Virtual Influencers as an advertising tool in the promotion of brands and products. Study of the commercial activity of Lil Miquela

Los Influencers Virtuales como herramienta publicitaria en la promoción de marcas y productos. Estudio de la actividad comercial de Lil Miquela

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ABSTRACT
Introduction: In the last years there has been a progressive and intense migration of audiences between traditional media and new digital formats, especially social networks. This trend is becoming more acute, especially among the younger sections of the population who are therefore more attractive to advertisers as consumers. This change in the media landscape requires the implementation of new communication and advertising strategies by advertisers. The rise of the so-called influencers has been a real novelty when it comes to publicizing and increasing the desire to consume brands and products from different sectors. **Methodology**: To carry out our study, we used a multi-method methodology that mainly consists of the use of qualitative and quantitative scientific research to analyze these communication strategies and their commercial possibilities in the current digital context. **Results**: This research aims to analyze the role of so-called virtual influencers, avatars created by artificial intelligence and augmented reality techniques, that allow the traditional influencer´s communication and advertising possibilities to be combined with the absolute control of his activity and "life" on the networks. **Discussion**: Influencers have become the opinion leaders of the 21st century and commercial brands are betting on them to deliver their messages. **Conclusions**: Virtual influencers are a necessary element to understand the evolution of advertising communication in the current digital context.

RESUMEN
Introducción: En los últimos años se ha producido una progresiva e intensa migración de audiencias entre los medios de comunicación tradicionales y las nuevas fórmulas digitales, especialmente las redes sociales. Especialmente entre los sectores más jóvenes de la población y que, por tanto, presentan un perfil más atractivo como consumidores para los anunciantes, esta tendencia se agudiza. Esta modificación del panorama mediático exige la implementación de nuevas estrategias comunicativas y publicitarias por parte de los anunciantes. El auge de los denominados *influencers* ha supuesto una verdadera novedad a la hora de dar a conocer y aumentar el deseo consumo de marcas y productos de diferentes sectores. **Metodología:** Para llevar a cabo nuestro estudio hemos empleado una metodología multimétodo que consta principalmente del uso de la investigación científica cualitativa y cuantitativa para conseguir analizar estas estrategias comunicativas y sus posibilidades comerciales en el actual contexto digital. **Resultados:** El objeto de la presente investigación consiste en analizar el papel de los denominados *influencers* virtuales, avatares creados mediante técnicas de inteligencia artificial y realidad aumentada que permiten aunar las posibilidades comunicativas y publicitarias del *influencer* tradicional con el control absoluto de su actividad y "vida" en las redes. **Discusión:** Los *influencers* se han convertido en los líderes de opinión del siglo XXI y las marcas comerciales apuestan por ellos para lanzar sus mensajes. **Conclusiones:** Los *influencers* virtuales son un elemento necesario para entender la evolución de la comunicación publicitaria en el actual contexto digital.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Influencers*; marca; comunicación; prescripción de producto; redes sociales; publicidad; Instagram.

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Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

1. Introduction

The rise of social networks among the youngest sectors of the population has allowed them to become an important element in their way of understanding the world around them. Once the differentiated perceptions between the real and virtual world have been overcome, social networks have become one more area in which people relate, interact, and coexist. "The ability that some minors are showing to generate content (UGC), manage it, and create a community of followers arouses the interest of brands that aspire to empathically communicate" (Tur-Viñes et al, 2018). Taking this into consideration, it is not surprising that these new media have become a relevant strategic element for traditional advertisers who find in social networks a new opportunity to connect with growing audiences that are increasingly difficult to reach through other more conventional media. According to preliminary studies, young people, due to their innocence and self-confidence, are the most active sector in social networks, following profiles that reflect lifestyles similar to theirs (González et al., 2021). The logics of participation in these models of social interaction require new creative and strategic rethinking (Mañas-Viniegra, L. and Jiménez-Gómez, I., 2019) insofar as they are configured as spaces for following and participating on an equal footing. Unlike what happened in the classic approaches to advertising in which the media imposed the contents that were consumed without any possibility to choose on the part of the audiences, social media require an integration

effort of the advertisers that users will follow, or not, depending on the attractiveness they manage to generate. Therefore, it is necessary to innovate in the construction of suggestive profiles, with daily activity, that provide relevant content in the why and way and that interact on a level of equality and respect with other users of social media.

The most used mechanism to accelerate the process of creating a profile with followers is usually the collaboration with influencers, that is, users who have a high number of followers and who can, therefore, be articulated as media with audiences themselves. "These opinion leaders of the new millennium began their journey as consumers who shared their experiences and gave advice about a variety of media products, such as video games, television series, books, clothing, cosmetics, or food" (Establés et al, 2019).

The purpose of this work is to go one step further, to examine the construction by communication and advertising agencies of not only a strategy to promote the brands or products of their clients but the construction of an influencer itself, in this virtual case, which can be endowed with attractiveness and seductive enough activity to achieve an interesting level of followers in advertising terms. On many occasions, some of the followers of the brands pass participatory users to the professional habit of the cultural industries, becoming a phenomenon of cultural convergence (Jenkins, 2006). The possibilities of having a profile of these characteristics are evident since the control over their behaviors, events they attend, forms of expression, etc... is total. In short, the virtual influencer manages to combine the advantages of having a traditional influencer in terms of notoriety, attractiveness, and prescription but eliminates the inherent risks of putting the brand, image, and reputation in the hands of a third person.

The first virtual influencer to appear on social media dates from just five years ago. Since then, the proliferation of these types of avatars has become a recurring phenomenon. The good reception among the real users of the different social networks, as well as their enormous potential in the commercial and social sphere, have favored efforts from different types of corporations to have a differential, strategic, profitable, and highly dynamic communication tool. Soon it was possible to verify the enormous appeal that this type of profiles generated for different commercial brands from the most diverse sectors and the advertising and sponsorship business that they are capable of bringing together. Furthermore, as a result of an activity that imitates flesh and blood influencers, virtual ones also show interrelationships with real and virtual users, adopt political positions, show concern for socio-cultural causes and problems, and can play certain activism.

