Behind the Scenes: An Empirical Exploration of Virtual Influencers' Leveraging on Immersive Platforms

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Abstract:

As immersive platforms reshape virtual influencers' roles, more brands are adopting them in these spaces. So far, research has focused on virtual influencers' use on social media. Our study explores virtual influencers' leveraging on immersive platforms and the associated goals brands aim to pursue. Based on expert interviews, we show that virtual influencers are mainly used on immersive platforms to create brand experiences that, in turn, encourage consumers to spend more time on such platforms (immersive time). We reveal two brand experience dimensions unique to these spaces evoked by virtual influencers and introduce three dimensions of immersive time, shaped by both new and established brand experience dimensions. Our findings offer valuable implications for brands, emphasizing the need for safe, interoperable experiences through regulated, responsive virtual influencers alongside the established experience dimensions to foster temporal engagement, exploration, and escapism.

Keywords: immersive platforms, influencer marketing, virtual influencer

Track: Digital Marketing & Social Media

1. Introduction

With rapid technological advancements in influencer marketing, virtual influencers (VIs) are becoming increasingly prevalent, shaping consumer behavior in many online environments (Audrezet & Koles, 2023). VIs are computer-generated creations that exist as social media profiles, with appearances ranging from animation-like characters to hyper-realistic models (Mouritzen, Penttinen, and Pedersen, 2023). They shape consumers' experiences and purchase decisions by combining human-like behavior with unique personalities and compelling narratives while overcoming the physical constraints faced by human influencers (HIs) (Audrezet & Koles, 2023). Fully designed and managed by third parties like brands or digital agencies, VIs allow for precise control over their image and communication (Mouritzen et al., 2023). They can, therefore, be tailored to specific contexts and audiences across diverse online environments (Mouritzen et al., 2023).

One promising online environment for brands to leverage VIs is immersive platforms, a three-dimensional evolution of social media (Batinovic, Tingelhoff, Hammerschmidt, and Schöbel, 2024). These platforms use virtual reality (VR) technologies to offer 360-degree perspectives and integrate multisensory features, enabling real-time social interactions. Consumers, embodied as avatars, can experience a unique sense of presence and intimacy akin to physical reality (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2022). As on immersive platforms all users (human and artificial) are visualized as avatars with similar appearances, consumers often cannot tell whether they interact with humans or virtual entities like VIs. This blurring of boundaries allows brands to use VIs for controlled, human-like consumer interactions.

As VIs are still a novel and emerging phenomenon, research has predominantly focused on VIs' role in social media platforms, highlighting their marketing effectiveness on Instagram or TikTok (e.g., Audrezet & Koles, 2023) and comparing their ability to influence consumer perceptions with that of HIs (e.g., Franke, Gröppel-Klein, and Müller, 2023). While these studies advanced the understanding of VIs in conventional social media contexts, they fall short of exploring how brands leverage VIs on immersive platforms and which objectives they want to attain within these environments. This is a significant gap, practically and conceptually. Practically, interaction possibilities on immersive platforms go far beyond the possibilities of social media, limited to likes, comments, or messages (Batinovic et al., 2024; Mogaji, Wirtz, Belk, and Dwivedi, 2023). Given the extended technological possibilities, a growing number of brands like Maybelline New York and Porsche are employing VIs in these environments (McDowell, 2024). Therefore, the unique combination of VIs and immersive

platforms warrants further investigation. Conceptually, recent studies have identified new dimensions within established constructs, like brand experience (BE), specific to immersive settings (e.g., Mingione, Mattia, Materia, and Pedeliento, 2024). Researchers have even started introducing new constructs unique to these platforms and not borrowed from other contexts, such as 'Immersive Time (ImT)' (Mogaji et al., 2023). Thus, relying solely on established constructs may not suffice to capture the full potential of VIs in these novel settings and may not effectively guide stakeholders active in these spaces.

This study explores this gap by analyzing what brands intend to accomplish through VIs, specifically on immersive platforms, and how they leverage VIs in these spaces. Examining these aspects will provide insights into the evolving role of VIs in immersive spaces and help identify opportunities for brands to strengthen their presence by crafting VI-driven experiences tailored to the unique possibilities of immersive platforms, ultimately achieving brand-beneficial outcomes. Therefore, we derive the following research questions:

RQ1: Why do brands deploy VIs on immersive platforms?

