

From Human To Synthetic Influence: An Evolutionary And Theoretical Analysis Of The Transition From Opinion Leaders To Metahumans In Digital Marketing

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Abstract:

This theoretical article offers an analysis of the evolution of influencers, exploring the transition from traditional opinion leaders to contemporary digital influencers and finally to metahumans - ultra-realistic virtual influencers created with artificial intelligence. Starting with a critical review of existing literature, the study traces the historical trajectory of influence strategies, highlighting the paradigmatic shifts in marketing approaches over the decades. Initially, opinion leaders, authority figures in their respective fields, played a central role in shaping consumer attitudes and behavior. With the advent of the internet and social media, a new type of influencer emerged, characterized by their perceived authenticity and direct connection with the public. These digital influencers have transformed marketing by enabling a more personalized and engaging interaction with consumers. More recently, metahumans have emerged as a new frontier in influencer marketing. Created through advanced artificial intelligence and digital rendering technologies, these virtual influencers offer brands a unique opportunity to shape consumer perception with unprecedented precision. However, the rise of metahumans raises critical questions about authenticity, ethics and the nature of influence in the digital environment. This article fills theoretical gaps by offering an evolutionary framework that connects these different phases of influencer marketing, analyzing the implications of each stage for contemporary marketing practice. In addition, the study projects future trends, suggesting that the ongoing development of virtual influencers could redefine marketing strategies and reshape consumer behavior in ways that are not yet fully understood. With this, the article makes a significant and robust contribution to the influencer marketing literature, offering paths that are both theoretical and practical, with relevance for academics and professionals in the field.

Key Word: *Influence Marketing, Metahumans, Virtual Influencers, Metaverse, Digital Authenticity*

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I. Introduction

Influencer marketing has evolved dramatically since its conception, reflecting the technological and cultural transformations that have shaped forms of communication and social interaction over the decades. From the first opinion leaders, identified by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) as individuals capable of shaping the attitudes and behaviors of their communities, to the rise of metahumans-ultra-realistic avatars created by artificial intelligence to act as virtual influencers-the field of influence marketing has witnessed a robust metamorphosis. This article explores this evolution, with a particular focus on the transition from traditional influencers to digital entities, culminating in metahumans, and how each stage of this evolution has impacted marketing strategies and consumer behaviors. The development of the internet and, subsequently, social media has enabled the emergence of a new type of influencer, the "digital influencer", who uses digital

platforms to engage, inform, entertain and persuade audiences (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2012). These influencers have extended the reach of traditional opinion leaders and redefined the dynamics of influence, introducing concepts of perceived authenticity and direct interaction with their followers. However, with the continuous evolution of technology, new actors have entered the scene, such as virtual influencers, who, according to Marwick (2015) and Juhlin and Zhang (2019), are digital characters that simulate human presence online. More recently, the introduction of metahumans, ultra-realistic AI-driven avatars, represents the vanguard of this evolution, providing immersive experiences and personalized interactions in the metaverse - an increasingly influential virtual environment.

Despite the growing body of research on digital and virtual influencers, there is a gap in the literature regarding evolutionary analysis that connects all these developmental phases and explores their collective implications for contemporary influencer marketing. In addition, the existing literature does not yet adequately address the ethical, authenticity and psychological impact issues associated with the use of metahumans as influencers, especially in the context of the metaverse - the next frontier of digital marketing. This article aims to fill these gaps by providing a theoretical framework that connects the different stages of influencer evolution, from opinion leaders to metahumans, offering insights into the transformations shaping the field of influencer marketing.

The central research question of this study is: How has the evolution of influencers, from opinion leaders to metahumans, shaped marketing strategies and impacted consumer behavior? To answer this question, the objectives of this article are: (1) to trace a historical trajectory of influencers, highlighting the main paradigmatic shifts; (2) to analyze the implications of these shifts for contemporary marketing practices; and (3) to explore future trends in influencer marketing, with a particular focus on the challenges and opportunities presented by metahumans and other emerging digital entities, such as Metaverse Influencers and Intelligent Autonomous Entities (IEAs).

