counterfeits with 98% accuracy by looking at minute features in texture and weave, allowing bootleg merchants to be quickly shut down and prosecuted (Zenina, 2024). Chatbots are becoming more and more common on company websites. One other example is Louis Vuitton's 'LV Virtual Assistant', which provides services including Store Availability, LV Assistance, Product Discovery, and Contact an Advisor. (Dou, 2024).

Figure 1.4: LV virtual assistant



Source: LV official (<https://www.louisvuitton.com>)

Additionally, AI has the potential to give the fashion and luxury industries the opportunity to offer customers extremely realistic product experiences and interactions using Virtual Reality (VR) technology. This greatly increases user happiness in addition to improving brand image. For example, Balenciaga used Oculus glasses to organize a virtual reality runway presentation that was accessible to 330 people globally as a new approach to introduce their autumn/winter 2021 collection. They also released a video game called "Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow" in conjunction with the fashion event. Additionally, this was the first video game ever made by a fashion firm. (Dou, 2024).

Figure 1.5: Videogame Balenciaga with AI



Source: Balenciaga Fall 21 (<https://videogame.balenciaga.com/en/>).

In conclusion, there is a lot of promise and importance for AI technology in the luxury and fashion sectors. However, it comes with several drawbacks, such as concerns about data security and privacy, moral dilemmas, and technological constraints. AI can contribute more significantly to the sector by resolving these problems and carrying on with its ongoing innovation, which will open new possibilities.

II. Conceptual Framework and Research Question

2.1 AI and Influencers: The Era of Virtual Influencers

Is the era of influencers coming to an end already? Specifically, the age of human influencers? According to Sookkaew et al. (2021), a virtual influencer is a digital person made with 3D visual design, simulation, and animation software. After this general definition it is important to underline that different research use many terms to define virtual influencer, so we need to make clarifications (Mouritzen et

al., 2023). The most used terms are computer-generated imagery (CGI) influencers and artificial intelligence (AI) influencers. CGI refers to virtual influencers that are created by computers (Ahn et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the term AI influencers is used to define those influencers that are created by artificial intelligence technologies and then use this type of technologies in creating content and interacting with consumers (Sands et al., 2022).

Influencer marketing has become a cornerstone of brand communication in the digital age, with a global market value exceeding \$21 billion as of 2023 (Statista, 2023). Within this landscape, virtual influencers have emerged as a novel form of influencer. Virtual influencers (VIs) are digitally-created characters with a social media presence who behave like human influencers by sharing content, building a persona, and engaging followers on social platforms (Dabiran et al., 2024). These computer-generated “personalities” can take the form of hyper-realistic 3D avatars or stylized animated figures, but in all cases they mimic human traits – they have names, backstories, opinions, and even “emotions” as portrayed in their posts. For example, Lil Miquela (a famous virtual influencer created in 2016) is presented as a 19-year-old robot living in Los Angeles, with an Instagram feed showing her fashion outfits, social activism, and everyday life, just like a real human influencer. By 2022, 35 virtual influencers had been verified on Instagram, underscoring the growing legitimacy of this phenomenon (The Influencer Marketing Factory, 2022). Brands are increasingly leveraging VIs to connect with audiences in creative ways, inaugurating what many call the era of virtual influencers in marketing.

One driving force behind the rise of VIs is their appeal to digitally savvy consumer segments and the high engagement they generate. Surveys indicate that a majority of young consumers are receptive to virtual influencers: in one U.S. study, 58% of respondents reported following at least one virtual influencer, and 35% had purchased a product or service recommended by a virtual influencer (Carr, 2024).

This suggests that VIs can effectively influence purchase decisions, functioning as credible spokespeople despite their fictitious nature. In fact, some evidence shows virtual influencers can achieve engagement rates up to three times higher than human influencers (Long, 2024). For instance, a 2023 industry analysis found that the average engagement rate for VI campaigns was 5.9%, versus 1.9% for comparable human influencer campaigns (Long, 2024). This elevated engagement is often attributed to the novelty factor and the carefully crafted content of VIs – followers may be intrigued by the concept and aesthetic of a virtual persona, leading them to like, share, and comment at higher rates. Additionally, VIs can be designed to be “perfect” influencers who align closely with audience interests, which further boosts engagement. As an agency blog quipped, *“we’re a blank canvas that gives our designers the creative freedom to turn us into a ‘perfect influencer’ living their best life”* (Carr, 2024). In essence, brands see an opportunity to capture audience attention in a crowded social media environment by using these eye-catching, algorithmically optimized digital characters.

Beyond engagement, marketers are drawn to virtual influencers for several practical advantages. Unlike human creators, virtual influencers do not age, get tired, or require physical photoshoots, which means they can produce content tirelessly and consistently (Hewapathirana & Perera, 2024). Brands maintain full control over a virtual influencer’s image and messaging, ensuring alignment with marketing strategy and minimizing the risk of off-brand behavior (Ozdemir, 2024). For example, a virtual influencer will never spontaneously promote a competitor or get involved in a scandal unless the brand itself scripts it. This control, combined with advances in AI content generation, allows rapid scaling of content: a VI can be in “Paris” shooting a campaign in the morning and “Tokyo” by evening, all through digital rendering (Carr, 2024). The cost efficiencies are notable as well – while top human influencers demand high fees per post, a virtual influencer can be created and maintained at a relatively fixed cost, potentially yielding a high return on investment once established (Long, 2024). As a result, companies ranging from luxury fashion houses to consumer electronics firms have experimented with either

creating their own virtual brand ambassadors or partnering with existing popular VIs.

Crucially, the emergence of virtual influencers is intertwined with developments in artificial intelligence and CGI (computer-generated imagery). Early virtual influencers like Lil Miquela were largely hand-crafted by teams of artists and storytellers, but newer ones leverage AI for content creation – for instance, AI-generated imagery, natural language generation for captions, or even AI-driven interactivity (chatbots giving the persona a “voice”). This convergence of AI and influencer marketing represents a new frontier in communication, where the influencer is essentially a digital creation powered by algorithms. Researchers have begun referring to these as “AI-powered influencers”, noting that they blur the line between human and machine-led communication (Sorosrungruang et al., 2024). Indeed, followers often interact with VIs as if they were real humans, which raises fascinating questions about psychology and authenticity that we will explore in subsequent sections. For now, it suffices to say that virtual influencers are here to stay – they are not a passing gimmick but rather a growing segment of influencer marketing. Their presence is especially prominent in sectors like fashion, beauty, and entertainment, where visual impact and innovation are highly valued. Major brands have already embraced virtual influencers in high-profile campaigns: for example, Prada invited Lil Miquela to take over its Instagram Stories during Fashion Week, and automaker Renault built a virtual avatar named Liv to engage younger audiences (Vogue Business, 2021). With more than 150 active virtual influencers globally by some estimates (as of 2023), we truly are in a new era where “*AI influencers*” mingle with human influencers in shaping consumer opinions.

However, the ascent of virtual influencers also introduces new challenges and uncertainties, particularly regarding how audiences perceive and relate to these non-human personas. The following sections delve into two key conceptual pillars for understanding virtual influencer effectiveness: anthropomorphism (i.e., human-likeness) and consumer response in the luxury branding context. Together,

these will frame our research question on the impact of virtual influencers in marketing communications.

2.2 Virtual Influencers and Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism – the attribution of human characteristics to non-human entities

(Dabiran et al., 2024) – is a critical concept for understanding virtual influencers. By design, VIs straddle the boundary between human and artificial, so how human-like they appear and behave will strongly influence audience reception. In this section, we first clarify the concept of anthropomorphism in general (2.2.1), and then discuss how it applies to virtual influencers, including varying degrees of anthropomorphism and their effects (2.2.2).

2.2.1 The Concept of Anthropomorphism

In psychological terms, anthropomorphism refers to the tendency to imbue non-human agents with human-like qualities (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). We often anthropomorphize objects and animals in daily life – for example, naming our cars or imagining a pet's intentions in human terms. Formally, anthropomorphism is when humans attribute human-like characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions to nonhuman agents (Epley et al., 2007). This can include attributing human-like emotions, motivations, personality, or even mind to something that is not actually human. In marketing and media, anthropomorphism is quite common: brands use human or animal mascots that talk and act like people, virtual assistants like Siri or Alexa speak in a human voice, and video game characters are given rich human-like backstories. All these are attempts to make non-humans more relatable by leveraging consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize.

Scholars note that anthropomorphism fulfills several psychological needs. According to Epley et al. (2007), one driver is the elicited agent knowledge –

humans apply their schema of “human” to interpret unfamiliar non-humans, especially if the non-human shows cues that resemble a face, voice, or behavior. Another driver is effectance motivation, the desire to understand and predict an agent’s actions; treating it as human-like can make its behavior feel more intelligible. A third is social motivation – when feeling lonely or socially disconnected, people may anthropomorphize to create a sense of social connection. These factors help explain why audiences might start to treat a virtual character as if it were a real person. If a virtual influencer posts like a person, interacts in real-time, and even “speaks” in captions as a human would (using “I” and emotive language), followers naturally begin to perceive a human-like presence behind the account.

While the psychological perspective explains how anthropomorphism emerges from cognitive and motivational mechanisms, semiotic approaches broaden this understanding by framing anthropomorphism as a **discursive and relational strategy**. In dialogue with Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, semiotic scholars like Peverini (2025) and Adamo (2024) interpret anthropomorphism not merely as a projection of human qualities onto non-human agents, but as the **construction of hybrids**—entities that exist through delegations of roles, actions, and meanings between human and non-human actants. These hybrid agents operate as **semiotic mediators**, acquiring agency within complex networks of meaning production. Rather than passively reflecting human input, virtual influencers and generative AI systems co-produce narratives, aesthetics, and interactions, challenging the binary between subject and object.

From this perspective, anthropomorphism is no longer just a cognitive bias but a **strategic affordance**. For example, as Adamo (2024) shows in her analysis of OpenAI’s branding around DALL-E, the platform strategically constructs an anthropomorphized identity by referencing Wall-E—an emotionally expressive, child-like robot—and surrealist artist Dalí. This naming choice encapsulates both innocence and creative imagination, aligning the brand with values of playfulness, artistic potential, and emotional safety. Combined with kawaii aesthetics and user

co-enunciation strategies (such as showcasing collaborative artworks on Instagram), these tactics generate a narrative of **mutual empowerment** between humans and machines, easing anxieties over automation and loss of control.

Importantly, anthropomorphism is not all-or-nothing; it can occur in degrees and across different attributes. A robot or CGI avatar might look very human-like in appearance but behave in a machine-like manner (high anthropomorphism in form, low in behavior), or vice versa. Researchers have therefore identified multiple dimensions of anthropomorphism. Dabiran et al. (2024) highlight four relevant dimensions in the context of virtual agents: appearance anthropomorphism (how human-like the entity looks physically), moral anthropomorphism (attributing a human-like moral sense or values to the entity), cognitive anthropomorphism (perceiving it as having human-like intellect and thought processes), and emotional anthropomorphism (believing it experiences feelings or can express human emotions). These dimensions capture a range of ways in which a virtual being can be made “human.” For example, a virtual influencer might have a photorealistic face and body (appearance), talk about right and wrong or show empathy in its content (moral qualities), display knowledge and wit in captions (cognitive), and use facial expressions or emotive language like “I’m so happy/excited” (emotional expression). Each of these cues can encourage followers to interpret the virtual character as more person-like.

Anthropomorphism has significant implications for marketing outcomes. Generally, making a non-human agent more human-like tends to increase social presence – the sense that a real other is present in the interaction – which can foster trust and engagement. Consumers may form parasocial relationships with anthropomorphized agents, meaning one-sided emotional bonds similar to those formed with human celebrities or influencers (Labrecque, 2014). If a follower perceives a virtual influencer as having a personality and feelings, they might feel a genuine friendship or affinity toward that character over time. This can enhance the persuasive power of the influencer, as messages coming from a “humanized” source often carry more weight. Indeed, Dabiran et al. (2024) observe that

anthropomorphic design features in virtual influencers can bolster their source credibility – consumers find them more credible and trustworthy when they exhibit human-like virtue and intellect. The underlying idea is that people use similar criteria to judge human and virtual sources; a virtual influencer that appears thoughtful, ethical, and emotionally expressive could be evaluated as a credible source, much like a human influencer who is knowledgeable and genuine.

However, anthropomorphism can also backfire under certain conditions, leading to skepticism or eeriness. A well-known concept related to appearance anthropomorphism is the “uncanny valley” effect (Mori, 1970), which describes how an entity that is very close to human in appearance but not perfectly lifelike can evoke discomfort or eeriness in observers. In other words, people might react positively to a cartoonish avatar (clearly not human) and to a perfectly lifelike human simulation, but feel uneasy about something that lies in the almost-human valley. In the context of virtual influencers, the uncanny valley is a pertinent risk: if a CGI looks almost real but something is off (e.g., slightly unnatural facial movements or an indefinable artificial quality), audiences may find it creepy rather than appealing. The authenticity of the agent comes into play here – an overly perfect, plastic-looking human simulacrum might be seen as inauthentic or strange, whereas a less realistic avatar might be more approachable because it’s clearly fictional and “cute.” Thus, achieving the right level of anthropomorphism is a delicate balance—one that requires brands not only to understand psychological triggers but also to shape **semiotic ecosystems** that make the presence of non-human agents culturally acceptable and emotionally meaningful.

2.2.2 Virtual Influencers and Their Degree of Anthropomorphism

Virtual influencers vary widely in how anthropomorphic they are, and these variations can lead to different audience perceptions. On one end of the spectrum, some VIs are highly human-like in appearance, often indistinguishable from real people in photos. An example is Shudu Gram, a virtual model who looks like a real model in every way; her skin texture, facial structure, and poses are ultra-

realistic (she was famously dubbed the “world’s first digital supermodel”). On the other end, we have more cartoonish or fantastical influencers like Noonnoori, a virtual fashion influencer depicted with big doll-like eyes and an obviously animated style, or Nobody Sausage, a whimsical anthropomorphic sausage character on Instagram. In between are avatars like Lil Miquela, who is designed to look like a real person but savvy followers can notice a slightly “digital” quality in her images. This continuum from clearly fictional to nearly indistinguishable-from-human represents the degree of appearance anthropomorphism. Beyond looks, VIs also differ in behavioral anthropomorphism – some “act” more human than others. For instance, many virtual influencers use first-person narratives (“I went to the park today and felt happy seeing the flowers bloom”), interact with followers in comments as if speaking as a person, and even simulate friendships or drama with other influencers. These behaviors heighten the illusion of humanity. Other virtual personas might remain more abstract, posting content without personal anecdotes or engaging less in direct interaction.

