



Master Thesis  
Business Administration and Economics  
- Brand and Communications Management

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*Next step for  
Influencer Marketing  
—the Fascination of  
Robots*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research study is to gain some knowledge about the rising popularity of virtual social media influencers (VSMI). The study has used a single case to explore the phenomena and conduct some qualitative research by questioning the followers of one virtual Instagram account - Lil Miquela. Miquela Sousa is a forever 19-year-old robot from Brazil, created by the L.A. based agency Brud.

Currently, there are no empirical studies on Virtual Social Media Influencers, which has caught the researchers' attention as a potential research gap. Since these virtual influencers are starting to get some traction, it was decided to study their following to learn about the specific motivations to follow. This study makes use of the brand equity model by Keller (2001) and Aaker (1996), to evaluate the brand value of a VSMI. Moreover, the profile of the predominant target groups of Lil Miquela was established by analysing the main motivations to follow this Instagram account - namely the *Community Seekers* (which amounted to 22% of the entire sample) and the *Technological admirers* (that resulted in 78% of the sample population). Community seekers find her exciting, and their motivation to follow is highly based on her being interactive and engaging with her audience. Technology lovers admire new technology, are interested in knowing the new trends, therefore found this new phenomenon amazing and having a bright future ahead. They cannot relate to Lil Miquela and therefore they are not loyal to this human brand. The main motivations to follow the account are curiosity and intrigue. In order to understand the brand equity of Lil Miquela, the authors have started analysing two dimensions of Keller's brand equity pyramid (2001)- brand salience and brand meaning; the results were both positive to both segments. After analysing these two dimensions, the authors felt the need to study further the value of Lil Miquela as a brand; therefore, the model of brand equity from Aaker (1996) was evaluated to have an overview of the various dimensions, giving different results for both target groups.

Finally, theoretical and Managerial Implications were discussed. The managerial implications were divided into three sections - those brands who are thinking of creating a virtual social media influencer, the ones who already have one, and the ones who would like to collaborate with one in the future. Future research in this research field could be related to conducting a broader spectrum study, including both followers of the virtual social media influencers and people who have never encountered them.

**Keywords:** *Brand equity, Consumer motivations to follow, Virtual social media influencer, Perceived quality, Human brands*

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## Introduction

In the new era of influencer marketing, the concept of introducing virtual profiles is highly debated. A "robot," "avatar," or a "virtual personality," these social media accounts go by many names. However, one thing is clear - followers are intrigued and interested in engaging with these virtual human brands. The authors have chosen to use Miquela Sousa, also known as Lil Miquela's personality, as a single case study for the topic about virtual influencers. Lil Miquela is a transmedia storytelling character, which, interestingly, interacts with her 2.2 million follower audience via the comment section and direct messages on Instagram. Based on the Hype auditor, she is the biggest virtual SMI at the moment (Hypeauditor, 2019).

Digital icons are not precisely new phenomena. Some examples of this would be Japanese pop idol Hatsune Miku, who is Vocaloid performing via a hologram, or the American artist Marshmello, who is performing wearing a headcover. Interestingly, the phenomenon of hiding one's true identity exists among many music artists and has not been explored yet. The authors decided to explore this research gap in the following study.

The study aims to determine what type of consumer is interested in engaging with this virtual influencer, which would further explain their motivations to follow. The knowledge from this research study can possibly help future brand managers that either will want to collaborate with an existing virtual social media influencer or create one themselves. By analyzing Lil Miquela's brand equity, considering her being a human brand, and earning income based on her appearances, collaborations, and music productions, the authors have found the level of her brand's image based on her followers' perception of her.

The literature regarding this topic was reviewed starting from describing consumer motivations. A. Maslow's hierarchy of needs was used to determine what are the main human needs and how does it translate to our needs as consumers. Product symbolism and the new era of consumption were mentioned as the consumption has evolved and is more hedonic than utilitarian. The authors have covered some of the literature regarding the Brand's Equity since it is a core concept in our finding section - Keller's CBBE and D. Aaker's Brand Equity models were assessed. Following Brand's Equity and Brand's Image, social media influencers were discussed and evaluated as Human Brands and the importance of Social media influencer marketing as a recent strategy. The authors have then touched upon

the subject of Hyperreality, first mentioned by J. Baudrillard in his “Simulacra and Simulation” which is a term describing the construction of reality, which is getting more and more relevant. The world is getting digitalized and a significant part of our online presentation of selves involves some sort of editing to present a better-curated image to others. The literature review section was concluded with some of the articles regarding the rise of virtual social media influencers, which are usually created by agencies and are similar to real human beings, despite not having a physical body.

The possible reason for this sudden digital wave of influencers could be explained by the rise of everyday robotics in our daily lives. Siri, Alexa, and Google Home are great examples of it. Another reason could be defined by Khumo Theko, who is a researcher and trend spotter at Flux Trends *"Those from Generation Z were digital natives. They understood social media better than any generation before them and would be more open to interacting with such technology."* (Rea Khoabane, 2018).

Brand equity defines the success of the brand, and studying the consumer motivations gives much insight for increasing the perceived brand quality. Over the years, the academics have understood that the value of a brand is socially constructed by the interactions of the consumers and every other stakeholder involved. The research gap turned out to be a lack of literature regarding Virtual Social Media Influencers and their perceived Brand Equity. The authors then decided on the research questions that would complement the current level of literature regarding VSMI:

***RQ1: What type of customers engages with a virtual influencer?***

***RQ2: What is the perceived Brand Equity of virtual human brands?***

The Brand Equity of the case study human brand Lil Miquela turned out to be perceived high based on the answers of her followers. The followers were grouped into two main categories - *Community Seekers* and *Technological Admirers* based on the patterns in their motivations to follow this Instagram account. *Community Seekers* were the ones who seemingly disregard the fact that Lil Miquela is not a real human, as they are looking to meet that sociological need of finding their “tribe”. *Technological Admirers* were a more diverse



group, having multiple interests, such as professional or academic interest in digital world or digital photography.

Considering the limited empirical literature about Virtual Influencers, this study follows an exploratory research design with a qualitative focus. A single case study approach has been selected in order to answer the research questions better. The data collection was made following a grounded theory method approach to a sample of 22 Instagram followers of the @lilmiquela page. Interviews were conducted both through direct messaging and via Skype with randomly chosen followers. At the end of this research study, the authors display an overview of the contribution that this study can provide to the existing literature. The limitations of the research method and options are displayed, as well as the further research suggestions and managerial implications.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This literature review is used to set the scene for the exploration of influencer marketing, Brand's Image, virtual reality, and the rise of virtual influencers. This chapter starts with the explanation of the customer needs and their motivations to consume, in order to prepare the reader to understand how is a brand value measured. This understanding will be built through the use of the renowned works of Keller Brand equity Pyramid (2001) and Aaker's Brand Equity model (1996).

Following, the authors describe the brand's image and its importance in the present research. The brand image is studied in order to understand the evolution of marketing trends and the rise of human brand, namely the rise of the Social Media Influencer (SMI) marketing. This new trend involves ordinary people who are experts in specific themes and are opinion makers in social media platforms. A Social Media Influencer makes partnerships with brands that are related to one's lifestyle and posts images and videos with sponsored products. For an SMI to have success, some traits are necessary, such as authority, credibility, and social attractiveness. However, a new type of SMI have appeared, which is a Virtual Social Media Influencer (VSMI). These influencers are very similar to a real SMI, but

they are entirely computer-generated, they do not exist in the real world. Moreover, some of them have Instagram accounts with millions of followers.

Everything around us, from the way we communicate to the way trade, is becoming more and more digital, so naturally, the marketers are exploring this virtual world as a new opportunity to become visible to the masses. The digital world allows us to not only follow human brands that are forming their image online but also observe a rise in virtual human accounts. They are created by agencies or individuals and portray a life of seemingly ordinary individuals with no real life. They are broadcasting their "every day" by posting pictures and videos online; however, it is clear that these are computer-generated imagery, which is becoming a massive trend in the realms of virtual reality. Digital influencers are a controversial topic - some people are welcoming them into the social universe online. In contrast, others are sceptical about the level of trust regarding their accounts and the intentions behind their social media activity.

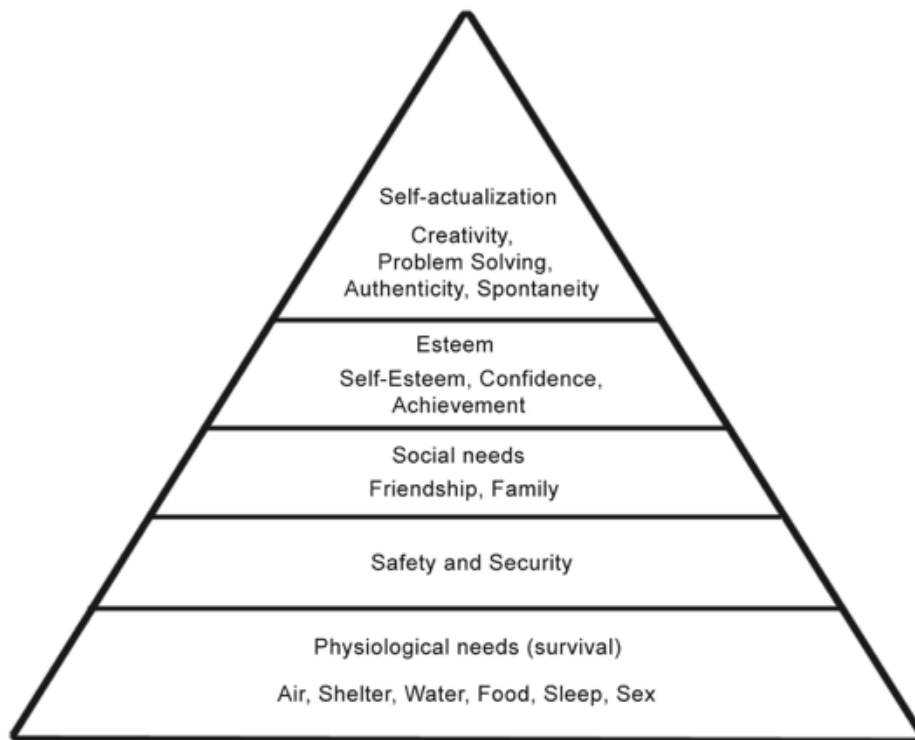
### **Consumer motivations for Purchase Intentions**

The motivations behind our consumption can tell us a great deal about the reasons behind admiring a particular brand. We enjoy the products, we enjoy the content that constructs a brand and we build ties with the brand, establishing parasocial relationships, where we feel a one-sided attachment to the object that we assume to be known well. The next couple of sections will, therefore, describe the motivations and the frameworks behind our purchase decision and the main drivers that influence our consumption habits.

### **Maslow's hierarchy of needs**

Maslow's pyramid of needs (1943) explains our, as individuals, motivational process when ranking our personal needs (Maslow A.H., 1943). The needs are ranked from physiological needs, that are our main ones in terms of survival, to the self-actualization ones, that ensures reaching our full potential and self-realization. The pyramid's core principle is that one cannot start meeting the needs on a higher hierarchical level before those on the lower ones are met.

Maslow's pyramid of needs explains, in each level, how a person can reach the level of self-actualization by ensuring its physiological, safety, social and esteem needs are met. Some criticize this model due to its hierarchical type, which strongly suggests that only wealthy people can achieve self-actualization. Well off consumers usually do not have to worry about safety or survival, hence they have more opportunities to explore their creativity.



**Figure 1 - Maslow's Pyramid of Needs**

Max-Neef (1991) has redefined A.Maslow's pyramid of needs and rejected the idea that some needs are more important than others (Manfred Max-Neef, 1991). His version has defined 9 needs: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity and freedom. We, as consumers can feel affection, when interacting with our favourite influencer and participation, when we get involved in their content co-creation. Consumers can form their identity, when they feel a sense of belonging to a certain group of followers (an example would be US singer's Lady Gaga's fans, that call themselves Little Monsters after one of her songs). Whether we look into the A.Maslow's pyramid of needs or the Max-Neef version of it, it is clear that our interaction with human brands helps us fulfil some of the social needs.

## **Product symbolism**

Product symbolism has been started to be researched in the early 1950s, by Gardner and Levy (Gardner and Levy 1955, Levy 1959). Levy was a pioneer in this research area while stating that "People buy products not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean" (Levy, 1958, p.118). Decades later, famous lifestyle coach Tony Robbins rephrase the statement by saying, "People buy feelings not things" (Tony Robbins, 2016), which shows that product symbolism is still a relevant issue in customer motivation for purchase intention (Wood & Solomon, 2010).

The 1970s was an era of consumption motivation research. Hirschman, Holbrook, and Levy looked into the aesthetic, intangible and subjective aspects of hedonic consumption. From a hedonic consumption perspective, the products are not viewed as objective entities by itself, but rather as personal symbols (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Product symbolism is, therefore, more of a consumer's emotional response to the product, than a pure functionality issue.

Hedonic consumption is especially relevant in the booming modern economy. According to Statista (2019) the personal luxury goods industry has had steady growth throughout the years, which is a sign that a modern consumer has more free-flowing cash to use on hedonic consumption inspired shopping (Statista, 2019).

## **Hedonic consumption**

Hedonic consumption is defined by the hedonic needs that are met when purchasing a certain item or an object, that we as consumers buy to satisfy our emotional and sensory needs, rather than the basic needs, like food and shelter. The term hedonic consumption was first mentioned in the 1980s to describe "*the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one's experience with products*" (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). One of the main traits of hedonic consumption is experience. Research has shown that multisensory external stimuli, such as perfume, will start generating multisensory images in consumers' minds, such as sights, sounds and tactile sensations, all of which will contribute to the overall experience of shopping. In addition to experience, a consumer can experience emotional arousal in response to purchasing an item. According to Izard and Beuchler (1980), emotions will act as a motivational phenomenon to purchase (C.E.Izard & S.Buechler, 1980). It has been

discovered that seeking emotional arousal will specifically push consumers to buy tickets to entertainment events, sports, movies, and concerts, as well as buying products that give us emotional satisfaction such as cigarettes or clothing (ibid.).

### **Utilitarian consumption**

In contrast to hedonic consumption, utilitarian consumption describes our purchase behaviour, when we need to satisfy our basic human needs and we shop for functionality rather than luxury. Utilitarian products can be in the same category as the ones that would fulfil our hedonic needs. An example could be watches - one could buy a watch leading to meet one's utilitarian (functionality, durability) or hedonic needs (brand name, luxurious).

Utilitarian products do not create any sensory attachment; they are practical, functional and add ease to our everyday. The decision process is fast and does not invite any room for doubt or second-guessing our decision. An interesting fact is that we benefit from both hedonic and utilitarian consumption, so those two could not be put in the same category. An example would be between choosing to watch a documentary or a comedy. One would gain knowledge from watching the documentary, whereas they would have fun when watching a comedy. Previous research has shown that consumers feel more guilt when choosing hedonic purchases since the utilitarian ones are more functional (Voss et al., 2003).

### **Brand Equity**

#### **Keller's Customer based brand equity model (CBBE model)**

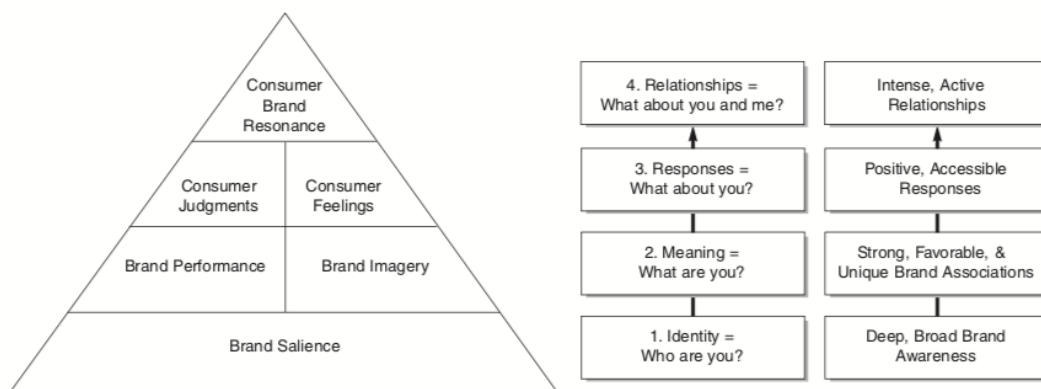
The way to achieve a Brand's Love is to identify the brand's relationships with the consumers. Keller's model on the Brand Image explains the necessary steps on how to reach the Consumer - Brand Resonance. The reason the authors discuss this in the literature review section is to follow a continuous stream of literature on the Brand's Image importance in consumer-brand relationships.

K.L.Keller has developed this model in order to help brands acquire stronger brand equity and overall image. It is based on the idea that in order to create a strong brand, we

have to think about how the consumer is thinking and feeling about our product. We have to offer such brand experiences, that the consumer would create specifically positive opinions and beliefs about the brand (Lane Keller, 2001).