The structure of this theoretical article is designed to provide an understanding of the evolving dynamics of influence, integrating both classic and emerging contributions in the marketing literature. Initially, we review the existing literature on the different types of influencers, from opinion leaders to digital and virtual influencers, highlighting the main theories and concepts that have shaped the field. We then discuss the emergence of metahumans and other AI-based influencers, analyzing the new dynamics of influence that arise with these entities. Finally, the article projects future trends, exploring how the continued evolution of digital influencers may redefine influencer marketing and consumer behavior in the context of the metaverse.

II. Evolution Of Influencers: From Opinion Leaders To Digital Influencers

The trajectory of influencers in the context of influencer marketing is marked by an evolution that reflects both technological changes and the socio-cultural transformations that have shaped communication over the decades. This evolution can be traced back to the pioneering concepts introduced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) in their study on opinion leaders. These authors identified that certain individuals, because they possessed specialized knowledge or high social status, exerted a disproportionate influence on the attitudes and behaviors of their communities. These opinion leaders acted as intermediaries between the mass media and the public, and also shaped the perceptions and decisions of their followers. Katz and Lazarsfeld's model was revolutionary in highlighting the role of interpersonal communication in the dissemination of ideas, marking the beginning of a more complex understanding of how influence manifests itself in society.

With the advent of the internet and the rise of social media, the influencer landscape began to change dramatically. The barriers to entry into the field of influence were lowered, allowing new actors-digital influencers-to emerge. Unlike traditional opinion leaders, who generally operated within specific and limited spheres, digital influencers have the ability to reach global audiences in real time, using platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and Twitter to build communities of dedicated followers. As Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) point out, these influencers use digital engagement strategies that go beyond the simple dissemination of information, focusing on building authentic relationships and constant interaction with their followers. This new paradigm has radically transformed marketing, allowing for more precise audience segmentation and personalization of content on a scale never seen before.

The paradigmatic shifts in consumer behavior driven by these new forms of influence are evident. The concept of authenticity, for example, has become central to digital marketing strategies, with consumers seeking genuine and transparent connections with the influencers they follow. This contrasts with the more one-dimensional and distant interactions that characterized the dynamics of influence in the era of traditional opinion leaders. In addition, the ability of digital influencers to create content in multimedia formats, combined with the instant feedback of social media platforms, has created a continuous cycle of engagement that keeps consumers constantly connected to the brands and narratives promoted by these influencers. As Gorry and Westbrook (2011) note, this digital proximity has reconfigured consumer trust, which is now built through specialized knowledge and through the perceived proximity and accessibility of influencers.

The connection between these historical phases and the new models of influence is fundamental to understanding the current dynamics of influencer marketing. While opinion leaders traditionally functioned as information gatekeepers, filtering and shaping messages before transmitting them to the public, digital influencers operate in an environment where information is abundant and control over the narrative is more dispersed. However, both types of influencers share the need for credibility and trust to maintain their effectiveness. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) already emphasized the importance of trust and expertise, aspects that remain central to the effectiveness of digital influencers today. However, the way in which this trust is built and maintained has evolved. Nowadays, perceived authenticity and transparency about business partnerships are crucial to maintaining audience loyalty, as Audrezet, De Kerviler and Moulard (2018) point out.

Thus, the transition from opinion leaders to digital influencers doesn't just represent a change in platform or communication techniques, but a profound evolution in the nature of influence itself. This evolution is shaped by technological advances that allow for more direct and specified interactions, while also reflecting cultural shifts around how audiences engage with authority figures and brands. As technology continues to evolve, understanding these transitions and their implications for consumer behavior and marketing strategies is essential to anticipating future directions in the field of influencer marketing. Therefore, exploring these connections and changes deepens our historical understanding and also illuminates the paths to new forms of influence that will continue to emerge.