According to (Dabiran et al., 2024), not all aspects of anthropomorphism contribute equally to a virtual influencer’s effectiveness. In their study, anthropomorphic morality and cognitive traits had the strongest impact on audience response – when a virtual influencer was portrayed as having human-like moral values and the ability to think/learn, followers perceived it as more credible and developed stronger parasocial relationships (Dabiran et al., 2024). In contrast, a purely lifelike appearance boosted parasocial relationship (fans felt connected to it) but did not significantly enhance credibility (Dabiran et al., 2024). This suggests that looking human helps people feel befriended by the avatar, but to trust the avatar’s endorsements or expertise, they need to sense a mind and character behind the pretty face. Interestingly, giving a virtual influencer human-like emotional expressions (“conscious emotionality”) showed no significant effect on credibility or parasocial bonding in that research (Dabiran et al., 2024). One interpretation is that audiences might take displayed emotions in a CGI character with a grain of salt (since they know it’s ultimately scripted), whereas showing consistency in

principles or clever thinking can make the character more substantively human in their eyes. These findings align with the idea that authenticity and depth – even in a virtual persona – are key to audience trust. A virtual influencer that demonstrates ethical stances or clever commentary may come across as a “real” personality that viewers can respect and care about.

The degree of anthropomorphism must be calibrated carefully. If a virtual influencer is too rudimentarily anthropomorphic (e.g., a low-quality avatar with little human resemblance), people may not take it seriously or may not form any bond. On the flip side, if it is too human-like, we risk the earlier-mentioned uncanny valley. There is some empirical evidence of uncanny valley effects with VIs. In a comparative case study, a highly human-looking virtual influencer actually received lower positive engagement compared to a more cartoon-like virtual influencer, indicating that the almost-human appearance made some viewers uncomfortable or less receptive (Kácha et al., 2021). The human-like avatar was “penalized for her almost human appearance,” reflecting an uncanny valley response where slight imperfections or the mere knowledge that “she’s not real” undermined audience affinity. In contrast, a stylized virtual influencer can capitalize on being obviously fictional – followers might appreciate it as a form of entertainment or art, with no eerie illusion of reality.

One strategy some less-realistic virtual influencers use to bridge the gap is to compensate with human-like communication. Research has found that cartoon-like VIs often use more personal pronouns and emotional language to foster connection, as if trying to make up for their non-human looks by sounding very human (Kim & Song, 2023). For example, a cute animated avatar might speak in a very familiar, friendly tone and frequently address the audience as “you” or refer to itself as “I”, nurturing a sense of relationship through text. This can effectively increase perceived human-likeness and authenticity in the eyes of followers, even if visually the influencer looks like a Pixar character. On the other hand, hyper-realistic VIs might actually distance their communication a bit to avoid over-promising humanness that they can’t deliver. It’s a delicate dance between visual

anthropomorphism and behavioral anthropomorphism, where the optimal mix may depend on the context and audience.

The role of anthropomorphism is especially pertinent when considering trust and authenticity. Many consumers are initially aware that a virtual influencer is not a “real person,” which could provoke skepticism – *can I trust an AI avatar’s recommendation?*. Yet, through anthropomorphic design, creators aim to make the audience *forget* that skepticism and engage with the character as they would with a human. A recent study in the context of social media endorsements found that when a virtual influencer spoke in a rational, informative tone, users found it just as credible and persuasive as a human influencer’s message (Ozdemir, 2024). In contrast, if the virtual influencer used more emotional or artificial-sounding language, credibility dropped. This underscores that not just who the influencer is (virtual vs human), but how they communicate, determines effectiveness. Anthropomorphism in communication style (using a human-like, credible voice) can thus mitigate the inherent trust gap of a non-human source.

In summary, anthropomorphism is a double-edged sword for virtual influencers. It is essential for making these digital characters relatable and capable of forming social bonds with consumers – without some degree of human likeness, a virtual influencer would simply be treated as an animated ad, not an influencer. At the same time, there are optimal levels and types of anthropomorphism: enough to foster connection and credibility, but not so much that consumers enter the uncanny valley or feel deceived about the agent’s true nature. The literature suggests that giving VIs human-like personalities, intellect, and values is particularly effective (Dabiran et al., 2024), whereas one must be cautious with purely cosmetic realism. Ultimately, the goal is to create a virtual persona who is perceived as authentic and engaging in its own right – a character consumers can identify with and trust, even while knowing on some level that it is not a flesh-and-blood human. This balance plays directly into how virtual influencers are used in branding, especially in domains that trade heavily on authenticity, such as luxury marketing, which we turn to next.

2.3 Virtual Influencers in Luxury Brand Campaigns: Controversies and Impact

Figure 2.1: Balmain's "Virtual Army" campaign (2018) featured three CGI virtual models – Margot (left), Shudu (center), and Zhi (right) – to showcase the brand's collection

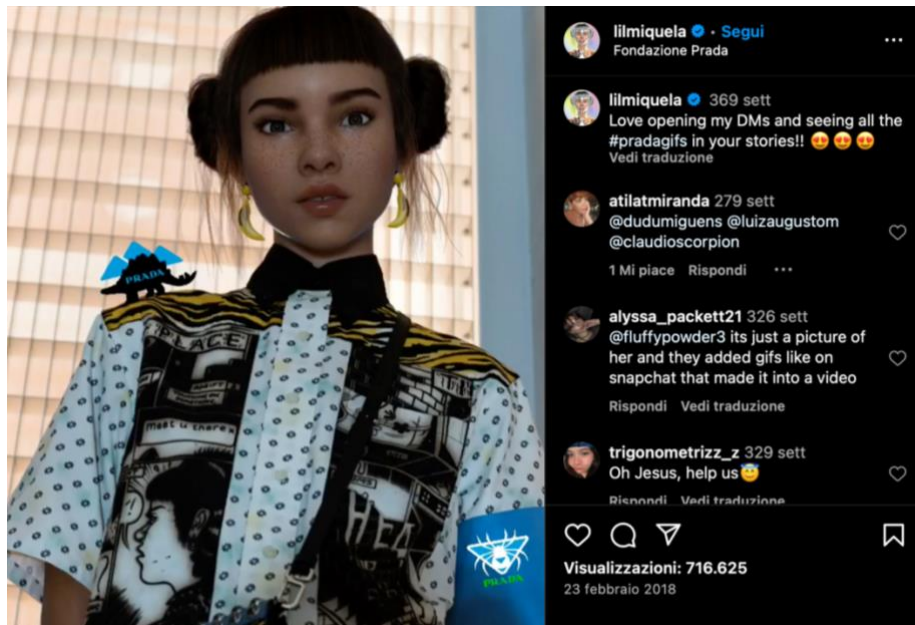


Source: Designboom, 2018 ([Balmain CGI Model Campaign](#)).

This early use of virtual influencers by a luxury house sparked debate about authenticity and diversity in fashion (Conti et al., 2022).

Luxury brands have been among the early experimenters with virtual influencers, drawn by the promise of innovation and the ability to tightly control brand image (Si, 2024). In 2018, for example, French luxury house Balmain launched a bold campaign dubbed the "Virtual Army," enlisting three hyper-realistic CGI models (including Shudu) to model its latest collection (Designboom, 2018). Similarly, Prada has collaborated with virtual it-girl Lil Miquela on multiple occasions (including an Instagram takeover during Milan Fashion Week) (Dazed, 2018).

Figure 2.2: Lil Miquela x Prada



Source: (Dazed, 2018).

Dior worked with virtual influencer Noonnoouri to promote make up. Late summer saw the release of Dior's Rouge Dior Ultra Rouge lipsticks. Prince's "Kiss" served as the soundtrack for a short film in which Ms. Portman, a longtime Dior ambassador, strutted around wearing an oversized sweater and applied red Dior lipstick.

For Rouge Dior, Noonnoouri replicated Natalie Portman's short.

Ms. Portman's spot is a fun, if conventional, marketing campaign for a luxury brand, but by having Noonnoouri make her own version, Dior gets twice as much exposure and can connect with younger audiences who are beginning to show an interest in high-end cosmetics particularly on Noonnoouri's most popular platform, Instagram.

Figure 2.3: Natalie Portman and Noonnoouri for Dior.



Source: (Ramirez, 2018)

These cases illustrate the appeal: a luxury brand can create a buzz by doing something cutting-edge and tech-forward, potentially attracting younger audiences who are active on social media (Phan et al., 2011). Virtual influencers in luxury campaigns often generate significant PR—publications highlight the novelty, and the digital renderings of high-fashion pieces can be striking (Byun & Ahn, 2023). From a brand fit perspective, certain luxury brands see virtual influencers as embodying futurism and innovation, which aligns with brands that want to be seen at the vanguard of creativity (e.g., Balmain under Olivier Rousteing’s tech-savvy direction) (Arana, 2016).

However, the use of virtual influencers in luxury brand communication is not without controversy (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024). By nature, luxury marketing relies on authenticity, heritage, and human artistry—think of the craftsmanship narrative of a Swiss watch or the personal creativity of a fashion designer (Hitzler & Müller-Stewens, 2017). Introducing a computer-generated ambassador raises questions:

Can a virtual persona convey the heritage and authenticity that luxury consumers expect? (Yan et al., 2024).

Some critics argue that VIs might undermine the authenticity of a luxury brand (Song et al., 2021).

Indeed, one of the main concerns is authenticity: virtual influencers “may lack the authenticity and relatability that human influencers offer” (Long, 2024), potentially making it harder for consumers to trust their storytelling (Long, 2024). A luxury handbag promoted by a virtual model might not carry the same weight as when a respected human tastemaker endorses it, because consumers know the virtual model has no genuine personal taste or life—she is essentially a brand puppet (Kim et al., 2023).

This perceived lack of genuineness can lead to trust issues (Long, 2024). Luxury purchases often hinge on emotional connection and brand trust; if the influencer is seen merely as a CGI mouthpiece, savvy consumers might discount the endorsement (Safira et al., 2023).

Another related controversy is the issue of transparency and deception (Ju et al., 2023). Brands must be careful to disclose that an influencer is virtual (most do, and many VIs are famous enough that the target audience knows they are CGI) (Sorosrungruang et al., 2024). But there have been instances of casual viewers being initially fooled. If consumers feel duped into thinking a virtual influencer was a real person, they may react negatively. (Lou et al., 2022).

Still, there’s a fine line: the marketing needs to acknowledge the fiction while still encouraging consumers to engage with the character’s story. This balancing act can be seen in how campaigns are messaged in press releases and interviews (Lundqvist et al., 2012).

One high-profile debate emerged around diversity and cultural representation. The Balmain “Virtual Army” campaign was lauded for its diversity on one hand (the three CGI models were of different ethnic appearances – Shudu is a dark-skinned model, Margot a white European, and Zhi of East Asian appearance ()). On the other hand, critics pointed out a paradox: instead of hiring real models of those

backgrounds, the brand generated women of color. This led to discussions about cultural appropriation and tokenism – for example, Shudu (the black virtual model) was created by a white male photographer, prompting some to ask whether it was right for a company to profit from a depiction of a black woman that isn't even real or compensated like a real model would be (Dazed Digital, 2018). Similar conversations occurred around Lil Miquela: she presents as a young woman of Brazilian/Spanish heritage, active in social justice causes, but was created by a tech startup run by (initially) two white male founders. Some argued this was appropriating marginalized identities in a manufactured way, rather than elevating real voices from those communities. Luxury brands, which are sensitive to perceptions of tokenism or insensitivity, have to navigate these ethical waters when using Vis (Hewapathirana et al., 2024). As one article put it, “*don't call it diversity if it's literally manufactured*” (Quartz, 2018).

Consumer reactions to virtual influencers in luxury contexts have been mixed. On one side, novelty and entertainment factor high: many consumers find it cool and futuristic that a brand would have a virtual ambassador (Gross, 2024). This can enhance the brand's image as innovative or in tune with digital culture (Okonkwo et al., 2023). It especially resonates with Gen Z consumers, who have grown up with virtual avatars and may even follow virtual idols in gaming or anime contexts. For instance, a Pew Research Center study found that 81% of Gen Z social media users follow some influencer, and many are open to virtual personalities (Lopez, 2024). These younger consumers might view a virtual influencer for a luxury brand as a playful extension of the brand's universe – almost like a character in a story – rather than a deceptive ad (Audrezet et al., 2023). If the storytelling is engaging (say, the virtual influencer embarks on a “journey” or has a narrative arc while showcasing the products), it can create a strong *experiential marketing* effect (StoneRM_, 2024). Luxury brands are increasingly about experiences and story worlds, and a virtual character can inhabit those worlds, whether it's attending a virtual fashion show or “traveling” to brand events in the metaverse (Gabisch, 2011).

On the other side, older or more traditional luxury consumers may be skeptical. According to a March 2022 Statista survey, the following percentage of American consumers bought goods or services that were recommended by virtual influencers, broken down by age group (Kazakova, 2025):

Figure 2.4: Age distribution of consumers purchasing products promoted by Virtual Influencers

Age Group	No (%)	Yes (%)
55 and older	82%	18%
45-54	72%	28%
35-44	55%	45%
25-34	60%	40%
18-24	60%	40%

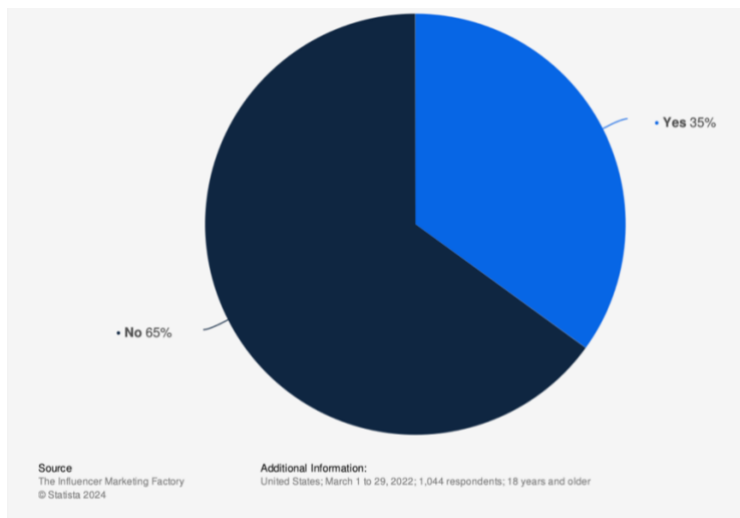
Source: (Kazakova, 2025)

Luxury often prides itself on human touch – the couturier’s hand, the model’s charisma, the personalized service. A virtual influencer might be seen as cheapening that mystique (Jhawar et al., 2023). Indeed, there’s evidence that many consumers still prefer human influencers, especially for certain product types. Belanche et al. (2024) conducted experiments comparing human and virtual influencers for utilitarian vs. hedonic products; they found that overall purchase intentions did not differ dramatically, but the mechanism of influence differed. Virtual influencers were perceived as more useful and informative for utilitarian products, whereas human influencers elicited more identification and emotional resonance for hedonic (pleasure-focused) products. In a luxury context, many products (haute couture, jewelry) are hedonic/experiential. This suggests that human influencers – who can convey personal emotion, style, and prestige – might have an edge in creating that aspirational allure and emotional desire for indulgence. A virtual influencer might do better for communicating product features or technical excellence (say, the innovation of a new luxury electric car)

where rational credibility is valued. This aligns with the idea of match-up hypothesis: the effectiveness of a virtual vs. human endorser depends on the product-brand context (Liu & Lee, 2024). Luxury brands must consider when a virtual influencer's image (often seen as modern, techy, and even a bit whimsical) matches the campaign goals, and when a human touch is irreplaceable (e.g., a perfume that needs a real person's emotional narrative) (Mendoza, 2025).

