

Engaging the Unreal: How Realism and Humanness Drive Reactions to Virtual Influencers

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Abstract

This study investigates how realism and human likeness influence consumer engagement with virtual influencers (VIs). Drawing on a qualitative cross-case analysis of four VIs—Imma, Mono Mars, Noonouri, and Birdsoup—categorized by realism and humanness, we identify six core engagement factors: criticism, admiration, skepticism, character affiliation, narrative affiliation, and social bonding. Findings show that realism increases skepticism and criticism, while human likeness enhances admiration. Surprisingly, less humanlike VIs elicit stronger emotional and narrative engagement, suggesting that stylized and fictional personas may outperform hyper-realistic ones in fostering meaningful connections. We propose six propositions to guide future research and provide strategic recommendations for aligning VIs with brand narratives. This study contributes to the influencer marketing literature by refining engagement models and offering insights for marketers navigating the evolving landscape of AI-driven brand engagement.

Track: Marketing and Technology Interaction