RQ2: How do brands leverage VIs on immersive platforms?

To answer these questions, we build on eight semi-structured interviews with industry decision-makers experienced in the rapidly evolving field of VI marketing. We contribute to organic theory building by understanding VI interactions uniquely grounded in the emerging context of immersive platforms, thereby investigating the particular goals brands pursue in these contexts through using VIs. Doing so helps us communicate better with practitioners who are "at home" in those immersive spaces and supports them in designing VIs to create favorable brand experiences in these environments effectively.

2. Conceptual background

VIs and HIs gain loyal fanbases by showing expertise and creating engaging content, shaping consumer perceptions of brands (Mouritzen et al., 2023). While HIs act as independent endorsers by communicating brand messages, VIs are created and managed by third parties (e.g., brands) to ensure controlled, tailored brand representation (Mouritzen et al., 2023). VIs, characterized by distinct appearances, unique personalities, and engaging storylines, exist solely in digital spaces without a human counterpart (Franke et al., 2023).

Driven by technological developments, immersive platforms reshaped VIs' roles, offering new opportunities to redefine their presence and interactions. These platforms involve devices

like VR headsets, allowing consumers to reimagine personal representation through avatars that can approach each other spatially, transforming digital interactions into multisensory and interactive experiences (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2022). This enables VIs' to be designed as avatars that can interact with others (e.g., consumers) and objects in virtual spaces, mimicking realistic gestures and behaviors through motion tracking and animations (Batinovic et al., 2024). To be considered immersive, these platforms must also enable real-time interactions and peer-to-peer transactions (Yoo, Welden, Hewett, and Haenlein, 2023). These functions let VIs engage in live shared experiences, overcoming the static limitations of social media content and enhancing consumers' perceptions of realistic, personal interactions (Batinovic et al., 2024). Although specific platforms featured some of these elements before, their full integration distinguishes immersive platforms as uniquely cohesive digital environments.

Despite VIs' innovative opportunities for brands on immersive platforms, little is known about the unique, platform-specific experiences that can be created with VIs. In this context, the focus of prior research on established dimensions of VI-driven BEs in immersive environments (Batinovic et al., 2024) highlights a gap in understanding newly identified dimensions distinctive to these spaces (Mingione et al., 2024). Further, it remains unclear how BEs with VIs drive brand-beneficial outcomes specific to these spaces (Mogaji et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

As VIs are still in the early stages of establishment on immersive platforms, we employ a qualitative approach to gain deeper, contextualized insights into their evolving roles as brand endorsers (Draper, 2004). Our study aims to better understand how VIs are changing and what defines them in immersive spaces, requiring an open perspective on their nature, characteristics, and meaning. To achieve this, we conducted eight expert interviews with industry decision-makers who possess deep knowledge of the evolving landscape of VI marketing on immersive platforms.

Our interview participants (IPs) were recruited via LinkedIn and were, on average, 35.9 years old (min: 27, max: 45). We interviewed four males and four females. The IPs were familiar with the topic, as they were involved in designing and managing VIs, with follower counts on social media ranging from 1,500 (IP6) to over 500,000 (IP5, IP2), and were either planning or already implementing VIs on immersive platforms. Additionally, we confirmed their understanding of VIs and immersive platforms by asking about these topics at the start of each interview. We adopted an interpretive, inductive approach and used semi-structured

interviews to explore our IPs' socially constructed realities through flexible, predefined questions, such as the role of a VI's avatar in immersive spaces centered on their experiences and insights. We explored our IPs' goals in using VIs on immersive platforms, focusing on design considerations, opportunities, challenges, and the evolving landscape of VI marketing in these spaces. Each interview, lasting an average of 61 minutes, was conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2013).

For data analysis, we used Gioia et al.'s (2013) coding framework, with two authors separately coding and resolving discrepancies through discussion until second-order themes emerged. After the 5th interview, we noted a high coding saturation (95% of categories established), consistent with studies on the method (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006).