In the core sense of it, the model represents four main questions that the customers will want to know about one's brand. Step one, the Brand Salience is making sure that a brand is recognized. Not only is it important to be "seen" and "known," but the crucial part is to be understood for the brand it is. The next step is to communicate this knowledge to your consumer through performance and imagery. Performance means having a product that completely satisfies the needs of the audience. Brand's imagery would mean meeting the needs of the consumer on social and psychological levels. The third layer of the Keller's CBBE model is the Customer's responses to the brand, which can either be judgments or

**Figure 1. Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid**



**Figure 2 - Keller, 2001**

feelings. Consciously or not, the loyal consumer will make the following judgments about your brand, such as quality, credibility, consideration and superiority. The brand can also evoke some feelings to its audience. According to K.Keller, they are warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval and self-respect. The last step to creating a strong brand is called the Brand's Resonance. This translates into having a deep psychological connection between the brand and their consumer. The questions to ask here would be about the level of the consumer brand attachment, sense of community, and behavioural loyalty. Achieving this level of Brand-Consumer relationship would mean having a loyalist, that would stick to one brand and choose it over the competitors (ibid.).

## Aaker Brand Equity theory

D. Aaker brand's equity model explains the value of the brand. It has been developed to view Brand Equity as a combination of loyalty measures, perceived quality, associations, awareness measures and finally market behaviour measures (Aaker, 1996). These aspects combined define the value a specific product or service is providing for the company. Knowing the brand strength can help to supplement financial company measures.

Professor D. Aaker viewed brand identity as one of the building blocks for successful brand management. The asset value should reflect the competitive advantage the studied brand has over the competitors, which is not easily copied.

The following categories represent customer perceptions towards the brand. These categories are directly related to the Customer's opinions, while the fifth category (market behaviour measures) is market-based information rather than customer-based.

The first category, Brand Loyalty is affected by every other dimension and is a core pillar to building Brand Equity. The "loyal customer represents a barrier to enter, a basis for price premium, time to respond to competitor innovations and a bulwark against deleterious price competition" (ibid.). What is measured is whether the price is high or low compared to the competitor's product price, and customer satisfaction regarding the use of the product (ibid.).

The second category, perceived quality, compares the product/service quality to the one from the alternative brand. It is measured through assessing the leadership and popularity from the brand, influenced not only for the "customer acceptance" the need to fit with the peers, but also because the product needs to have quality in order to be the sales leader (ibid.).

**TABLE I.** The Brand Equity Ten

<b>Loyalty Measures</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Price Premium</li> <li>• Satisfaction/Loyalty</li> </ul>
<b>Perceived Quality/ Leadership Measures</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived Quality</li> <li>• Leadership</li> </ul>
<b>Associations/ Differentiation Measures</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived Value</li> <li>• Brand Personality</li> <li>• Organizational Associations</li> </ul>
<b>Awareness Measures</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brand Awareness</li> </ul>
<b>Market Behavior Measures</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Market Share</li> <li>• Price and Distribution Indices</li> </ul>

*Figure 3 - The brand equity ten (Aaker, 1996)*

The third category, associations, involves characteristics that are unique to the product, such as the brand-as-product, which is the value proposition of the brand transmitted to the product. The brand personality, the emotional and self-expressive benefits and finally the organizational associations, which considers the people, values and programs that the organization is made of, are also important characteristics.

The fourth category is Brand Awareness. Brand Awareness is an important driver for Brand Loyalty and reflects the salience of the brand in the mind of the customers. Having a high Brand Awareness positively influences the perceptions and attitudes of the clients towards the product (ibid.).

The last dimension is Market Behaviour, which measures the market share of the product among the competitors.

In order to measure the final value of the Brand Equity, Aaker (1996) suggests that a weighting of all the dimensions is equally made (ibid.).

When studying modern influencers, whether that would be human or computer-generated accounts, we see one depicting similarity between the two - they are working with different brands to promote their collaboration and gain more exposure. The brand-influencer collaborations allow brands to build their equity, as firstly, they get more interactions, likes and follows. Moreover, the influencers are paid to advocate for a certain brand, which plays well with the Brand's Image and their trustworthiness. It builds social trust and increases their recall value as well as Brand Awareness, when an influencer, one trusts, recommends them (Brown & Basil, 2010).

## **Brand image**

### **What is Brand Image**

When discussing the reasons behind certain purchasing patterns and consumer preferences, it is important to mention the term "brand image". Brand's image determines its equity and its value in the eyes of their consumers. "Exclusive", "exciting," or "young" are just some of the terms we use to describe the brands. In the following literature review part about the brand's image, how it is created, and how should it be measured, we will review some of the early definitions of this term and its origins.



Some of the terms that researchers have been associating "brand image" with have been "the sum of the total impression" by Herzog (1973), "everything the people associate with the brand" by Newman (1957) and "the product perception" by Runyon and Stewart (1987). (Dawn Dobni & George M. Zinkhan, 1990). Gardner and Levy (1958) were the pioneers to crystalize the term Brand image (ibid). They have tried to dig deeper and unravel the real reasons behind our purchase intentions. Gardner and Levy argued that the attitude the consumers had towards brands, contributed to the "image" the brand had in their heads. Moreover, their research was based on the idea that products have more than just a physical nature - it serves our psychological and social needs too (ibid.).

James Duesenberry (1949) argued that the act of consumption has more of a symbolic meaning rather than an actual functional one (ibid). We, as consumers, buy goods and services to attain and create a perfect reflection of self and our values. We want to display what we believe into the outside world too, in order to get some recognition, a social status or other social benefits.

It has been confirmed that Brand's Image has a direct effect on purchase intention (Dolich, 1969). The products act as a symbol or the promise that could help us, the customers imagine ourselves as "ideal selves" (Sirgy, 1985) (ibid). To clarify, many authors throughout the literature review have used the terms "product" interchangeability with "brand." The word "brand" has a symbolic meaning throughout some of the branding literature.

Polhman and Mudd (1973) defined it as "symbolic utility," Levy (1985) called brands "the symbols by which we buy", while Sommers (1963) named it "perceived product symbolism". These authors made it clear that choosing a brand to purchase it way more than just choosing it based on price on functionality (Dawn Dobni & George M. Zinkhan, 1990). Consciously or not, we as consumers perceive brands as symbols of something representative of our value system as individuals.

### **How is it created?**

Some researchers state that brand image is created through constant and continuous work done by brand managers and its consumers. Brand's image is the creation of a shared input of these two parties. It is, however, an ongoing debate about whether the brand's image is something conveyed or something received. Levy (1978) argued that brand image and its

meaning is created through the consumer understanding and interpreting the product, by associating it to certain feelings or memories (Dawn Dobni & George M. Zinkhan, 1990).

Gensch (1978) has proposed that brand image consists of the way we evaluate their product - their past promotions, reputation, and peer evaluation. Other authors argue that speaking about product attributes is not the way to describe and measure a brand's image. Friedmann (1986) suggests that we should look into the "*psychological meaning*" of the products as well as objective and functional product qualities (ibid.).

There are quite a few definitions on a brand's image, and what it consists of, Boivin (1986) has measured brand's image in isolation, when comparing it to its competitors, Keon (1984) has measured it based on the advertisement pictures and consumer ideal points, while McClure and Ryans (1968) have measured it by comparing it to two different perspectives - from the consumer and from the retailer sides (ibid.).

The attachment theory states that the amount of care we receive as infants and how it impacts our future relationships plays an essential role in the creation of the brand-consumer relationships (Bowlby, 1979). Current research admits that we, as consumers experience a similar interpersonal attachment when interacting with our favorite brands (ibid.).

### **The new consumption culture**

The authors have chosen to discuss the Show-off consumerism because it is one of the main drivers behind some of the consumer trends. It directly correlates to visible popularity of human-brands and social media influencers. As consumers, we are deemed to be wanting things others have and flaunt. Our value of "self" is measured by how others perceive us, and being active on social media platforms allows us to be judged and measured in comparison to our peers (Alba & Williams, 2013).

Marketing has undergone a complete shift in the last couple of decades. It has turned from being a way of selling products and services to marketing experiences and unattainable lifestyles, that you could potentially flaunt on your socials. The marketing tools have also changed - we see way more personalization, technology, and AI in the marketing strategies. Social media platforms are acting as a strong influence on our shopping habits. The industry has been shaped by new ways we communicate, technological changes, and even a value

shift in the modern consumer's mind. The modern consumer has a completely new perspective on ownership. We went from owning to renting. From buying to leasing. Shared economy has seemingly changed the entire value system. Older generations took pride in having something "at hand," or that's "their own". Younger consumers are enjoying their financial freedom and the big part of this generation does not feel like being tied down to monthly house payments or other heavy financial constraints. Social media platforms have also shaped our mindset with a new set of trendy values. Traveling is suddenly considered a good investment, as well as investing into yourself or your business. All of these trends are contributing to portraying the online lives and maybe painting them a bit better than they are. We follow accounts that give us style or travel inspiration. Moreover, following brand accounts allows us to be the first ones to find out about new product launches and even shop online (Instagram has a new Shopping feature, that allows you to see the price of a pictured item, as well as being taken to the merchandise site directly). That is how "show-off culture is affecting our consumer behaviour (ibid.).

BBC has written an article where they pinpoint to an alarmingly increasing number of narcissism cases in modern China from research done in 2011. Showing off starts with a need to "fit-in." Human beings, tend to compare themselves to our "tribe", while one of the basic human needs is the need for belonging (Maslow A.H., 1943). Belonging in the modern world means consuming the same way our peers are consuming. Subconsciously, the act of consumption brings us pleasure, since we get to show it off (Alba & Williams, 2013). Increased consumption of popular goods helps us shape our social presence, which is a modern representation of the selves we want to portray to others. Some consumers show off while "tagging" the brand accounts on their pictures online. This indicates the ability to afford buying certain brands that are deemed to be exclusive or judged positively by our peers.

These and others of the modern marketing trends are shaping the way we see and understand social media, influencers, and the way we portray our own lives online. It affects the way we consume, and we will be looking into it in a further relationship analysis between the consumers and brands.

## Human brands

When discussing a brand's image and its value in modern marketing approaches, we cannot oversee the human brands. "Human brand," according to Thomson (2016) is a term used to describe any well-known person, whose images or likeness is explored in marketing efforts. In a way, we all are a brand of our own, with the values we portray and the things we do and say in public. In the age of virtual platforms and social media networks, personal branding is even more relevant (Thomson, 2006).

*"Celebrities achieve brand status through the mass mediatization and mass consumption of their identities and personalities"* (Milligan, Pringle, 2004). Celebrities and influencers are a great example of modern human brands, since the technology allows users to follow their day-to-day more closely than ever (Zhang, 2010). Consumers are purchasing the goods the influencers are endorsing from a sheer standpoint of wanting to be like them, which is essentially what every brand should be aiming to be - a role model. The celebrity commodification can manifest itself in branded products that become an actual product name, one of the greatest examples being "Air Jordan" athletic apparel by M. Jordan and Nike (ibid.).

P.S. Loroz and B.M.Braig (2010) present the "Oprah effect" idea, which is that personal qualities in the consumer-brand relationship will lead to brand loyalty (Zhang, 2010). The article analyses an existing framework for human brand attachment, which identifies autonomy, relatedness, and competence as antecedents of the attachment strength. However, current research introduces brand personality appeal (favourability, originality, and clarity) as defining factors that connect the predecessors and the outcomes of the attachment theory.

Cole and Leets (1999) studied human brand authenticity, where they have found out that consumers will more likely get attached to those human brands that display a certain level of genuineness. Psychologists have studied that certain factors, mainly the so-called ARC - autonomy, relatedness and competence are some of the basic human needs, which, when discovered in the relationships with others, will lead to emotional security and hence intense attachment. Autonomy is explained as one's sense of freedom regarding their choices and self-expression (Zhang, 2010). Specifically Thomson (2006) stresses the importance of autonomy, as we as individuals feel like it is important to foster the feeling of self-determination and independence (Thomson, 2006). Relatedness creates a feeling of

belonging, closeness and connectedness to the consumers (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Lastly, competence refers to one's sense of skill, effectiveness, and accomplishment (ibid.). We judge competence based on social standards, such as success, influence, achievements and capability. Although a human brand follower might feel one or all three of the above mentioned aspects to start feeling attached to the specific persona, it is also important to mention that the likability and personality of that said person plays an equally important role. Moreover, originality plays an essential role in creating sustainable competitive advantage for any brand, including human brands. "*Consumers are more likely to be drawn to distinctiveness, allowing the increased impact of the ARC relationship qualities the brands foster*" (Zhang, 2010).

Human brands are something we consume because we feel emotional connection to them. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the products we buy because we have been influenced by these parasocial relationships we form online are rarely something that would fulfil our physiological needs. More often than not, it is something that would help us express ourselves, such as clothing items, status symbols, such as cars or items and products that would help us self-actualize, such as concert tickets (Hope Jensen Schau, 2000).

## **Influencer Marketing**

### **Rise of influencers and influencer marketing - from celebrities to ordinary people**

Influencer marketing strategy entails making partnerships with opinion leaders, who can personalize and forward the message of the brand to their followers. These key leaders have always been recognized as traditional celebrities (Gallegos, 2019).

Also, Word-of-Mouth (WOM) is the marketing technique known as being the most effective. WOM is an organic marketing technique, where the information about the product characteristics is passed on to the personal network of the previous consumers. They had a good experience when consuming the product (E. & A., 2008). This technique is more effective, as a person perceives a message as being more credible if it is passed by a previous consumer, compared to when the same message is given by an advertiser (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Nowadays, the social media has allowed brands and customers to exchange knowledge, opinions and product-related information. This amplifies the effects of peer recommendation and allowing one-to-many sharing of information, moving the traditional WOM to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (A. Merz, Michael; Zarantonello, Lia; Grappi, n.d.).

This transition creates a decision-maker ecosystem, which is a place where customers, the target group, and a decision-maker, known as the influencer, create a community to talk and comment about a common subject of interest (Goleman, Daniel; Boyatzis, Richard; Mckee, 2019). When this ecosystem is created in a social media network, the influencer is called Social Media Influencer (SMI).

The SMI is not necessarily a celebrity. Usually it is a regular person, with no unique profession (not a model, or actress, or analyst/specialist) but is an expert in a specific area, such as fashion, health, travel, food and make-up which creates, shares and posts content on social media. This new type of online celebrities is said to be more influential than traditional ones, as they do not represent unachievable ideals (Hall, 2015). Followers accept and trust more the SMIs when these collaborate with brands that correspond well to their areas of expertise (ibid.).

The relationship between the influencer and the brand is that the influencers' followers are the brand's target consumers. Therefore, the marketers and brands pay to the selected influencer in order to have a post talking and promoting the brand's product. This way, the marketing is done explicitly to the influencer's own followers, which correspond to the brand target group (Yodel, 2017). This type of marketing, influencer-produced brand content is considered more effective than brand-generated advertising, even if the post contains the label "Sponsored content" and considering the lower quality of the posts (Müller et al., 2018; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Consumers may hold the same level of trust on the influencer as they entail for their friends. Influencer marketing is considered to have more organic, authentic and direct contact with the target group of the brand (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Talavera, 2015).

Therefore, a more precise definition of social media influencers could be as follows: "A social media influencer is first and foremost a content generator: one who has a status of expertise in a specific area, who has cultivated a sizable number of captive followers— who

are of marketing value to brands—by regularly producing valuable content via social media" (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Influencer marketing is much more affordable to brands than traditional advertising channels, or than renowned celebrity endorsers (Hall, 2015). Therefore, nowadays 75% of marketers are using influencer marketing, and 94% of the brands who have made this type of campaigns claim that they were effective and lead to 11 times the return on investment (ROI) compared to the traditional advertising techniques (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

### **How to measure the engagement with audience - Instagram**

As Instagram is a networking site that is able to provide users with video and photo-sharing possibilities, the network lends itself very well for eWOM purposes because products and brands can be visually imaged and named in the caption of the photo. Moreover, it is one of the most popular social networks in the world, and currently has over 1 billion active users and counting (Statista, 2020). Instagram has capability of instant feedback for the profile owner or other parties about the reach/engagement of its posts, growth and reachability of its audience, engagement rate and advertising performance (Baklanov, 2019). Being the best social media platform to measure engagement between the consumer and the brand (ibid.)

### **Traits of Social Media Influencers**

There are various factors that affect the followers' trust on the influencers' branded posts. Lou et al. (2019) identify four as the most relevant factors: the informative value of the generated content, the trustworthiness, attractiveness and similarity to the follower. The higher the post scores on these factors, the higher the trust that the follower has on the brand, influencing the Brand Awareness and Purchase Intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

For brands to choose to work with the influencer, one's inherent characteristics play a vital role (Lou & Yuan, 2019) and SMIs that have more followers are more likable (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Users travel on social media websites to fulfil their information, entertainment and mood management needs (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). When coming across a Social Media

influencer, the user will notice the similarity, authenticity, and expertise through the peripheral route of the Elaboration likelihood model (ELM) - the stimulus that leads the user to make a simple inference of the situation leading to the final decision of following or not the SMI (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The follower will notice if the content is entertaining, easy to absorb, interesting and adapted to its age ranges (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). In the fashion and beauty blogger industry, the physical attractiveness of the influencer is the most noticeable characteristic (ibid.). Therefore, there are three fundamental characteristics that a Social Media Influencer should have in order to persuade its audience: authority, credibility and social attractiveness (Kelman, 1958).

Authority implies compliance - the messenger receiver will comply with the communicator in order to be rewarded or not to be punished. The communicator will have authority depending on the position one has on the social structure (ibid.).

Credibility implies the internalization of the message received. To obtain credibility, the influencer should be an expert in a specific area, should be trustworthy, a reliable source, and have goodwill (ROGERS & BHOWMIK, 1970). In order to be trusted, the speaker needs to be perceived as honest, while the goodwill is the ability of showing care for the followers. Hence, by entailing all these factors, the influencer is influencing the attitude and behaviour of the audience (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), leading to an higher purchase intention of the brands this influencer is representing (Gunawan & Huarng, 2015).