1.1. Social networks. Evolution and characteristics

To understand the phenomenon of influencers as opinion leaders of the 21st century, it is necessary to understand the functioning of social networks from a sociological point of view. In this sense, we can affirm that social networks are: Individuals or groups connected by some type of common link, shared social status, similar or shared functions, or some type of cultural or geographical connection. Social networks are formed or disappear depending on the specific needs and interests of their members (Barker, 1999, p. 399).

From this definition, it follows that the fundamental element to consider a group of people as a social network is to have a common link that keeps all its members together, it can be friendship relationships, sharing the same ideology, having a patriotic feeling, or any other occupation or entertainment. In a physical environment, these links that hold the network together are usually tangible, cohesive, and with face-to-face contact between its members. However, the Internet introduces the possibility of being able to count on other members, who have similar characteristics

in similar interests to the people that make up the network, being able to become part of that network keeping the ties of union alive for a long time, without the need for face-to-face contact. In these cases, the links become more indefinite and intangible in the online world; connections become more open and barriers between groups or communities are diluted.

It is known to all that with the arrival of the Internet there is a new form of communication between people, unifying interpersonal communication between individuals with the ability to expand the message from a single sender to many subjects at the same time, just as the mass media. This new form of communication was called by Cathcart and Gumpert (1986) mediated interpersonal communication or computer-mediated communication, and is defined as "any person-person interaction where a means of communication has been interposed to transcend the limitations of time and space".

Therefore, a new phenomenon is produced where interactive social networks allow the creation of connections between subjects in a mass communication space as no other medium has allowed so far. For this reason, interactive social networks have other characteristics than traditional social networks. In general terms, we can affirm that traditional social networks have strong and very cohesive links that unite them. The Internet makes it possible to increase the number of links between individuals on the network, compared to a traditional social network, at the same time that it causes them to be much weaker and superficial links: for example, the commitment that is acquired by regularly attending a political rally or a singer's concert is not comparable to following the political party or the singer's Facebook page or sharing a YouTube video.

Interactive social networks are made up of small interpersonal communications that are established between the individuals of the network, rather than by an ideology or group bond.

The fundamental difference is that these communications are open to the public, developing interpersonal public messages (Walther et al., 2011). This new reality in which sets of individuals are connected in an open space, united by weak connections, and with private messages open to the entire network, generates a new type of public space that Danah Boyd (2011) calls *networked publics*. The concept of public, meaning a group of people with a common bond, had already been used before when dealing with social groups and their connection with the media. Authors such as Habermas (1989) had already used the concept of the public sphere to name a space in which members of society interact and exchange information. Sonia Livingstone (2005, p. 9) had also used the concept of the public as "a group of people who share the same way of understanding the world, the same collective identity or consensus regarding the collective interest". In the online environment, the concept of public acquires another meaning. These connected publics are defined according to Boyd (2011) as publics that are restructured by network connection technologies. Therefore, they simultaneously are:

- space built through these connected technologies.
- the imaginary collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice.

They contemplate several of the same functions that other types of publics have: they allow to meet for social, cultural, or civil reasons and they help to connect people with an environment beyond their close friends and family.

While these "networked publics" share many characteristics of other types of social groups, the way how technology structures them introduces different uses and possibilities that change how people

interact in these technological contexts. This brings with it different and new dynamics of personal participation.

Once the environment in which digital social networks are developed has been framed, we are in a position to be able to establish their definition. For this, we take that of Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 221) who define social networks as: Internet services that allow individuals to:
- build a public or semi-public profile within a closed system.
- articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection.
- see and go through their lists of connections and those of other users who are within the system.

The definition of Ponce (2012, p. 16) emphasizes pointing out the interaction function of digital social networks: Thus, online social networks can be defined as social structures composed of a group of people who share a common interest, relationship, or activity through the Internet, where social encounters take place and information consumption preferences are shown through communication in real-time, although deferred communication may also occur.

This definition reveals the time flexibility of interpersonal relationships maintained in social networks. Not only are they both private and public, but they can be in real-time or deferred, generating a feeling of superficiality and indefiniteness of the links that unite these people. Furthermore, messages on these networks can be recorded, archived, and disseminated by others, so they are much more persistent since they are maintained over time, even if the circumstances of that person change and the authorship or the initiator of the conversation is diluted in the thread of the conversation (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

1.1.1. Evolution of social networks

For the study of the evolution of social networks we can distinguish five different periods:

1º First appearance of social networks (1997/2001)
The first platform with the characteristics of a social network was the SixDegrees.com website (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). This social network allowed users to create public profiles, make lists of friends, and search for other friends. These options existed separately before in chats, forums, or dating websites, but Sixdegrees.com was the first service to bring all these elements together. This caused a change that would define the course of social networks: the creation of profiles faithful to the offline identity.

At the end of the 90s, social networks began to emerge in different parts of the world and with different purposes such as Asian Avenue, Blackplanet, Migente, or Livejournal. Likewise, other platforms changed their business model to that of social networks when they saw the growing popularity, such as the Swedish LunarStorm in 2001 or the Korean page Cyworld in 2000 (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

2º The first social networks (2001/2004)
Social networks are beginning to take hold with more defined proposals, focused on more specific audiences, and with greater functionalities for users.

The creation of Ryze.com in 2001 as a platform for companies to create their own social networks led to the development of new social networks starting in 2003, both professional such as LinkedIn or Xing, as well as specialized in a specific topic.

Other prominent networks are:
- Friendster: considered the predecessor of Facebook and the first social network created as such, to connect friends of friends and thus recommend or link suitors to each other.
- MySpace: Founded in 2003 as an alternative to Friendster, which was losing popularity at the time. MySpace did not have a specific target, but the adoption of this network by Indie-Rock bands made MySpace begin to position and promote itself as a service for music groups.