III. Virtual Influencers: The Transition To Digital Entities

The emergence of virtual influencers marks a turning point in the field of influencer marketing, reflecting the growing digitalization of human interaction and the advancement of technology in the creation of virtual characters that convincingly simulate human characteristics. Defined by Marwick (2015) as digital entities that personify influential figures on social platforms, virtual influencers are the products of complex artificial intelligence algorithms and advanced graphic rendering techniques. They have an online presence that, although not human, is meticulously designed to interact with users in a way that mimics the authenticity and personality of human influencers. Juhlin and Zhang (2019) complement this definition by pointing out that these influencers are characterized by their ability to maintain a rigorous visual and narrative consistency, adapting to the needs of brands and the expectations of followers with a precision that human influencers can hardly match.

Comparing human and virtual influencers reveals important nuances in the dynamics of authenticity, reach and engagement. Human influencers have been valued for their ability to create genuine emotional connections with their followers, building a sense of community based on perceived authenticity. Authenticity, in this context, is seen as a reflection of the transparency, vulnerability and shared reality between the influencer and their audience (Audrezet; De Kerviler and Moulard, 2018). In contrast, virtual influencers, despite their artificial nature, challenge traditional notions of authenticity. They are designed to be perfect, they don't make mistakes, and their fictional lives can be carefully adjusted to align with brands' marketing objectives. However, this programmed perfection raises questions about perceived authenticity and the extent to which followers are willing to invest emotionally in figures who, although engaging, have no real existence.

Reach and engagement are also different between these two types of influencers. While human influencers rely on their personality and charisma to attract followers, virtual influencers can be optimized to maximize reach and engagement through sophisticated algorithmic strategies. As Leung and Guo (2020) point out, virtual influencers can interact with multiple audiences simultaneously on different platforms, without the limitations of time and energy that affect humans. What's more, their interactions can be personalized and adapted in real time, ensuring that each follower receives a level of attention and engagement that is difficult for human influencers to replicate. This ability to operate at scale, combined with the narrative flexibility of virtual influencers, offers brands a powerful tool to reach and engage audiences in a productive way.

The ethical and psychological implications of virtual influence, however, are areas of growing concern. The creation of virtual influencers raises questions about transparency and authenticity in brand communication. If authenticity is a valuable currency in influencer marketing, then the use of virtual characters-who have no real life experiences or genuine emotions-can be seen as a form of manipulation, deceiving consumers by making them relate emotionally to artificial entities. Marwick (2015) argues that while some consumers may be aware of the artificial nature of these influencers, others may not realize or underestimate the extent to which their interactions are carefully managed by algorithms and brand strategies. Furthermore, dependence on virtual influencers can exacerbate issues related to body image and self-esteem, since these entities, being perfect by design, set standards of beauty and behavior that are impossible for humans to achieve (Kim and Kim, 2021).

Case studies of virtual influencers, such as Lil Miquela, a virtual influencer created by artificial intelligence, illustrate how these entities can be used effectively in marketing strategies. Lil Miquela, who has millions of followers on Instagram, is a mixture of reality and fiction, with a narrative that includes collaborations with high-profile fashion brands and interactions with human influencers. Her popularity

demonstrates the effectiveness of virtual influencers in generating engagement and building an effective brand presence. However, their existence also serves as a reminder of the complex ethical and psychological issues associated with these new models of influence. The ability of virtual influencers like Lil Miquela to generate emotional connection, despite their artificial nature, represents a new challenge for influencer marketing, requiring brands and consumers to reconsider what it means to be influenced in a world where the boundaries between the real and the virtual are increasingly blurred.

Virtual influencers represent a considerable evolution in influencer marketing, bringing both opportunities and challenges. The comparison between human and virtual influencers highlights the changing dynamics of authenticity, reach and engagement, while the ethical and psychological implications raise important questions about the future of digital influence. As case studies continue to evolve, it will be crucial for academics and marketing professionals to explore these issues in greater depth, ensuring that marketing strategies using virtual influencers are developed in an ethical manner, respecting both the needs of brands and the rights and expectations of consumers.