The last characteristic is social attractiveness, related to the identification process (Kelman, 1958). Social cognitive theory suggests that the followers are more influenced by the SMIs perceived as matching the follower's self-image (Sukhdial et al., 2002).

*"Attractive speakers can change the attitudes of the audience"* (Sharma, 1990). As referred previously, social attractiveness can be a robust peripheral cue for decision making (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), being that appealing SMIs are more likely to influence the followers than less attractive ones (Chaiken, 1979). This happens because the audience feels or would like to feel similar to the influencer and create a positive relationship with him/her. Moreover, the followers will be inspired by the lifestyle of the influencer and some aspects of his/her personality, trying to transpose those aspects for themselves (ibid.).

Another important aspect that makes the SMI socially attractive is if his/her beliefs, ideals, education and social status match the ones from the follower. This phenomenon is



known as attitude homophily - similar individuals are more likely to interact with each other (Prisbell & Andersen, 1980). The more interactions the individuals have, the stronger is the relationship between them. The same happens between the SMI and the follower. The more interactions happen between them, the stronger the bond the follower perceives as having with the influencer. Because it is a one-sided connection, it is called a parasocial relationship (Brown & Basil, 2010).

### **Parasocial relationship between influencers and their followers**

The parasocial relationship goes all the way back to 1956 when Horton and Wohl (1956) presented this concept in order to address a tendency that was shown by people that developed feelings and had made-up intimate social relations with characters in media (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Parasocial relationships were distinguished in three different elements: Friendship - defined by Tukachinsky (2010) as a sense of intimacy and liking to the extent that friendships nurtured. Understanding - feelings that a follower nourishes regarding the media character, which feelings are depending on the knowledge that the follower has about the character's values and motivations. To finalize identification - adoption of similar traits, behaviours or values as the media person (ibid.).

The existing relations between an influencer on Instagram and the follower is not unidirectional since users can interact with the content posted, whether it is by discussion via comments, where the content owner has the possibility of interacting with the audience or via direct messages, where the content owner can answer in a more personal and direct way. Digital personalities seem to have stronger persuasiveness and credibility than celebrities as followers are more able to relate to them (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The profiles that are most appreciated are the ones that support their followers frequently, providing positive reviews and helping them by enhancing the perceived image that the follower has of himself.

The study made by Agnihotri et al. (2016) affirms that a scandal involving an influencer, has a negative impact in the parasocial relationship; the stronger the relationship, the more "parasocial breakup" the participants experienced after the scandal (Agnihotri et al., 2016).

## Hyper-reality

*"We already live out the 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality"* (Harrison & Wood, 2003).

In the last few decades the lines between reality and digital lives have become more blurred. Between the digital platforms, where consumers and brands are able to communicate, upload content, and shop/sell, the digital self-representation is becoming a well-spread phenomenon. Almost every single person owns some type of account on social media platforms which is used to broadcast a version of their own reality. The term "version" is employed because, over the years, the content we upload online has changed. It is no longer a simple unedited picture of everyday life - more often than not, it is a heavily edited version of our reality. It has become a curated version of our everyday lives, whether we are aware of it or not. Here comes the term hyperreality, which has already been around in the late 1970s. Hyperreality is a socially constructed concept, where the term was described in detail in the Jean Baudrillard essay "Hyper-realism of Simulation" (originally published in 1976). The first exploration of the hyper-realism has already started in the 1990s, while the concept has become more widespread in current days with real-life simulation games (Sims, Second life), Virtual reality, 3G and 4G cinema experiences, creation of personalised avatars (Bitmoji) and computer-generated imagery social media profiles (Baudrillard, 1988).

In this first touch upon the subject, J.Baudrillard explains the way our saturated information, modern media world and the abundance of signs and symbols are blurring the lines between what's real and altered. "Reality" is only recognized when it is reproduced in simulation. Truth and reality are mediated and interpreted to the extent that culture can no longer distinguish reality from fantasy." (ibid.) Jean Baudrillard calls this phenomena hyper-reality and later continues the research in his paper "Simulacra Simulation" (1988) he uses the example of Disneyland, where the reality is bent in order to make the visitors live out their imaginary fantasy world and the whole concept serves as an escape from the ordinary "real" world (Baudrillard, 1988).

## Virtual reality

Virtual reality is an after match of the Baudrillard's explorations within the "Hyperreality." In MR.Maffesoli article "Second life and Hyperreality" (2008) the author is elaborating within the topic of exploring the digital world and presenting oneself in a virtual light "*Beyond the principle of the reality of our professional life, of our family routine, we live, or we dream, sometimes both at the same time, the fairy tales, or the nightmares which allow us to escape from the exhausting habits which, little by little, destroy our vital energy. On the contrary, our avatars allow us to live phantasms and imaginations, which have a reinvigorating function.*" (Maffesoli, 2008).

Virtual realities allow consumer to become whoever they desire to be and maybe someone utterly different from their offline selves. *Second life* game is an excellent example of a bigger picture that has become a modern norm. People are crafting their own image with the use of avatars, edited pictures, and carefully written descriptions to create a beautiful illusion of their lives. Not only is it used to "escape" sometimes mundane realities of work and everyday life, but also to craft a parallel reality, where one can appear a better version of themselves. A google search of the words "picture editing" gives 551 million results in under a second. The abundance of photo editing apps is mirroring the reality and the pressure to appear perfect. In a digital world, as Belk wrote, one is allowed to be "*freed from the prior constraints of our physical bodies as well as from societal prejudices due to gender, race, age, class and physical impairments*" (Belk, 2014). Consumers are constructing their own virtual reality and inviting everyone else to be the players in their world. What Belk is saying, the internet age allowed us to present ourselves in a way that we would like to see ourselves in.

Virtual reality platforms are functioning almost the same as any other human group life (Boostrom, Jr., 2008). Blumer (1968) stated that the one thing that defines human group behaviour is the action taken. What action is being taken by everyone in this specific group? What defines them as a group and not only as many individuals? From the sociological point of view, the actions one takes in our offline lives could easily be translated into the virtual world too (Herbert Blumer, 1988).

## **Social editing and the Proteus effect**

The absence of a physical body is leading to the freedom of choosing one's online "presence" appearance. Belk has described it as "*The relative freedom of configuring our avatar bodies has led some to suggest that our avatars represent our ideal selves (Kozinets and Kedzior 2009; Robinson 2007; Taylor 2002), possible selves (Young and Whitty 2012), aspirational selves (Martin 2008; Wood and Solomon 2010), or a canvas on which we can "try out" various alternative selves (Biocca 1997; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010a)*" (Belk, 2014). Belk has predicted long before that the line between reality and our constructed selves will be blurred. People have been editing their pictures to appear more perfect online, and it shows in the increased number of online photo editing apps and tools.

The Proteus effect is a good starting point to begin explaining the human need to switch our appearances in order to fit better with the idea of what one looks or should look in their own heads. The Proteus effect was named after the ancient Greek god Proteus - the sea god, who was able to switch his appearances when needed and is used to express versatility, is an effect that the virtual avatar looks has on the real human behaviour. In other words, the individual will change its behaviour in virtual worlds based on their avatar, knowing that others expect some type of behaviour based on the avatar's demeanour (Yee & Bailenson, 2007).

## **Re-embodiment**

Re-embodiment and co-construction of self are two sides of creating one's new persona online. The behaviour online affects one's real-life selves. In other words, the use of avatars (whether it is a carefully curated online persona or an actual video game character) shapes our ideas of identity, material body, and embodiment (Meadows, 2009). Human brands, described below, are creations of modern communication technology that allows us to broadcast our real personality or create an entirely new one on digital social platforms.

Belk (2013) writes that there "*is a tendency to choose online visual representations that are closer to the fantasy or ideal self than the actual self*" (Belk, 2013; p.34, 35). Not only human influencers are carefully constructing their image online, but the emergence of virtual influencers completely erases the line between the edited and constructed "from scratch" version of ourselves (Belk, 2013).

The New Yorker article "*How social media shapes our identity*" describes that the beginning of the internet era and arrival of social media has helped a lot of people, who were afraid or could not show their true personality traits in their material life (Renner, 2019). The internet is permanent and everything it is posted there stays on it forever. However, the millennials, who have started to use it around their teenage years had the chance to become whoever they wanted behind the computer screens. There were no old childhood pictures of them like there are with Gen Zs and younger generations nowadays. Moreover, millennial parents can construct their image as a perfect parent, showcasing online the beautiful parts of their days, on so-called "mommy blogs" (ibid.).

As appealing it is to create a better version of oneself when portraying one's life online, a new tendency is seen to turn things around and show the authentic side of things. The life that is not always perfect or curated. This trend is also seen on the accounts that are completely constructed by other people, such as CGI account Lil Miquela. The Brud agency, which is creating her content, could choose to show the highlights, the luxury lifestyle and only the beautiful aspects of being an influencer. However, they are trying to portray her as authentic as possible, showing the highs and the lows.

### **Co-construction of self and an arrival of world's first Digital collection**

The quotation below implies that individuals co-construct their image, based on the feedback they get from the peers. One of the basic human needs - social acceptance plays a huge role in their digital lives. "*More than 100 years ago Charles Cooley [45] suggested that we come to know ourselves through the mirror of others' reactions to us. In the digital world, tagging, comments, endorsements, 'likes,' and similar feedback provide much more input than the feedback we are likely to get face-to-face.*" (Belk, 2013).

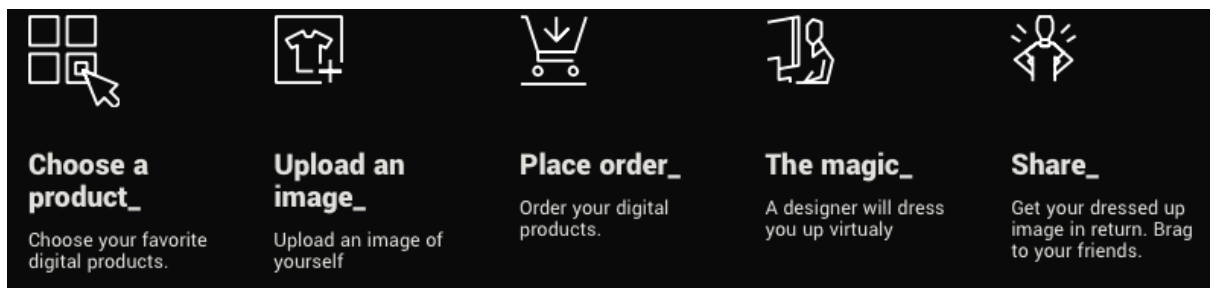
The newest digital invention is taking a page from the computer-generated imagery (CGI) book. The digital collection is a collection of fashion items that one can order online when paying around 30 dollars. The idea is that after ordering an item, the buyer sends a picture of himself to the digital creators, where they photoshop it onto the sent picture and send it back, so the buyer can add it to his social accounts. The idea developed from various computer games, where one can buy digital clothing for the avatars. This phenomenon was successful, as individuals want to dress the characters in a game the same way they want to

appear fashionable in their own social accounts. This all ties up to self-expression through the appearances and the need to appear "perfect".

The example to this would be the so-called Blockchain jacket<sup>1</sup>, created by the Scandinavian brand Carlings. This brand offers a few items one can choose from, all very futuristic looking and definitely one of the kind. This latest fashion trend is arguably sustainable and proves that the modern consumption patterns are changing from being purely utilitarian to the ones of fulfilling our self-expressive needs. One could argue that this example is a starting point when trying to explain the "show-off" culture, we have described above.



*Figure 5 - Blockchain jacket created by Carlings*



*Figure 5 - How Digital Collection works*

<sup>1</sup> <https://digitalcollection.carlings.com/products/silverhood-metallic-track-top>

## CGI influencers - Virtual Influencers

### What are Virtual Social Media Influencers

Since "virtual influencer" is a new concept, the definition may seem unclear. Throughout the definitions of "virtual" and "influencer" in the Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries, a quite accurate definition can be created stating "*A person not physically present as such but made by software, who is paid by a company to show and describe its products and services on social media, encouraging other people to buy them.*" (Cambridge and Oxford dictionaries). This report is based in this definition adding to the same delimitations for defining and influencer, which is that the virtual influencer is operating on social networks, specially Instagram and that is either a macro or micro-influencer.

### Acceptance of Virtual Robots

When it comes to human-like robots, the problem that comes up is that the similarities between both parts can be perceived as uncomfortable (Mori et al., 2012).

Authenticity is a characteristic that has a considerable weight on the followers regarding human influencers; this fact brings up questions of how virtual influencers are going to be accepted and develop parasocial relationships with the followers.

Recent research was conducted regarding robot attendance. In this research, different forms of service such as the virtual robot were acknowledged. This robot was put forward as an intangible service, consisting of video, voice and text-based functionalities. Bearing this in mind, and consisting of these four functionalities, virtual influencers are categorized as virtual robots (Nonaka et al., 2004).

When it comes to robot acceptance, Stock and Merkle (2018) defend that the robot must fulfil the social-emotional needs of people. Connecting this with virtual influencers, there are three social-emotional elements that need to be considered: perceived humanness, perceived social interactivity and perceived social presence of the robots (Molin & Nordgren, 2019). These three factors are suggested to explain the acceptance of virtual influencers further.

## **Engagement with Virtual Influencers**

The humanness that the followers perceive when it comes to the virtual influencers affects the level of attractiveness, similarity, and trustworthiness. These are the factors that affect the degree of credibility of the source (Kelman, 1958). Virtual social media influencers (VSMI) stand in a problem with authenticity and transparency, as they are created, manufactured and owned by a company. This impacts their attractiveness, since authenticity is one of the most important characteristics for followers on Instagram. Lack of authenticity and transparency implicates the trustworthiness of these characteristics as the communicator is unknown. Virtual influencers are perceived as having a superior ability to be available online and personal interaction. This reason elevates their attractiveness. However, as it was mentioned before since they are controlled by a company, their trustworthiness decreases.

The acceptance to virtual robots is proposed to be a precursor for the development of parasocial relationships with virtual influencers, hand in hand with three factors in source credibility: trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity (Molin & Nordgren, 2019).

In order to increase the followers and keep them curious, two aspects have to be geared in mind: virtual influencers have to be realistic when it comes to appearance, but the fictional part has to be noticeable. The content of the account has to be adapted to the audience and the overall aesthetic of the feed needs to be visually appealing (Darner & Arvidsson, 2019).



## Research Gap and Research Objectives

### Crossroad: Virtual Social Media Influencers, Brand Equity, and Customer motivations

In the following section, the researchers will present the connection and the crossroad between each significant theme in our research study, namely Virtual social media influencers and brand equity and virtual social media influencer and customer motivations to purchase.

#### Virtual social media influencers and brand equity

According to [www.pixlee.com](http://www.pixlee.com) a social media influencer is someone who *"is a user on social media who has established credibility in a specific industry. A social media influencer has access to a large audience and can persuade others by virtue of their authenticity and reach."* (Pixlee, 2020)

Virtual social media profiles have been around since 2016, according to one of the biggest virtual accounts on Instagram, Lil Miquela's Wikipedia page. These digital beauties are seemingly taking over the entertainment industry while singing, modelling, or even just voicing their opinions online. Despite all the brand deals some of them get, these digital models are raising awareness about how much editing the consumers are willing to see, and overall, is this even ethical? The ethics regarding digital influencers raises questions such as *"Is it fair to imperfect humans, as we all are, to be presented with pictures of perfectly smoothed computer-generated imagery?"* or *"Do the consumers even know that this person is not a real human?"*. A well-known fashion label Balmain stepped into the future of this industry, when they have hired an army of digital personalities to represent their brand<sup>2</sup>. This could be called an excellent move for diversity while tapping into the different looking models from all over the world (Lauren Jackson, 2018). However, many fans left confused since the digital models do not represent a specific country or a region. *"Do you still support a business that is creating a diverse looking campaign with different ethnicities, while they are created by a computer instead of hiring actual humans?"*

<sup>2</sup> Products line presented in CGI models: <https://www.balmain.com/us/balmain/balmains-new-virtual-army>

Although it invites some controversy, one cannot deny that these avatars are capturing everyone's attention and thus giving the brands that collaborate with them more exposure and attention.

Brud agency has instigated a Lil Miquela's profile hacking situation, where another digital influencer @bermudaisbae has taken over her account. She demanded that Lil Miquela would come clean and tell her followers the truth that she is not a real human being. Bermuda Bae is created by the same agency Brud, so this was clearly a publicity stunt. It has, however, generated enough traffic for Lil Miquela's profile, that it has pushed it over 1 million followers milestone, which is one of the requirements for bigger and more profitable brand deals. Coming back to the Balmain example, it is hard to find out what kind of impact did the "Balmain Army" of digital creations and its introduction had to their brand's image. The overall brand's equity (hence there lies our research gap); however, one way to measure it by a ballpark is to compare their social media engagement. Trying to measure a brand's equity based on their use or engagement of virtual social media influencers is very hard. It often cannot offer a specific number link to the specific collaboration, since the brand's equity is measured as the sum of all of a brand's deals and interactions. Having that in mind, one can still try to compare their social media engagement numbers in the year where they have used digital supermodels and the current year, where the brand is primarily working with real human models. According to Social Blade we can see that in 2018, the month of March (3rd to the 16th) when the "Balmain army" campaign was introduced, the average number of new followers per day was +3315, while in 2020, the month of April (1st to the 14th) the daily average is -4953. This is, however, just a gross estimate of the impact these digital influencers had on the brand since Balmain has also changed its brand logo in 2018, which could have contributed to the increased attention levels (Social Blade, 2019). Measuring customer-based brand equity (W. et al., 1995) is an article, that had developed a customers' brands equity scale based on 5 underlying dimensions of brand's equity: performance, value, social image, trustworthiness and commitment. In their findings, brands that have scored higher on the scale they have developed generally had higher prices

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.statista.com/topics/1110/global-luxury-goods-industry/?fbclid=IwARoFUKoIKTjdmEEen\\_eezMPiMeeYq7hA1vpp5AoJcbrnLhsD1kawDJ4NrDwU](https://www.statista.com/topics/1110/global-luxury-goods-industry/?fbclid=IwARoFUKoIKTjdmEEen_eezMPiMeeYq7hA1vpp5AoJcbrnLhsD1kawDJ4NrDwU)

to their products, which indicates that the brand's overall performance and the social image has an effect on their profitability.