3° Consolidation of social networks (2004/2009)
In 2004, Web 2.0 appeared. This fact caused the appearance of new social networks. The consolidation of the Internet in homes around the world allowed social networks to achieve a global reach and capture massive audiences.

The appearance of 2.0 businesses and pages, with more interactive and two-way content, created the ideal environment for the stabilization of social networks. Not only did webpages incorporate more social and user-interaction elements, such as recommendations or comments from other users, but businesses based on content generated by the users themselves, such as Flickr or Last.FM, had characteristics or features of social networks. These businesses also grew massively, creating a new culture among young people to share and exchange information on the Internet among their networks of friends or acquaintances (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

The appearance of Facebook was undoubtedly the platform that changed the course of the evolution of social networks. Facebook was born in 2004 as an exclusive network for Harvard students since it was only possible to be a member through the email harvard.edu (Cassidy, 2006). In March 2004, it began to spread to other prestigious universities such as Stanford, Columbia, and Yale. In a few months, it reached many other universities such as Boston University, New York University. The following year, Facebook also expanded to the institutes of the United States and all its universities. In 2006, it began to expand to other countries. During 2007 and 2008, Facebook adapted to different languages to reach non-English speaking countries.

In this period, other global social networks also began their development and expansion. Twitter was born in 2006 as a response and/or evolution of blogs. It was positioned as a tool to quickly spread news, content, or information in 144 characters, a totally unusual format for the time. For its part, YouTube, which was born in 2005, revolutionized audiovisual content on the Internet.

4° Stabilization of social networks (2009/2017)
It is in this period when we can speak of a moment of maturity of social networks. Facebook is consolidated as the most used social network worldwide. In April 2008, Facebook ousted MySpace in the number of monthly active users, due to the consolidation of its "Like" button in the web environment and obtaining benefits thanks to its advertising system for companies.

5° Social networks today (2017/2021)
Technological innovation in recent decades was located in Asian markets. Six of the fifteen social networks with the highest number of users are located in Asia (Vicent, 2020) and two of them are used worldwide: WeChat and TikTok.

WeChat has become an indispensable social network for any company that wants to sell its products online in Asia.

Also noteworthy is Tik Tok, which most experts point to as the next global social network. This platform was born in 2016 in China under the name Douyin. It began its international expansion by

buying the social network Musical.ly, focused on a western adolescent audience, in which users make videos with their choreographies of famous songs (Yubal, 2017). In less than two years, Musical.ly accelerated its expansion, being the fourth most downloaded app in Spain in 2019 (Solís Lerici, 2019). However, it will be at the end of 2019 and the first months of 2020 when this network goes from being a channel focused on children and young people, to becoming an increasingly massive channel also used by adult audiences. In February 2020, this app broke the record for worldwide downloads (Direct Marketing, 2020a) and with the coronavirus health crisis, the massive transfer of Instagram users to Tik Tok has increased.

1.1.2. Social networks today in Spain

Social networks in Spain have reached their maturity. The profile of the users of these platforms in Spain is widely distributed in the population: 31% of the users are between 16 and 30 years old, 39% are between 31 and 45 years old, and 30% are between 46 and 65 years old (IAB and Elogia, 2019), although these data do not show minors' use of these platforms, which will foreseeably be much higher than the exposed data. Facebook is the social network that Spaniards spontaneously remember the most with 94%, well above Instagram (69%), Twitter (68%), or WhatsApp (25%) (IAB and Elogia, 2019). However, when the same respondents are given a list of social networks, Facebook remains in the first position with 96% awareness; even so, it enjoys similar awareness to other networks such as WhatsApp (93%), Twitter (93%), Instagram (84%), and YouTube (82%) (IAB and Elogia, 2019).

1.1.3. The role of influencers

The use of virtual characters that become influencers on social networks has fostered the natural interest of advertising agencies to hire their services to promote various brands and products, as can be seen from the studies by Cillo and Prandelli (2020), which in turn raise interesting reflections on classic advertising issues such as transparency in the prescription of products, the relevance of certain emplacements, or circumstances of a more ethical and moral entity such as the reproduction of certain aesthetic canons.

Vázquez, Rodríguez Hernández, and Fernández Fernández (2019) reflect on the importance of the figure of the virtual influencer in the luxury market. Goikoetxea (2019) researches the influence of virtual intelligence in the development of the fashion sector. We can also find some studies referring to the specific case of the most successful virtual influencer, Lil Miquela, Shieber (2019), that will also serve as the basis for our study.

2. Objectives

To understand the role of virtual influencers as a characteristic and defining element of new forms of consumption in social networks, the following general objectives are proposed:
- Define the concept of influencers in social networks.
- Know the phenomenon of influencers as mediators and catalysts of consumption.

From these general objectives, the following specific objectives are derived:
- Differentiate between real and virtual influencers.
- Identify the behavior carried out by virtual influencers and how it is reflected in the commercial messages they publish on their social networks.
- Analyze the messages generated by Lil Miquela regarding commercial activity
- Explain the success of virtual influencers regarding the number of followers.

3. Methodology

Addressing a novel object of study such as that of virtual influencers in which different cutting-edge technologies, novel forms of social relationship, and some ethical and moral traditional issues converge is not a simple matter. We consider it pertinent to point out at this point a series of initial complications that we must resolve if we do not want to fall into an excessive dispersion that makes it difficult to obtain significant results:

- Difficulty in delimiting such a broad object of study and with so many realities.
- The expectations it generates, both for the description of such a complex process and for the explanation of its operation.
- The multiplicity of its fields of application.

After analyzing these difficulties, the object of study is focused on commercial activity, understanding by advertising content three assumptions: the explicit appearance of the brand, the discourse about the brand, and consumption of a product in which the brand is clearly identifiable in the case of the avatars. Therefore, the object of study focuses on virtual influencers and their ability to present themselves as the image of brands and product prescribers, taking as a reference the profile of Lil Miquela, as she is the virtual influencer with the most followers on Instagram.