IV. Metahumans: The New Frontier Of Influence Marketing

The introduction of metahumans into the field of influencer marketing signals the arrival of a new frontier in the interaction between brands and consumers, characterized by an unprecedented level of realism and immersion. Metahumans are ultra-realistic digital avatars, created using advanced artificial intelligence and 3D modeling technologies, which have the ability to interact in real time with the public in a way that almost perfectly simulates the nuances of human behavior. This new generation of virtual influencers is the result of a convergence of technologies, including deep learning, real-time graphics rendering and natural language processing algorithms, which enable the creation of characters with a sophisticated and realistic appearance, voice and facial expressions (PARK; LEE, 2021).

The technological development of metahumans is a significant advance on previous virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela and Shudu, who, although realistic, still carried visual elements that clearly differentiated them from humans. In contrast, metahumans are designed to be indistinguishable from real people, capable of expressing complex emotions and interacting convincingly with their environment and followers. As Jang and Lee (2022) point out, this technology represents a milestone in the creation of influencers who mimic human appearance and incorporate elements of personality and behavior that can be adjusted in real time to align with brands' marketing needs. This ability to personalize in real time, combined with the absence of physical or emotional limitations, makes metahumans a powerful tool for marketing campaigns that require precision, consistency and high engagement.

The impact of metahumans on consumer behavior and brand perceptions is profound. Metahumans have the potential to shape consumer attitudes and behavior in ways that traditional human or virtual influencers cannot match. Through their personalized interactions and ability to engage with audiences on multiple platforms simultaneously, metahumans can create a continuous and immersive brand presence, keeping consumers engaged for longer periods. In addition, the controllable nature of metahumans allows brands to adjust their campaigns in real time, responding quickly to changes in consumer preferences or market conditions, something that is much more difficult to achieve with human influencers (KIM and KO, 2020).

However, the introduction of metahumans also presents significant challenges for both brands and consumers. One of the main challenges is the issue of authenticity. While human influencers build their careers largely on a perception of authenticity and genuine emotional connection with their followers, metahumans, by their very nature, are artificial creations, which raises questions about the depth and veracity of the interactions they can offer. Studies suggest that while consumers may initially engage with metahumans due to their novelty and impressive realism, the lack of a real life story and genuine emotions may limit the depth of the relationship they can build with followers in the long term (Leung and Guo, 2020).

Furthermore, the ethical implications of using metahumans in influencer marketing are complex and not yet fully understood. The creation of digital avatars that are indistinguishable from humans raises questions about transparency and consent. Marwick (2015) argues that if consumers are not fully aware that they are interacting with an artificial entity, there can be an element of deception that undermines trust between the brand and the consumer. In addition, the use of metahumans can exacerbate concerns about objectification and dehumanization, especially if these avatars are used to perpetuate stereotypes of gender, race or beauty that are unattainable and potentially damaging to consumers' self-esteem and identity.

On the other hand, the opportunities presented by metahumans are vast, especially when it comes to innovation in marketing strategies. The ability of metahumans to offer immersive and interactive experiences in real time can redefine consumer engagement, allowing brands to create dynamic and personalized narratives that continually adapt to audience feedback. This increases the potential for engagement and allows brands to experiment with new forms of communication and branding that were previously impossible. As Park and Lee (2021) note, integrating metahumans into marketing campaigns can also help brands position themselves as

innovative and ahead of their time, which is particularly valuable in sectors such as fashion, technology and entertainment, where innovation is valued.

In terms of transforming marketing strategies, the introduction of metahumans requires a re-evaluation of traditional approaches to authenticity and emotional connection. Brands will need to balance the use of metahumans with the need to maintain consumer trust and loyalty, which may entail greater transparency about the artificial nature of these influencers and a renewed focus on creating narratives that resonate emotionally with audiences. Furthermore, as metahumans become more common, consumer expectations of what constitutes an authentic interaction may change, leading to a redefinition of success metrics in influencer marketing.