There is also the question of consumer trust and long-term engagement (Chen et al., 2022). Initial novelty can attract eyeballs, but can virtual influencers sustain long-term loyalty? Some research indicates that trust in virtual influencers is still moderate – for example, one survey found only 15% of respondents rated their trust in products promoted by virtual influencers at 7/10 or higher (Admin, 2024). Moreover, 35% of U.S. consumers said they were open to buying products promoted by AI influencers, whereas 65% were unlikely to do so (Statista, 2024).

Figure 2.5: Share of consumers who bought a product or service promoted by a virtual influencer in the United States as of March 2022



Source: The Influencer Marketing Factory Statista 2024

These statistics imply that a significant segment of consumers remains hesitant to act on virtual influencer promotions. In the luxury segment, where purchase decisions are high-involvement and risk (expensive items), trust is paramount (Song et al., 2012). Thus, while virtual influencers can generate engagement and

buzz, luxury brands have to evaluate if that translates into conversion and brand equity, or if it mainly yields superficial engagement (Shen, 2024). Some luxury houses have used VIs as a complement rather than replacement – for instance, pairing a virtual influencer with a human celebrity in the same campaign. This strategy can bring innovation while keeping a human anchor for authenticity (Chiu & Ho, 2023).

When executed thoughtfully, virtual influencers can indeed bring positive impact for luxury brands. They can refresh brand image, appeal to younger demographics, and generate extensive press coverage (which itself is valuable brand exposure). They also allow storytelling in new creative ways. For example, Prada created a virtual character named “Candy” to personify its Candy perfume line (Hiort, 2021). By having an official virtual muse, Prada could animate Candy in fantastical social media content that blurs advertising and entertainment. This kind of campaign can deepen engagement (fans follow Candy’s “life”) and differentiate the brand (Pesonen , 2022).

Figure 2.6: Candy: Prada’s virtual influencer



Source: (Pesonen , 2022)

Additionally, in an increasingly digital and metaverse-oriented consumer environment, having a virtual ambassador positions the brand for the future of virtual commerce and experiences (Rincon Soto et al., 2022).

However, brands must mitigate the controversies: ensuring transparency (so consumers know Candy or Shudu aren't real people, which most do know, but clarity helps), preserving authenticity (perhaps by giving the VI a credible, well-developed personality and not overclaiming "she loves this product" in a disingenuous way), and aligning the VI with brand values. On the latter point, alignment is critical – a study by Dabiran et al. (2024) noted that influencer–product congruence moderates effectiveness, meaning if the virtual influencer's persona is congruent with the brand/product, the impact on purchase intention is higher. Luxury brands typically craft their VIs or choose ones whose style matches the brand's aesthetic. For example, **Noonoouri** has a chic, couture-inspired wardrobe and a passion for high fashion, making her a natural fit for collaborations with Dior, as we have seen in previous chapters. If a luxury brand creates its own VI, it often designs it explicitly around brand DNA. For example, Yoox's virtual influencer "Daisy" was made to reflect the style of its catalog, and even only "exists" on the brand's Instagram (Hiort, 2021).

Figure 2.7: Daisy the virtual influencer of Yoox



Source: (Hiort, 2021)

When congruence is high, the VI feels like an extension of the brand, and consumers are more likely to accept it as a legitimate brand ambassador (Belanche et al., 2021).

Another potential benefit is risk management. While earlier we noted the accountability risk (the brand is on the hook for the VI's actions), there is a flip side: a virtual influencer will not have unpredictable personal scandals unrelated to the brand (Marketing, 2024). Many luxury brands have faced issues where a human celebrity endorser got into trouble, hurting the brand's image (Kanter, 2025). A virtual influencer is entirely controllable – it won't have an unscripted outburst or a wardrobe malfunction or a change of heart about a cause. In luxury, where brand image is everything, this control can be seen as an advantage. If controversy arises, the brand can simply reprogram the narrative or quietly retire the avatar with far less fallout than dealing with a real person's contract (Dall'Omo Riley & Lacroix, 2003).

In terms of impact metrics, virtual influencers in luxury have shown strong engagement and reach (Jhawar et al., 2023). The Dior x Noonooori partnership, for instance, garnered significant social media engagement (Ramirez, 2021), and Lil Miquela's posts for Calvin Klein and Prada drew millions of impressions along with discussion in media about the campaign's boldness (Hwang et al., 2024). The ROI is a bit trickier to gauge—luxury sales cycles are long and influenced by many touchpoints—but some brands have hinted at positive results (Sharma, 2024). An experiment by Rungruangjit et al., 2024 found that virtual influencers can enhance brand innovative image, which in luxury is linked to consumer willingness to buy new collections (Rungruangjit et al., 2024). That said, researchers like Lou et al. (2023) caution that over-reliance on virtual endorsements might reduce perceived brand authenticity over time if not balanced with human touch.

In the end we can say that Virtual influencers can make luxury brands appear innovative, engage digital audiences deeply, and offer controlled, creative storytelling platforms. They drive social media metrics and can contribute to brand

equity in modernity and excitement. On the flip side, they can trigger debates about authenticity and may not yet equal humans in building long-term trust and emotional connection for high-stakes purchases. It appears that many luxury brands are adopting a hybrid approach – using virtual influencers as one tool in the marketing mix, while still leveraging human influencers and brand ambassadors for other objectives. This hybrid approach might yield the best of both worlds: the engagement and novelty of VIs plus the relatability and trust of humans.

2.4 Introduction to the Research Question

The review above has outlined the conceptual landscape in which our research is situated. We have seen that virtual influencers represent a convergence of AI technology and influencer marketing, raising intriguing questions about anthropomorphism, authenticity, and consumer engagement. Key themes that emerged include: the importance of human-like characteristics (anthropomorphism) in driving audience trust and relationships, the balance between innovation and authenticity in using VIs (especially for heritage-rich luxury brands), and the mixed evidence of effectiveness compared to human influencers (with context-specific advantages and disadvantages). Theoretical foundations such as anthropomorphism theory and parasocial relationship theory suggest that consumers can indeed form bonds with virtual personas, but critical debates highlight concerns like the uncanny valley effect and ethical transparency. There are evident research gaps at this intersection of technology and consumer behavior. For instance, while initial studies have examined general consumer responses to VIs, there is still limited understanding of how virtual influencers operate in high-end markets and how factors like the influencer's human-likeness interact with luxury brand perceptions. The luxury sector provides a rich context to test theories because it amplifies the tension between *artifice* and *authenticity* – a tension intrinsic to virtual influencers.

One salient gap is the lack of empirical insight on consumer trust and purchase intention for luxury products endorsed by virtual vs. human influencers. Do luxury consumers (who might be older or more tradition-oriented than typical Instagram users) respond differently to virtual endorsers? Another gap is in the role of anthropomorphic design features: we know from (Wasti et al., 2024) that certain anthropomorphic cues increase credibility, but it remains to be explored how this plays out in a real advertising context, and whether, for example, a highly anthropomorphized virtual influencer can mitigate the authenticity concerns in luxury marketing. Furthermore, the long-term brand impact – beyond immediate engagement metrics – is under-researched: Could heavy use of virtual influencers strengthen a luxury brand's innovative image but weaken its sincere, human luxury values? These are open questions important for both theory and managerial practice.

Bringing these threads together, this study will focus on the following **research question**:

RQ: "How does the collaboration between virtual influencers and luxury brands impact on brands value systems? What are the perceptions of consumers?."

In essence, we seek to investigate whether virtual influencers can be as effective as human influencers for luxury brands, what advantages or pitfalls their anthropomorphic design brings, and how consumers negotiate the authenticity of a luxury brand when its messenger is virtual.

By answering this question, the research aims to contribute to the academic understanding of influencer marketing in the age of AI, and offer practical guidance to luxury marketers contemplating the use of virtual ambassadors. The findings will shed light on whether virtual influencers truly represent a paradigm shift for luxury communication or function merely as a supplement to traditional strategies. In the next chapter, we will detail the methodology devised to investigate this question, including the study design, data collection, and analysis plan, which are grounded in the conceptual insights reviewed here.

Ultimately, this research stands at the intersection of marketing communication, consumer psychology, and new media technology, and it endeavors to map out how emerging forms of AI-driven communication (like virtual influencers) can be harnessed effectively without eroding the core attributes that define luxury brand value in consumers' minds. The balance of human and virtual, real and artificial, is delicate – and our research question is poised to explore that balance and its implications for the future of marketing in a digital era.

III Methodology

3.1 Mixed Methodology

This research adopts a mixed methodological approach that combines semiotic analysis with a qualitative sentiment analysis to explore the research question: How does the collaboration between virtual influencers and luxury brands impact on brands' value systems? What are the perceptions of consumers? The study is grounded in a dialogue between semiotics and marketing, aiming to capture both the visual-symbolic construction of brand identity and consumer responses to such digital collaborations. Semiotics allows for a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed in visual campaigns, while sentiment analysis provides insight into how these meanings are interpreted and emotionally received by audiences.

This integration of semiotic and qualitative methods reflects the exploratory nature of the study and the social complexity of the phenomenon being investigated. Rather than adopting a quantitative approach, which may risk flattening the richness of symbolic and affective nuances, this methodology is designed to observe and interpret how meaning is created, negotiated, and reacted to in digital spaces. In this sense, the use of secondary data—specifically, user-generated comments—offers a valuable opportunity: it provides direct access to spontaneous, real-time consumer responses situated in the same digital environments where the campaigns themselves circulate. Although this approach has its limitations in

terms of generalizability, it allows for a contextual, in-depth understanding of the ways in which audiences emotionally and cognitively engage with branded content. As such, this methodological choice lays the groundwork for future research that may expand upon these insights through complementary quantitative analyses.

3.1.2 Corpus Selection

The corpus of this research includes two case studies involving the most prominent virtual influencers in the current digital landscape: Lil Miquela and Imma Gram. These figures were selected not only because of their high-profile collaborations, but also due to their cultural and geographical positioning—Lil Miquela being a dominant figure in Western markets and Imma representing a significant presence in Asia. Their involvement with globally recognized luxury brands—such as Prada, Dior, and Balenciaga (Lil Miquela), and Puma and Dior (Imma Gram)—makes them particularly relevant for understanding how luxury branding strategies are evolving in relation to virtual identities.

The corpus is composed of:

- Official campaign materials, including photos, video ads, and digital lookbooks;
- Instagram posts and captions shared by the virtual influencers during their respective collaborations;
- User-generated content and consumer comments across Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter.

For the *diachronic and synchronic analysis*, a broader set of campaign visuals was selected in order to examine how Lil Miquela and Imma are positioned in relation to luxury values, aesthetics, and narratives. This visual corpus was crucial to interpret the symbolic codes embedded in the collaborations and how they align with—or challenge—the traditional frameworks of luxury communication.

The *sentiment analysis*, on the other hand, focused primarily on Lil Miquela, as the selected campaigns involving her generated a significantly higher level of user engagement and sparked diverse emotional and critical reactions among consumers. This focus allowed for a more nuanced understanding of audience perceptions, particularly concerning issues of authenticity, identity, and technology. The outcomes of this part of the study will be discussed in depth in paragraph 3.8, where different consumer interpretations and their implications for brand equity will be explored.

3.2 Semiotic Analysis: Anthropomorphism and Storytelling in Virtual Influencers' Luxury Campaigns

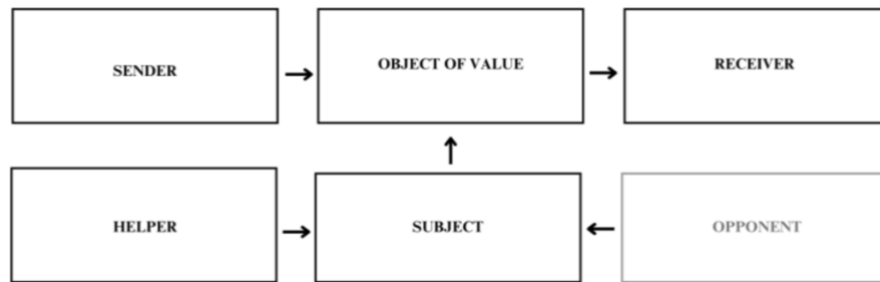
In order to explore the narrative construction of virtual influencers within luxury brand marketing, I will adopt a structuralist semiotic approach, primarily drawing on the theories of Algirdas Julien Greimas. Structuralist semiotics, rooted in Saussurean linguistics, posits that meaning is not intrinsic but arises from the relational differences between signs within a structured system (Zhou, 2020). Greimas developed this perspective further, emphasizing that meaning is generated through deep structures that organize the narrative surface through a *generative trajectory* (Greimas, 1983).

The **generative trajectory of meaning** (*parcours génératif du sens*) conceptualizes meaning as unfolding through multiple levels: from fundamental semantic categories to narrative structures and finally to discursive forms (Greimas & Courtés, 1982). This trajectory is particularly valuable in marketing communication, where storytelling strategies progressively translate abstract brand values into concrete narratives that resonate with consumers (Floch, 2000). Through this analytical lens, the semiotic structures underlying the narratives of virtual influencers, such as Lil Miquela and Imma Gram, and their relationship with luxury brands can be systematically decoded.

Central to Greimas's semiotic model is the notion of **enunciation** (*énonciation*), defined as the set of mechanisms through which the speaker and the addressee are inscribed within the discourse (Greimas & Courtés, 1982). Enunciation marks the shift from abstract narrative structures to a situated act of communication, where the "I" and "you" are constructed within the text. In digital marketing, and particularly in influencer branding, enunciation processes are set to create a perceived intimacy and authenticity between the virtual influencer and the audience (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015). Authenticity, as numerous scholars argue, is a critical currency in digital cultures where consumers seek relational trust and emotional resonance (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Abidin, 2016).

Moreover, Greimas's **Actantial Model** provides a methodological framework to analyze narrative roles in influencer marketing. According to Greimas (1966), narratives can be broken down into six core actants: the subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent.

Figure 3.1: The Actantial Model



Source: Algridas Julien Greimas (1966)

In the context of luxury branding, virtual influencers typically function as subjects striving for aspirational goals—beauty, exclusivity, social recognition—which reflect the object of value defined by the brand's symbolic universe (Kapferer, 2012). The luxury brand often acts simultaneously as both sender and helper, initiating the quest and providing the tools (products, experiences) needed for its

fulfillment (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). At the same time, external forces—such as societal skepticism toward artificiality or competing brands—may assume the role of opponents, complicating the influencer's journey toward authenticity and consumer acceptance.

This dynamic construction of meaning culminates in the **effect of authenticity**, a semiotic phenomenon whereby constructed narratives simulate "real" emotions and life experiences to gain credibility (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015). As Barthes (1977) explains, the "effect of the real" (*effet de réel*) in narratives operates through seemingly trivial details that lend believability to otherwise artificial constructions. Virtual influencers employ enunciation strategies—personal storytelling, emotional vulnerability, alignment with social causes—to simulate human relational dynamics, thus reinforcing their credibility in the eyes of consumers.

Understanding these semiotic mechanisms is essential in luxury marketing, where the authenticity of storytelling directly impacts brand desirability and consumer loyalty (Beverland, 2005). By employing a structuralist semiotic framework—incorporating the generative trajectory, enunciation theory, the actantial model, and the notion of authenticity effect—this research aims to reveal how luxury brands strategically craft narratives around virtual influencers to produce aspirational meaning, reinforce symbolic capital, and enhance emotional engagement within a highly competitive and culturally sophisticated market environment.