The time frame of the study is limited to the last four months (September, October, November, and December) of 2020.

The hypothesis that guides our research was stated in the following terms:

Virtual influencers are important commercial tools, especially among the younger audience, capable of mobilizing this group to obtain their desire to purchase, whether it is towards a product, brand, or even a lifestyle.

To carry out this research, a methodology divided into three phases has been proposed in which qualitative and quantitative techniques are combined through which an analysis of the selected sample can be carried out, in the first place, to be able to carry out later the analysis of these elements by observing and applying instruments to measure the impact of publications and their content (see Table 1). With the combination of these techniques, it is intended to carry out a deep analysis of the commercial behavior shown by Lil Miquela.

Table 1. *Research methodology*

Phase	Study	Task	Purpose
First	Descriptive theory	Contextualization and conceptual review of the influencers' phenomenon	Study and reflection of social networks and the phenomenon of influencers and virtual influencers
Second	Quantitative, qualitative, and descriptive experimental	Experimental work	Choice of the sample. Content analysis. Analysis and results of the analyzed sample
Third	Conclusive	Check the degree of compliance with the research objectives	Check the role of social networks and virtual influencers as catalysts for consumption

Source: Self-made

In a first approach to the object of study, social networks and their evolution have been analyzed, as well as the phenomenon of real influencers and virtual influencers. The second phase consists of an experimental study with which it is intended to analyze the selected sample from a quantitative and qualitative point of view. Lastly, a final conclusive phase derived from the analysis carried out, in which the degree of compliance with the hypothesis and the objectives set, will be verified.

To carry out this research, a sample of the profile, with the largest number of followers, of the virtual influencer Lil Miquela has been selected. The 122 publications made on this social network during the last four months of 2020, the period after the harshest confinement of the COVID-19 health pandemic, have been analyzed. Within the publications, the different contents and the accounts related to the different posts have been researched.

4. Discussion / Results

4.1. Social networks. Evolution and characteristics

The so-called influencers have become the opinion leaders of the 21st century. At a time when television content has been left aside to give way to the internet and, more specifically, to social networks, the competition to get a greater number of likes is the main engine of communication on these platforms. In this way, commercial brands bet on the figure of influencers to publicize their brand or launch their advertising messages.

The study carried out by InfoAdex (2000) on advertising investment in Spain pointed out that, in just 25 years, digital advertising went from being non-existent to becoming the medium with the highest advertising investment in Spain in 2019, thus surpassing television.

Ferrer López (2000) explained that the fact that leads the young population to be present on social networks consists of the need to establish connections and links between its members. One of the main characteristics of social networks is that all members can have a share in the different content. These platforms have become two-way media where the opinion of the target audience is of great importance.

Although at first it was thought that social networks would present a considerable difficulty in interpersonal relationships, the opposite has happened. Thus, numerous studies show that these platforms favor interpersonal links, achieving greater communication capacity between human beings even when they are territorially separated (Birnie and Horvath, 2006; Ploderer et al., 2008).

The evolution of the media is closely related to technological development. The emergence and great development of the internet have contributed to transforming human relationships. In the work of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, we can observe:
1. At present, the concept of "displacement" has disappeared, however, in ancient times this concept was totally indispensable to be able to transmit information (Bauman, 1999, p. 24).
2. The development of electronic devices, increasingly smaller, allow us to become senders and receivers of open messages, not only to our acquaintances but also to the rest of the Internet surfers (Bauman, 2017, pp. 24 -40).

3. The wide development of the consumer society has invaded all areas of human life. Consumer development has led to an increase in the quantity and speed of the transmitted information (Bauman and Donskis, 2015, pp. 56-61).
4. The emergence of social networks allows human beings to live simultaneously in two differentiated worlds: the traditional, characterized by relationships of belonging, and the online, totally independent and autonomous since browsing through social networks is free and each one decides the information they want to receive and the people they want to interact with (Bauman, 2016, pp. 92-95).

In this world in which we live, commercial brands are committed to creating participatory content to "hook" younger consumers. Continuous communication is carried out with which it is intended to achieve an emotional and unconditional attachment with their followers.

The possibilities that social networks currently present and the ease of connection, practically anywhere in the world, make influencers a powerful weapon when it comes to generating content related to commercial brands.

4.2. Virtual Influencers

The importance acquired by social networks as a means of communication and relationship with other users, demonstrates the importance of this advertising medium, becoming one of the media with the greatest impact and investment at the moment.

In 2016, thanks to the importance that influencers were acquiring in the advertising world, the first virtual influencer was created. The reason was to create a character with which messages could be controlled as well as their behavior. The main advantage of avatars in social networks is that they are born and die in the network, and that behind them is a team formed to create content of interest and most appropriately encapsulate advertising messages.

The main objective of influencers, both real and virtual, is to capture the attention of their followers and maintain their loyalty. Instagram has a very characteristic way of being able to tell stories, as explained by Casas-Moreno, Tejedor-Calvo, and Romero-Rodríguez:

> Instagram has become a platform for storytelling, visually recounting the events of your daily life. This app (Instagram stories) also allows you to add photos and short videos with the ability to add texts, emoticons, filters, etc. The human brain is prepared to store information as a story. (2018, p. 45)

Virtual influencers have increased their success in the last five years, climbing positions compared to real influencers. This is due to the work that advertising agencies carry out around these profiles. A team specialized in communication is in charge of creating the content, working very closely with art, photography, virtual reality, and special effects directors. In this way, attractive content is created with the ability to attract followers through a specific common thread.

People who interact on social networks show interests and preferences on specific topics. This is used by virtual profiles to create stories that mimic those interests, showing different areas of everyday life. By studying followers, messages and social behaviors can be developed in which brands will play an important role, establishing a connection link between avatars and their followers.