Metahumans represent both a new frontier and a challenge in influencer marketing. Their advanced technological development offers unprecedented opportunities for engagement and personalization, but also raises ethical and practical questions that need to be carefully considered. As this technology continues to evolve, it will be crucial for brands and marketers to navigate these new dynamics sensitively and responsibly, ensuring that strategies using metahumans are effective as well as ethical and in line with consumer values and expectations.

V. Emergence Of Metaverse Influencers And Other Digital Entities

The emergence of the metaverse as a new marketing environment represents a profound transformation in the way brands interact with consumers, offering a digital space where the physical and the virtual merge into immersive and interactive experiences. The metaverse, defined as a collective and persistent digital universe made up of interconnected virtual worlds, enables users to interact with each other and with digital environments in real time, creating new opportunities for marketing (Mystakidis, 2022). This digital environment expands the possibilities for engagement and allows for the creation of new forms of digital presence, including metaverse influencers, who are avatars or digital entities designed to operate exclusively within these virtual spaces. These metaverse influencers represent an evolution in influencer marketing, bringing with them characteristics and interaction dynamics that differ substantially from traditional digital influencers.

Metaverse influencers stand out for their ability to create immersive and personalized experiences, making the most of the unique characteristics of this digital environment. Unlike conventional digital influencers, who operate on two-dimensional social media platforms, metaverse influencers interact with users in a three-dimensional space where the boundaries between physical and digital reality are increasingly blurred. As noted by Schlemmer and Backes (2021), these influencers occupy a virtual space and actively shape user experiences, using augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies to create deeper and more engaging interactions. This allows brands to offer product or service experiences in a more tangible and emotionally resonant way, increasing the likelihood of conversion and loyalty.

In addition, metaverse influencers can be programmed to dynamically adapt to user preferences, creating a relevant interaction. For example, an influencer in the metaverse can guide a user through a virtual shopping experience, adjusting product recommendations based on the user's previous interactions and preferences expressed in real time. This represents a marked evolution compared to traditional digital influencers, who, despite personalizing their messages, still operate within the limitations of a linear feed and less sophisticated recommendation algorithms. The flexibility and personalization offered by metaverse influencers could redefine the way brands conceive of engaging with consumers, enabling contextually relevant interactions.

The introduction of Autonomous Intelligent Entities (AIE) as emerging influencers in the metaverse adds another layer of complexity and potential to influencer marketing. AIEs are artificial intelligence systems that operate independently, interacting with users and digital environments without the need for direct human supervision (Li and Brown, 2021). These entities can take the form of avatars in the metaverse, interacting with consumers in a continuous and adaptive way. The ability of AIEs to learn and evolve based on interactions with users makes them effective influencers, able to adjust their communication and engagement strategies to better meet consumers' needs and desires. This represents a radical change from human influencers and even metahumans, who, although sophisticated, still depend on some level of human control.

The potential impacts of these entities on future marketing practices are vast. Firstly, the presence of metaverse influencers and AIEs in influencer marketing has the potential to extend the reach and effectiveness of marketing campaigns. By operating in a persistent and interactive virtual environment, these influencers can maintain a constant presence, interacting with consumers on a scale and with a depth that traditional influencers cannot match. In addition, the ability of AIEs to process large volumes of data in real time and adjust their interactions according to changes in consumer behavior allows brands to respond more quickly and accurately to emerging trends and consumer preferences (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2017).

However, the integration of these advanced digital influencers into influencer marketing also raises ethical and practical issues that need to be carefully considered. The autonomy of AIEs, for example, can lead to concerns about transparency and accountability, especially if consumers are not aware that they are interacting

with an artificial entity. In addition, the increasing sophistication of these systems can exacerbate issues related to privacy and data use, since AIEs are able to collect and analyse vast amounts of personal information to personalize their interactions. These ethical considerations are key to ensuring that the adoption of these new technologies in influencer marketing is carried out responsibly and in line with consumer values and expectations (FLORIDI et al., 2018).