3.3 Diachronic Analysis: The Evolution of Lil Miquela and Imma Gram and the Introduction of AI in Luxury Brand campaigns

3.3.1 Lil Miquela: The Role of a Virtual Influencer in Luxury Advertising

Lil Miquela, also known as Miquela Sousa, is a virtual influencer who first appeared on Instagram in 2016. Created by *Brud*, a Los Angeles-based startup

specializing in artificial intelligence and storytelling, Miquela was introduced as a 19-year-old Brazilian-Spanish-American model and musician with a distinctive freckled face, sleek style, and effortlessly cool persona (Abidin, 2021). What instantly set her apart was her lifelike appearance, which blended seamlessly into Instagram feeds, leaving many followers initially unsure whether she was human or computer-generated (Murray, 2020).

From the beginning, Lil Miquela was more than just a digital character; she was crafted to spark conversations about identity, technology, and the evolving nature of influence. Her posts, which mix fashion campaigns, music releases, and social justice advocacy, present her as a relatable young woman navigating modern culture — much like her human influencer counterparts (Abidin & Ots, 2021). By 2023, she had built a loyal community of over 3 million followers, connecting with audiences through her storytelling, personal reflections, and collaborations with major brands.

A defining feature of Lil Miquela is her AI-empowered identity, which positions her at the intersection of technology, storytelling, and branding. Created by the transmedia studio Brud, Lil Miquela is not just a CGI character but a sophisticated construct shaped through algorithms, data-driven behavioral modeling, and narrative scripting. Her presence online is the result of continuous human-AI interaction, where artificial intelligence helps define not only her visual consistency but also her tone of voice, emotional resonance, and cultural relevance (Cut the SaaS, 2023). This technological backbone allows brands to collaborate with an influencer who is fully controllable, immune to scandal, and infinitely adaptable across markets and platforms. Lil Miquela's AI infrastructure plays a crucial role in shaping how authenticity is simulated and perceived, a topic particularly relevant when examining consumer reactions to her endorsements within luxury fashion campaigns.

Researchers have noted that Lil Miquela represents a new kind of influencer, one who blurs the line between fiction and reality. Abidin (2018) describes her as an example of how digital characters can feel authentic and trustworthy, despite being entirely virtual. Similarly, Mavroudis and Milne (2020) argue that her hybrid identity — part fantasy, part everyday life — makes her especially appealing to younger, digitally native audiences who are comfortable navigating between virtual and real worlds. This unique position has made her a valuable asset for luxury brands and tech companies seeking to align with innovation, diversity, and future-facing narratives (Milne & Mavroudis, 2021).

Between 2017 and 2023, Lil Miquela's role in brand campaigns evolved significantly, reflecting both her own growth as a virtual influencer and the increasing familiarity of audiences with digital figures in advertising.

Lil Miquela's role evolved from "brand muse" and "curiosity object" (2017–2018), to "lifestyle storyteller and cultural provocateur" (2019–2020), and finally to "strategic partner and co-creator" (2021–2023). This trajectory mirrors broader shifts in digital marketing, where authenticity, interactivity, and co-creation have become increasingly valuable to brands seeking to engage younger consumers.

In this initial phase (2017–2018), Lil Miquela positioned herself as an early adopter within the influencer landscape, embodying a futuristic, edgy, and experimental aesthetic that set her apart from traditional brand ambassadors. Her collaborations, such as those with Prada and Balenciaga analyzed below, centered on visually striking and unconventional content that sparked curiosity and challenged established fashion marketing norms. These early campaigns reflected a strategy that prioritized cultural capital and niche appeal, which is often used by influencers to differentiate themselves and attract a highly engaged audience (Abidin, 2016). Her posts were intentionally disruptive, blending hyperreal visuals with street culture references to generate a sense of novelty and intrigue, a tactic aligned with how influencers create distinctive and authentic-feeling content to

engage their followers (Marwick, 2015). Authenticity on social media, far from being rooted in conventional “realness,” often stems from a carefully constructed persona that appears culturally relevant and relatable to audiences (Marwick, 2015). Lil Miquela’s deliberate ambiguity—where users could not easily discern whether she was real or virtual—enhanced this form of perceived authenticity. At the same time, the continuous curation of her digital presence, designed to attract attention and sustain relevance, reflects the kind of “visibility labour” central to influencer culture (Abidin, 2016). These strategies allowed Miquela to leverage her novelty as a virtual figure to captivate both brands and audiences, embedding herself organically within the cultural fabric of emerging digital fashion communities. Here are some examples of campaigns during this period of time:

Figure 3.2: Lil Miquela x Prada



Source: Lil Miquela Instagram post 21/02/2018

This Instagram post from February 21, 2018, marks one of Lil Miquela's earliest high-profile collaborations, featuring her partnership with Prada during Milan Fashion Week FW18. At this stage of her career, Miquela's role was primarily that of a digital fashion model, used to visually promote the brand's new collection through product placement and aesthetic alignment. Her pose, styling, and the graphic Prada logo in the background emphasize her position as a virtual ambassador seamlessly inserted into the visual culture of high fashion. As noted by Mavroudis & Milne (2020), virtual influencers during this period were mainly employed in visually driven campaigns to enhance brand imagery rather than engage in deeper narrative storytelling. This campaign illustrates how Miquela was leveraged to embody the avant-garde and innovative identity of Prada, aligning with the brand's ongoing interest in blending technology and fashion. Another example is the Balenciaga campaign during the same year.

Figure 3.3: Lil Miquela x Balenciaga



Source: Lil Miquela Instagram post 6/05/2018

This post, dated May 6, 2018, showcases Lil Miquela's collaboration with Balenciaga for Highsnobiety, highlighting the playful and fashion-forward approach that characterized her early brand partnerships. In the image, Miquela is styled in a striking orange jacket and holds an oversized neon sneaker, blending elements of streetwear and luxury fashion. This visual not only reflects Balenciaga's signature avant-garde aesthetic but also underscores Miquela's role at the time as a digital fashion model primarily engaged in product placement. By featuring her in a campaign that appeals to a younger, street-savvy audience, the brand capitalized on her futuristic yet relatable persona to spark visual interest and cultural relevance. As observed by Mavroudis & Milne (2020), virtual influencers like Miquela were often used in campaigns where their aesthetic qualities could strengthen brand imagery, while still maintaining a light narrative tone that resonated with digitally native audiences.

From 2019 to 2021, Lil Miquela's role in brand campaigns began to shift, reflecting both her consolidation as a recognised virtual influencer and the increasing normalization of digital figures within mainstream fashion and luxury marketing. While her early collaborations had focused on generating curiosity through experimental content, in this second phase she progressively moved towards more structured partnerships that aligned her image with established brand narratives and values. This evolution mirrors a broader tendency among influencers to transition from niche novelty to mainstream legitimacy as they accumulate cultural capital and expand their audience reach (Abidin, 2016). As the novelty of her virtual identity diminished and audiences became more familiar with her presence, brands increasingly leveraged Miquela not just for her disruptive aesthetic, but also for her perceived authenticity, storytelling ability, and influence over digitally native consumers (Marwick, 2015). This period marks a key turning point where Miquela's positioning evolved from avant-garde experiment to credible brand collaborator, particularly in the luxury fashion and lifestyle sectors. An example is the collaboration with Prada in 2021.

Figure 3.4: Lil Miquela x Prada



Source: Lil Miquela instagram post 25/02/2021

An emblematic example of Lil Miquela's second phase is the Instagram post published on February 25th, 2021, Prada's Fall/Winter 2021 show. In the picture, Miquela wears a total white outfit with an optical texture and showcases the Prada Cleo bag, a signature item that the brand was relaunching at that time. The caption reads: *"Forgot to charge last night, but I'm using my last 8% of 🔋 to watch the @prada show LIVE. Anything for my FASHION FAMILY"*. This post integrates two key elements: on one hand, an intimate and conversational narrative typical of influencer-oriented communication; on the other hand, a meta-reference to her robotic identity ("battery charge"), which humorously alludes to her status as a virtual influencer.

During this period, Lil Miquela strengthened her role as a credible ambassador for luxury brands by balancing perceived authenticity and visibility-building strategies. The labour of influencers lies precisely in making the relationship with brands appear transparent and accessible while maintaining a sense of everyday spontaneity (Abidin, 2016). At the same time, Miquela reinforced what can be defined as performed authenticity, where plausibility and relatability prevail over the ontological distinction between real and virtual (Marwick, 2015). The caption “*Anything for my fashion family*” not only fuels the perception of belonging to the fashion industry but also consolidates her image as an insider within a specific cultural community.

This content clearly demonstrates the maturation of her communication strategy: Miquela no longer merely surprises as a novelty, but becomes a recognized and legitimized figure within established brand narratives, capable of mobilizing authentic engagement around key cultural events such as fashion weeks (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015).

Another landmark campaign of this second phase is her collaboration with Calvin Klein, which generated significant attention and debate. The video advertisement features Lil Miquela alongside model Bella Hadid in an intimate, stylized encounter. The campaign stands out for its dreamlike, sensuous atmosphere, characterized by soft lighting, slow motion effects, and close-up shots that blur the line between hyperreality and corporeality. The emotional ambiguity of the scene – oscillating between seduction, tenderness, and curiosity – deepens the sense of disorientation regarding Miquela’s virtual identity and highlights the brand’s intention to push cultural boundaries through experimentation. This campaign will be analyzed in detail in paragraph 3.4.

The third phase (2022–present): From experiment to established brand partner
From 2022 onwards, Lil Miquela enters a third phase of her career, where the boundaries between early adopter novelty and mainstream integration

progressively dissolve. In this period, Miquela transitions from a disruptive curiosity to a fully-fledged brand partner, engaging in campaigns that emphasize aesthetic maturity, cultural legitimacy, and consumer co-creation. This evolution aligns with broader trends in influencer marketing, where long-term partnerships and strategic alignment with brand identity become central (Abidin, 2016). A further emblematic example is her collaboration with Diesel, showcased in an Instagram post dated October 9, 2024.

Figure 3.5: Lil Miquela x Diesel



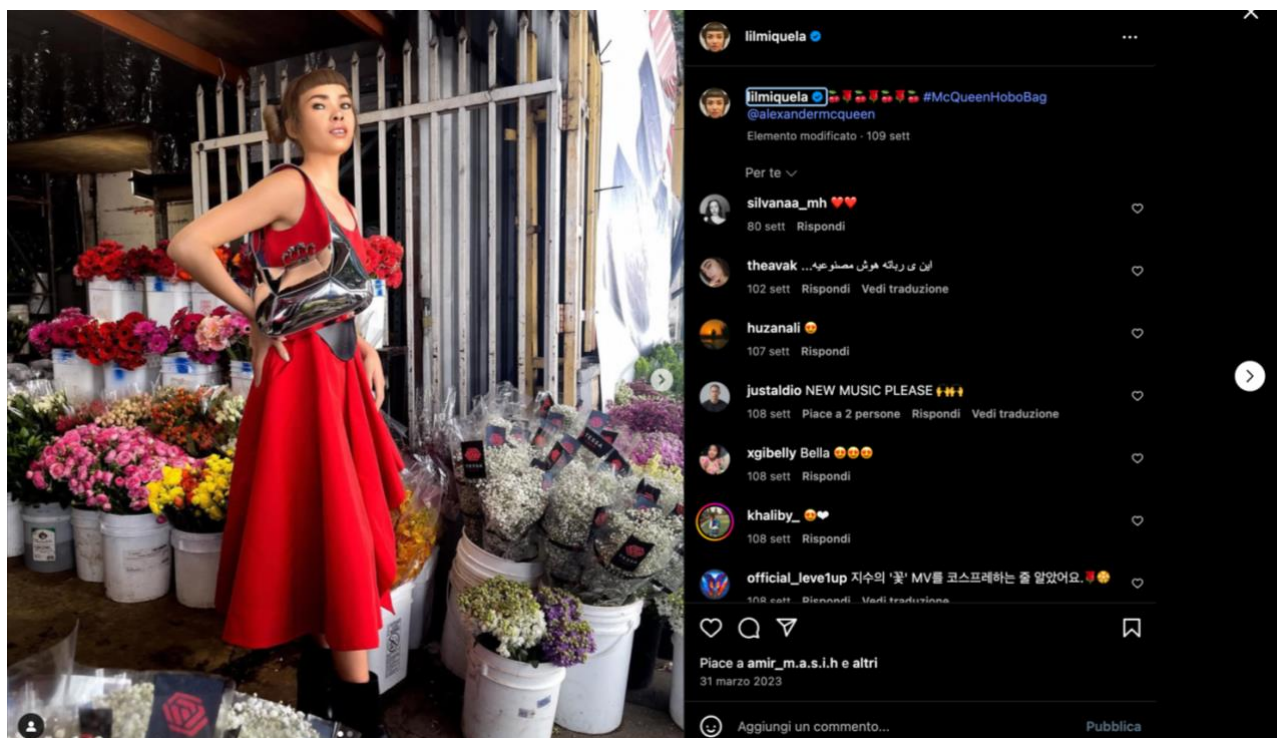
Source: Lil Miquela Instagram post 9/10/2024

In this campaign, Miquela is styled in a full denim-on-denim Diesel outfit, composed of a cropped jacket, skirt, and matching accessories, complemented by light-blue boots and a textured handbag. The photograph, set against the urban backdrop of The Viper Room mural in Los Angeles, conveys a cool, confident,

and slightly nostalgic aesthetic, blending Y2K-inspired fashion with contemporary edginess. Miquela's pose—relaxed yet assertive, with hand on the head—evokes both effortless glamour and streetwise sophistication, perfectly aligning with Diesel's identity of rebellious modernity. Her caption “Denim-on-denim, but make it @diesel” explicitly references the brand while adopting a casual, conversational tone that enhances relatability and perceived authenticity. This campaign exemplifies how Lil Miquela's virtual persona can seamlessly integrate into real-world streetwear narratives, reinforcing her versatility as both a digital and cultural intermediary (Abidin, 2016).

Another relevant example from this third phase is Lil Miquela's collaboration with Alexander McQueen, as featured in an Instagram post dated March 31, 2023.

Figure 3.6: Lil Miquela x McQueen



Source: Lil Miquela Instagram post 31/03/2023

In the image, Miquela poses confidently in front of a vibrant flower market while wearing a striking red dress and showcasing the iconic McQueen Hobo Bag. The

setting—a mix of everyday urban scenery and luxury fashion styling—exemplifies a deliberate juxtaposition that reinforces Miquela’s identity as a digital figure who seamlessly navigates both high fashion and accessible visual culture. This campaign highlights a key dynamic of Miquela’s evolving brand alignment: her transition from novelty to credibility. By associating with a prestigious heritage brand like Alexander McQueen, Miquela demonstrates her capacity to engage with established fashion houses not just as a gimmick, but as a legitimate cultural intermediary. Her presence in this campaign signals trust in her digital persona’s resonance with luxury audiences, especially among Gen Z consumers attuned to hybrid realities and aesthetic innovation. Moreover, the stylized, editorial nature of the campaign—with its clean composition, bold contrasts, and strategic product placement—indicates that Miquela is no longer a disruptive outsider. Instead, she functions as an integrated narrative device, enhancing the brand’s storytelling with a futuristic, yet emotionally engaging dimension. This mirrors broader trends in digital influencer marketing where virtual figures are used to mediate between aspirational branding and experiential authenticity (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015).