Another advantage of this type of profile is that audience segmentation can be carried out, positioning themselves with a greater number of followers. This means that their interest as a commercial advertising platform increases, achieving greater economic interest.
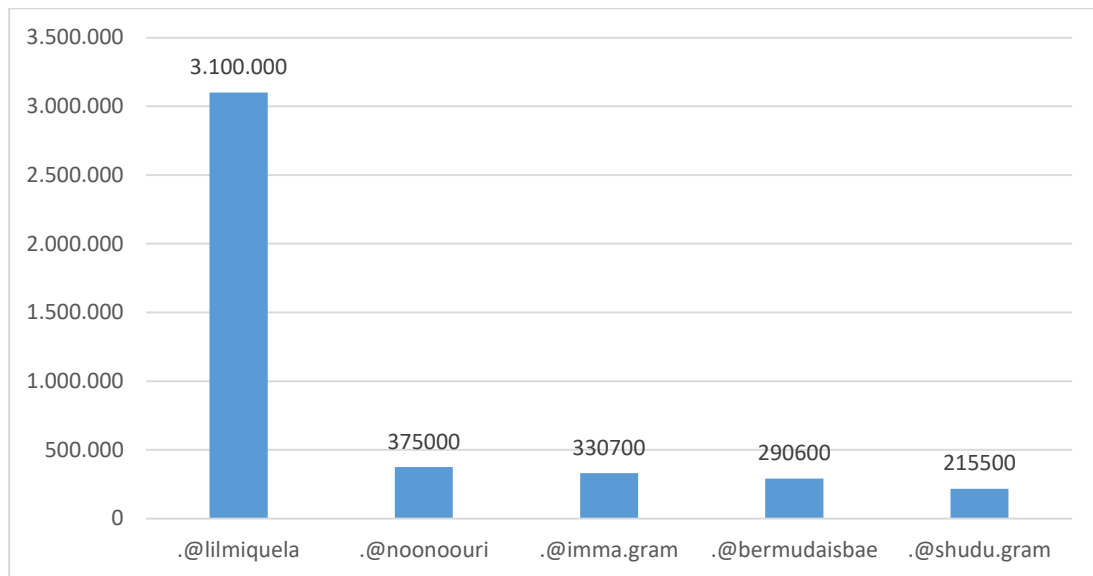
Graph 1: *Number of followers of the five most prominent virtual influencers*
Source: HyperAuditor, 2021
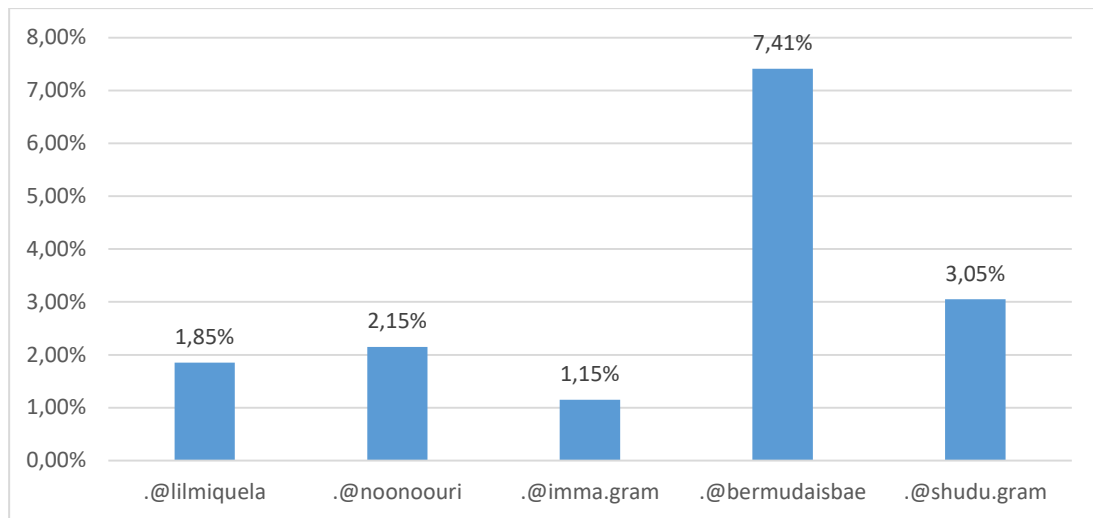
Graph 2: *Percentage of followers who "like" or comment on posts*
Source: HyperAuditor, 2021

In graphs 1 and 2 you can see a comparison between the number of followers of the most prominent virtual influencers' profiles and their percentage of the audience that comments or likes the posts (ER). The importance marked by the number of followers (more than 3,000,000 followers) as well as the published posts (1,080) makes Lil Miquela's profile the most important and the main reason why this account was chosen for carrying out the fieldwork.

On the other hand, we can see that the most active profile regarding interaction with followers is the @bermudaisbae account, however, in the last year, this user has practically not published their own posts.

On April 23rd, 2016, the Brund firm created the first virtual influencer, Lil Miquela, who is currently the Instagram profile with the largest number of followers. A robot, as it is presented in her account, residing in Los Angeles and that with its eternal 19 years has obtained more than 3 million followers by publishing a high number of posts and stories.

This profile has turned the life of an avatar into the perfect medium to launch advertising messages, as well as social and ideological content.

The main objective of these accounts is to reflect reality as it is, and therein lies the success of virtual influencers. The largest number of followers is found among Generation Z, since, although they know that they are not real, they have a high degree of empathy with these types of profiles. Núñez-Gómez, P., Rodrigo-Martín, L., Rodrigo-Martín, I., and Mañas-Viniegra, L. speak of the need to know the preferences of this target audience to carry out messages with a greater degree of depth since "brands should research this new audience more and responsibly and educationally address it, because, in the long term, brand loyalty will be linked to it" (2020). Virtual influencers are created as similar to their followers as possible to achieve effective participation.

4.3. Analysis of Lil Miquela's profile posts

To address Lil Miquela's case study, we made a first approach to the posts made since 2016. The affinity and influence capacity of this profile regarding the target audience can be reflected in the increase in the posts made throughout these years.