The emergence of metaverse influencers and Intelligent Autonomous Entities represents an evolution in influencer marketing, bringing new opportunities and challenges for brands. The ability of these entities to create immersive experiences in the metaverse has the potential to transform marketing practices, enabling deeper and more contextually relevant interactions with consumers. However, the successful implementation of these technologies will require a careful and ethical approach that balances innovation with responsibility, ensuring that the new forms of digital influence are used in a way that benefits both brands and consumers.

VI. Theoretical Integration: Connecting The Evolutionary Stages Of Influencers

The evolution of influencers in digital marketing, from traditional opinion leaders to metahumans, represents a complex development that reflects technological and socio-cultural changes over time. To understand this evolution in a connected way, an integrative theoretical model is needed that explains the transitions and interrelationships between these different phases of influencers. This model must consider the unique characteristics of each type of influencer and also how emerging technologies and changing consumer expectations have shaped their roles and effectiveness in influencer marketing.

The proposed theoretical model begins with opinion leaders, whom Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) defined as individuals with influential power in their communities due to their specialized knowledge and credibility. These opinion leaders functioned mainly in a context of mass communication, where information was disseminated unidirectionally, and their influence was largely mediated by their social interactions. With the advent of the internet and especially social media, digital influencers emerged, which Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) characterize as individuals who use digital platforms to engage directly with a broad, global audience. Unlike opinion leaders, digital influencers operate in a two-way communication environment, where constant interaction with their followers is a key element of their influence.

The next stage in this evolution is marked by the introduction of virtual influencers, who, as described by Marwick (2015) and Juhlin and Zhang (2019), are digital avatars designed to simulate human presence online. These influencers combine digital marketing techniques with technological sophistication, allowing brands greater control over the message and visual consistency, but at the cost of challenges in relation to perceived authenticity. Finally, the arrival of metahumans represents the culmination of this evolutionary trajectory, where ultra-realistic digital avatars, as described by Park and Lee (2021), simulate human appearance almost perfectly and interact in real time and can be customized to respond dynamically to consumer interactions.

The proposal of this integrative theoretical model connects these evolutionary phases along three main dimensions: (1) technological evolution, (2) changes in marketing strategies, and (3) the transformation of consumer behavior. Technological evolution is the driving force that has enabled the transition from traditional opinion leaders to metahumans. From mass media to social networks and artificial intelligence technologies, each technological advance has expanded the capabilities of influencers and increased the complexity of their interactions with the public. For example, while opinion leaders relied on their presence on traditional platforms, digital influencers use social media algorithms to maximize their reach, and virtual and metahuman influencers benefit from advanced AI to create personalized, real-time interactions (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2017).

The changes in marketing strategies reflect how brands have adapted their approaches throughout these evolutionary phases. Initially, influencer marketing was based on indirect recommendations made by opinion leaders, whose credibility was the main success factor. With digital influencers, brands began to adopt more engaging strategies, taking advantage of the perceived authenticity and direct connection these influencers had with their followers. In the case of virtual influencers and metahumans, marketing strategies evolved even further to include direct manipulation of the image and message, allowing brands to create narratives perfectly aligned with their objectives, but raising questions about the authenticity and ethics of these practices (Kim and Ko, 2020).

Consumer behavior has also undergone transformations throughout these evolutionary phases. At first, consumers were passive recipients of influence, relying on opinion leaders to guide their decisions. With the rise of digital influencers, consumers have become active participants, interacting directly with influencers and shaping conversations around brands and products. Today, with virtual influencers and metahumans, consumers face a new reality where the boundaries between the real and the virtual are increasingly blurred, requiring new forms of discernment and a redefinition of what authenticity means in the digital context (Leung and Guo, 2020).

The implications of this integrative theoretical model for the theory and practice of influencer marketing are profound. Theoretically, it provides a framework for understanding how different types of

influencers operate and evolve within an ever-changing technological ecosystem. It also highlights the complex relationships between technology, marketing strategy and consumer behavior, suggesting that the effectiveness of influencers is not just a function of their popularity or reach, but also of how they align with consumer expectations and values in different technological contexts. In practice, this model offers brands a basis for evaluating and adapting their influencer marketing strategies, taking into account the continuous evolution of technology and changing consumer dynamics.