DATE		FOLLOWERS			
			2018-03-03	Sat	+7,640
2020-04-01	Wed	-	2018-03-04	Sun	+5,856
2020-04-02	Thu	-833	2018-03-05	Mon	+5,891
2020-04-03	Fri	-1,454	2018-03-06	Tue	+3,698
2020-04-04	Sat	-707	2018-03-07	Wed	+779
2020-04-05	Sun	+8	2018-03-08	Thu	+3,824
2020-04-06	Mon	-394	2018-03-09	Fri	+2,368
2020-04-07	Tue	-327	2018-03-10	Sat	+2,313
2020-04-08	Wed	-645	2018-03-11	Sun	+2,031
2020-04-09	Thu	-823	2018-03-12	Mon	+2,336
2020-04-10	Fri	-766	2018-03-13	Tue	+1,573
2020-04-11	Sat	-177	2018-03-14	Wed	+2,804
2020-04-12	Sun	-260	2018-03-15	Thu	+2,971
2020-04-13	Mon	-30	2018-03-16	Fri	+2,332
2020-04-14	Tue	-532	2018-03-17	Sat	+2,491
			2018-03-18	Sun	+3,676

**Figure 6 - Balmain campaign using CGI models vs. not using**

### Virtual social media influencers and customer motivations

Customer motivations to follow an SMI are known to be mainly due to the authority, credibility, and social attractiveness of the influencer. However, through considering the influencer as a human brand, the authors need to consider the motivations for a consumer to "buy a product", meaning "consume", a Social Media Influencer.

Customer motivations to purchase are usually fuelled by underlying needs that come from our unconscious or conscious minds. A. Maslow's hierarchy of needs explains the five-layer needs a scheme that every human being needs to achieve in order to feel the sense of self-actualization. Forbes magazine has described the 4 step process that allows the brand to identify their consumer's motivations in order to offer them relevant products (Duggal Radhika, 2018). It starts with merely identifying the latent or overt need, which would then cause the consumer a slight discomfort that would motivate them to look for fulfilment. The motivation then translates into the desire for either a specific product (your brain might crave for a particular taste that only a specific brand can offer) or a more general food group.

The tension a customer feels is only released when they satisfy the initial need. In order to catch these consumers in their decision phase, it is crucial to understand what kind of functional or emotional value the brand can offer. Many marketers have trouble identifying these specific needs, when all of the basic consumer needs are already met, like food or shelter. Ernest Dichter developed a system in the 1950s, that explains how product consumption is driven and what are the 12 main motives that would translate into product purchases (Gries & Stefan Schwarzkopf, 2010). These are power, masculinity-virility, security, eroticism, moral purity/cleanliness, social acceptance, individuality, status, femininity, reward, mastery over one's environment, desalination (a desire to feel connected to the world around us) and magic-mystery. There is not much literature connecting the consumer's purchase intentions to social media influencers. The 2019 article "*Instafamous and social media influencer marketing*" has uncovered that when it comes to social media influencer, consumers are finding them more trustworthy in comparison to traditional celebrities and their brand endorsements (Jin et al., 2019). The findings show that consumers feel a stronger social presence with the Instagram influencers, which mediates the causal effects on trustworthiness, brand attitude, and envy. Since the connection between consumer motivations to follow is made with real human influencers on Instagram, one could assume that there should be a number of similarities between actual human influencers and virtual ones.

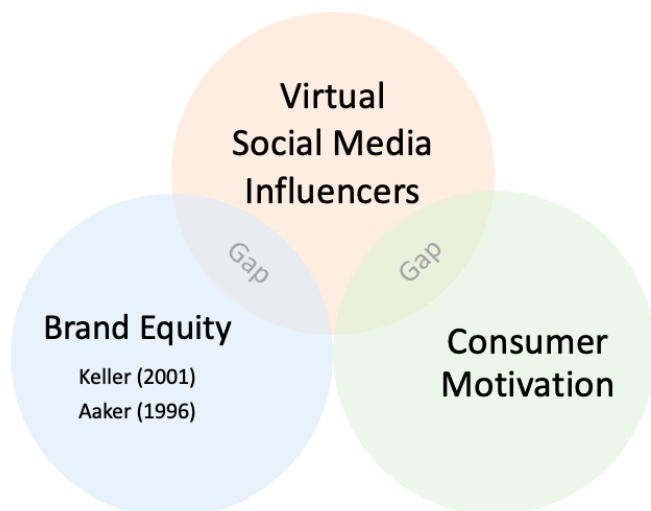
In the article mentioned above, it was discovered that the phenomenon of being "Instafamous" had arisen specifically because of some of the app's qualities. One is an ability to connect and interact with your consumers, which is observed and done by both types of influencers. Interestingly enough, being able to connect to one's audience is not explicit to real-life influencers (ibid.).

## The research gap

After conducting the literature review based on how influencer marketing has come to be one of the most market-shaping trends in the modern branding era, we have concluded that there is still a lot left to uncover when it comes to our knowledge about virtual influencers. Human brands have had some literature coverage regarding consumer attachment to them and what stimulates the level of our consumer-brand involvement in the case of the influencers. However virtual influencers are a relatively new topic that has not been studied or explored in detail yet. They are both different and at the same time relatively similar to each other. The similarities start with the fact that their followers are seeking to find a connection within a certain community. However, one main difference that we would like to research further is the question of authenticity, which is usually something many influencers pride themselves with. Being authentic and honest on social platforms signals vulnerability, which in return should attract consumers to follow, react to their content and stay loyal to these human brands (Audrezet et al., 2018). While it is clear that a human brand is someone who is usually truthful about who they are and what they post online, the virtual influencers are not always being transparent with who is behind their accounts and who is creating content.

The research gap we have discovered is a combination of research about brand equity, virtual social media influencers, and consumer motivation. When discussing Brand's Equity, we will be talking about human Brand's Equity. While there is enough literature covering human influencers and their impact on modern marketing tactics, Brand's Equity (Awareness, Recognition, Trial, Preference and Loyalty) and consumer motivation behind the purchase intentions (hedonic or utilitarian), there is a lack of understanding on how these subjects tie together with virtual media influencers, a new way of presenting a brand. We will first study the perception the consumers (virtual influencers' accounts followers) have regarding these "human" brands. Is it any different than towards regular human being influencers? What are the consumer motivations behind "consuming," meaning, following, these accounts? This will help us draw a broader image regarding how these human brands are viewed online and what kind of future these types of accounts could have in terms of successfully marketing themselves and their content. After finding out what are the consumer motivations for following virtual social media accounts, we will then study the connection between the Virtual influencers and their perceived value in terms of building

their Brand Equity online. Human brands, as well as regular brands, have to build an image for themselves, which we will be dissecting in order to find out what value do they really have and how could this value be used in terms of earning profit.



**Figure 7 - Research Gaps**

### **The research question**

After covering the Brand Equity factors by Keller (2001) and Aaker (1996), the consumer motivations behind following an influencer, and the Virtual Social Media influencers, the authors have identified a gap on the crossroad between the Brand Equity (of human brands specifically) and the Virtual social media influencers, and another gap on the connection between the Virtual Social Media influencers and the consumer motivation to follow them.

Virtual Social Media influencers have been selected as the focus point on both gaps, as this particular field of social media influencers can be the next big trend in marketing. Our technological world and its abilities are developing rapidly every day and we have seen a recent spike in the digital "human" accounts online, which represent human-like "robots" or computer-generated imagery, that is supposedly living a real human being life. Brands have started to use these "bots" to increase their Brand Awareness, such as German-based make-up brand Essence, who have "hired" a CGI intern. The motivations behind introducing

such digital characters to shape the Brand's Image online are still unknown; however, this does tell us about the importance of opening the studies on this particular field.



**Figure 8 - Essence CGI Intern**

## Research Objectives

In the light of the exploratory research design chosen, the research objectives for this paper are non-hypothetical ones, but rather research questions covering broader themes such as the link between social media influencers and Brand's Equity as well as social media influencers and customer motivations to follow them. These objectives were explored instead of being measured in any conductive matter, since the conducted interviews could only give the authors guidance and glimpse into the field of perceived quality of the virtual social media accounts based on a specific digital influencer. Building on the research gaps expressed above, the authors intend to connect the new trend of Virtual Social Media Influencers with their followers and Brand Equity. Therefore, this study aims to fulfil four research objectives, which are:

First, to contribute to the already existing literature about customer motivations to follow Social Media Influencers, adding a new variation, which is the Virtual Social Media Influencer (VSMI).

Secondly, the authors aim to understand the perception of a VSMI as a human brand. For this reason, authority, credibility and social attractiveness will be studied concerning VSMI. These three factors are considered essential to trigger interest and to follow a Social Media Influencer.

Thirdly, to contribute to the already existing literature about Brand Equity (Keller, 2001; Aaker, 1996) and its six dimensions: Brand Salience, Brand Meaning, Brand Awareness, Brand Loyalty, Perceived Quality and Purchase Intention. The contribution will be through assessing these six dimensions to VSMI and relating those to the personal attributes and individual experiences of the participants.

Lastly, the primary research objective is to identify whether there is a prevailing group of followers which is more influenced by the VSMI.

Therefore, with this empirical study, the authors want to find out whether Virtual Social Media Influencers have value as human brands, and if this value varies accordingly to specific target groups. These findings would be relevant for managers, who can consider creating a Virtual Social Media Influencer as a brand persona or collaborating with one. VSMI allow to advertise a Brand Identity, its values, and, ultimately its products, and know whether their target group is more prompt to be influenced by a VSMI or not.

Moreover, the ultimate goal of this thesis is to answer the research questions:

***RQ1: What type of customers engage with a virtual influencer?***

***RQ2: What is the perceived Brand Equity of virtual human brands?***

The authors will look into the different philosophical theories, choose the most adequate one and use it as a guidance to further decide on the way the collection of data will be held, which data will be collected and what methods and samples will be used to collect the data in order to answer the research questions.



## **Methodology and Data Analysis**

### **Philosophical considerations**

In order to understand the three types of philosophical assumptions - Ontology, Epistemology and Axiology, a first placement is made by the authors on one of the two opposite extremes of a multidimensional set of continua - Objectivism or Subjectivism. This project is based on a subjective approach (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016). The customer motivations, as well as the brand equity of these virtual social media influencers, are subjective to various factors, as the followers' own values, life experiences, and tastes (Lim et al., 2017). Narrowing down, the Subjective perspective adopted is Interpretivism, as such a complex reality cannot be law-generalized.

#### **Ontology - Constructivism:**

Ontology concerns the assumptions about the nature of the world and reality. Objectivism ontology defines reality as real, unchanged, there is only one universal truth, and this truth is always in order. External - the researcher is an observer and does not interact with the data being studied. Hence, this perspective does not go accordingly to the author's study, will observe and study the lives of the participants, and their relation with the Virtual Social Media Influencer (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016).

Therefore, a Subjective approach will be adopted during this research work. The ontology of Subjectivism defends that there are various realities, depending on the perceptions and actions of the social actors (relativism). This reality is socially constructed through social interactions, as social actors create partially shared meanings and realities. The social reality is decided by convention and flows in chaos, is always subjected to revision (ibid.).

Hence, social constructivism defends that individuals have different interpretations of the events, which affect their actions and interaction with others. Through interacting with the environment, these social actors interpret the events and meanings, so their actions are meaningful in the context of each constructed reality. Because the event is produced through social interactions, it is continuously revised, and there is never a defined event - different versions are experienced by different people (ibid.).

### **Epistemology - Interpretivism:**

Epistemology assumption determines what kind of contribution to knowledge can this research make. It concerns assumptions about knowledge - how we know what we assume to know, what is valid and acceptable knowledge, and how we can communicate the created knowledge to other individuals (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016).

The epistemology of the subjective view is adopting the assumptions of arts and humanities, opinions and narratives are accepted as good-quality data, and the conclusions are attributed meanings to specific individuals and contexts. A subjective perspective is the Interpretivism, which states that individuals cannot be studied as if they are physical phenomena because they create meaning (ibid.).

Different circumstances, lived by different individuals with various backgrounds and experiences, lead to different realities lived by different people. Interpretivism says that such different and complex realities are lost if reduced to general laws (ibid.).

### **Axiology - Interpretivism:**

Axiology determines the role of the researcher's and participant's values and roles in the research process. The researcher studies a situation in detail to understand what is happening and what realities are being experienced by the social actors, being interested in the different opinions and narratives. Hence, researchers cannot reduce the conclusions to the everyday experiences between the participants, losing the individual circumstances. Moreover, researchers should search deep into the participant what is essential to him/her (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016). Because the researcher participates and adopts an emphatic attitude while gathering data, a bond is created with the observance, making them expose and dealing with integral and reflexive values (ibid.).

Therefore, Interpretivism suggests that the significant factor to consider is to interpret the data gathered and the researcher's values and thoughts as the researcher will play a reflexive role (ibid.).

## Research Approach

### Abductive Approach

Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) point out the importance of the right choice of the approach to develop the theory. Firstly, this choice enables us to make a more informed decision about the research design, which will be useful to answer what data is essential to gather, where from, and how to interpret the data in order to provide good answers to the initial research questions. Secondly, this choice helps to think about research strategies and methodologies. It enables us to avoid unnecessary constraints, such as practical ones (as an example, limited access to data) or a lack of prior knowledge of the subject (Smith et al., 2012)

This thesis studies a new topic where there is not enough literature about it - Virtual Social Media Influencers. Therefore, it is useful to work inductively with this theme by generating data, analyzing, and reflecting on the theoretical themes the results may suggest. On the other hand, this thesis analyzes two other topics: Brand Equity and Customer motivations to follow Social Media Influencers. There is an acceptable amount of literature about these two topics, which leads to the use of a deductive approach. This approach is used to adapt the already existing theory to the new topic (ibid.).

Therefore, an abductive approach is used, as it combines both methods, Inductive and Deductive, through moving back and forth from theory to data (deductive approach) and data to theory (inductive approach). The Abductive approach starts by identifying a surprising fact, the rise of Virtual Social Media Influencers, and then the authors develop a theory of how this fact could have happened. Firstly, detailed and broad data is gathered in order to allow the exploration of the phenomenon by identifying patrons, topics, and ideas. Secondly, the findings are integrated into the already existing conceptual framework about Brand Equity and Customer Motivations to follow SMI, building up a theory specifically to Virtual SMIs. Lastly, the new theory is tested through using the existing and new data and revising as necessary.

## **Research Design**

### **Exploratory design**

Research design defines the marketing research problem and helps to find a suitable approach (Malhotra & Birks, 2017). The two major research design types are exploratory and conclusive, being the conclusive design further divided into descriptive and causal types. The nature of these designs are determined by the perspectives of the decision-makers. For the sake of this paper, we will be looking into exploratory research design, since it was our chosen approach.

Exploratory approach puts an emphasis on discovering new ideas and insights, while the two types of conclusive research designs focus more on determining the cause and effect and the frequency of occurrences (ibid). An exploratory study, in our case, was the right choice since it is more flexible and unstructured. It allows us to use qualitative research methods with semi-structured interviews and gain a deeper insight into the field of virtual social media influencers.

The research design to help us answer our research questions and investigate the gap between the past research papers and the current phenomena was created with two stages. In the first stage, we, as researchers, have conducted enough social media investigation and analysis of a specific account on Instagram - Lil Miquela. There were a few main objectives for this step. First, we wanted to find out how Lil Miquela's followers feel about her being a digital avatar that is supposedly living a real human being's life and broadcasting its daily updates. This would tell us whether or not there was a specific type of people that would be interested in engaging with said account and, more general, engaging and interacting with all digital human brands in the future. Another objective was to figure out the reason why they are following her and do discover the traits that attract a future customer/follower. This would help us conduct a study that has some scientific weight for future research in this field.

### **Qualitative approach**

The authors of this research study decided it would be most appropriate to use the qualitative approach when designing this research study. Qualitative approach is advantageous when dealing with human perceptions related themes (Dollinger, 2011).

Qualitative research study allows us to analyze personal experiences, attitudes, and impressions, which is a key axis of our research regarding the perceived value of a human brand (Ibid). It is also often associated with an interpretive philosophy (Denzin, 2009). The main subject of this paper is a digital influencer, which is a subjective matter to each individual interviewee. It is a common practice to use an inductive approach when using qualitative research methods - a naturalistic research design is used to gather enough information to support a new theory around the phenomena. We have chosen to use the abductive approach, where we could come up with some inductive inferences, while the deductive ones are being tested throughout the research (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016).

As mentioned earlier, a qualitative approach is perfect for studying participant's relationships and meanings between them, while the data collection allows us to develop a conceptual framework that would contribute to the theory regarding virtual influencers.