Table 2. *Data of the posts made by @lilmiquela*

Year	Nº *Post*	First Date	Last Date
2016	12	April 23rd	December 28th
2017	55	January 27th	December 31st
2018	296	January 1st	December 31st
2019	273	January 2nd	December 30th
2020	327	January 1st	December 30th
2021	103	January 1st	May 27th

Source: Self-made

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total	12	55	296	273	327	103
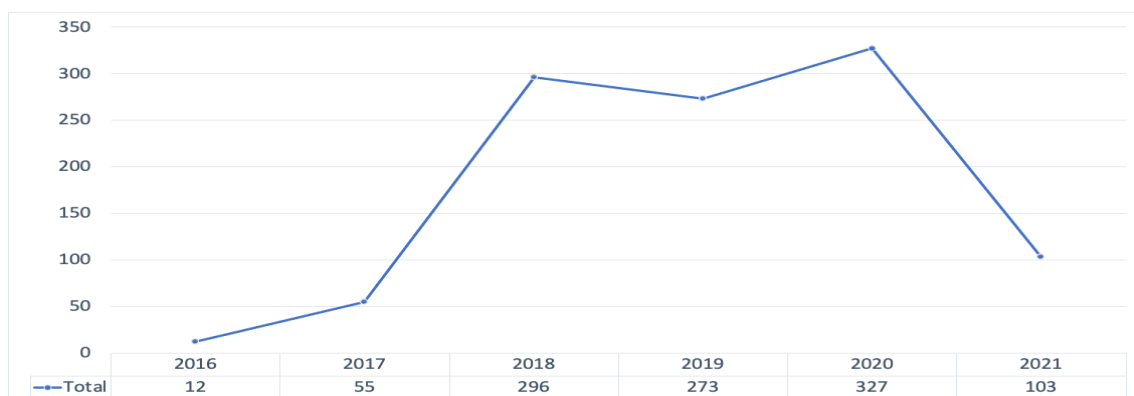
Graph 3: *Evolution of @lilmiquela's posts*
Source: Self-made

The activity carried out during the first year on Lil Miquela's profile, with 12 publications, is not representative. As of 2017, the profile begins to make a greater number of publications, although maintaining a clear distance from real influencers.

The largest number of publications are made during 2018 and 2019 with almost 300 posts. Very careful and natural messages are launched, which makes the big fashion or luxury brands opt for Lil Miquela's account to support their commercial messages.

The health crisis due to COVID-19 makes 2020 a turning point in the profiles of virtual influencers. These accounts were unaffected by mobility restrictions or lockdowns and continued to show life as it was before COVID. The pursuit of normality made these accounts have a high profile of publications during the past year, significantly increasing compared to previous years.

From January 1st to May 27th, 2021, 103 publications have been made, 14 less than in the same period in 2020. Although at the moment, the number of publications is lower, growth is similar to that of the previous stage.

4.4. Field analysis

To carry out the study, the last four months of 2020 have been selected, since we consider that this is when social relations begin to normalize after the hardest period of the health pandemic due to COVID-19. In total, 122 posts made by the virtual influencer Lil Miquela have been analyzed.

The fact of selecting a virtual influencer, the most followed in the Instagram social network with more than 3,000,000 followers and 1080 posts since 2016, wants to show that the likes of the followers on Instagram are not based on whether the character is real or virtual, but in its ability to entertain and fascinate. For this reason, virtual influencers are rapidly positioning themselves in the market, since they have a team behind that works by and for them, to create entertainment spaces, similar to television series, with the advantage that it is possible to play with space and time without additional costs.
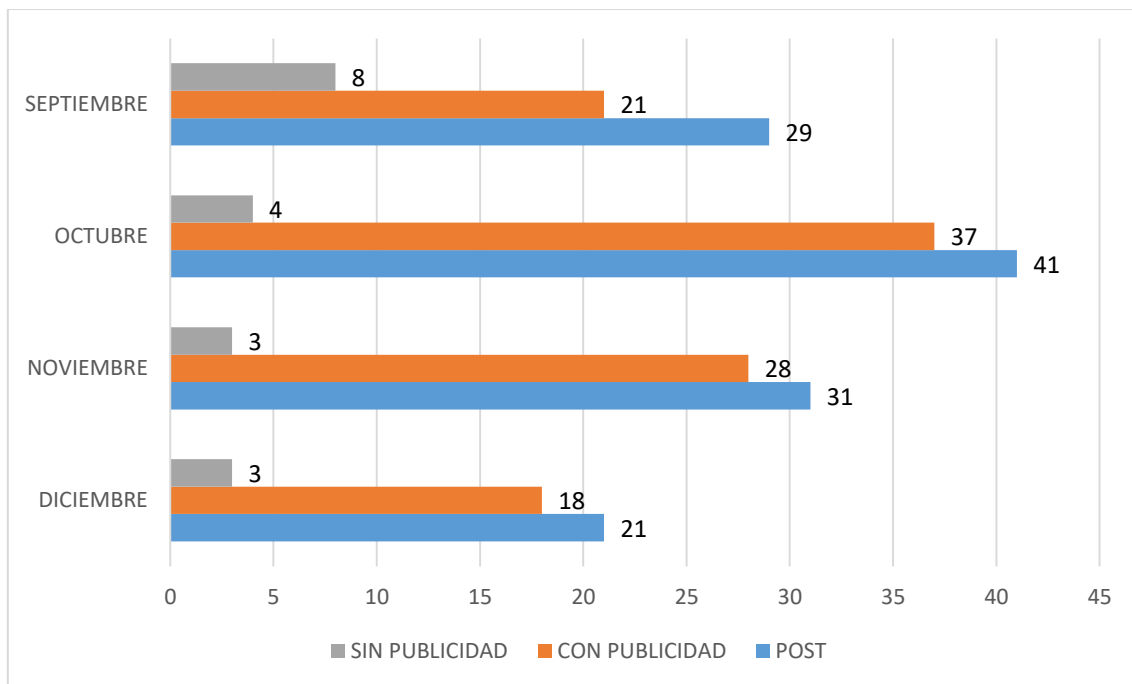
Graph 4: *Content of the posts made by @lilmiquela*
Source: Self-made

As can be seen, the trend in publications throughout the analyzed months is very similar, only December being below the average with 21 posts. We also find two different types of publications, some with advertising or reference to commercial brands or events, and others without advertising in which the avatar is shown performing different activities of daily life.