Another illustrative case is her involvement in the BMW iX2 campaign in 2023. In this instance, Lil Miquela was positioned as a virtual co-pilot, interacting with audiences through immersive content that promoted BMW’s vision of sustainable mobility and technological sophistication. This campaign will be examined in detail in paragraph 3.4, as it represents a particularly significant instance of immersive and interactive brand storytelling.

Throughout this third phase, Miquela consolidates her credibility through a consistent presence in campaigns that emphasize innovation, inclusivity, and experiential engagement. As Marwick (2015) suggests, the authenticity of influencers increasingly depends on their ability to navigate complex platforms and present themselves as adaptable cultural intermediaries. Miquela’s collaborations in this period demonstrate how performed authenticity can

seamlessly coexist with high-level brand integration, confirming her position as a pioneering figure within both luxury and digital culture.

3.3.2 Imma Gram: Positioning and Impact in the Asian Luxury Market

Imma Gram, stylised as **imma.gram**, is widely recognized as **Japan's first virtual influencer**, developed in 2018 by the Tokyo-based company **Aww Inc.** Her name—derived from the phrase “I’m ma” (short for “I’m myself”)—alludes to themes of **identity, self-expression**, and the performativity of digital personas. As a Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) model empowered by AI (?), Imma represents a fusion of **hyperreal visual rendering and contemporary fashion culture**, embodying a pink-bobbed, porcelain-skinned character that challenges traditional notions of authenticity, beauty, and online influence. A common misconception is to reduce Imma's presence to mere CGI aesthetics; however, her identity is powered by a complex AI system that goes beyond visual generation. Developed by Aww Inc., Imma's behavior, style, and online persona are the result of AI-based data processing, strategic scripting, and machine-generated personalization (Aww Inc., 2024). Through artificial intelligence, she interacts with digital environments and audiences in a way that simulates human-like intentionality and emotional presence, making her a dynamic agent of influence rather than a passive image (Hidreley, 2019).

What distinguishes Imma within the growing ecosystem of virtual influencers is her **distinct cultural positioning**: rather than emerging from Silicon Valley aesthetics or Western digital subcultures, she is deeply rooted in **Japanese visual traditions**, including *kawaii* minimalism, urban futurism, and subtle emotional detachment. This grounding gives her a different cultural resonance compared to figures like Lil Miquela, whose presence is more overtly provocative or activist in tone (Abidin, 2016).

From the outset, Imma has been presented not merely as a marketing tool, but as a **multidisciplinary digital personality**. Her early appearances were focused on high-fashion editorial visuals and collaborations with avant-garde designers, allowing her to move fluidly between **art, fashion, and technology**. With a growing presence on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and even TikTok, Imma's role has expanded over time—from a silent digital mannequin to a socially responsive, transmedia entity who engages with themes such as sustainability, gender identity, and the future of digital existence (Marwick, 2015; Virtual Humans, n.d.).

Technologically, Imma is constructed using a hybrid production process: her face and upper body are rendered in 3D and then superimposed onto photographs of real environments or body models. This method results in a **hyperreal simulation** that intentionally blurs the boundaries between virtuality and physicality, allowing her to inhabit both real and imaginary spaces with striking credibility. This duality reinforces her appeal in a time where the digital self is increasingly central to how identity and status are constructed online (Marwick, 2015).

In less than a decade, Imma has participated in campaigns for brands such as **Porsche, IKEA, Valentino, Dior, Nike, BMW**, becoming a prominent example of how **non-human influencers** can serve as strategic cultural intermediaries—adapting seamlessly to diverse brand narratives while maintaining a consistent and recognizable persona (Storyclash, 2024). Her trajectory exemplifies how synthetic identities are no longer limited to speculative fiction or gaming culture but have entered the **mainstream influencer economy** with increasing legitimacy and commercial relevance.

Imma Gram's career as a virtual influencer can be divided into **three key phases**, each marking a shift in her aesthetic, narrative function, and cultural positioning. The first phase, from 2018 to 2019, is defined by her emergence as a hyperreal visual figure and early experiments in digital identity representation.

During this initial stage, Imma began constructing a distinctive visual persona defined by a soft pink bob, minimalist fashion, and extremely high-resolution CGI rendering. Unlike Western counterparts such as Lil Miquela, Imma was not introduced with an overt storyline or controversial backstory. Instead, her presence relied on photorealistic ambiguity, situating her more as an artistic and technological object than a fully-fledged digital character (Abidin, 2016).

Her Instagram posts at the time were visually rich but narratively sparse, often consisting of brief captions or emoji, allowing the images to speak for themselves. This positioned Imma as an enigma—an aspirational icon whose lack of personal voice paradoxically enhanced her allure. Her carefully curated aesthetic aligned with elements of **Japanese kawaii minimalism** and **futurist editorial styling**, attracting attention from the fashion world and tech-savvy audiences alike.

A particularly illustrative example of this phase is her collaboration with **Porsche**, published on Instagram on **November 18, 2019**.

Figure 3.7: Imma Gram x Porsche



Source: Imma Gram Instagram post on 18/11/2019

In the post, Imma is portrayed in a hyper-stylized urban environment—presumably a digital rendition of Shibuya, district of Tokyo—posing confidently next to the electric **Porsche Taycan**. Dressed in a glossy burgundy trench coat, she visually complements the car's sleek, high-tech aesthetic. The caption describes the vehicle as a response to “a new era,” subtly casting Imma as both a **symbol of futuristic mobility** and a **visual ambassador for technological luxury**. The composition of the post, with its synthetic lighting and futuristic skyline, reinforces Imma’s identity as a VI figure that bridges the gap between aspirational fashion and innovation (Marwick, 2015).

In this phase, Imma was not yet performing a narrative or social role; instead, she operated as a **visual icon**—a digital canvas upon which fashion, art, and brand identity could be projected. Her early success lay precisely in this ambiguity: a figure who was nowhere and everywhere, silent but present, and always meticulously composed.

The second phase of Imma Gram’s evolution marks a shift from visual experimentation to full commercial integration and social identity construction. In this period, she moved beyond being a photorealistic curiosity and began to embody the role of a digital persona capable of engaging in branded storytelling, cultural dialogue, and lifestyle communication (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015). A representative case is her **collaboration with Burberry**, as seen in an Instagram post dated **September 4, 2020**.

Figure 3.8: Imma Gram x Burberry



Source: Imma Gram Instagram post 4/09/2020

In this image, Imma is casually seated outdoors, holding a smartphone and wearing a street-style ensemble, while prominently displaying the **Burberry Pocket Bag**. The caption reads: “Found the perfect handbag to hang out with this fall @burberry ❤️,” followed by the hashtag **#ThePocketBag**. This campaign signals a clear departure from Imma’s earlier cryptic, visually driven posts. Instead, she adopts a more personal, relatable tone—mentioning how the bag became her “new favorite item” and casually crediting a friend for her shirt—thereby mimicking the communication style of human influencers.

This post also demonstrates a strategic **humanization of Imma’s character**. By portraying her in a spontaneous, lifestyle-driven context, the content fosters emotional relatability and positions Imma as a fashionable, mobile, and urban youth—qualities that resonate with Burberry’s evolving brand identity focused on **youth, city life, and digital-first luxury**.

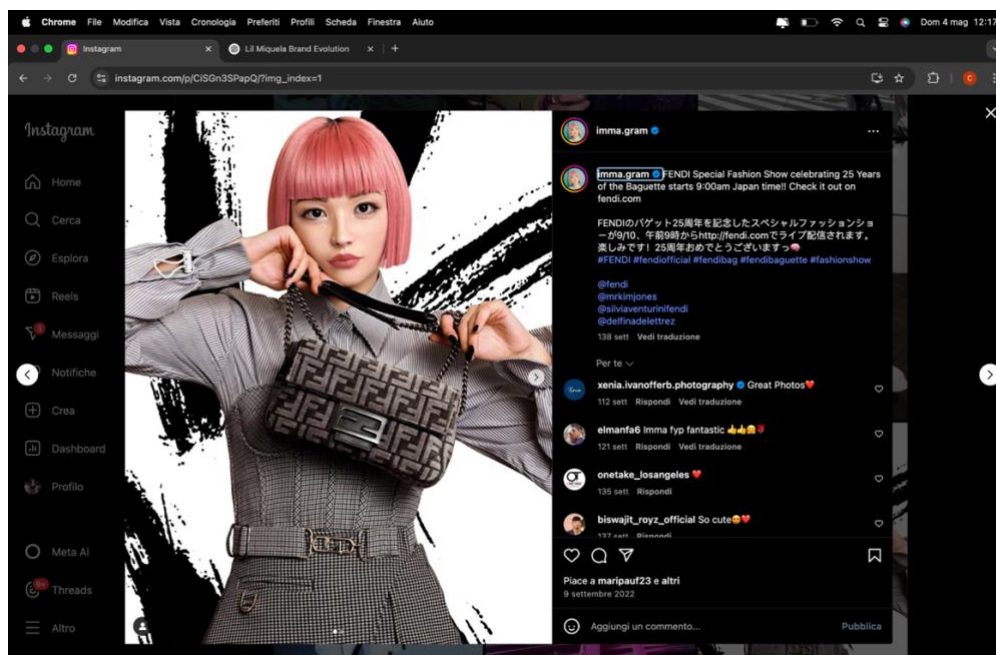
Moreover, the image reinforces Imma’s growing role as a **cultural intermediary**: she visually connects the luxury heritage of Burberry with the digital-native aesthetics of CGI influence. The seamless integration of product and persona contributes to the normalization of virtual influencers in mainstream brand communication (Virtual Humans, n.d.). At this point, Imma is no longer just a

visual object; she has become a **performative brand asset**, capable of enacting familiarity, trend-consciousness, and authenticity within a marketing framework.

The third phase of Imma Gram's evolution is marked by her full integration into the luxury fashion system and her expansion into **transmedia roles**—spanning not just Instagram, but also live events, art installations, and immersive digital experiences. During this period, Imma ceases to function merely as a model or product presenter; instead, she emerges as a **symbolic bridge** between brand tradition and digital futurism (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016).

A key example of this shift is her participation in **Fendi's Special Fashion Show** for the **25th anniversary of the Baguette bag**, as highlighted in an Instagram post dated **September 9, 2022**.

Figure 3.9: Imma Gram x Fendi



Source: Imma Gram Instagram post 9/09/2022

In the image, Imma holds the iconic Baguette bag close to her face, against a sharp, brushstroke-inspired black-and-white background that accentuates her hyperreal

features and the precision of her styling. Dressed in a belted, houndstooth-patterned corset layered over a pinstriped blouse, Imma channels both **heritage craftsmanship** and **avant-garde visual coding**, embodying the duality Fendi sought to celebrate in this campaign.

The caption—announcing the event livestream on Fendi.com—demonstrates a strategic shift from mere product showcasing to **event-based brand participation**, highlighting Imma’s role not just as a digital mannequin, but as a **promotional interface for real-time luxury experiences**. This reflects the evolving role of virtual influencers as immersive assets in the communication strategies of high-end brands, particularly in the post-pandemic landscape where **phygital engagement** has become crucial (Storyclash, 2024).

Imma’s appearance in this campaign also confirms her positioning as a **cultural and technological intermediary**: a figure capable of carrying the symbolic weight of a brand like Fendi while introducing it to younger, digitally native audiences accustomed to synthetic aesthetics and virtual presence. Her meticulously designed persona no longer serves simply as a stand-in for human influence, but as a **posthuman aesthetic agent**, capable of sustaining brand identity across multiple platforms and realities (Abidin, 2016).

3.4 Synchronic Analysis: Lil Miquela and Imma Gram Today and Their Market Positioning in Luxury

In 2025, virtual influencers **Lil Miquela** and **Imma** have established themselves as prominent figures in the luxury fashion landscape, blurring the line between digital personas and real-world brand ambassadors. **Lil Miquela** commands a following of roughly 2.4 million on Instagram. She has become a fixture in high-end fashion campaigns, leveraging her persona as a trendsetting “robot It-girl.” Miquela’s collaborations with luxury houses speak to her influence: she has officially worked with brands like **Prada**, **Dior**, and even street-luxury labels such

as **Diesel**, alongside other majors like **Calvin Klein** (Storyclash, 2024). Notably, she famously took over Prada's Instagram during Milan Fashion Week and starred in a Calvin Klein ad kissing supermodel Bella Hadid – bold stunts that garnered massive publicity (Virtual Humans, n.d.). In the past lone Miquela collaborated with 91 brands on Instagram, reaching nearly 10 million users and generating an estimated €219K in media value (Storyclash, 2024). This expansive reach, coupled with features in Vogue and The Guardian, has made the fashion world take notice. Industry sources even rumored her annual earnings to be around \$10 million from endorsements (Nexoom, 2023). Her audience is largely Gen Z: about 47% of followers are 18–24 and 28% are 25–34, with a slight female majority and a heavy U.S./English-speaking base (Storyclash, 2024). This demographic sweet spot – young, global, and fashion-forward – positions Miquela as an ideal marketing conduit for luxury brands aiming to engage digital-native consumers. Her branding strategy accentuates a socially conscious, avant-garde image (she has been described as a “change-seeking robot” and was named among TIME's 25 Most Influential People on the Internet) (Virtual Humans, n.d.), which in turn lends an air of progressive, futuristic cool to the labels she represents.

Imma, by contrast, has carved out a niche as Asia's foremost virtual model in the luxury sector, with a persona tailored to her region yet equally impactful. Debuting in 2018 as Japan's first virtual influencer, Imma is characterized by her signature bubblegum-pink bob and chic style that resonates with Harajuku street fashion and haute couture alike. Her Instagram following (around 400,000 as of 2025) may be smaller than Miquela's, but it is highly engaged and primarily Japanese (about 78% of Imma's followers are in Japan) (Storyclash, 2024) – a key market for luxury brands. Imma frequently showcases luxury designer pieces in her content, often seen wearing labels like **Valentino**, **Fendi**, **Chanel**, **Dior**, and **Balenciaga** (Cappelletti, 2023). This organic display of high-end fashion has led brands to seek formal collaborations with her. Imma's resume now includes campaigns and projects with an array of luxury and premium brands: she has fronted a campaign

for **Balmain**, been cast in promotions for **Dior**, and even partnered with Italian label **Diesel** on a headline-making campaign that placed Imma “photographed” beside real models (Agenic, 2023). In these campaigns, Imma’s hyper-realistic appearance effectively blurs the line between reality and virtual, creating buzz and novelty value for the brands. Over a recent 12-month period, Imma collaborated with about 80 brands on Instagram, reaching over 4 million users (Storyclash, 2024). Her content strategy emphasizes a mix of local culture and global luxury: Imma often blends Japanese pop-cultural elements with top-tier fashion, positioning herself (and by extension, her sponsor brands) at the cutting edge of style and technology. This approach has made her especially appealing to Gen Z in East Asia, a demographic that is digitally native and luxury-aware. Marketers recognize Imma as a gateway to young consumers in Japan and beyond, evidenced by high-profile engagements like Imma’s appearance at the Tokyo **Dior** exhibition and even tech-cultural events – all of which bolster her credibility as a fashion tastemaker (Cappelletti, 2023). Imma’s rising profile has earned her mainstream accolades (she was listed among Forbes Japan’s Women of the Year 2020) and collaborations with not just fashion brands but also art and media projects, reinforcing that her influence extends across lifestyle sectors while remaining anchored in luxury fashion (Cappelletti, 2023).