### **Research Strategies**

It is a plan of how the authors will answer the Research questions. It links the philosophy with the methodology choice and the methods to collect and analyse the data. The strategies are chosen depending on the Research questions and its objectives, the research approach, and propose. In this thesis, the main strategy used is a Case Study.

### **Single Case Study: Lil Miquela - The Virtual Influencer**

The method of developing a case study entails making in-dept inquiries about a specific topic or phenomenon within its real-life setting (Yin., 2014). The case study happens in the exploratory stage of the research, where the purpose is to study the dynamics between the topic and the context where it is relevant.

This method is designed to identify what and why this phenomenon is happening and understand the implications for the action. It leads to the development of a new theory, through the rich and empirical descriptions obtained through this method.

Researchers will analyse the gathered data, identifying themes and patterns, and place them in the already existing literature, in order to extend, develop and complete these frameworks (Ridder et al., 2014).

Therefore, the authors have decided to use a single case study due to the critical and unique nature of this case, with the purpose to observe and analyse a phenomenon that has had little attention in the past – the virtual social media influencer Lil Miquela. This single case study is treated in a holistic way, as the authors intend to study various dimensions of the virtual influencer and do not dismiss any aspect of her existence that may influence her followers.

### **Lil Miquela**

The virtual influencers, in general, are seemingly taking over both the modeling and the influencer industry. They even have got a name - Brandfluentcatars (brand + influence + avatars). It is why they are getting so much attention - they are an easy and eye-catching solution for brand representation. One no longer has to book and pay for a model, shooting crew, and all of the expenses that come with the photoshoot. All it takes is just one skilled digital artist and a computer program.

Lil Miquela is the name of an Instagram account with over 2 million followers, created by a marketing agency Brud, based in Los Angeles. The account started to raise awareness around 2018, when their main creature and the most popular avatar Miquela posted some controversial ideas about her being aware of her creation and that she had nothing to do with the character the agency wanted her to portray. The phenomena were so unusual that it has created a worldwide sensation. That level of self-awareness from an avatar that is made and curated by a human lead agency (which playfully and brilliantly toys with an idea of her being self-sufficient) was unheard of before.

Lil Miquela is a 19 year old, Brazilian, singer, influencer and activist, that has her own political opinions and helps to support causes like the Black lives matter movement and the LGBT community. As a robot, she does not age, and turns 19 again and again every year. A conversation with one of her followers (Interviewee 10) revealed that she would like to age when being asked about what would be one human thing, Miquela would want to be able to do, she said "Hmm....Maybe turn 20?? lol" (*Appendix nr. 1*).

Lil Miquela is one of many virtual influencers on the rise. The same agency that created her, has made two other accounts - @bermudaisbae and @blawko22, which both have around 150 thousand followers each. The agency creating the content for her has a few digital marketing masterminds on their team. They keep feeding Miquela's followers stories involving her friends, such a PR stunt, they have created a while ago, where one of their avatars @bermudaisbae hacked Lil Miquela's account. They are also producing content, where Miquela is supposedly dating an actual human boy. The storyline there is a teenage heartbreak, that many of her followers can relate to. This also fuels some creative content, where she is able to produce songs about her love life - her music career is one of the things that she is famous for. Some of her songs, such as *Automatic*, has over 3,6 million views on YouTube.

Lil Miquela has achieved more than the majority of human influencers could ever dream of. Besides being in multiple brand deals and video ads for companies such as Calvin Klein, Prada, Diesel, Samsung, she is in the top 25 most influential list by Times. These accomplishments are one of the reasons why the authors have picked her as the main research subject. She has accumulated the most considerable following of all digital influencers' accounts on Instagram and has a distinct way to connect to her fans. She is usually responding to the first comments under her pictures and is even engaging in conversations with people via direct message. People seem to be drawn to her and to her constructed personality, which is why this thesis aims to study the reasons behind the motivation to follow this unique Instagram account.

## Data Sources

As mentioned in our methodology chapter, the qualitative research design was chosen for this study. The rationale for using specifically this type of design technique was based on the preferences and experiences of the researchers, the subconscious feelings that the researchers intended to extract from their participants and the complex phenomena that this study aims to understand and therefore some of the participants may be unable to comprehend or express the true feelings and opinion about it (Malhotra & Birks, 2017).

Based on these reasons and specifically the nature of this research study, the authors have decided to use a qualitative research design and its techniques to collect this

information. The following methods were used to conduct the information needed for the study:

- Non-standardized, semi-structured internet-based interviews (written)
- Non-standardized, semi-structured face to face (video interviews)

Conducting semi-structured interviews, that were complemented with the Text analysis of the Instagram comment section, allowed the researchers to gain deeper insights into this very subjective phenomenon, which is becoming a current marketing/branding trend. Interviews were specifically useful when trying to answer the research question regarding the motivations behind following a virtual influencer online, as it is something that could be based on the consumer's hobbies interests and underlying curiosity fuelled by a subconscious need.

The semi-structured interviews were complemented by a face to face/video interviews, which offered an opportunity to explore the phenomena while asking more follow-up questions and requesting for clarification when needed.

According to Saunders (2016), conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews would likely be the most advantageous option, when the questions are either complex or open-ended, when there is a large number of questions to be asked and when the order of questions might be varied depending on the interviewee and the flow of the conversation (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016).

### **Semi-structured interviews**

The semi-structured interviews are advantageous when wanting to ensure a natural flow and guidance throughout the interview process, which resembles a dialogue (Bryman & Bell, 2014). They provide more in-depth debate about research topics, while the interviewee can enjoy more freedom and flexibility when it comes to their answers. Rather than asking close-ended questions, the qualitative approach encourages "rambling" and potentially going a bit off-topic (Bryman, 2012). This would give the research elaborated answers of the topic and would help identify what is really relevant and essential for the participants.



According to Saunders (2016), these are the main advantages when conducting semi-structured non-standardized interviews:

- Openness and guidance - the interviewee is able to hear himself out loud and maybe realize things they have previously not thought before
- Qualitative nature - ability to “probe”, meaning that the researcher is able to ask for elaboration, explanation, and building upon the initial responses
- Flexibility and freedom to interpret the questions in their own way

The features of the semi-structured interview are especially important when discussing a brand’s equity and consumer’s personal motivations. Some of the questions allowed u to gain a deeper insight into the personal background of the research participants, which could have had some influence on their perception regarding the research topic. Choosing to conduct the semi-structured interviews for this exploratory study, allowed us to be flexible with the order of the questions and allowed us to ask about specifics when we needed clarification (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016).

### **Interview design**

The interview design was drawn based on the qualitative method interview technique (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016). Interview structure has several types and differs regarding the goal and the formality level. Semi-structured interview typology was chosen, where some parts were completely uniform and structured, and others had some freedom for elaboration. Another interview typology according to Saunders (ibid) differentiates between Standardized and Non-standardized. Standardized interviews refer mainly to questionnaires, with no room for explanation or elaboration. Non-standardized typology was therefore chosen to be the right fit for this exploratory study. Non-standardized interviews are then divided into either one-to-one or one-to-many. The one-to-one type was chosen since it allowed the researchers to conduct either face-to-face, telephone, or internet-mediated interviews.

Our interviews were conducted using two approaches: Face to face (video calls, considering the current situation, which did not allow us to conduct real-life interviews) and Internet-mediated interviews (Direct messaging through the social media platform Instagram).

## **Preparation**

Around one month was allocated to do the preparation work for the interview process. The preparation has been divided into the following steps:

- Conduct a pilot interview with loosely structured questions to test what themes and patterns we could spot forming
- Decide on the sample size based on sample frame and the realistic participant availability
- Prepare an interview guide, based on the research question and research gap and get it approved by the thesis supervisor
- Reach out and wait for answers
- Conduct an interview via a direct message over the course of days/weeks
- Transcribe interviews in order to be able to code them

## **Interview guide**

In order to ensure a seamless interviewing process for both interview conductors, an interview guide was developed based on the three themes in our research gap - brand equity, customer motivations, and virtual social media influencers (Intra *Interview guide*, Appendix 6). The guide provided some elasticity, for example, when or if something of interest would catch the conductor's mind, they could ask to elaborate on that topic. The questions were designed to understand consumer motivations to follow virtual influencers, specifically, Lil Miquela, understand what kind of value she has as a human brand (brand equity) and to learn what type of consumer is interested in following a CGI account.

To start our interview guide, we have asked our participants to introduce themselves. We wanted to know their age, where they are from, their profession if possible, and some of their hobbies/interests. This step would allow the study to get a general overview of the type of consumers, we are talking to. Their interests allowed grouping them into several clusters - people who are following her based on their interest in technological advancement, photographers or digital artists, who are interested in the photo editing possibilities, people with artistic abilities, that admire the effort put into the creation of this account and

someone, who is interested in the sense of community they would get by following her. These were the main major categories that were distinguished from the initial contact.

After finding out the specific type of consumer, the second part of the interview guide was started, which was based on customer motivations to follow. Here the questions revolved around participants' motivation to follow Lil Miquela and what is there to gain from it. The goal here was to find out how they feel towards this virtual influencer and whether or not she is any different from regular influencers. Customer motivations to follow this CGI account can actually be the same as the reasons following real human influencers, which we wanted to get some perspective on.

The third section in the interview guide was about brand awareness. This section was meant to help understand her perceived quality as a human brand. Brand awareness is one of the key elements in acquiring a brand's equity together with brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand associations (Aaker, 1996). The participants were asked questions about her content, whether or not they are aware and listening to her music or interacting with her in any way. The information gathered would give the study information about the extent to which the consumers are familiar with the image or the qualities of her brand.

The fourth section of the interview was dedicated to brand loyalty. The participants were asked to answer questions regarding their loyalty to this specific account - for how long have they been followers and if they are following any other similar accounts.

The next section was created to get more information regarding Lil Miquela and her personality - the perceived quality as a human brand. This part was the biggest in regard to the number of sub questions it had. The participants were asked to judge her style, personality, honesty, and values. The questions were building upon product features such as fit and finish (style), reliability (honesty), or performance (her being vocal about supporting the LGBT community or the Black lives matter movement).

The last section of our interview guide was dedicated to purchasing intention. The questions asked were supposed to determine if the participants would recommend the product, in our case, social media account, to their friends or family. Purchase intention is a great tool to determine one's behaviour towards purchasing or repurchasing a specific item or service (Ghosh, 1990).

Due to the nature of our research method - the internet-mediated interviews that took place online over an extended period of time, some of the interviews were not finished to completion. Some of the reasons behind this might have been the lack of enthusiasm from the interviewee side, annoyance due to the extensive style of the study or misinterpretation of the questions and aims. However, the conductors still chose to keep the interviews and use them in the study, as it is essential to get as much information as possible in the exploratory study design.

## **Sampling**

Sampling allows the research study to investigate the topic and produce valid results since it is often physically or financially impossible to investigate the entire census (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016). A subset of the population called the target population was used to access the data of Lil Miquela followers. The target population allows the researchers to study the subset of the entire population of the Virtual Social media influencer audience, which was decided to be represented by Lil Miquela's followers.

A few questions need to be answered when first deciding on sampling techniques that would best suit a specific study (ibid.). Firstly, can the data be collected from the entire population? This is a rare case and usually only is available for governments conducting questionnaires. No sampling is needed for this since the researcher (or a ruling body of an entire country) is interested in everyone's opinions. The next question to be asked is - is a sampling frame available? The sampling frame is a list that is available to be used to pick participants from a population. In the case of this research study, the sampling frame is a list of Lil Miquela's followers. If the sampling frame is available, the next question to ask is whether or not statistical inferences have to be made from the sample. In the case of this exploratory study with quantitative research design methods, the researchers are not aiming to produce definitive statistical conclusions, so the non-probability sampling typology was used to define a sample.

Sampling techniques are divided into two groups - probability or representative sampling and non-probability sampling (ibid.). A non-probability sampling typology was used in this research study, which relies on the judgment of the researcher and is suitable for a small-scale study with a few participants to gain more in-depth knowledge (ibid). It is critiqued to not be the most statistically efficient, as by the luck of the draw you might not

get the most accurate representation of the entire population, however, it is relatively easy to generalize results from the sample back to population (W. Trochim, 2020). The non-probability sampling was particularly appealing for the researchers of this study, since the interviews were conducted over a social media app, Instagram, where several aspects came into play in regards to data gathering. Firstly, one is not always allowed to reach out to everyone, meaning that if a follower has a private account, the message function will be turned off. Even if the account one is trying to contact is set to be public, the messages can be ignored or unseen. Secondly, when looking into the sample frame of Lil Miquela's followers - they are displayed in the order from the newest followers to the oldest. Meaning that the accounts on the top of the list might have followed her only for a day and therefore not have yet formed an opinion about this human brand. However, it is not indicated how long each of the 2 million followers have been following her for, so it is up to the judgment of the researcher to decide how far down the list one has to scroll to get a more insightful answer. Non-probability sampling is further divided into accidental and purposive (ibid.). Accidental or convenience sampling method is one of the most common methods, where the traditional "man on the street" method is widely applied. The problem with this type of method is that the researchers have no evidence that the participants picked are the right representation of the population we are interested in generalizing to (ibid). Considering the issues regarding Lil Miquela's follower sample frame it was difficult for the researchers to come up with any kind of methodological pattern, when it came to picking our participants. The study has relied on the ones that were interested enough and had the time available to help the research.

The sample responses were ranked as follows (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016): Non-responses (complete refusal) - ignoring or not seeing your messages; Break-off (less than 50% answered); Partial response (50% to 80% answered); Complete response (over 80% answered).

Counting in all the responses, including complete refusal ones helped the study to show the struggle of conducting a qualitative study regarding the topic. There was no incentive method used to help get the research more answers and therefore was completely in the hands of responders and their willingness to participate. The list of the participants that provided the break-off, partial and complete responses is displayed in the table below.

The researchers have estimated that around 30 to 40 participants had the complete refusal, while the rest 22 provided some level of completion.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Completion</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Other information/interests</b>
Interviewee nr. 17	Completed	Male	22	US	Drawing, creating music, is interested in the technology world, a part of the LGBT community
Interviewee nr. 22	Completed	Female	28	Lithuania	Photographer, interested in a computer-generated imagery, new ways of marketing, technological and AI trends
Interviewee nr. 6	Completed	Male	16	South Africa	Is interested and impressed by the current technological advancement, goes to art school, plays music
Interviewee nr. 15	Completed	Male	14	Spain	Very interested in the world of art, innovations, and technology, likes to draw, a part of the LGBT community
Interviewee nr. 4	Completed	Female	16	Philippines	Not really into technology, did not know Lil Miquela was not a real human
Interviewee nr. 12	Completed	Male	34	US	Makes interactive art, has seen some experimental virtual accounts before, is interested in the design and technological side of it, did not know she made music
Interviewee nr. 18	Completed	Female	15	-	Is interested in technology and how far it has come
Interviewee nr. 13	Completed	Male	25	Mexico	Interested in the new technologies and digital world, not artistic, more into sports
Interviewee nr. 21	Partial response	Female	16	Philippines	Enjoys her music, was confused at first, but then stayed, because she was impressed by the way she acts and communicates
Interviewee nr. 7	Partial response	Male	43	Italy	A filmmaker, his partner did not know that Lil Miquela is not real. He is interested in art and likes to follow digital art accounts

Interviewee nr. 1	Break - off response	Male	20	Mexico	Interested in arts, is a graphic designer and filmmaker, wants to work with technologies and maybe even create computer-generated pop icons like Gorillaz
Interviewee nr. 8	Break - off response	Male	21	-	Has been following Lil Miquela for 3 years, is interested in modern technology and digital art, all things “new and weird”
Interviewee nr. 10	Completed	Female	14	US	Likes to dance and play basketball, has actually contacted Lil Miquela and had conversations with her account
Interviewee nr. 20	Completed	Female	15	Indonesia	Interacts with Lil Miquela’s account, comments under her pictures likes her music, says she does not support the LGBT community
Interviewee nr. 9	Completed	Female	23	Jamaica	Listens to her music, is very interested in the new technology and innovation
Interviewee nr. 3	Completed	Female	34	Brazil	Loves fashion, likes technology
Interviewee nr. 19	Partial response	Female	19	US	Graphic designer student, likes technology
Interviewee nr. 16	Partial response	Male	25	India	Has an MBA in Finance, is interested in technologies
Interviewee nr. 5	Completed	Male	24	Brazil	Loves singing, dancing, loves Lil Miquela’s music, is a part o the LGBT community
Interviewee nr. 14	Completed (via Skype)	Male	22	Portugal	Loves going out with friends, has studied marketing and is very interested in new technologies. Supports LGBT community
Interviewee nr. 11	Completed (via Skype)	Female	24	Portugal	Loves to draw, cook and fashion. Studies design of 3D animation. Is very into new technologies
Interviewee nr. 2	Completed (via Skype)	Male	23	Portugal	Loves new technology and has studied marketing. Is not interested in any cause.

## **Secondary data**

### **Text analysis of Instagram comment section**

In order to gain some additional insights into the world of Social media virtual influencers, their perceived quality as a human brand and the consumer motivations to follow them, the study has additionally included a couple of comments as examples of consumers' perception of Lil Miquela. These comments were scouted in two of her biggest social media platforms - YouTube and Instagram, since these platforms allow consumers to comment freely under her pictures, posts or videos.