85% of the analyzed publications have some advertising reference, which makes this Instagram profile a benchmark in commercial advertising. However, the remaining 15%, by not containing advertising references, try to turn Lil Miquela into a friendly character, giving a sense of normality and imitating real influencers.
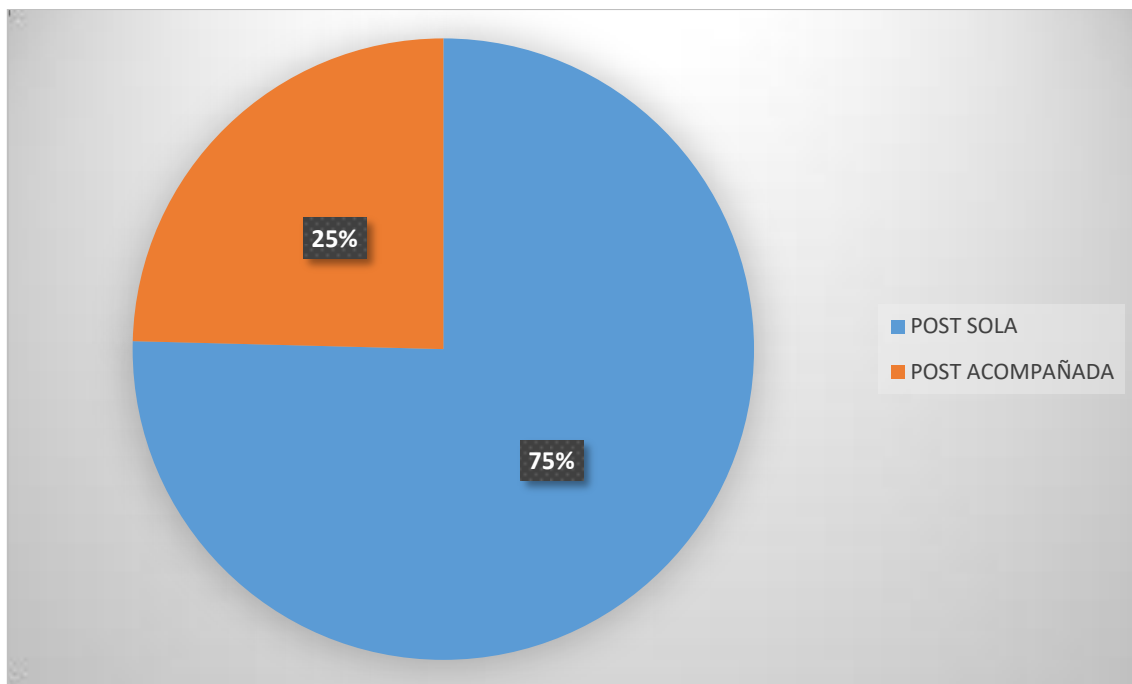
Graph 5: *Percentage of posts in which Lil Miquela appears in the company of other people*
Source: Self-made

Another of the main characteristics of this Instagram account is that it is a personal account. In most of the posts made, the avatar appears alone, only in 25% of the analyzed publications, we can see Lil Miquela's avatar accompanied by other people, both real and virtual.

In Lil Miquela's profile, you can see how collaborations are also made with other accounts. Throughout the posts of the last four months of 2020, we can see Lil Miquela accompanied by several virtual and real influencers, which makes this account acquire a feeling of greater realism since a robot is linked to social relations that real people keep.
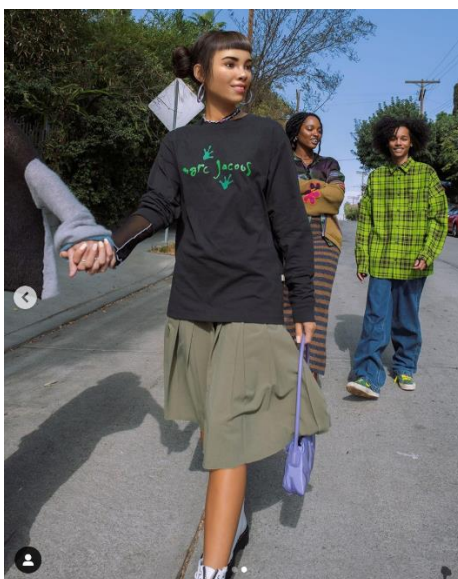
Image 1: *Post of November 28th, 2020, which shows the social relationships that Lil Miquela keeps*
Source: Lil Miquela's profile on Instagram, 2020
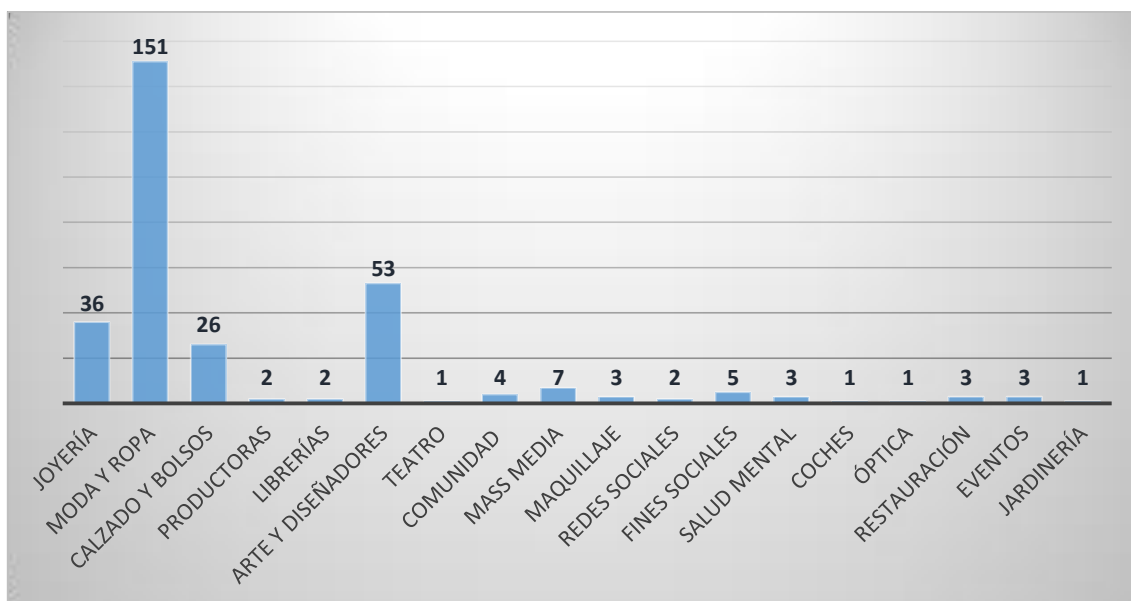
Graph 6: *Percentage of the sectors advertised in the @lilmiquela account*
Source: Self-made