The theoretical gap filled by this model lies in its ability to link technological developments with changes in marketing strategies and consumer behavior in a cohesive manner. While many studies have explored the aspects of digital, virtual and metahuman influencers separately, few connect these evolutionary phases in an integrated way, considering the interrelated implications of these changes. This theoretical model offers a systemic view that can serve as a foundation for future research and practice in the field of influencer marketing, allowing for a deeper understanding of how influence is built, maintained and transformed over time. In this way, it sheds light on the past and present of influence marketing and provides perspectives on the future directions this field may take.

VII. Future Trends And Future Research Directions

As influencer marketing continues to evolve, driven by ever-faster technological advances, the future of this field promises to be both challenging and full of opportunities. Emerging trends indicate that digital technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) and the metaverse will play increasingly central roles in the way brands interact with consumers. The integration of these technologies into influencer marketing suggests a future where the line between the real and the virtual will become even more blurred, creating new dynamics of influence and requiring brands to rethink their engagement strategies.

One of the main projections for the future of influencer marketing is the expansion and sophistication of metahumans and virtual influencers. These digital influencers, driven by advanced AI and real-time rendering technologies, will continue to evolve in terms of visual realism and interactivity and will be increasingly capable of delivering personalized experiences on a large scale. As Park and Lee (2021) note, metahumans have the potential to transform the way brands approach marketing, enabling interactions that are both immersive and adaptable to individual consumer preferences. This suggests a future where metahumans will not just be a niche phenomenon, but a common tool in marketing campaigns, capable of operating in real time on social media platforms, in the metaverse and in mixed reality environments.

The interaction between metahumans and consumers in the metaverse is a particularly promising area for future research. The metaverse, an immersive and persistent digital space, offers an environment in which metahumans can interact with consumers in ways that would be impossible in the physical world. Through virtual and augmented reality, metahumans can guide consumers through personalized brand experiences, create virtual events, or even interact continuously with consumers in dynamic digital environments. This interaction can open up new fronts for study, such as the effectiveness of metahumans in generating brand loyalty, the emotional influence of these interactions in virtual environments, and how different demographics respond to influencers who operate exclusively in the metaverse. As highlighted by Mystakidis (2022), these interactions in the metaverse can redefine the concept of presence and influence, creating a new dimension of engagement that goes beyond physical and temporal limitations.

However, as influencer marketing becomes increasingly digitized and dependent on advanced technologies, critical questions about sustainability and ethics arise. The use of virtual influencers and metahumans raises concerns about the authenticity and psychological impact of these interactions. As Marwick (2015) argues, the growing prevalence of digital figures who imitate perfection can contribute to the creation of unrealistic expectations among consumers, especially among younger generations, who can be particularly susceptible to external influences. In addition, transparency becomes a central issue: consumers have the right to know when they are interacting with an artificial entity versus a human being, and brands need to be clear about the nature of these interactions in order to maintain public trust.

Sustainability in the use of virtual influencers and metahumans is also an area that requires attention. The development and maintenance of these digital avatars demand significant computing resources, which raises questions about the environmental impact of marketing campaigns that rely heavily on these technologies. Future research could explore ways to make these practices more sustainable, perhaps through the use of renewable energy in data centers or the creation of digital influencers who promote conscious consumption practices and environmental sustainability. As Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2017) suggest, there is a growing need to balance technological innovation with social and environmental responsibility, ensuring that marketing practices move forward in an ethical and sustainable manner.

Finally, ethics in the use of virtual influencers and metahumans must be at the center of future discussions. The ability of these digital entities to influence consumer behavior in a subtle and pervasive way

calls for a reassessment of ethical standards in marketing. Marwick (2015) points out that as AI technologies become more sophisticated, there is a risk that interactions with digital influencers could become indistinguishable from interactions with humans, leading to potential abuses of power by brands. It is therefore crucial that future research and marketing practices address issues of consent, transparency and accountability, ensuring that consumers are fully aware of the interactions they are involved in and the intentions behind these influences.