The comment section is a great source for secondary data, since it allows the researchers to get a glimpse how her followers really feel about her. The whole analysis (*Appendix 2 – Text analysis*) is grouped after the 6 basic human emotions - anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise. We have decided to alter them into surprise, disbelief, confusion, love/admiration, anger/hate, sadness. The comments were added to the finding section as a complementary data source to support the primary findings.

### **Preparation**

The comment section of these two platforms were searched for specific human emotions in order to support the primary data collected during the interviews. The steps taken were:

- Deciding how to group the majority of the most popular comments into categories
- Grouping the most prominent comments into themes based on the main human emotions
- Finding an appropriate place to insert the comments to emphasize the meaning behind our findings

### **Text analysis guide**

The text analysis of a Instagram comment section was used as a supplementary method to help answer our research question and provide more information in regards to



the research gap between social media virtual influencers and brand equity and social media virtual influencers and the consumer motivations to follow.

The text analysis will be divided into the following types of comments:

- Surprise
- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Love/admiration
- Anger/hate
- Sadness

The comment examples from this analysis were used to emphasize the knowledge gained during the interview process. The comment sampling was done via random simple sampling, which may not objectively represent the phenomena in the most accurate way, however, it provides the support needed to strengthen the meaning of the finding section.

### **Platform choice**

Instagram was the main choice for the secondary data sourcing. There were a few reasons for it. Firstly, it is a very visual platform, that is based on its users uploading visual content, whether it is pictures or videos. According to Statista (2020) Instagram is a platform, that is primarily used by younger generations - 35% of the entire audience are between ages 24 and 34 (millennials), while 29% of them are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Gen Z audience). These two generations are used to adapting to technological changes and are very receptive towards new digital inventions (Statista, 2020). Moreover, due to its nature, Instagram is seen as communication platform, where researchers could approach their participants easily, unlike on YouTube or Twitter. Instagram was also the one social media platform, where Lil Miquela has the biggest audience - 2.2 million followers.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis chapter will be used to explain the methodology used for data analysis, that came from 19 semi-structured non-standardized one-on-one interviews, and the text analysis of the Instagram comment section under the Lil Miquela's account posts. The Grounded theory approach was chosen for this part, where the main key points of this method will be explained in the following.

## Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was developed as a response to extreme positivism by Glaser and Strauss (1967) (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016). They did not really agree, that positivism is the best paradigm to be used for social science. The authors argued instead, that social research should be based on a premise that *theory will reveal a pre-existing reality* (ibid). Grounded theory was developed as a process to analyse and understand different meanings and interpretations that social actors construct from their everyday experiences. Interpretivism was therefore chosen to be used for this study as the research topic is a product of socially constructed meanings, that the participants have towards the Social media virtual influencers, (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). An abductive approach is considered to be the most appropriate one, combining and moving between induction and deduction (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016). Coding is a key element of the Grounded theory, where the data is being categorized and checked for similarities and differences. The main three coding stages are: Open coding - reorganizing data into categories; Axial coding - recognizing relationships between categories; Selective coding - integrating categories and producing theories.

The coding process is constantly supported by constant comparison. It promotes the higher levels of analytical coding, when moving between the inductive and deductive thinking. Grounded theory is very different from the traditional research approach, where the researcher picks an existing theoretical framework and collects data that would either apply or deny the phenomena (ibid). The researcher should avoid being overly sensitized by pre-existing theoretical knowledge and concepts in order to make sense of their participant's answers. The quick run-through the research methods while using the Grounded theory would be:

1. Starting with a question or an observation
2. Collection of the qualitative data
3. Once the data is collected, the repeated ideas, concepts and patterns are identified
4. Tagged with codes, that have been extracted from the data
5. Codes then can be grouped into concepts
6. These categories can then become basis for a new theory

### **Coding:**

After conducting the semi-structured interviews, the authors transcribed the qualitative data in order to organize it but also to become familiar with the data collected. Through immersing in the data, the authors are able to look for meanings, recurring themes and patterns.

In order to start the data analysis, a first stage starts, which is coding. Coding is used to identify the data with similar meanings and categorise it depending on the different themes found on the data (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016). Involves labelling each unit of data with the correspondent theme that this data belongs to. The themes are known as codes, which are labels to assign meaning to the data that the authors are interested in further studying (Malhotra & Birks, 2017).

A unit of data is a number of words or lines which is summed up by a certain code. These codes are formed by actual terms used by the interviews' participants – “in vivo” codes. Coding allows the authors to link similar units of data or to link opposite units of data which can be used to compare and contrast (Saunders, Mark; Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2016). The process of coding starts by retrieving data from the entire mass of gathered data, followed by organizing the data through the grounded theory process and finally the interpretation of data through the use of theoretical dimensions (Malhotra & Birks, 2017).

### **First stage: Retrieving data**

In the first stage of coding, particular words or statements are identified to examine the fit with other declarations (Malhotra & Birks, 2017).

The first stage of data collection was made through direct messaging on Instagram. First because the method of sending direct messaging is instantaneous, and secondly because the answers obtained did not reveal the context of the interview and some language restrictions were felt by the researchers.

Although this method has some limitations, the authors have conducted the interviews, transcribed and then started a basic analysis by looking at the most relevant themes arising and identifying similarities and differences in the various interviews. As the interview guide was semi-structured, the common themes that the participants discussed and talked about were very straightforward and in line with the questions made.

This first manual analysis was relevant in order to improve the guideline for the interview conducted by Skype through promoting the discussion about the topics that had most discordance and agreeability on.

Afterwards, the Skype interviews were conducted, and a basic analysis was again conducted in order to identify broad common themes and extract particular words or statements from the mass of data that fit with other statements of the previous interviews conducted.

## **Second stage: Organise the data**

The grounded theory approach starts by coding the gathered information, and has a special focus on data that inform, extend and refine emerging analytical themes (Malhotra & Birks, 2017). Following the grounded theory approach, the authors aimed to find similarities and differences among the dimensions of Brand equity and Virtual SMI, and the Customer motivations to follow the Virtual SMI as a human brand.

Hence, the need to find a suitable tool to organise all the data and categorize it has arisen. The authors chose to use the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) software **NVivo** to help increasing flexibility, and improve validity and auditability of qualitative research. NVivo allows the researchers to organise, analyse and find insights in qualitative data. This tool has the capacity of helping to find connections in the data and new insights, as well as common themes and evidence-based insights. It asks critical questions in order to find patterns and connections otherwise difficult to find manually. It ultimately

reaches and present valid and defensible conclusions to create effective outcomes (PatResearch, 2019).

As Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggests, the grounded theory coding process is developed through a 3-step process: Open coding, Axial coding and Selective coding (Malhotra & Birks, 2017).

### **Open Coding**

The first step is to open up the data to all possibilities and potential contained in them. The authors have considered all the possible meanings and examined the context before attributing interpretive labels to the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

The first nodes were created similar to the questions present in the questionnaire in the attempt of describing the understanding of the question – a researcher-denoted concept (ibid.). Every other sentence that did not answer the question in matter was attributed to a new node. This process was made in the program NVivo, as it allows the authors to create nodes with explicit names and organise the nodes into categories and subcategories.

After making the first attribution of nodes, these were revised with an attempt of finding similar nodes and placing them in a new one with a new name. Broad categories and subcategories in the form of nodes were then created, with the purpose of being further analysed.

In the table below an example of Open coding is shown.

<b>Open Coding</b>	<b>Example of sentence</b>
Engagement	“She replied to my tweet, and my Instagram comments, calling me a total sweetheart.”
Honesty	“Yes, I think she is as honest as can be.”
Not a real human	“Oh I knew from the start haha but yes, I know she’s not real”

### **Axial Coding**

Axial coding is to crosscutting or relating concepts to each other. Is “the process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed ‘axial’ because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 123).

Open and axial coding are almost made simultaneously, and although the data is firstly separated (open coding) into different concepts, it is then related again, and similar subcategories are put together to form broader categories.

An example is below aiming to describe the axial coding:

<b>Axial Coding</b>	<b>Open Coding</b>	<b>Example of sentence</b>
Brand Awareness	Engagement	“She replied to my tweet, and my Instagram comments, calling me a total sweetheart.”
Brand Associations	Honesty	“Yes, I think she is as honest as can be.”
Brand Saliency	Not a real human	“Oh I knew from the start haha but yes, I know she’s not real”

### **Selective Coding**

The final stage of coding – Selective coding, aims to refine and adjust the last details in order to create categories that go in line with the literature review and aim to answer to the research questions, which are what are the customer motivations to follow Virtual Social Media Influencers, and what is the brand equity of a Virtual Social Media Influencer (Corbin & Strauss, 2007)

Therefore, the authors have identified five main categories: Personal aspects, Customer motivations; Keller’s CBBE and Aaker Brand Equity. Following is an example of the categories.

<b>Selective Coding</b>	<b>Axial Coding</b>	<b>Open Coding</b>	<b>Example of sentence</b>
Aaker’s Brand Equity	Brand Awareness	Engagement	“She replied to my tweet, and my Instagram comments, calling me a total sweetheart.”
Customer Motivations	Brand Association	Honesty	“Yes, I think she is as honest as can be.”
Keller’s CBBE	Brand Salience	Not a real human	“Oh I knew from the start haha but yes, I know she’s not real”

After categorizing the data in such detail and in line with the research questions, the data was entirely organized in the qualitative tool NVivo, and ready to be interpreted. Following is an overview of the final categories.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▼ ● 1. Personal aspects <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 1.3 Occupation</li> <li>● 1.4 Interests</li> <li>▼ ● 1.5 New Technologies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Problems</li> <li>● VSMI as a new trend</li> </ul> </li> <li>● How long have you been following her</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▼ ● 2. Customer Motivations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 2.1 To follow real influencers</li> <li>● Curiosity</li> <li>● Intrigue</li> <li>● Love</li> <li>● Music</li> <li>● Work related</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▼ ● 3. Keller's CBBE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▼ ● 3.1 Brand Salience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Aware that she is not real</li> </ul> </li> <li>▼ ● 3.2 Brand Imagery <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How did you find Lil Miquela's account</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▼ ● 4. Aaker Brand Equity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▼ ● 4.1 Brand Loyalty <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interesting to talk about</li> <li>● Recommend</li> </ul> </li> <li>▼ ● 4.2 Perceived Quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Comparison with a real SMI</li> <li>▼ ● Following other CGI influencers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Greater popularity</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>▼ ● 4.3. Brand Associations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Attractiveness</li> <li>● Authentic</li> <li>● Honest</li> <li>● Same values and ideals</li> <li>● Would you like to be her</li> </ul> </li> <li>▼ ● 4.4 Brand awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Curiosity</li> <li>▼ ● Engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interacting posts</li> <li>● Music-Singer</li> <li>● Relatable</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Findings

The following chapter aims to answer these research questions displayed below:

***RQ1: What type of customers engage with a Virtual Influencer?***

***RQ2: What is the virtual influencers' perceived value (brand equity) as human brands?***

It is essential to mention that the findings of this exploratory study cannot be generalized due to the nature of the research. Moreover, it is a single case study (see infra Single Case study) based on one Virtual Social Media influencer. Meaning the data gathered from interviewing her followers (see infra Limitations and Future research) can not be applied to all Virtual SMIs out there. However, Lil Miquela is the most popular SMI on Instagram, based on her follower count and media coverage surrounding her profile



(Hyperauditor, 2019). Having her as the front figure and the most recognizable face of these types of accounts, it does give the research some ground to acknowledge the fact that her followers might as well accurately depict the rest of the target audience for Virtual SMIs.

The results will be presented by answering each Research question separately. The first question will divide the followers into brand personas created based on their views on Virtual SMIs and Lil Miquela specifically. They have been divided into Community Seekers and Technological Admirers. The community seeker is a consumer, who does not necessarily care for whether or not Lil Miquela is a real human or just an imaginary character. It is someone who shows support and admiration. These types of consumers express the need to be seen and heard, which Miquela, as a human brand, provides by answering their comments or private messages. The Technological Admirers have grouped several consumer types into one category. One consumer sub-category is interested in digital art, A.I., and other technological advancements. These types of consumers might follow a Virtual SMI because of their work (graphic designer, filmmaker, photographer) or because of their hobby, which might include some sort of interest for the computer-generated imagery or the virtual world. Another consumer sub-category under Technological Admirers is the marketing people. They are acting as curious observers and feel the need to be up-to-date with the newest influencer marketing trends, rather than being interested in the technical side of it. This consumer target group consists of marketers, students, and people who see the future in working with human brands in general.

The authors felt the need to study consumer motivations to follow these types of accounts since the motivations behind our actions explain a lot about a particular consumer type. The motivations to follow fell under the same RQ1, and the participants were asked to answer the questions related to it. The answers were divided into five main categories based on the patterns presented in findings. They were a curiosity, intrigue, love, musical interest, and work-related motivational factors. Interview outtakes were used as examples of these major categories, which were supported by the secondary data - the text analysis of some of the Instagram comments.

The second research question was answered through combining the models of Keller (2001) and Aaker (1996), creating a new brand equity model which was used to measure the quality of the two main target groups following Lil Miquela: the Community Seekers and Technological Admirers.

To round up, a paragraph that has summarised the findings is displayed. Text analysis is used from the comment section of Lil Miquela's Instagram account to support the primary data findings.

### **RQ1: What type of consumers engage with a Virtual Influencer (and what are their motivations behind)?**

This paragraph will be divided into the following:

- *Community Seekers description of the target group and their Motivations to follow*
- *Technological Admirers description of the target group and their Motivations to follow*

In order to answer the first research question about the type of consumer that would be interested in engaging with virtual SMIs, the study participants fell under these categories, which are explained below.

#### **Target group description**

##### **Community Seekers**

Community Seekers are people who have been deemed to be interested in interacting with Lil Miquela just as much as they would interact with any other SMI, human, or avatar. These followers expressed indifference towards her being a virtual avatar, as long as she was able to communicate with them and provide that sense of community they were longing after. Some of the participants admitted commenting under her posts:

*Interviewee 17: "It is fun to engage with new and rising artists, I think it's the thought we know she's not real and to see that she responds to us is just exciting. She's commented on a couple of my posts plenty of times and it's fun to share the excitement with her directly."*

This example displays Miquela is exhibiting Brand Salience, when actively trying to respond to the majority of the comments and private messages. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, in order to gain acceptance, robots or avatars must display a certain level of humanness and must fulfill the social-emotional needs of their followers (Stock and

Merkle, 2018). Lil Miquela is displaying warmth and acceptance through her communication with her audience, hence meeting their sociological needs of finding a "tribe," a place where one is heard and listened.

The fact that this virtual influencer can interact is exciting for a few of her followers. Lil Miquela is always getting thousands of comments under her pictures, which are usually displaying love and admiration.

As one of the participants, Interviewee 17, has explained, it is exciting for him to see if she would reply, since he knows Miquela is not an actual person. In the examples below, some of the interview answers have been picked that supported that displayed need of belongingness:

Interviewee 9: *"...and she interacts with everyone on social media, she's almost like a best friend."*

Interviewee 17: *"I feel it's because people can relate to her, yes it's weird seeing a "robot" have feelings but I feel when we are in tough situations and we're looking for a light we can find it anywhere and in anything...especially artificial intelligence social media influencers. I feel Miquela interacts more with her fan base tbh."*

Interviewee 15: *"...it's a sensation of self-confidence that i can walk anywhere and be me for me and because even though she might not be real it's a step into self-motivation from digitized simulations instead of real humans" and "But Miquela is different, like she really cares about all of us."*

The examples prove a crucial point for our research paper - one does not have to be human in order to portray some human-like qualities and gain respect and admiration from others. An interesting observation made by a few of the participants reveal that because of Miquela's consistent communication on her social media platforms, her followers feel supported and loved, sometimes even more so, when compared to human SMIs. One major difference between virtual avatar influencers and human ones is that virtual ones might appear more relatable, as they are deemed to be "an outcast" or the minority. Since virtual avatars are still seen as something new and intriguing, while being widely discussed, some might say that Lil Miquela is a minority of her type amongst other SMIs. Customers who follow such accounts can relate to the feeling of being a minority in their social circles and find safety and community within the rest of the virtual SMI fan base.

Interviewees often display a level of excitement, when talking about a virtual SMI of their choice. The examples below illustrate their feelings towards Lil Miquela:

Interviewee 17: *"It's fun to engage with new and rising artists, I think it's the thought we know she's not real and to see that she responds to us is just exciting."*

Interviewee 6: *"I mean, it's just really bizarre, but like it's super cool as well I guess. I shouldn't be surprised judging by the technological era we're living in currently...but still. It's really impressive though"*

Excitement is expressed through the fact that she is an entirely computer-generated avatar, which means she does not exist in the reality her consumers are living in. However, the fact that she can communicate with her audience appears to be an exciting antinomy.

### **Technological Admirers**

Another type of consumer is someone interested in the technological aspect of following a virtual personality. This section is further divided into three sub-categories, that fuel the interest for this topic: technological admiration, future potential, and professional interest. These are the motives that drive a technologically driven consumer to engaging/following a virtual SMI. Some of the participants, when asked about their motivations to follow, expressed that they believe the society will be seeing more of these types of accounts. The current level of attention to them is what made them be interested in following along from the start:

Interviewee 15: *"A digital artist which is pretty rare right now, but this may be the future as we drift off to a new world."*

#### **2.1 Technological admiration**

Technological admiration is a consumer motivation that explains an occurring spark when something exciting happens in one's field of interest. The participants below have explained that they admire the level of effort and the skill that took to make Lil Miquela into who is she is. Some of the participants are aspiring digital artists or filmmakers who have a natural interest in following current technological trends within the digital world. Some of the

participants were able to admire the level of detail and labor that goes into every post, whether it is a video or a picture.