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Shaping brand experiences with virtual influencers on immersive platforms

The embodiment of VIs as avatars lays the foundation for rich BEs on immersive platforms (Mingione et al., 2024). As IP2 argues, "3D embodied VIs allow for more multidimensional experiences of brands." BEs are consumers' internal reactions triggered by brand-related stimuli integrated into brand designs, communications, and environments (Schmitt, Zarantonello, and Brakus, 2009). Our results (Fig. 1) reveal that VIs on immersive platforms offer brands unparalleled possibilities to influence various experiences. Below, we specify and contextualize the established five BE dimensions – *intellectual*, *affective*, *sensory*, *relational*, and *behavioral* – while incorporating two new dimensions – *safety* and *interoperability* – unique to this environment (Mingione et al., 2024).

Most interviewees discussed the *intellectual* and *affective dimensions*, indicating a focus on VI-related brand activities on immersive platforms. According to our IPs, the new interaction possibilities and spatial proximity facilitate a novel form of "edutainment" (IP1, IP3-IP5, IP7, IP8). This focus on the two dimensions partially contrasts with prior findings suggesting that intellectual aspects play a negligible role in immersive platform experiences, emphasizing the emotional component (Mingione et al., 2024). However, from a brand perspective, combining education (IP1, IP3-IP8) with amusement (IP1, IP3, IP5-IP8) can enhance the overall BE (Batinovic et al., 2024), as consumers are often drawn to VIs for their entertaining characters (Audrezet & Koles, 2023) and learning increases their intention to use immersive platforms (Wang & Shin, 2022). Further, VIs can create visually stimulating brand impressions (IP1-IP6) and serve as tangible branded projections for creative concepts (IP1, IP2, IP4-IP8), particularly in close range, enhancing the *sensory dimension* (Mingione et al.,

2024). From our IPs' perspectives, auditory experiences are crucial, given that VIs can represent a brand's voice (IP1-IP8), as "consumers are not just talking to a logo; they can virtually speak with a personified version of a brand" (IP2). Facilitated by spatial proximity between avatars, VIs can excel in the *relational dimension* (Batinovic et al., 2024), fostering consumer-brand relationships (IP1-IP8). In this context, "community management will be key for brands in these spaces, as VIs can enhance consumer contact through direct interactions like meet-ups" (IP6), serving as cornerstones for building brand communities (IP1-IP4, IP6). The *behavioral dimension* is considered less significant for driving traditional purchasing behavior (Mingione et al., 2024). As IP8 elaborated, "while VIs on social media mainly drive consumer behavior toward transactional experiences, in immersive spaces, the main goal of the BE is not about influencing transactions." Instead, our IPs indicate that stimulating bodily experiences (e.g., gaming) play a greater role, as VIs should encourage consumers to play branded games (IP1, IP2, IP4-IP6, IP8) and have brand-related dialogues (IP1, IP3, IP4-IP8).

Our IPs also elaborated on two new dimensions as constituents of VI-driven BEs on immersive platforms: *safety* and *interoperability* (Mingione et al., 2024). Brands can foster safe BEs by, for instance, ensuring transparent verification of VIs' identity (IP1-IP3, IP5, IP6) and establishing ethical conduct (IP2-IP4, IP6, IP7). Verification standards for VIs are crucial, as "their avatar representation makes differentiation from humans challenging " (IP1), and failing to disclose the digital nature of VIs can cause consumer deception (e.g., Franke et al., 2023). With VI regulations currently limited to a few countries, companies could proactively enhance BEs. In contrast, brands have limited influence over *interoperability*, which requires seamless system integration for effective data exchange without consumer input (Mingione et al., 2024). Our IPs envision VIs as interfaces across marketing channels (IP1-IP3, IP6, IP8) and used in various immersive spaces (IP1, IP2, IP4, IP6). For instance, transferring avatars (e.g., VIs) from VRChat to Horizon Worlds is currently impossible (Mingione et al., 2024). Moreover, the interaction speed on these platforms can lag behind real-time encounters (IP2, IP3, IP6, IP8). Still, brands can design VIs to help consumers feel in control (IP3, IP5, IP7) by enabling them to react to consumer feedback. This is linked to *interoperability*, allowing consumers to manage resources related to their online behavior (Mingione et al., 2024).