The future of influencer marketing will be shaped by technological advances that promise to push the boundaries of what is possible in terms of engagement and personalization. However, with these new opportunities come significant challenges in terms of sustainability and ethics, which must be addressed to ensure that influencer marketing evolves responsibly. Future research directions include the exploration of interactions in the metaverse, the psychological impact of digital influencers, and the development of sustainable practices that balance innovation with social responsibility. In navigating these new frontiers, academics and marketers alike will play a crucial role in shaping a future that is both technically advanced and ethically robust.

VIII. Conclusion

The conclusion of this study synthesizes the main findings and offers a critical reflection on the theoretical and practical contributions that this work brings to the field of influencer marketing. By exploring the evolution of influencers, from traditional opinion leaders to ultra-realistic metahumans, this article has provided an analysis of the ever-changing dynamics of the digital marketing environment. Through a detailed literature review and the proposition of an integrative theoretical model, it was possible to identify the technological and cultural transitions that have shaped marketing strategies and consumer behavior over time.

In response to the research question-How has the evolution of influencers, from opinion leaders to metahumans, shaped marketing strategies and impacted consumer behaviors-the findings of this study demonstrate that each evolutionary phase of influencers has introduced new possibilities and challenges for brands. Opinion leaders laid the foundations for credibility and trust in marketing, while digital influencers revolutionized the way brands interact with consumers, bringing authenticity and direct engagement to the heart of marketing strategies. With the arrival of virtual influencers and, more recently, metahumans, brands have gained new tools to create personalized and immersive brand experiences, albeit at the cost of ethical challenges and issues of perceived authenticity. The study achieved its objectives by connecting these evolutionary phases, offering a complex insight into the transformations in influencer marketing and projecting future directions for the field.

The relevance and contribution of this study to the influence marketing literature are significant. Firstly, the proposed integrative theoretical model fills an important gap in the literature by connecting technological evolutions with changes in marketing strategies and consumer behavior. This model offers a framework for understanding the historical progression of influencers and provides a basis for future research that seeks to explore the interrelationships between technology, brand strategy and consumer dynamics. In addition, this study contributes to practice by helping marketers navigate the complexity of contemporary digital marketing and make more informed decisions about using different types of influencers in their campaigns.

However, as with any study, there are limitations that must be acknowledged. One of the main limitations of this work is the reliance on existing literature, which, although robust, is still evolving with regard to understanding virtual influencers and metahumans. Furthermore, the theoretical nature of the paper means that the practical implications proposed lack empirical validation. Although the theoretical model offers a precise framework, it still needs to be tested and refined through empirical studies that explore the real experiences of consumers and brands with these new types of influencers. Another limitation is the scope of the technologies discussed; as new technologies emerge, such as quantum computing and brain-computer interfaces, the implications for influencer marketing may evolve in ways not yet foreseen in this study.

Given the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of influencer marketing, there are several promising areas for future research. Empirical studies that validate and expand the proposed theoretical model are essential to test its practical implications. In particular, research investigating the effectiveness of metahumans in different cultural and demographic contexts could develop insights into how these digital influencers are perceived globally. In addition, the intersection between ethics, authenticity and technology in the use of virtual influencers and metahumans is an area that deserves continued attention, especially as AI and other advanced technologies become more integrated into marketing practices. Finally, the exploration of new emerging technologies and their potential impact on influencer marketing-such as the use of biometric data and neuromodular interfaces-offers a rich vein of research for academics and practitioners interested in being at the forefront of this rapidly evolving field.

This study provides an in-depth understanding of the evolutionary phases of influencers and their implications for marketing, and lays the groundwork for future research that will continue to break new ground in this ever-changing field. As digital technologies advance and consumer expectations evolve, influencer marketing will have to adapt, and this work serves as a theoretical and practical guide for this ongoing journey of innovation and discovery.

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