Both virtual influencers, Lil Miquela and Imma Gram, occupy similar strategic ground in luxury marketing, yet they exhibit distinct positioning reflective of their origins and target markets. In terms of similarities, Miquela and Imma each serve as innovative, controllable brand ambassadors for luxury labels, offering a novel way to connect with consumers. Brands like **Dior** and **Diesel** have capitalized on both of these Virtual personas (Cappelletti, 2023), signaling a broader industry trend of embracing virtual figures in campaigns. Importantly, both influencers allow companies to tap into the youth demographic with a futuristic twist – they come with built-in storylines and tech appeal that engage Gen Z audiences on platforms like Instagram. Their virtual nature also grants brands greater creative

freedom and reliability: a virtual model can be in multiple places at once, never age, and remain scandal-free. In fact, a major draw for luxury houses is that these influencers offer “24/7 consistent brand representation, with zero risk of personal scandals,” making them an attractive marketing asset in an era when human celebrities can be unpredictable (Nexoom, 2023). Both Miquela and Imma have cultivated high-fashion credibility – appearing in magazine editorials, sitting (virtually) front-row at fashion shows, and aligning with prestige designers – thereby legitimizing virtual influencers within the luxury sphere. At the same time, there are notable differences in their strategic positioning. Miquela’s branding is heavily Western and transmedia: she is Los Angeles-based and her narrative extends into music and activism (e.g. releasing pop songs, championing social causes), which enhances her relatability to Western youth culture and adds depth to her character (Parsani, 2023). This broader storytelling approach means that while she models luxury fashion, she also personifies a lifestyle and value system that global brands can leverage for emotional connection. Imma, conversely, focuses more squarely on fashion and art within an Asian context. Managed by Tokyo’s Aww Inc., Imma’s persona is crafted to resonate with Japanese aesthetics and values – she’s often portrayed exploring art museums, embracing Japanese pop culture, and exemplifying the intersection of traditional and modern Japan (Cappelletti, 2023). Her collaborations skew toward brands eager to strengthen their foothold in Asia and align with cutting-edge tech culture (e.g. Apple, Dior, Fendi), reinforcing her position as a virtual fashion muse in the East.

3.5 Semiotic Analysis: Marketing Strategies of Lil Miquela and Imma Gram in Luxury Branding

In this section, we explore the marketing strategies of virtual influencers within luxury branding through the lens of semiotic analysis. The campaigns under examination feature prominent virtual characters—namely Lil Miquela and Imma—embedded in luxury brand narratives developed by Calvin Klein, BMW, and Coach. Each commercial is dissected through a sequence-by-sequence

analysis, following a systematic breakdown of visual and auditory elements. The objective of this approach is to uncover how meaning is constructed within each advertisement and how virtual influencers contribute to or reshape brand positioning. Drawing on Greimas' generative trajectory, each spot is interpreted as a complex text in which signs—visual, sonic, and narrative—interact to produce symbolic value. This method allows us to understand how campaigns communicate themes such as authenticity, innovation, identity, and aspiration—values that are central to contemporary luxury branding. Each commercial is segmented into coherent narrative sequences, each driven by a unified action, emotional tone, or stylistic structure. This breakdown structure is inspired by the semiotic framework developed by Peverini (2012), who stresses the importance of systematically identifying and interpreting all elements that contribute to the construction of meaning in media texts. By observing the relationships between image, sound, rhythm, and spatial composition, it becomes possible to decode the narrative logic and ideological stance of each advertisement. Below, each campaign will be analysed through a detailed breakdown grid reflecting this method (Peverini, 2012). These visual and auditory codes are not purely aesthetic: close-ups may suggest intimacy or emotional intensity; long shots can provide narrative context; high or low angles affect the viewer's perception of power or vulnerability. Lighting and colour schemes evoke specific moods or symbolic associations such as trust, tension, or nostalgia, while transitions shape the temporal and emotional flow of the story. By applying this analytical framework to the selected campaigns, we aim to identify the brand values being promoted, the symbolic roles assigned to the virtual influencers, and the strategies used to generate authenticity, desirability, and audience engagement. Special attention is given to how these campaigns manage the tension between virtuality and credibility—a defining challenge in the use of computer-generated influencers in luxury communication.

Bella Hadid and Lil Miquela X Calvin Klain- I Speak My Truth

The Calvin Klein campaign featuring Bella Hadid and virtual influencer Lil Miquela sparked widespread attention and controversy upon its release in 2019. The short video showcases an unexpected and provocative interaction between the real-life supermodel and the Virtual Influencer, blurring the lines between reality and simulation. Set against a minimalist backdrop typical of Calvin Klein's aesthetic, the campaign explores themes of intimacy, artificial identity, and the evolving role of technology in fashion and representation.

# Sequence	Sequence Length	Visual Column	Soundtrack Column
1	0:00 – 0:10	- Content description: Bella Hadid appears alone in a minimal, monochrome studio setting, wearing Calvin Klein outfit. For the first 7 seconds we can see only her, at second 8 there is the entrance of Lil Miquela who comes on the scene - Frame width: from full-shot to close-up. First we can fully see Bella Hadid, then there is	Ambient music; Bella Hadid voiceover, it is supposed, begins: <i>“Life is about opening doors”</i>. Subjective sound

		a slow close- up with the entrance of Lil Miquela. - Camera angle: horizontal. - Lighting: At the beginning the light is soft and diffused, then it becomes really bright. Shadows are visible, indicating that the light source comes from outside the frame and is directed toward the scene. - Colour: The color are very defined, Bella Hadid is wearing a black Calvin Klain's cord-set while Lil Miquela is wearing a red dress - Internal composition: The composition is very	
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		basic, it is centered and minimalist. - Transition: fade-in.	
2	0:11 – 0:20	- Content description: Bella Hadid and Lil Miquela kiss - Frame width: Head-shot with a high focus on the kissing scene followed by a half body shot - Camera angle: horizontal and the movement is really slow - Lighting: spotlight effect on both - Colour: bright color - Internal composition: The shot shifts, initially positioning the two characters to the left	Ambient, slightly ethereal music continues under voiceover. There is Bella Hadid's voice saying "creating new dreams you never knew could exist". The sound subtly swells as they start kissing. Subjective sound.

		of the frame; the camera then zooms out, gradually re-centering them within the composition. - Transition: smooth pan.	
3	0:21 – 0:30	- Content description: The two models face each other, holding eye contact in a moment of silent tension - Frame width: extreme close-up on faces followed by a a zoom out giving a full shot - Camera angle: eye-level with slow tracking movement. - Lighting: The lighting remains intense until the camera begins to pull back; as the frame widens, Lil	Music rises gently to a climax during the after-kiss moment.

		Miquela gradually becomes covered in shadow. The sequence ends with both characters no longer illuminated. - Colour: Same as the first scene but in this last one they are inverted. At the beginning bright color to conclude with dark. - Internal composition: symmetrical and centered. - Transition: slow dissolve to black with the appearance of the Calvin Klain's logo.	
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The first-ever BMW iX2 × lil Miquela

This campaign published on October 11 2023 follows virtual influencer Lil Miquela on an emotional journey through a futuristic real-world environment, guided by her interaction with the BMW iX2. The ad blends hyperreal Virtual Influencer aesthetics with

intimate human moments, forming a visual metaphor for the convergence of virtuality and reality. Below is the complete technical breakdown:

# Sequence	# Sequence	Visual Column	Soundtrack Column
1	0:00 – 0:13	- Content description: Lil Miquela appears in a futuristic cityscape at dusk, observing the world around her with curiosity. - Frame width: wide establishing shot, followed by close-up. - Camera angle: aerial drone, then eye-level. - Lighting: soft natural lighting with neon highlights. - Colour: cool tones with neon accents. - Internal composition: Miquela is centered and the car appears	The sound of wind opens the scene, followed by digital sound effects that announce the focus on Lil Miquela

		in the shot from the right - Transition: cross-dissolve.	
2	0:13 – 0:23	- Content description: A dynamic shift in focus moves from Lil Miquela to the BMW vehicle, before ultimately returning to highlight her eye in close-up. - Frame width: The scene begins with a close-up, gradually zooming out into a wide field shot before concluding with an extreme close-up on Miquela's eye - Camera angle: eye level then aerial - Lighting: soft natural lighting with neon highlights - Colour: neutral	Sounds generated by the car as it speeds up

		color with shades of light pink and light blue - Internal composition: There is a high focus on the car - Transition: Cut	
3	0:24 – 0:35	- Content description: The car drives through the city while Miquela enjoys the ride and starts looking around - Frame width: A mix between field shot from the outside of the car and head-shot of Lil Miquela inside the car - Camera angle: horizontal view and fast movements - Lighting: the light is not really bright since the scene is at dusk	Music builds rhythmically; no dialogue; ambient city noise and electric engine hum.

		- Colour: The color red, emanating from the car, stands out as the brightest element in the scene, contrasting with the surrounding soft and muted tones. - Internal composition: contrast between outside motion and inside stillness. - Transition: fast cuts between the inside and outside of the vehicles	
4	0:35 – 0:44	- Content description: She looks at a dragonfly passing by the car's window. She reaches toward a dragonfly that flitters nearby – but as her hand passes through the insect, it slices through it, causing the dragonfly's form to	Music becomes more emotive; ambient sounds of human activity layered in.

		momentarily distort like a glitch before reconstituting. This visually conveys that Miquela is not fully corporeal in this world - Frame width: medium and close-up shots. - Camera angle: eye-level, fostering emotional proximity. - Lighting: warm natural light. Colour: soft warm tones. - Internal composition: focus on human connection. - Transition: slow fades.	
5	0:45 – 0:54	- Content description: The sequence alternates between shots of the	The music reaches a climax, blending with the sound of the car's

		car, Miquela, and the surrounding landscapes, including a bridge she crosses while driving - Frame width: close-ups and field shot - Camera angle: eye-level alternating with field shot. - Lighting: There is a shift in lighting, suggesting that it is right before sunset . - Colour: bright contrasts - Internal composition: focus on the connection between the car and the humans - Transition: cuts between the different shots	acceleration to enhance the sense of speed
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6	0:54 - 1:07	- Content description: Miquela observes people playing on the beach, a sweet, human moment, children are playing by the shore, eating fruits, embodying carefree innocence . One of them looks to the car when Miquela passes. -Frame width: close-ups of her thoughtful expression; wide shot of the car and some shots of humans - Camera angle: zoom-in on Miquela, some focus on the car and other people - Lighting: sunny light Colour: the colors of the summer	Noise of children playing and music in the background
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		- Internal composition: connection with humans - Transition: mix of fade and cut	
7	1:08 – 1:33	- Content description: The narrative shifts from the beach to a more dynamic setting as she drives toward a city. She passes through buildings, people walking. She sees people at the bar, a person throwing away flowers and drives away - Frame width: close-ups of her thoughtful expression; wide shot of the car and some shots of humans in the city - Camera angle: zoom-in on Miquela, some focus	Music playing in the background.

		on the car and other people - Lighting: mix of day and dusk lights Colour: mix of color depending on the specific shot - Internal composition: reflection on the humans' daily activities - Transition: mainly cut to change from one shot to another	
	1:34-1:58	- Content description: Lil Miquela is in a nightclub, surrounded by real people. She observes her surroundings with curiosity and detachment, then notices a beam of light cutting through the darkness. As she	Music playing in the background. Music playing in the background. Music playing in the background.

8		reaches out to touch it, she pauses — as if reflecting on its meaning. Suddenly, she steps back and accidentally bumps into a man. They lock eyes, and a brief, intense connection is established. What follows is a rapid sequence of short, alternating shots: flashes of the car, the two leaning in for a kiss, and Miquela abruptly pulling away and running off. –Frame width: close-ups of her thoughtful expression and wide shot for the nightclub and she running - Camera angle: zoom in and zoom out depending on the shot	
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		- Lighting: The scene is dark due to the nightclub setting, except for a beam of light shining down from above Colour: Dark tones dominate the scene, with Miquela's brightly colored dress serving as a visual focal point. - Internal composition: relationship with the external world - Transition: cut	
9	1:59 – 2:50	- Content description: Lil Miquela is in a nightclub, surrounded by real people. She observes her surroundings with curiosity and detachment, then notices a beam of light cutting through the darkness. As she	

		reaches out to touch it, she pauses — as if reflecting on its meaning. Suddenly, she steps back and accidentally bumps into a man. They lock eyes, and a brief, intense connection is established. What follows is a rapid sequence of short, alternating shots: flashes of the car, the two leaning in for a kiss, and Miquela abruptly pulling away and running off. –Frame width: Initial close-up shots gradually transition into a zoomed-out frame, centering the attention on the car but then back on her - Camera angle: zoom in and zoom	
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		out depending on the shot - Lighting: The scene begins in darkness, but as she starts driving, the lighting gradually shifts to daylight Colour: The scene transitions from cold, dark tones to warmer, natural daylight hues. This color shift visually marks Miquela's passage from illusion to perceived reality. - Internal composition: Miquela is centered within the frame, while the road stretches symmetrically ahead, reinforcing her role as the driver of her own transformation	
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		- Transition: A smooth visual transition connects night and day, symbolically blending two realities through continuous forward motion.	
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Coach × Imma Gram- Find Your Courage

This campaign follows virtual influencer Imma Gram as she embarks on a journey through a series of virtual worlds, each inhabited by different Coach brand ambassadors. Every sequence unveils a distinct environment where Imma explores themes of self-expression and courage, reflecting Coach’s core message of embracing one’s authentic self.

