Virtual Influencers as Endorsers? Examining the Interactions Between Consumers and Avatars on Instagram

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With more than 1 billion individuals active on social media globally, it is more difficult for brands to stand out in digital marketing (Tayenaka, 2020). As a result, brands have turned to advancements in technology, such as artificial intelligence, to break through the advertising clutter on social media. Specifically, companies have created computer generated fictional characters accompanied with personalities and backstories to serve as brand ambassadors (Bradley, 2020). In fact, millions of dollars are being invested in the growth of these virtual influencers (Yaro, 2019) and major sport companies, like adidas, have partnered with virtual influencers (Carp, 2017).

Utilizing virtual influencers as the newest type of endorser can benefit sport marketers because it enables them to control the amount and frequency of content produced by them, resulting in more impressions than a human counterpart (Yaro, 2019). However, given the novelty of virtual influencers there may be some challenges, including skepticism by consumers and concern of lack of authenticity (Charlton & Cornwell, 2019). While virtual influencers offer tremendous marketing opportunities, consumers must be willing to engage with them to capitalize on their potential.

Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study is to utilize a qualitative approach to evaluate consumers’ interactions and responses to virtual influencers. Based on the endorsement literature and utilizing the theories of meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989) and source credibility model (Hovland et al., 1953), the authors developed the following research questions:

RQ1: What consumer patterns of parasocial interactions with virtual influencers on Social Media exist?

RQ2: What social processes are consumers using for their interactions with virtual athlete influencers on Social Media?

To address these research questions, a netnographic data collection and content analysis was employed to identify the types of interactions between virtual influencers and their followers. To perform the netnography and content analysis, a list of virtual influencers was compiled and then influencers were removed if they (1) had over 1 million followers or under 1000 followers; (2) did not appear lifelike; (3) did not post in English; (4) did not have an Instagram profile for at least a year; or (5) did not have branded posts.

The comments in the remaining avatars branded posts were coded using an inductive category development approach (Mayring, 2000) and five major themes emerged: (1) cognitive interactions, (2) affective interactions, (3) behavioral intentions, (4) foreign language, and (5) phishing. The results showed that consumers are having similar interactions with virtual influencers as they are human influencers. Specifically, it was found that consumers are developing deep relationships with virtual influencers and at times blurring the line between virtual and reality. These types of interactions have been shown to positively affect endorser effectiveness, including enhancing attitude toward the advertisement and brand (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015) and purchase intention (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

Thus, sport marketers should create virtual influencers to help personify their brands and further marketing messages through these humanlike interactions.