4.2 Affecting immersive time with virtual influencers

Research shows that extended engagement with technologies, like social media platforms and applications, is linked to increased brand loyalty and purchasing behavior (e.g., Luo, Zhang, and Duan, 2013). Hence, "ultimately, it's about how much time you're exposed to VIs

on immersive platforms" (IP5). For these platforms, the concept of ImT describes the time consumers spend using devices like VR headsets to engage with their environment, including VIs, with safe consumer experiences as its foundation (Mogaji et al., 2023).

Foremost, *temporal engagement* was highlighted by our IPs. The time consumers spend with VIs in immersive spaces should be convenient (IP1-IP6, IP8) "so that they want to return to the VI to experience more aspects of the brand" (IP4). VIs should also engage consumers so they forget about time (IP1-IP6, IP8), "e.g., by embodying the brand's voice to spark sensory-rich conversations" (IP2), leading to extended time investment (IP1, IP3-IP6). This is rooted in consumers feeling that their time spent with VIs is valuable (IP3-IP6, IP8). As IP6 stated, "it's crucial for us as a brand to create immersive worlds and use VIs, but more importantly to consider what value this offers beyond promotion." IP3 added, "I've worked with avatars like VIs for years, and advertising brings no value to these spaces."

In this context, brands aim to foster *explorative engagement* through VIs encouraging consumers to discover the value of their branded worlds (IP1, IP2, IP4, IP5, IP8) (Tingelhoff, Klug, and Elshan, 2024), "a value deeply rooted in [relational] experiences that strengthen consumer-brand connections through the VI" (IP3). Such engagement can be facilitated by VIs enabling consumers to explore different brand-inspired identities (IP1-IP3, IP5, IP6) or participate in game-like branded adventures (IP1, IP4-IP6, IP8), blending reality with virtual brand worlds (IP2, IP3, IP4, IP6). This is also reflected in an "edutaining" BE, where "content must be informative and amusing, encouraging consumers to spend time with VIs in branded settings" (IP5) to promote bodily experiences (Mingione et al., 2024; Mogaji et al., 2023). Further, incentives can enhance exploration and increase time spent. For example, "consumers might attend a VI-led brand event to earn NFTs or Power-ups as benefits" (IP8).

Additionally, VIs can foster *escapist engagement*, supporting earlier research (Audrezet & Koles, 2023) and reinforcing that ImT is spent to escape reality (Mogaji et al., 2023). This requires VIs to be captivating (IP1, IP3-IP7), for example, by serving as gateways to branded narrative worlds (IP1, IP2, IP4, IP6-IP8) or promoting a sense of adventurous playfulness (IP1, IP2, IP4) "with responsive VIs being essential to maintaining engagement" (IP1). IP8 sums up the ImT discussion by stating: "Spending time with VIs in these immersive worlds is a great way for brands to create experiences that let consumers discover, learn, and escape life for a while. Thus, after adapting to social media consumer needs, brands now need to embrace immersive worlds and leverage VIs to engage with the next generation of consumers" (IP8).