Throughout the analysis, it has been possible to verify how the sectors that choose the @lilmiquela account to advertise their products or services are varied, however, there is one that stands out above the others. The fashion sector, specifically regarding textiles, comes first.

50% of commercial posts are made around the fashion sector. In the second place, but with a much lower percentage, only 17%, is the sector related to art, artists, and designers. 12% of the posts revolve around jewelry and 9% on the footwear and handbags sector.

With this analysis, we can highlight that the publications made with a higher percentage are closely related to each other since both footwear and jewelry or designers have a common core such as fashion. In this way, Lil Miquela has become a showcase for brands, all of them related to a virtual model, who sometimes also participates in model shows and tells us about her tastes depending on which brands pay the most.

Another of the highlights when analyzing Lil Miquela's profile is that within the same post she can refer to several commercial brands. That is, when she publishes a post related to the fashion sector, generally, it refers to several brands, specifying which brand is each of the garments that she is wearing, which designers have made them, or where we can find the pieces of jewelry that she uses in a given post. This leads us to verify that, within the 104 posts with commercial brand advertising, 151 references are made to fashion and clothing, being, as has been said, the most prominent sector in this Instagram profile.

Alejandra de la Riva (2017) pointed out that fashion brands, always pioneers in using new communication tools, have been the first to bet on new trends. A virtual influencer helps us reach a broader and younger audience.

Of these 151 references to fashion, we find 84 different brands, among which are haute couture firms such as Prada or Dior, but the main core focuses on giving visibility to small fashion or clothing companies located, generally, in the United States. Slightly more than half of the commercial brands,

44, are only mentioned once, 40 twice, 14 three times, seven are cited four times, five as many times, and the *simonmillerusa* brand appears tagged in 6 posts throughout the last four months of 2020, being the brand with the greatest notoriety in the analyzed period.

We can say that, although many commercial brands use this Instagram profile to make themselves known, less than 50% of those brands do so regularly. The great notoriety of this account, together with the high number of followers, increases the cost of advertising.

5. Conclusions

Throughout this study, it has been possible to verify the great capacity of the profiles created for virtual influencers to become an advertising and promotion medium for first-rate commercial brands. It has been shown that these avatars perform their advertising function in all the cases raised, firstly, traditionally inserting the brand in their publications or post, secondly, constructing a discourse in which the brand is cited and argued about, and thirdly, consuming brand products, as product placement.

We believe that the objectives set have been achieved to a remarkable degree. The review through the history of social networks and their mechanisms of operation and interrelation, allow us to draw a clear profile of the figure of the influencer, in general terms, and of the virtual influencer in particular. The differences between one and the other are limited to their nature since, in the commercial sphere, which is the object of this study, both operate similarly. The advantages of having a virtual influencer derive from the absolute control that the account manager has over the behavior and speech of the avatar, which allows it to fit perfectly with its commercial work. A traditional influencer is a person who makes their own decisions and who leads a life that, at times, can contradict the advertising discourse that they maintain in their commercial activity.

The ability of these avatars to generate appeal, especially among younger people, is an element that has not gone unnoticed in the advertising industry. The agencies have found in certain profiles a valid advertising medium for brands in any sector, mainly high-status and especially in the field of fashion. The profile taken as the basis of the study, Lil Miquela, advertises brands and products from the following sectors: jewelry, fashion and textiles, footwear and accessories, production companies, bookstores, art and designers, theater, communities, mass media, makeup, social networks, social purposes, mental health, automobiles, optics, restoration, events, and gardening. In other words, a first-rate advertising fan, with remarkable results in all those fields.

The virtual influencer becomes a strategic tool insofar as it is not only capable of promoting brands but, what is much more interesting, it is capable of generating trends. The construction of an avatar that reflects an attractive model and lifestyle, without economic or legal restrictions, manages to connect on an emotional level with its followers who experience something similar to a personal relationship, so its ability to prescribe is considerably increased encouraging the growth of the effectiveness of advertising activity.

The study of the commercial activity of Lil Miquela has allowed us to corroborate all these previous expositions. Their interest for brands from different sectors, their dynamism when promoting different lifestyles linked to commercial brands, and their special relationship with young audiences, make virtual influencers a fundamental element to understand the evolution of advertising activity in the current digital context and to glimpse the trends of its future evolution. Advertising carried out through virtual influencers has a capacity to connect with younger audiences that is notably superior

to other more traditional advertising and marketing formulas, which allows us to conclude that it will become a significant element of advertising in the coming years.

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