Interviewee 12: *"I think the time that goes into each post to render and make shows that their level of effort and care and I think there is value in that in some ways more than other influencers."*

This participant admired her ability to connect to her human audience, while being fully aware that Lil Miquela is just a virtual creation in a constructed reality.

Interviewee 18: *"I just followed her bc it's so interesting how far our technology has come and I think she is so interesting bc she looks so real and the fact that she can understand humans is insane."*

Some of the participants expressed a wish to create a virtual CGI account or a character in the future:

Interviewee nr.1: *"I wanna make pop culture idols like Gorillaz and I think Gorillaz and Lil Miquela is the same thing. I wanna work with technologies"*

When asked about if the interviewee would like to create a similar account by himself, (interviewee 12) replied:

Interviewee 12: *"Yeah, I guess so, never thought of doing it tho, but not a bad idea! Hahaha"*

## **2.2 Future potential**

Another type of technologically interested follower is someone who is fascinated to see what the future will bring within the field of digital creation. The interviewees mentioned that they see endless possibilities in this field, especially with the current generation being more accepting of technological advances:

Interviewee 4: *"This generation is more on technology, it is really possible that in the future, everything is under control of different technologies. I'm sure that the creator imagined a lot of possibilities that a virtual influencer can do."*

Some implied that they admire all art forms, and they would be interested to see how the lines between the real and virtual worlds would continue blurring:

Interviewee 6: *"I'm not freaked out enough to unfollow her yet so I wanna see where this goes you know?"*

Interviewee 7: *"I like to explore other art forms"*

### **2.3 Professional interest**

Finally, the third sub-category of this consumer type is the followers who have professional aspirations within the field of marketing, photography, or communications. Virtual SMIs are being discussed around the world as a new form of influencer marketing. Despite being digital creations, these characters can show their constructed reality that is mimicking human influencers - getting brand deals, posting shots of their everyday routines, and even experiencing heartbreaks. This interviewee found about Miquela during a marketing conference, where she was introduced as a rising digital star:

Interviewee 22: *"Actually, I haven't heard about anything like this before the conference, so definitely had to follow and explore this phenomenon."*

Interviewee nr.2 and nr.11 said that following current digital trends was a crucial part of their studies:

Interviewee 2: *"Yes, I really enjoy knowing all the new trends, also related to my area of Marketing."*

Interviewee 11: *"I follow the tendencies, also because my area of studies. As I am studying design, it's really important to keep track of the trends, as it will influence my work life."*

### **Motivations to follow**

Motivations to follow a particular human brand directly correlated to the type of consumer one is, which is why the study has analyzed some of the most common motivations behind the fascination of this VSMI. The most common motives to follow turned out to be curiosity, intrigue, love, musical admiration, and work-related interest.

## **Curiosity**

Curiosity was frequently mentioned when asked about common motivations to follow Lil Miquela's account. Participants mentioned her beauty and her collaborations with other famous people, which has spiked their interest to find out who she really was. Others were curious to see the development of her character and the graphics that are getting increasingly more realistic.

Interviewee 3: *"I found her very beautiful, I entered the profile, I thought it was not possible a perfect person like that, then I saw the videos when she spoke and then I saw that it was a computer graphics"*

Interviewee 7: *"I started to follow her because she appeared to me as a suggestion and I was interested to see the profile of a virtual user done very well, in fact my girlfriend believed she is a real person"*

Interviewee 11: *"Yes, to see how she will develop. Not really about her daily life, but to see how is the digital part of her evolving. The pictures with VIP, the videos... how much can she become a human"*

## **Intrigue**

Intrigue is a common motivator to follow virtual social media influencers, according to both primary and secondary data gathered. Both interview answers and comments on Miquela's Instagram account section indicated that many followers are confused about whether or not she is real, as well as being intrigued about how she can produce content while being an avatar.

This interviewee was showed intrigue when wondering how is she able to sing and produce songs, music videos, and even interviews:

Interviewee 17: *"But who is behind her? Is the voice also manipulated, or does someone do it? That intrigues meahaha"*

The following two interviewees expressed excitement following someone who is so unusual when compared to regular human influencers. They can depict that Miquela's pictures are somehow edited, which is not an unusual thing on social media platforms. However, Miquela's account is taking it to another level. The participants seemed to be intrigued by her origin story and the traction she is getting while only existing online:

Interviewee 8: *"Yeah she's really been gaining some traction as of late, when she first appeared online it was strange because she had such a small following, nobody really knew what to make of it."*

Interviewee 13: *"I feel weird at the beginning cause I feel that something's wrong with the picture, but at the same time she looks like another typical model and I started to follow her cause I never seen anything like her, something like a virtual model created by a computer."*

## Love

Love is a regular consumer motivator for engaging with their favorite brand, or in this case - a human influencer brand. Some of the reasons for loving this character were her personality, talent, honesty, and relatability. Moreover, interviewees felt like she was doing a good job when engaging with her audience and taking the time to write her followers back.

Interviewee 9: *"Well, after I heard the interview with her, I basically started following her because she's cool. I think she has a really down-to-earth personality, and she's always saying that even robots need love. She has this really likable personality."*

Interviewee 17: *"She's talented, she's amazing, she's cute and funny"*

Interviewee 10: *"I decided to Follow her because she's very humble and honest. And very relatable"*



**Figure 9 - Direct messages between Lil Miquela and a follower demonstrating Love**



## **Musical admiration**

Musical admiration was mentioned quite frequently in the primary data collection process. Many of the interviewees admitted listening to her songs, and some even mentioned that it was the way they have discovered this virtual influencer/singer. Lil Miquela has over 700 thousand monthly listeners on music sharing platform Spotify and over 19 million views on her YouTube videos.

Interviewee 17: *"I started listening to her music and the first song was Money, and then came Wasted and Wasted is one of my favorite songs by her! Then I looked to Instagram to see her and my love for her sparked there, knowing she's not real, she still left a mark on me"*

Interviewee 5: *"Nothing else but the music really made me follow her"*

Interviewee 21: *"I actually like her music"*

## **Work-related interest**

Work-related interest is the last motivator for the technologically interested consumer. These followers are either marketing field students or someone who already is working with influencer related communication.

Interviewee 14: *"As an example, when she is with some friends, I look at the profile out of curiosity. If they are brands, I wonder why is the brand tagged there, if they are sponsoring or making something with her. This is mostly because I am studying marketing, so the brands part really interests me."*

Interviewee 2: *"Because she goes according to my interests as a professional from the area of Marketing. I can see her as the future of my profession. And we should always be informed about the new tendencies and what the world is doing."*

The following few categories were not mentioned as frequently. However, the researchers thought that these examples depicted the way customers felt towards Lil Miquela and were worth mentioning it.

## Realism

The first part is realism. The participant Interviewee nr.12 mentioned that Miquela is different from other Virtual SMIs since she displays a higher level of realism in her pictures. She is always seen together with other human celebrities, artists, and influencers, where they interact or just pose for a picture together. Since there is an entire digital agency behind her creation, they have the resources to make her appear as realistic as possible. Lil Miquela is seen in interviews on social media platform YouTube, music videos, and on daily Instagram stories.



**Figure 10 - Demonstration of Realism appreciation**

Interviewee 12: *"my one first thought is they focused on realism for lil Miquela and often show her perfectly composited with other people. So I think that realism attracts people to the account or maybe even tricks them I wonder if some people think she's just a slightly off looking real person"*.

Another interviewee added that what makes Miquela, so human-like is the history created for her. The followers who have been around for longer have noticed her "getting a boyfriend" and then breaking up, having feuds with her friends, and collaborating with some famous musicians. The fact that other people are involved and appear in her pictures makes it more believable since she does not just exist in her reality.

Interviewee 14: *"I enjoyed the fact that she has a history behind and shares this life. Although she is not real, there is someone behind the character how really makes the effort to find a history – I found this interesting and also made the character appearing more credible. Also, caught my attention the fact that she had several pictures with international singers and actors"*

## Human-like connection

Another essential feature Interviewee 12 has mentioned her ability to connect with her followers. She has distinct human-like qualities when she speaks, such as pausing before or after a particular phrase, laughing, giggling, flirting, or showing sadness. The team behind her creation is trying to make her as "real" as possible, explaining how one interview participant did not even know she was not a real human girl (interviewee nr.4).



*Figure 11 - Demonstration of a heavy human like connection and similarity*

Interviewee 12: *"she has a distinct human quality, feels like whoever runs the account uses Miquela as a character that infuses with some of their own traits, so the human element still shines through and feels like something you could connect with."*

From the videos posted on Miquela's Instagram and YouTube accounts, one can see her having and expressing a personality. She is playful when avoiding certain questions and even acts offended when asked about more controversial topics (YouTube interview with Zach Sang show, 2019). Moreover, she is empathetic and shows her support to all societal groups, such as the LGBT community, for example.

## **RQ2: What is the virtual influencers' perceived value (brand equity) as human brands?**

In order to understand the construction of the Brand Equity of Lil Miquela, the authors have started by analyzing two variables of the Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid – the Brand Salience and the Brand Meaning (Keller, 2003). The next stages of this model which are the Brand Response (Judgements and Feelings) and the Brand Resonance, were substituted by the dimensions of the Aaker's Brand Equity model composed by the Brand Awareness, Brand Loyalty, Purchase Intention and Perceived Quality (Keller, 2003; Aaker, 1996).

Hence, the authors intend to assess the virtual influencers' perceived value by combining these two notorious models to measure the Brand Equity of the human brand Lil Miquela. In order to measure Brand Equity, all the dimensions were measured weighting equally, the strategy suggested by Aaker (1996). The results were showed in percentage of the total answers of each target group. These calculations are shown in the *Appendix 5 – Findings percentage*.

### **Brand Salience**

#### **All the Target Segments**

The base of the construction of Brand equity is to have Brand Salience, which states that a brand is recognized and understood for what it is (Keller, 2003). For Lil Miquela, her Brand Salience is to be recognized for her non-human nature. When asked to the participants whether they know and immediately understood that Lil Miquela was not a real person, the answers were always positive with one exception:

Interviewee 2: *"Yes, although she is very well conceived, I think you can easily understand she is not real."*

Interviewee 6: *"I think she's a real person with a CGI face."*

Interviewee 7: *"I was able to recognize it right away unlike my partner who believed it was real."*

Interviewee 18: *"Yes I know ahah."*

Interviewee 21: *"Yes I am fully aware of that."*

Therefore, the first stage of Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid was achieved. Lil Miquela is fairly easily identified as being a non-human Instagram profile.

## **Brand Meaning**

### **All target groups**

The following parameter in Keller's pyramid is to achieve a clear Brand Meaning, which is composed of Brand Imagery and Brand Performance. This dimension aims to meet the needs of the customer on a psychological and social level. It also aims to access the quality of the product. It was identified through assessing how the followers find the account of Lil Miquela on Instagram, and what was the first impression when they saw her Instagram page.

It was agreed among the participants that Lil Miquela's Instagram page was beautiful the first time they saw it, and interesting to follow.

Interviewee 3: *"I found her very beautiful, I entered the profile, I thought it was not possible a perfect person like that, then I saw the videos when she spoke and then I saw that it was a computer graphics"*

Interviewee 4: *"My younger brother showed me a picture of her, he told me to search her name on Instagram and I found really cute that's why I followed her."*

Interviewee 7: *"through the internet I've searched for interesting accounts in the art world"*

Interviewee 11: *"my sister Joana told me about this account, as she knew I love this area and want to study and work on 3D animation. After this, I started following Lil Miquela and we now talk about her sometimes."*

Interviewee 14: *"Some friends of mine told me about this new concept of virtual influencers, or influencers digitally created. I decided to learn more about the subject, and felt that she, among the other Virtual influencers, had a better content and was very interesting, therefore I decided to follow her"*

Through the follower's statements, the authors understood that the Brand Meaning is met the first time the Instagram page is seen. These followers accessed the quality of the human brand through her posts and continued following her.

## **Brand Loyalty - Recommendation**

### **Community Seekers**

All the interviewees were satisfied with following the brand Lil Miquela. Aaker (1996) suggests that the question *"Would you recommend it to others"* is made to loyal customers. There was a predominant attitude as 50% of the respondents affirmatively said that they had recommended Lil Miquela's Instagram page to peers:

Interviewee 17: *"Oh yes!! By a landslide!" "I show her to my friends she's in these different places posting these different pictures, that's what amazes me about her and I want to show that to everybody!"*

Interviewee 15: *"Yes, on my story one time and to one of my bf's and she follows her now:)" and "it's so cool cause we all can talk about her now with the same interest"*

However, around 40% have talked about Lil Miquela but not recommended following her, and one respondent has never mentioned Lil Miquela. Interviewee 9 believes that *"Her music isn't really popular here"* and *"They don't really care all that much. Most would only think she's a real person wearing a mask for fame"*.

### **Technological admiration**

For the Technological Admirers, the scenario was similar but more extreme. Half of the respondents have recommended others to follow Lil Miquela, 33% have talked about her but did not suggest the friends follow her, and finally, 17% of the group have not mentioned Lil Miquela to anyone else. Below is a representative statement of each situation.

Interviewee 11: *"I would recommend people to follow it, is very interesting."*

Interviewee 2: *"I thought some people would like to know about this existence. Friends of mine who are in the area of marketing and new technologies, but also to my sisters, who love fashion. "* and *"Just to see, then they can see whether they are interested in following or not."*

Interviewee 4: *"No, I'm not going to waste my time for that, I mean, I am just going to make my friends confused too."*

## Perceived Quality

The Perceived Quality of a brand can be measured as a direct comparison with the competitor brand (Aaker, 1996). Scales are whether this brand has a higher and consistent quality; if it is the best in the market, if it is the leading brand, growing in popularity, is innovative and is the first with advances in the product (ibid.). Translated to the human brand of Lil Miquela, the participants were asked to compare Lil Miquela to real Social Media Influencers and Virtual Social Media Influencers.

## Community Seekers

The Community Seekers believe that she is either comparable to real SMIs, or even better than real SMIs.

Interviewee 9: *"Well, it's not really a difference necessarily, except for the fact that she is a robot, there really isn't much difference. I mean it, everyone of these people are relatable for me in their own way, and I can love them equally without preferring one over the other"*

Interviewee 9: *"I personally like her more. She's more real than other influencers. She replies to people. She builds people up. She's not always about herself."*

Interviewee 17: *"if you follow a real life influencer you start to get bored with them cause yes they're real, but it'll be once in a blue moon where they actually post something or share something that grabs your attention. With Miquela...knowing she's not real...every time she posts a pic it's eye grabbing cause we look at different poses she does and we look at all the environments she's placed"*

Interviewee 15: *"it's a step into self motivation from digitized simulations instead of real humans which gives us a glimpse on what image people may set for themselves."*

In regards to a comparison between Lil Miquela and other VSIMs, the results showed that 75% of the Community Seekers also follow the Instagram account BermudaisBae, and 25% only follow Lil Miquela.

Interviewee 9: *"I definitely listen to Bermuda as well. She has a lot of potential, would definitely love to see more of her personality"*

Interviewee 10: *"I follow Bermuda as well. Only Bermuda and Miquela."* The reason Interviewee 10 believes that Lil Miquela is more popular is *"Probably because she produces music, and has a YouTube channel. And Miquela has been around longer than Bermuda. Plus Bermuda started getting bigger when she was harassing Miquela and forced her to come out about being a robot"*.

Hence, Community Seekers tend to follow other Virtual SMIs, because they are genuinely interested in Lil Miquela's life, so they want to be aware of everything and everyone that she connects with. However, these followers still prefer Lil Miquela to BermudaisBae.

Concluding, this Target Group perceives Lil Miquela as a market leader and growing popularity.

### **Technological admiration**

33% of the Technological Admirers perceive Lil Miquela as being less genuine than real SMIs. As Interviewee 21 states, *"I don't really think she's the same as real influencers because lilmiquela is programmed everything she says and thinks is A.I. Real influencers are more special because they have real passion and real emotions which makes their work more valuable. Lilmiquela is actually slightly different from real influencers she can do what others do it's that it's not that genuine."* Interviewee 2 also reinforces the idea: *"The differences are that lil miquela is super customizable, that although she has a set of defined values, she is much more flexible in that sense, she can use all the types of brands, say everything she wants... while real people have a different personal pressure. She also doesn't have the division between her personal and professional life. She can say anything she wants to and do whatever she wants to"*.

Nevertheless, the majority (42%) of this segment believes that as an influencer, Lil Miquela is not different from real influencers even though she has a computer-generated imagery face.

Interviewee 1: *"I mean the internet was a different world and doesn't care to much thinks...Since was a child I'm influenced with cartoons. And don't care if these was real or not"*



Interviewee 13: *"Actually she is like other influencers, if I didn't notice her face that looks like a face made by a computer I thought she was another influencer like others"*

Interviewee 22: *"her content is not so much different from the real influencers / singers - focusing on fashion, relationships, brands, pop culture. The only difference - that she is fictional."*

Moreover, 17% of the Technological Admirers believe that Lil Miquela is a better influencer than real influencers, but the reasons are different from the Community Seekers.