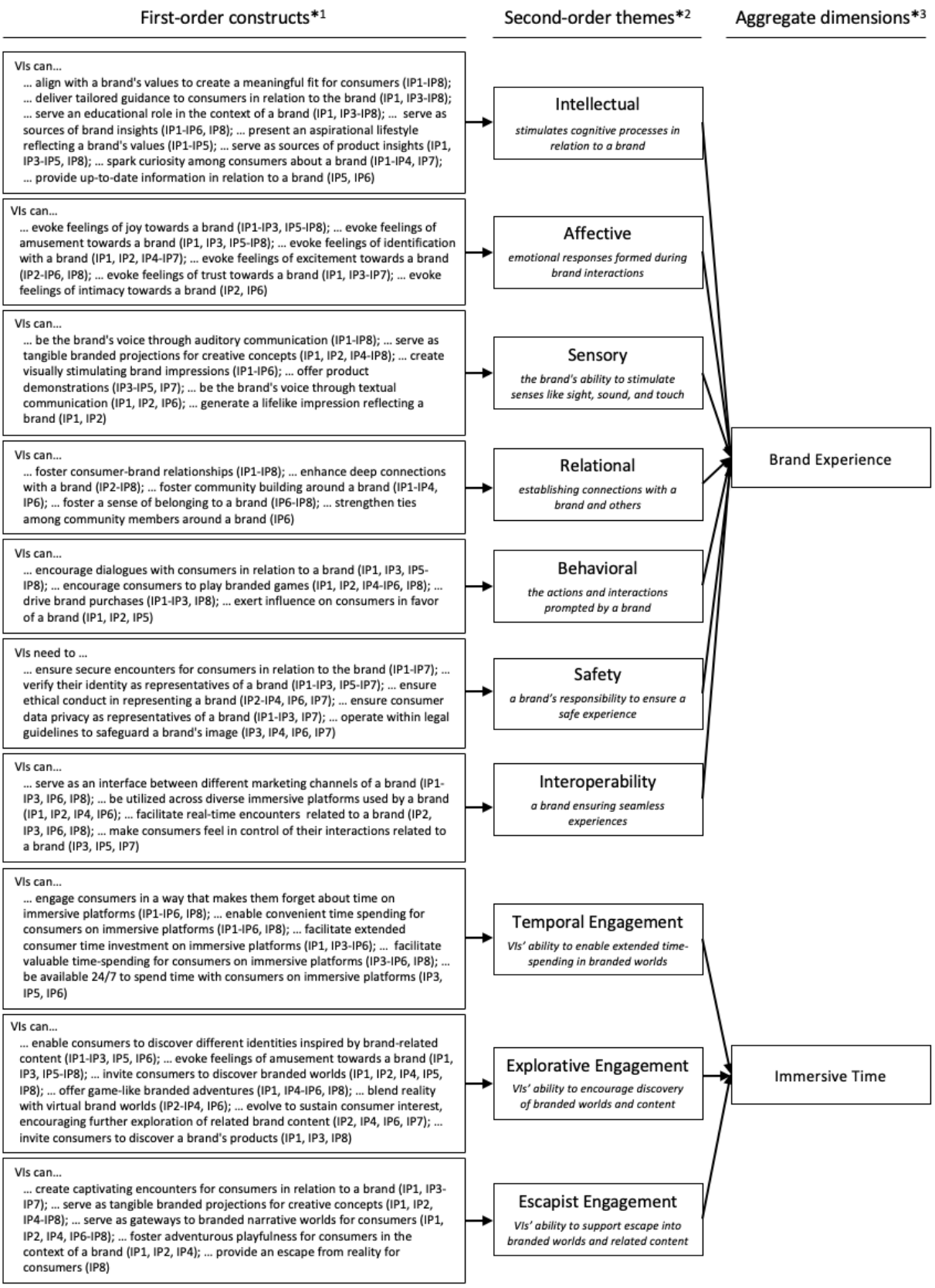

Figure 1. Coding Framework for Brand Experience and Immersive Time with VIs

5. Conclusion and implications for theory and practice

This study uniquely contributes to academic research by applying the constructs of BE and ImT to VIs on immersive platforms. We advance pioneering research on VI-driven BEs (Batinovic et al., 2024) by two new dimensions: *safety* and *interoperability*. Specifically, we provide crucial insights into *safe* BEs through diverse guidelines and extend *interoperability* by showing how VIs offer consumers control through responsive design. Moreover, we show that both *affective* and *intellectual* dimensions are crucial for BEs with VIs on immersive platforms. Further, our study marks a shift in VIs' role from influencing consumer transactions to stimulating bodily experiences (*behavioral dimension*). It emphasizes community and relationship building via close-range VI interactions (*relational dimension*).

Our research responds to Mogaji et al.'s call (2023) to investigate ImT with VIs on immersive platforms. Brands use VIs to boost time spent in these spaces by enhancing exploration and escapism. Additionally, we show that ImT is a crucial goal of VI-driven brand experiences and how this time is shaped by both established and newly identified BE dimensions. Finally, our study is the first to identify three ImT dimensions (*temporal*, *explorative*, and *escapist engagement*), supporting scale development for ImT.

This study provides insights for brand managers adopting VIs on immersive platforms, guiding persona design to enhance BE and ImT. VIs have a unique potential for community building through events or games. Thus, brands should prioritize discovery of branded spaces with VIs as guides and product sales as a secondary focus. Finally, ensuring safety and control through ethical VI frameworks and developing responsive avatars is crucial.

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