# Sequence	Sequence Length	Visual Column	Soundtrack Column
1	0:00-0:02	Content description: The scene opens with a close-up of Lil Nas X, who gazes off into the distance and slowly shakes his head, suggesting disbelief or	Electronic music begins.

		contemplation. He stands beside Imma, the virtual influencer, in a dreamlike cityscape composed of pastel colors. The setting resembles a giant chessboard, merging architectural surrealism with digital aesthetics. In the final second, Lil Nas X makes a sudden leap across one of the chessboard squares, injecting motion and energy into the otherwise static, stylized environment. - Frame width: Head shot for Lil Nas transitioning to wide establishing shots. - Camera angle: eye level shot followed by aerial views followed by eye-level shots. - Lighting: Soft, diffused lighting	
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		creating a dreamlike atmosphere. - Colour: Dominant pastel hues (pink and blue) with contrasting elements. - Internal composition: Symmetrical arrangements emphasizing the chessboard motif. Lil Nas is centered for each of his shot - Transition: dissolve to next scene.	
2	0:02-0:12	Content description: The phrase "the courage to change the game" appears on screen, setting the tone for the campaign's empowering message. The camera then zooms in on a Coach bag, highlighting it as the central product and symbol of	Music with rhythmic beats;

		transformation. Immediately after, the focus shifts to Imma Gram, who finds herself transported into a surreal, entirely pink-toned world—an unrealistic digital space that blurs the line between virtual identity and fantasy. Her presence in this stylized setting reinforces the theme of self-expression and disruption of traditional norms. - Frame width: Medium shots having different focus - Camera angle: Head shots and wide shots - Lighting: regular light there is no a real focus to highlight something	
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		- Colour: most of them are pink with only the bag that is black - Internal composition: Centered - Transition: it is a continuous sequence	
3	0:12-0:46	Content description: Imma Gram enters a fictional world and finds herself on a giant chessboard with Lil Nas X. Suddenly, he slams his Coach bag onto the board, sending the chess pieces flying in every direction. He then turns to look at Imma, repeating the same head movement he made at the beginning of the ad beginning of the ad. - Frame width: Wide shots of landscapes	Electronic instrumental music.

		interspersed with close-ups. - Camera angle: Low and head angles emphasizing grandeur of nature. - Lighting: Natural lighting with warm tones - Colour: Earthy colors with green and pink dominance. - Internal composition: Balanced framing with central subjects. - Transition: Fade out	
4	0:47-1:00	Content description: Imma Gram enters a futuristic setting, confidently showcasing the bag. A phrase appears on screen: 'Find your courage – #CourageToBeReal'.	Pop music with a steady rhythm

		Moments later, another message follows: 'The story continues', as the scene reveals the other characters from the next chapters of the campaign - Frame width: Medium to close-up shots capturing expressions. - Camera angle: Eye-level shots for direct engagement. - Lighting: Cool, artificial lighting with neon accents. - Colour: Dominant pink - Internal composition: Asymmetrical layouts suggesting movement.	
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		- Transition: Quick cuts leading to the name of the brand	
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Coach, in its campaign featuring the virtual influencer Imma Gram, developed a serialized advertising narrative structured in chapters, each of which presented distinct interactions, evolving roles, and varying character participation. This approach enabled the brand to construct its identity through a cohesive yet fragmented storytelling arc, reinforcing its image across multiple narrative episodes.

A similar strategy is observed in the case of Renault, which, rather than relying on a single advertisement, builds its brand identity through a series of interrelated commercials. Each spot contributes to the overarching narrative, forming a semiotically rich and narratively coherent structure (Rossolatos, 2021). In other words, a coherent brand discourse.

3.6 The Semio-Narrative Level

In the context of advertising campaigns featuring virtual influencers—digital AI figures designed to emulate human appearance and behavior—it is possible to investigate their deep narrative structure through the application of Greimas's canonical narrative schema (Greimas & Courtés, 1982) and, in a secondary capacity, the actantial model. These tools from narrative semiotics allow for the breakdown of the "story" enacted in the commercials, identifying the functional role of characters (actants) and the phases of the narrative path (manipulation, competence, performance, sanction).

The following analysis focuses on three exemplary campaigns—two starring the virtual influencer Lil Miquela and one featuring Imma—highlighting the differences in narrative role organization, the structuring of canonical sequences,

and the communication strategies used in each case. A specific critical focus is placed on the issue of enunciation: who is truly "speaking" in these spots—the brand, the virtual influencer, or a hybrid voice? This reflection will emerge progressively through the analysis, framing the issue of the enunciator's identity and the authenticity of the message as a central question.

- The Calvin Klein campaign "I Speak My Truth in #MyCalvins" (2019).

It features a surreal scene between the real-life supermodel Bella Hadid and the Virtual influencer Lil Miquela. Rather than a conventional narrative, the commercial offers a single evocative sequence culminating in a kiss between the two figures.

Figure 3.10: Lil Miquela and Bella Hadid "I Speak My Truth"



Source: Youtube

The ad proposes a disruption of norms as its central communicative act. In Greimasian terms, the manipulation phase is framed by the brand's provocation: Calvin Klein acts as the sender inciting the protagonists to perform a symbolic

transgression that challenges heteronormativity and reality boundaries. The competence phase is only suggested: Bella and Miquela appear liberated from conventions, empowered to act outside the norm. Their ability to perform this action is supported by the stylized and dreamlike aesthetics of the spot. The kiss becomes the performative climax which is considered as performance in terms of canonic schema (performance is the phase in which the subject carries out the action aimed at achieving the desired object of value), marking a transgressive gesture that alters the state of things. Sanction is implied rather than explicitly shown: the final message invites viewers to reflect on personal truth and freedom of expression. However, the real-world sanction was ambivalent. While some interpreted the ad as empowering, others saw it as an act of queerbaiting—a superficial use of LGBTQ+ imagery to provoke and generate engagement without sincere representation (Allwood, 2019).

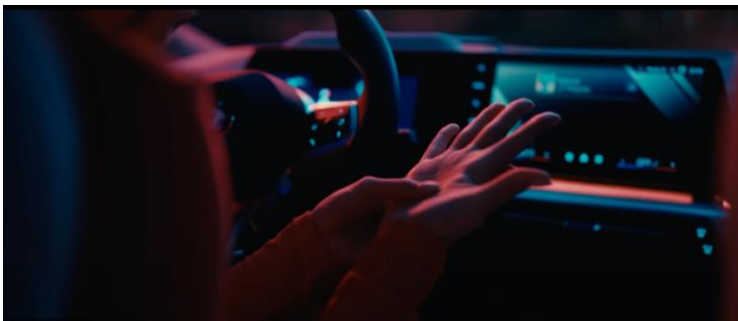
Actantially, Bella is the subject, Miquela the object or perhaps the helper in expressing Bella's truth. Calvin Klein remains the sender, while the audience is both internal (Bella herself) and external (the public). The opponent could be construed as social norms and conventional representations of gender and sexuality. From the point of view of enunciation, the ad raises a critical question: who is speaking? Is it Miquela, Bella, or Calvin Klein? The lack of voice and agency attributed to the characters in the ad suggests a dominant authorial presence of the brand. The influencer serves as a spectacular tool rather than a narrative agent. Hence, we may argue that Calvin Klein is the enunciator, while the characters are objects within the enunciated discourse (Petrarca, 2019).

- BMW Campaign “Make it Real”

The approach from the previous campaign differs considerably from the BMW campaign “Make it Real”, which instead constructs a linear narrative of transformation and self-discovery. Lil Miquela is again the protagonist (Subject), but this time actively engaged in a journey from the virtual world into the tangible

one, mediated by the BMW iX2 vehicle. In this context, the manipulation begins with BMW's call to "Make it Real", inciting Miquela's desire to experience human sensations (making the receiver become the subject). BMW functions as both sender and helper, providing the technological means to cross boundaries. The competence phase is represented by Miquela's progressive ability to touch, feel, and interact with the physical world, culminating in a key performative moment where she is touched by a human. The sanction is explicit and positive: Miquela has fallen in love with real life, and the viewer is invited to do the same. In particular there is the scene where Lil Miquela looks at and touches her own hand marks a pivotal moment in her simulated interaction with the physical world. This intimate gesture suggests a shift from pure virtuality to embodied perception, as if she were beginning to experience the human sense of touch. More than a technical display, the moment symbolizes a deeper emotional and existential awakening—an AI-powered figure becoming aware of her presence in a world that blends the digital with the tangible. It visually encapsulates the campaign's core message: a desire to make virtual experiences feel real.

Figure 3.11: Campaign Make it real – Lil Miquela



Source: Youtube

Unlike the Calvin Klein ad, where Miquela remains largely voiceless and symbolic, here she is positioned as the narrative subject. Yet, the question of enunciation remains complex. Who is narrating the story—Miquela, or BMW? While the emotional tone and perspective may seem hers, the creative direction is

still orchestrated by the brand. This hybrid enunciation situates the virtual influencer somewhere between autonomous speaker and branded avatar (Little Black Book, 2023; Natividad, 2023).

- Coach Campaign “Find Your Courage” - Imma Gram

Finally, the Coach campaign "Find Your Courage" pushes this narrative structure even further by organizing the story as an episodic hero's journey. Imma, another virtual influencer, is cast as the subject on a quest for courage. The manipulation begins with Coach's implicit invitation to embrace authenticity. Each chapter pairs Imma with a human celebrity—Lil Nas X, Camila Mendes, and others—who function as helpers. Through each encounter, Imma learns new emotional and expressive tools, eventually building her competence. In each chapter, she performs an act symbolizing her growth, and the sanction is both internal and external: she gradually affirms her realness not despite her virtuality, but through it.

What stands out in Coach's campaign is the sophisticated handling of enunciation. Imma is given narrative agency and symbolic voice, appearing to interact meaningfully with human figures. The polyphonic narrative includes not only the voices of Imma (not in the first chapter but in the others) and the celebrities, but also a deeper brand discourse about identity and expression. Thus, who speaks here? The brand, the influencer, or both? In this case, the answer leans toward a shared enunciation—Coach speaks through Imma, but also allows her voice to shape the narrative. The result is an immersive and emotionally engaging campaign, exemplifying how virtual influencers can become credible narrative agents when integrated with care (Kelly, 2024; Burney, 2024; Ju, Kim, & Im, 2024).

Beyond the visual narratives and strategic brand alignments, the campaigns analyzed reveal a deeper layer of axiological tension, touching upon values that

transcend marketing and speak to contemporary cultural anxieties and aspirations. The presence of AI-generated influencers like Lil Miquela and Imma introduces a new set of symbolic coordinates that challenge not only the aesthetics of fashion communication but also the foundations of human identity itself. These figures embody a paradox: they are hyper-designed yet emotionally resonant, artificial yet socially relatable. Their very existence questions the uniqueness of the human experience, forcing audiences to confront what remains intrinsically “human” in a world where non-human agents can express style, emotion, and even activism.

The tension between human and non-human co-presence is especially significant in the luxury context, where tradition, craftsmanship, and exclusivity have historically been linked to authenticity and heritage. Virtual influencers disrupt this paradigm by being simultaneously inhuman and hyperreal, offering an unsettling yet fascinating redefinition of presence and influence. In doing so, these campaigns implicitly raise ethical and philosophical questions: Can emotional connection be manufactured? Is luxury still about rarity, or has it become a performance of relevance and innovation? And ultimately, what does it mean to trust a figure that does not physically exist, yet resonates emotionally with millions?

These questions reflect a broader value shift in the culture of consumption, where technological innovation collides with existential inquiry. Rather than resolving these tensions, the campaigns explored embrace them — turning the friction between human and synthetic, real and virtual, into a fertile space for brand storytelling and audience reflection.

3.7 Qualitative Analysis

In conducting this study, a semiotic analysis was initially performed on three advertising campaigns featuring virtual influencers: Calvin Klein's "I Speak My Truth" with Bella Hadid and Lil Miquela, BMW's "The First-Ever BMW iX"

featuring Lil Miquela, and Coach's campaign with Imma Gram. However, for the sentiment and thematic analyses, the focus was narrowed to the first two campaigns. This decision was based on the higher engagement levels observed on Instagram and YouTube for these campaigns, which provided a richer dataset for analysis. Ultimately, Instagram was selected as the primary source of comments due to its community-driven interactions and the substantial volume of responses, which enhanced the quality and reliability of the analysis (Marwick, 2015; Zhang & Zhao, 2021). The sentiment analysis was conducted by manually coding each Instagram comment into one of three distinct sentiment categories: positive, negative, or neutral. This coding scheme was chosen for its clarity and suitability for capturing the overall emotional tone expressed by users in a social media context.

3.7.1 Sentiment Analysis: Consumer Perception of Lil Miquela and Imma Gram in Luxury Branding

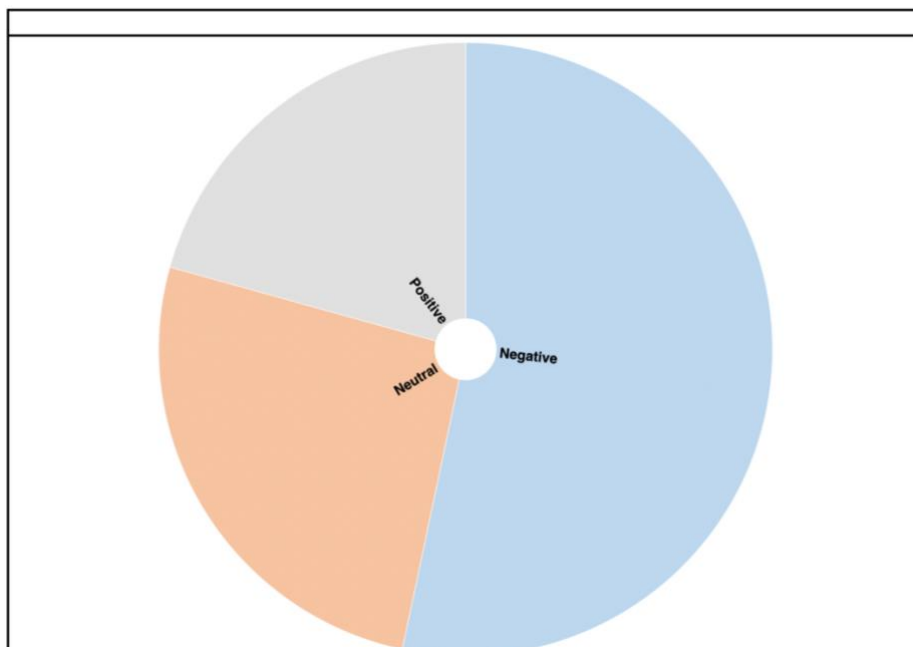
To ensure consistency and reliability in the categorization process, the entire corpus of comments was initially considered. With the support of ChatGPT, all comments deemed irrelevant to the research question—such as unrelated remarks, comment replies, or user tags that did not contribute meaningfully to the analysis—were removed. A clear set of coding criteria was then developed prior to the analysis. Comments were considered positive if they included language that conveyed appreciation, admiration, or agreement with the campaign. Comments were labeled negative if they expressed criticism, disagreement, discomfort, or offense. Lastly, neutral comments were those that either lacked an explicit emotional tone or expressed mixed or ambiguous sentiments that could not be clearly classified as positive or negative. Each comment in the filtered dataset was individually reviewed and evaluated according to these criteria. This manual approach, though time-intensive, was considered the most effective for capturing nuanced emotional reactions in natural language, especially in the case of

Instagram comments, which often contain irony, emojis, or colloquial expressions that automated tools may misinterpret. The process also enabled a more context-sensitive interpretation of key terms that may shift in meaning depending on usage (e.g., the word love used sarcastically vs. sincerely). The application of this methodology across both campaigns allowed for a robust comparison of public sentiment and provided a strong foundation for the subsequent thematic analysis, which delves deeper into the content and recurring concerns expressed by users.

I Speak My Truth (Calvin Klein)

The sentiment analysis of the "I Speak My Truth" campaign involved a filtered sample of 482 comments from an initial pool of 5,379 Instagram comments. The results indicated that 102 comments were positive, 255 were negative, and 127 were neutral.

Figure 3.10: Codification in Positive, Negative and Neutral - Lil Miquela x Calvin Klein

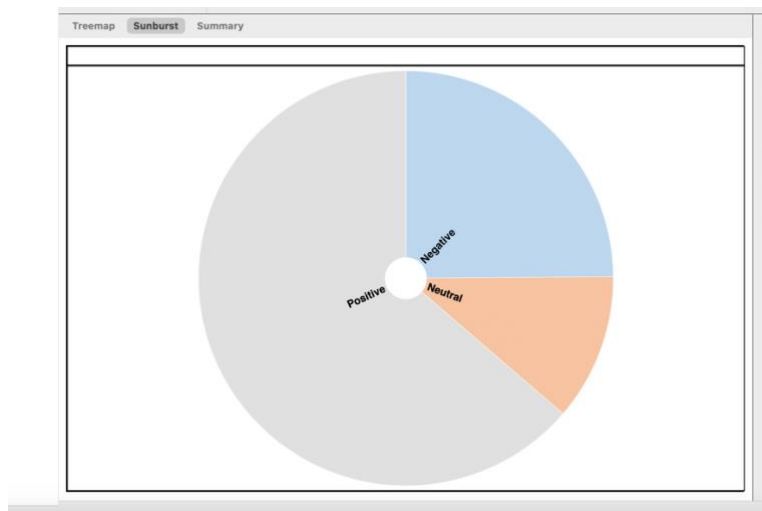


Source: Nvivo

The First-Ever BMW iX (BMW)

In contrast, the sentiment analysis of BMW's "The First-Ever BMW iX" campaign, based on a filtered sample of 201 comments from an initial 367, revealed a more favorable reception. Among these comments, 128 were positive, 50 were negative, and 23 were neutral.

Figure 3.12: Codification in Positive, Negative and Neutral – Lil Miquela X BMW



Source: Nvivo

The accompanying word cloud emphasized positive expressions such as "love," "beautiful," and "humans," indicating a generally appreciative audience response.

BMW's campaign, featuring virtual influencer Lil Miquela, focused on themes of innovation, exploration, and the fusion of digital and real-world experiences. The ad portrayed Miquela discovering the tangible world through the lens of BMW's new electric vehicle, resonating with audiences who appreciated the blend of technology and human emotion (Media.Monks, 2023). This approach aligns with BMW's broader marketing strategy, which emphasizes emotional branding and storytelling to forge deeper connections with consumers (Villing, 2023).

The contrasting audience sentiments between the two campaigns can be attributed to differences in thematic focus, narrative tone, and timing.

108

context that mimicked queer representation, without substantive engagement with the community, was seen as performative and opportunistic (Abad-Santos, 2019).

Conversely, BMW's campaign steered clear of contentious social issues, instead highlighting technological advancement and emotional connection. By focusing on the journey of a virtual influencer experiencing the real world, the ad conveyed a message of innovation and human curiosity, which resonated positively with audiences. This strategy reflects BMW's commitment to emotional branding, aiming to create lasting impressions through storytelling that aligns with the brand's values and customer aspirations (Villing, 2023).

In summary, the divergent receptions of these campaigns underscore the importance of authenticity and audience perception in marketing. While both campaigns utilized virtual influencers, the context and execution significantly influenced public sentiment, highlighting the nuanced dynamics of modern advertising strategies.

3.8 Thematic Analysis

Following the sentiment analysis, a thematic analysis was conducted to examine in greater depth the content and patterns emerging from user comments under the two selected Instagram campaigns featuring Lil Miquela. While the sentiment analysis provided a categorization of emotional tone, the thematic approach allowed for a more interpretative and culturally grounded understanding of how audiences responded to the presence of a virtual influencer in luxury brand communication.

The analysis was guided by the thematic framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which emphasizes the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns (*themes*) across qualitative data. All Instagram comments were manually reviewed

and inductively coded, allowing themes to emerge organically while remaining aligned with the broader research questions.

Three macro-categories were defined, each encompassing two micro-categories, for a total of six sub-themes:

1. Role of AI in Communication

- *AI as Innovation and Creativity*: comments that celebrated the technological potential and originality of using virtual influencers in marketing.
- *AI as Manipulation or Threat*: reactions expressing discomfort, fear, or ethical concerns regarding the use of artificial intelligence and synthetic identities in commercial storytelling.

2. Transformation of Luxury Brand Meaning

- *Modernity and Progressiveness*: recognition of brands adopting digital tools and virtual figures to appear contemporary and aligned with youth culture.
- *Loss of Authenticity or Coherence*: critiques suggesting that the use of virtual influencers undermines the traditional values or perceived credibility of luxury brands.

3. Construction of Virtual Identity

- *Relatability and Emotional Engagement*: expressions of empathy, connection, or curiosity toward the virtual influencer, often reflecting human-like attributes.
- *Artificiality and Distance*: comments highlighting the emotional or existential gap between the audience and the virtual figure, often referring to the “unreal” nature of the character.

These categories were used to classify and interpret the content of user comments, revealing how audiences negotiated themes of technology, identity, and brand image. This layered approach provides insight not only into what people felt about

the campaigns, but also into **why** they responded in those ways, and how the presence of a virtual influencer triggered broader social and emotional discourses.

3.8.1 Main themes and Subcodes

The thematic analysis was conducted using a consistent coding framework across both campaigns, allowing for direct comparison between user responses to Calvin Klein's "I Speak My Truth" and BMW's "The First-Ever BMW iX". The same set of macro- and micro-categories was applied to the Instagram comment sections of both ads, facilitating a structured exploration of how audiences engaged with themes such as AI communication, virtual identity, and brand meaning.

In the first campaign (Lil Miquela x Calvin Klein), three thematic patterns stood out in terms of volume and contrast. Within the "Role of AI in Communication" code, the sub-theme AI as Manipulation or Threat appeared prominently, accounting for 50 coded references ("Never did I ever think I would see AI queerbait, but here we are I guess") , compared to just 7 references for AI as Innovation and Creativity ("I'm so curious about how they made this"). This suggests that many users interpreted the presence of a virtual influencer as deceptive or ethically problematic, rather than as a technological advancement.

Under the "Transformation of Luxury Brand Meaning" code, the most frequent sub-theme was Loss of Authenticity or Coherence, with 122 references ("Who approved this? Does Calvin Klein seriously not have any LGBTQ+ employees? No one at @calvinklein thought this was a bad idea") compared to only 35 for Modernity and Progressiveness ("This is amazing. Amazing work, amazing music."). This indicates that viewers perceived a mismatch between the traditional values of Calvin Klein and the use of a synthetic figure, undermining the brand's credibility in their eyes. Finally, within the "Construction of Virtual Identity" category, the sub-theme Artificiality and Distance, 156 comments ("Imagine how awkward that scene must have been of her kissing air") far outnumbered

Relatability and Emotional Engagement, 112 references (“Both are awesome on the earth... coz it is very difficult to tell your feeling... 🤔”) revealing a sense of emotional detachment and discomfort with Miquela’s digital nature.

ANALYSES ADV LIL MIQUELA X CALVIN KLAIN			
Categories	Subcategories	# of comments in the subcategory	% for each subcategory
Role of AI in Communication	AI as Innovation and Creativity	7	12%
	AI as Manipulation or Threat	50	88%
Transformation of Luxury Brand Meaning	Modernity and Progressiveness	35	22%
	Loss of Authenticity or Coherence	122	78%
	Relatability and Emotional Engagement	112	42%
Construction of Virtual Identity	Artificiality and Distance	156	58%

In contrast, the BMW campaign elicited a more balanced distribution of sub-themes. In the AI-related category, AI as Manipulation or Threat was still more frequently mentioned; 85 references (“Poor me. That AI model can enjoy BMW while I'm just here doing comments “), than AI as Innovation and Creativity; 20 reference (“Love to see innovations that are shifting old stuff flipping to the cutting edge technologies”), yet the disparity was notably smaller than in the Calvin Klein case. This could suggest that although some skepticism remained, the framing of AI in BMW’s ad was less controversial or provocative.

In the second category, Transformation of Luxury Brand Meaning, the gap between Modernity and Progressiveness ; 21 comments (“Wow that’s crazy compared to the previous one”), and Loss of Authenticity or Coherence; 16 comments (“How does it feel to watch fake content created by AI folks? But whatever makes money for big brands.. this is the world we are living in”) was relatively narrow, indicating that audiences may have been more accepting of BMW's use of digital storytelling to modernize its image.

Similarly, under Construction of Virtual Identity, the difference between Artificiality and Distance; 30 comments (“ I am asking the people of the whole world not to normalize these robots, they may be useful for humans now, but in less than 20 years they will be working against humans.”)and Relatability and Emotional Engagement; 29 comments (“Omg that’s my girl miquela “) was minimal, implying that the virtual influencer in this context generated both curiosity and connection, without evoking the same level of alienation seen in the Calvin Klein ad.

ANALYSES ADV LIL MIQUELA X BMW			
Categories	Subcategories	# of comments in the subcategory	% for each subcategory
Role of AI in Communication	AI as Innovation and Creativity	20	19%
	AI as Manipulation or Threat	85	81%
Transformation of Luxury Brand Meaning	Modernity and Progressiveness	21	57%
	Loss of Authenticity or Coherence	16	43%
	Relatability and Emotional Engagement	29	49%
Construction of Virtual Identity	Artificiality and Distance	30	51%

Taken together, these results show that although the same thematic codes were used, the intensity and direction of engagement varied greatly. The Calvin Klein campaign provoked more polarized and critical responses, particularly around issues of manipulation, authenticity, and disconnection. In contrast, BMW’s ad prompted a more evenly distributed set of reflections, suggesting a more successful or at least less divisive integration of virtual influencer technology into luxury branding. Basically, what emerged from this analysis is what emerged also from the semiotic analysis.

IV Conclusion

4.1 Conclusions

The purpose of this thesis was to answer the question:

"How does the collaboration between virtual influencers and luxury brands impact on brands value systems? What are the perceptions of consumers?".

The NVivo analysis of Lil Miquela's campaigns reveals clear contrasts. The Calvin Klein campaign featuring Bella Hadid and Lil Miquela generated overwhelmingly negative sentiment online; many users labeled the ad "tone-deaf" and "queer-baiting" (Cusumano, 2019; Cranley, 2019). Calvin Klein, a brand with a stated tradition of advocating LGBTQ+ rights, publicly apologized for misrepresenting that community. This suggests consumers saw a misalignment between the campaign and authentic brand values. In contrast, the BMW iX2 campaign cast Lil Miquela in a narrative about bridging digital and physical realities, which resonated more positively. BMW executives described the ADV as "all about real life" and focused on emotion and human connection (Natividad, 2023). NVivo-coded comments reflected intrigue and approval of the campaign's philosophy, indicating better influencer-brand fit. In sum, when Lil Miquela's persona matched the brand's innovation-driven image (as with BMW's "Make it Real" theme), consumer sentiment was generally favorable; but when the campaign felt gimmicky or insensitive (as with Calvin Klein's same-sex kiss scenario), it provoked backlash. Regarding authenticity, users questioned the sincerity of the CK ad's message – many felt using a CGI character in a love scene undermined truthfulness (Cranley, 2019). By contrast, BMW's story emphasized genuine emotion, and audiences accepted the narrative as authentic enough to be engaging (Marketing-Interactive, 2023).

Turning to the Imma Gram case, our conclusions are based on theory and context rather than NVivo data. Imma, a Japanese virtual influencer known for her pink-

haired aesthetic, has collaborated with luxury brands such as Coach, Dior, and Porsche Japan (Hiort, 2023). In these instances, Imma's tech-savvy persona aligns with brands targeting younger, digitally native consumers. However, theoretical research cautions that virtual influencers often face authenticity issues; consumers may view Imma as less "real" than a human model, affecting trust (Long, 2024). For example, Imma's campaign imagery leans heavily on digital futurism, which luxury audiences may perceive as fresh and forward-thinking but also potentially less personal. Overall, while Imma's collaborations suggest virtual idols can symbolize innovation for luxury brands, the same consumer scrutiny of genuineness applies as with Lil Miquela. The general reflection is that luxury marketers can leverage Imma's novelty to reinforce values of creativity and technology, but should remain aware that some consumers may doubt the authenticity of such CGI endorsements.

4.2 Managerial Implications

Luxury brand managers should use virtual influencers only when there is strong alignment between the influencer's persona and the brand's value proposition. The BMW case illustrates how a technology-infused campaign ("Make it Real") can coherently integrate Lil Miquela into a narrative of electrification and human experience (Marketing-Interactive, 2023). Brands with innovation or futurism in their DNA can highlight that fit. By contrast, Calvin Klein's attempt to signal inclusivity through a virtual kiss felt insincere (Cranley, 2019). Managers should therefore ensure that any virtual influencer's style and story authentically reflect the brand. Audience segmentation is also key: younger, digitally native segments tend to embrace virtual influencers. Luxury brands targeting Gen Z or millennial consumers can capitalize on the novelty and high engagement rates of CGI figures. However, managers must be cautious with older or more traditional demographics who may view virtual spokespeople as less trustworthy (Long, 2024).

Content sensitivity must not be overlooked. The backlash to Calvin Klein's campaign shows that combining virtual influencers with sensitive social themes can amplify negative reactions (Cusumano, 2019; Cranley, 2019). Managers should avoid using VIs in contexts that could appear exploitative (for example, tokenizing LGBTQ+ imagery), and should transparently disclose the virtual nature of the influencer to prevent feelings of deception (Long, 2024). In practice, this means treating virtual characters like any celebrity endorser – with respect for the audience's values. Platform strategy is another consideration: virtual influencers live in digital spaces, so campaigns should leverage interactive and visual channels. For instance, BMW extended its campaign with Lil Miquela into a Fortnite virtual city, engaging fans through gaming in addition to Instagram and YouTube (Natividad, 2023). Luxury managers should deploy VIs on social media and emerging platforms (TikTok, AR/VR experiences) where storytelling and immersion are possible. In sum, a practical approach is: use virtual influencers when their identity enhances the brand story, target segments that appreciate digital innovation, handle sensitive content with extra care, and utilize a multimedia platform mix. When applied thoughtfully, VIs can generate excitement and an innovation narrative for luxury brands; but without careful alignment and transparency, they risk seeming gimmicky or undermining authenticity.

4.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study's findings are constrained by the limited case set. We analyzed only two Lil Miquela campaigns and discussed Imma only in broad terms. Such a small sample limits generalizability. Notably, the Calvin Klein case combines two controversial elements (a CGI influencer and a same-sex kiss involving a heterosexual model), making it difficult to isolate the driver of negative sentiment (Cusumano, 2019; Cranley, 2019). In other words, consumer backlash may have been due to the campaign's perceived "queerbaiting" rather than to Lil Miquela's virtual status per se. This ambiguity suggests the need for caution in interpretation.

Future research should expand on these cases with more diversity. Scholars could examine additional virtual influencer–brand collaborations across different luxury sectors (fashion, beauty, automotive) and cultural contexts. For example, how do Western consumers versus Asian consumers respond to the same virtual influencer? Do reactions differ between product categories (e.g. high fashion versus technology)? Longitudinal studies could also track whether consumer sentiment changes as virtual influencers become more commonplace. Furthermore, future work should disentangle factors by varying campaign content: for instance, comparing ads that feature a VI in similar scenarios with different social messages. Finally, researchers should investigate outcomes beyond sentiment (such as actual purchase behavior or brand loyalty) and consider other virtual influencers and platforms. By broadening the range of cases and contexts, future studies can better understand when and why virtual influencers enhance or undermine luxury brand value systems.

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