Interviewee 6: *"i feel like what makes her even more interesting than the other influencers is the fact that she's so mysterious. Like, you find yourself asking "why?"....and that makes you intrigued and wanna know how far they can push everything"*

Interviewee 14: *"I think she is more honest, as she shares much more things about her life than normal people. It is difficult to find a singer that makes a post saying that has ended everything with the bf, explaining all the details. Therefore, I believe she shares more than the real influencers." and "because she shares more about her feelings than the others. The real ones would make an idealistic statement about how is it to finish with the boyfriend, while she really shares the feelings one go through the process."*

Finally, 8% of the interviewees believe that Lil Miquela entails more work effort than real influencers.

Interviewee 12: *"I think the time that goes into each post to render and make shows that their level of effort and care and I think there is value in that in some ways more than other influencers. I don't want to assume for everyone, but there are a lot of the hot model girl and guys' instagrams that essentially they just take a selfie a day and get millions of followers, doesn't seem deserving sometimes, when you realise they aren't putting much care or additional concept into their posts, they are just repurposing what works over and over. So I think lil Miquela being a C.G., making music (now I know haha) and the attention to detail to make her seem realistic gives the account more interest to me and made me follow."*

Regarding whether this target group is following other virtual SMIs or not, 75% of them are only following Lil Miquela. The main reason is that the main interest in following Lil Miquela is to be aware of the new technological trends and where it will all go. The

followers are satisfied with only one Instagram page and believe that the other Instagram Virtual SMIs are similar but have lower quality and popularity.

Interviewee 2: *"she is the only one I follow, because inside my area of marketing she is a future trend (...)" and "one is enough to have in my profile. If one day I decide to create a professional profile then yes, I will follow more of these characters."*

Interviewee 14: *"Nop, she is the only one. Sometimes I see other virtual friends of her (sometimes I can't even say whether they are virtual or not because its super well-conceived), but she is the only one I follow" and "I am not very interested in the content they share, and because she was the first one I followed and she is a good representative of this family, I don't feel the need to follow anyone else."*

Interviewee 21: *"I don't follow other virtual influencers. I think Miquela is the most popular because besides the fact she almost looks like a real human being the personality that was built into her is more interesting and more fun."*

## **Brand Associations**

Involve image dimensions that are unique to the product (Aaker, 1996). The authors have decided to study the brand as a personality, therefore chose the dimensions authenticity, attractiveness, honesty, values, and support of causes.

## **Authenticity and Honesty**

### **Community Seekers**

The entire target group Community Seekers believes that Lil Miquela is as authentic and honest as she can be.

Interviewee 9: *"Yes, I think she is as honest as can be. If you took the robot out of the equation, I don't think she really has any reason to lie to anyone."*

Interviewee 15: *"Lol well, she's not real, but yeah, pretty much all in a digital perspective from a phone or T.V., but not in real life."*

Interviewee 17: *"the person we supposedly see as Miquela is actually going to these places! The only thing not real is her face. Think of Marshmello for example, we don't know*

*what he looks like cause he wears a mask wherever he goes. Think of that with Miquela the person is real and her face is only a 3D designed face to hide her identity."; "because she's not real we can't fully expect a truth but as far as her online persona...yes I do" and "Like I said with her online persona, she's looking to live a normal life, find true love and enjoy her love for making music."*

### **Technological Admirers**

The majority of the target group (75%) does not believe that Lil Miquela is honest and authentic.

Interviewee 11: *"For me it's not honest as I can't see who is behind her. I believe there is an entire agenda behind. She needs to follow what the society wants her to do. She is not spontaneous (can't be) and is taking the job of real people who work in this field. Everything she makes is not natural, she is not walking in the street and spontaneously makes something." and "as a character, she does live that life. (...) I always think about what is behind her posts."*

Interviewee 2: *"we also see that as not being authentic, because the opinion she is giving is not hers, is from her creators. They want her to follow the trends, so not, I don't see her as being honest"*

Interviewee 22: *"No - she is not real anyway, and it's super weird to read about her breaking up with her boyfriend, for example." and "Somehow I can't accept her as a "real person" - always think about what's behind all this."*

Interviewee 6: *"It definitely kind of feels like I'm watching a movie...Doesn't feel 100% authentic to me"*

However, 25% of the participants from this target group believe that Lil Miquela, as a character, is authentic and honest.

Interviewee 14: *"I believe so, as she ends up sharing most of her life on Instagram, her relationship, her state of mind... I think that is very interesting and gives credibility to the profile. I believe she is an authentic character inside her type of character. That is good as it can establish a connection between her and her followers, as she has necessities, interests and human emotions." and "I enjoyed the fact that she has a history behind and*

*shares this life. Although she is not real, there is someone behind the character who makes an effort to find a history – I found this interesting and also made the character to appear more credible"*

Interviewee 12: *"I think so, she has a distinct human quality, feels like whoever runs the account uses Miquela as a character that infuses with some of their own traits, so the human element still shines through and feels like something you could connect with."*

## **Attractiveness**

### **Community Seekers**

The entire target group perceives Lil Miquela as being beautiful and having a cool style.

Interviewee 17: *"Her style is so damn bomb. She always looks so good. There's something about her that I'm mesmerized. She's talented, she's amazing, she's adorable, she's cute and funny"*

Interviewee 15: *"OMG I love her style she has her bright and beautiful colors blended in together it's just AGHHH!! Amazing, and yes, she is very pretty"*

### **Technological Admirers**

The majority of the Technological Admirers (77%) find this character beautiful and having a cool style.

Interviewee 14: *"Ahaha Yes, I think she corresponds to the beauty pattern, and also the irreverent, rebellious and determinate personality is associated with the body." and "I would say is very punk rock, but matches her personality, and makes sense and she is a determined person and enjoys living the life. She is not very girly."*

Interviewee 1: *"Yes jajaja she's pretty. (...) she is modern and isn't a cartoon, is a symbol, Fashion symbol." and "I don't really care too much her style, she dresses like any other girl in this decade She is fashionable, but be fashion is normal in every girl in these years"*

Interviewee 11: *"She looks very pop, young, connected to music. I don't think it's my style, but yes, she has an appeal, and her Instagram profile is appellative and pretty. She is very pop style, which is not my style."*

Nevertheless, 23% of the target group does not think she is an attractive character.

Interviewee 12: *"I don't, she does still appear C.G. to me."*

Interviewee 2: *"No, that would be weird. Moreover, Asian looking girls are not my type, and she has some Asian features."* and *"For me (the style) is too much, too extreme, I can't relate to that or like to see that style in normal girls."*

Interviewee 3: *"Because Miquela has a more singular face, looks oriental and oriental features are in fashion due to the spread of kpop."* and *"I think she's pretty and sometimes she's not so pretty. I'm more @bermudaisbae's style".*

### **Same Values and supporting the same Causes**

The last trait of personality is the values and causes that Lil Miquela believes in and supports. The authors have recognized whether the followers identify themselves and support the same causes as Lil Miquela does. The values are love, equality, honesty, and some of the causes are LGBT and Black Lives Matter.

### **Community Seekers**

Only one respondent does not support the causes that Lil Miquela encourages, the majority does support, saying that:

Interviewee 15: *"Yes, it's important to respect everyone, even some of her fans may not seem comfortable but that just means they don't truly know her and that all should be equally treated."*

Interviewee 17: *"we both support any cause! Love is love! You should be free to express your love for anyone!"*

## **Technological Admirers**

In this target group, the numbers are more evenly distributed. Approximately 60% of the group does support and share the same values as Lil Miquela, and 40% of the target group does not know what these values are, or simply does not care about the causes she fights for. Below is an example of supportive followers:

Interviewee 14: *"Yes! I support all these causes, I think they deserve to be promoted and divulged, and she uses her influence in the digital world to support and share these causes to have an impact on the young people that follow her." and "I believe the values she says are about the equality of the society, environmental impact... she has a didactic approach. She is the representation of a girl from our generation, that has this environmental concern, is determined and has the power to share her beliefs through the social media power she has." (...) "And she makes me think more about these causes."*

Interviewee 6: *"she is basically perfect and although we shouldn't strive to be PERFECT, we should all strive to have a mindset of respecting everyone equally, and as well as to have basic human decency. So yes, I do share the same values."*

Following are some examples of followers who do not believe in the values and support the same causes as Lil Miquela:

Interviewee 11: *"hmm that's difficult to say, but I don't think so. I like her better for the brands she uses and her life-style, more than the values she tries to transmit, is not so real" and "I didn't know she was into that or supported those causes, but it's again not natural. She is portraying the values of someone behind her."*

Interviewee 2: *"For me it is indifferent, I don't care." and "I would say more or less then. For me those subjects aren't relevant, as I think that this values normally lead to extremism, and she can fall into that, which can finish her attractiveness to some people and brands. Those are solid values, which will segment her followers, and make some people leave her. Also, for the brands, some may not want to collaborate with her if they do not share the same values."*

Interview 4: *"If about LGBT, well I'm not against them, I don't support them as well. I just don't focus on things that aren't affecting my life."*

## **Brand Awareness**

Awareness can affect perceptions and attitudes towards a brand, and it can be a driver for loyalty (Aaker, 1996). The different levels of awareness are whether the brand is only recognized, recalled, on the top-of-mind (the first-named Brand Recall). Awareness manifests itself if the brand is a dominant brand, known by its followers, and lastly, if the user has an opinion about the brand (ibid.).

Because the authors have only interviewed already existing followers of this human brand, it is assumed that all the followers are in the stage of brand knowledge or in the phase of having an opinion about the brand. The distinction between being in either of these stages is if the follower knew that Lil Miquela is a singer or not.

Therefore, the knowledge about Lil Miquela's music, the interaction with Lil Miquela, and opinion about her and the Virtual SMIs as a future trend were the dimensions attributed to the study of Brand Awareness.

## **Music**

### **Community Seekers**

All of the Community Seekers enjoy Lil Miquela's songs. Some statements are that:

Interviewee 15: *"I love her music, it's a sensation of self confidence that i can walk anywhere and be me for me"* and *"we listen to her in the car"*

Interviewee 17: *"her voice is astounding" (...) "she can really sing"*

Interviewee 20: *"Fan of her music"*

### **Technological Admirers**

Most of the Technological Admirers know that Lil Miquela is also a singer (64%) but does not listen to her songs. 37% of them did not know she was a music producer, and only 9% enjoy the songs.

Following are some statements of the followers from this target group who know that she makes music but claim that this music is not their style:

Interviewee 14: *"I didn't search them, but I see them when she makes a story or post about it. It's pure curiosity, because I don't download them or the music is not my style. Its more about how could them make a video clip with Lil Miquela on movement."* and *"Yes, as her character is a singer, it makes sense that her page is similar to one of a real singer. And when a singer creates a music, she shares it in her network, and is constantly creating new content, so it makes sense that Lil Miquela does the same."*

Interviewee 2: *"I know more or less about it, but I have never searched more about it. I listened to part of the music on her Instagram, but it's not my style of music, so I wasn't curious enough to go to Spotify and search about it."*

Interviewee 6: *"I'm aware. Haven't listened to any of it yet."*

Below are some statements of followers who were not aware that Lil Miquela was a music producer:

Interviewee 11: *"No! Actually no! Now that you say that, I might have seen something about that, but I have never realized that"*

Interviewee 12: *"Oh I didn't even know she made music! I learned something new lol, I told I just started following hahaha, so might be a noob"*

## **Interaction**

The engagement rate of an Instagram page post is a vital measure to qualify the quality of the Social Media Influencer. This engagement can be done by only "liking" the picture, by commenting, by looking into the brands and people tagged in the picture or by sending a direct message to Lil Miquela.

## **Community Seekers**

The entire community interacts with Lil Miquela's posts, either commenting or even sending a personal, direct message to her. They claim that she answers them. Therefore they are thrilled to interact with her and are hoping for an answer. Below are some examples of it:

Interviewee 17: *"It's fun to engage with new and rising artists, I think it's the thought we know she's not real and to see that she responds to us is just exciting. She's commented*



*on a couple of my posts plenty of times and it's fun to share the excitement with her directly. There's something about her that I'm mesmerized by and I can't seem to yet figure it out lol, she blows my mind! In a good way of course" and "I start to think of her almost as my best friend"*

Interviewee 9: *"Yes, of course I do. It's one of the reasons I will continue to follow her. She replied to my tweet, and my Instagram comments, calling me a total sweetheart. I've never had a direct conversation with her before yet even though I sent her a message. Let's be honest here, I live in a developing country, and my biggest problem isn't chasing famous people, but if they make me want to support them, then I will emotionally invest in them"*

All the Community Seekers click on the brands or people that Lil Miquela tags in her posts, as Interviewee 20 claims, *"of course because of my curiosity."*

### **Technological Admirers**

All of the Technological Admirers only like the posts and never comment on them. The reasons are that:

Interviewee 6: *"I'm a bit hesitant. Feels like I'm speaking to an entity rather than a person."*

Interviewee 11: *"I might like some posts but no, I never comment anything or D.M. I'm this kind of person who sees everything but never comments, neither in real influencers." and "I follow her, but I am not super into her, I only see what appears in my feed."*

When Lil Miquela "tags" a brand or a person in her posts, 60% of the Technological Admirers do not click on the tag and 40% click. These followers claim that:

Interviewee 2: *"No, unless is a brand that I know. I don't click on weird brands or people, as I don't love the clothes she wears. I did see once the profile of her boyfriend, to see if he was real or fake. But I am not really interested in her life."*

Interviewee 3: *"No. Only when there are brands that I already know. She doesn't have that power of persuasion over me."*

Interviewee 14: *"yes yes, I have been doing that. As an example, when she is with some friends, I look at the profile out of curiosity. If they are brands, I wonder why is the brand tagged there, if they are sponsoring or making something with her. This is mostly because I am studying marketing, so the brands part really interests me."*

### **Relatability to Lil Miquela**

In this section, the authors want to study whether the followers relate themselves with Lil Miquela and wish to be her.

### **Community Seekers**

All the Community Seekers feel that they can relate to Lil Miquela and wished they had a similar life as she does. They state that:

Interviewee 15: *"Sometimes and most of the time I just wish I was her lol, I've always wanted to be an influencer or a celebrity." and "they may be infinitely inspiring and always working on their goals so that we may follow them and also follow our goals in life."*

Interviewee 17: *"I had my dreams lol most definitely! But I'm ok with the life that i live! As long as I have access to music I'm ok! Music is what shaped my life, did have those talents and famous dreams but I'm grateful for what I have now:)" and "she blows my mind (...) I'm so jealous!"*

Interviewee 9: *"Yeah, to some extent I do, but she says she is always going to be 19 years old. I'm 23 now, and I'm not going to have the mentality of a 19-year-old forever. I do agree that we all need people around us who care about us, but most of her concepts is really for teenagers, at least for now. Think about it, if she's stuck at one age for the rest of her life, or till she dies, she still going to have to mature emotionally and mentally because of her life experiences"*

### **Technological Admirers**

The entire group feel that cannot relate to Lil Miquela, with the arguments that:

Interviewee 3: *"I don't feel that I know her. I can't establish that link with her precisely because she's a robot or a computer designer."*

Interviewee 22: *"No - when reading her posts I am rather trying to imagine the person / agency who created her and what's the purpose of this post / project in general. Somehow I can't accept her as a "real person" - always think about what's behind all this."*

Nevertheless, still, 33% of the target group considers having some common threats with her.

Interviewee 6: *"Yeah, I do understand her and I guess share the same motives as her character in a way...We're both artists and we both want to create safe space for our supporters and listeners."*

## **Virtual Social Media Influencers as a Future Trend**

### **All the target groups**

With this section, the authors intend to show the opinion of the followers about the phenomena of Virtual SMIs. One common factor among the followers of Lil Miquela is that everyone believes that in the future, there will be more Virtual Social Media Influencers. Below, some statements about this trend:

Interviewee 1: *"Yes, i think in the future we will not care if people are real or not"*

Interviewee 11: *"I believe so, at least in the near future yes, I don't know about long term. They will need to get a better quality/definition characters, they will need to fit in the different generations... but yes, I believe that they will have a bright future. Now that we are all inside home. If, in the future there will be even more limitations to be social, we will need to be even more connected to the technologies, and these characters can play an important role on fulfilling this social need, as humans get sick, old. These characters don't, they will always be there."*

Interviewee 18: *"I just followed her bc it's so interesting how far our technology has come and I think she is so interesting bc she looks so real and the fact that she can understand humans is insane"*

Interviewee 4: *"I'm sure that the creator imagined a lot of possibilities that a virtual influencer can do."*

## **Market Behaviour measures**

### **Market-related**

The last dimension to measure brand equity is the market share of Lil Miquela in the world of Virtual Social Media influencers. According to HypeAuditor, the Instagram account LilMiquela ranks the number #1 in the "Top 30 Virtual Influencers List", being, therefore, the most popular VSMI in the world, with 2.2m followers.

## **Findings Summary**

To access the value of Lil Miquela as a human brand, the following dimensions were measured for the two distinct target groups - the Community Seekers, which accounted for around 22% of the interviewed participants and the Technological Admirers, who accounted for the rest 78% (*Appendix 5- Findings percentage*). Community Seekers are the consumer group that found Lil Miquela being an understanding, attractive and honest character. They were admiring her ability to connect with her following even though she was not a real human. Technological Admirers were a more sceptical consumer segment that displayed a cautious curiosity and less excitement and engagement. These were the participants who are following along the new marketing trend of virtual influencers for work or study-related purposes.

The authors started to identify the achievement of Brand Salience. This element was measured by finding whether the participants immediately understood that Lil Miquela was not a real person. Most of the answers were positive, which means that the Brand Salience - the nature of the brand is achieved.

The second measured factor was the Brand Meaning, identified through assessing how the followers found the Instagram account of Lil Miquela and the first impression they had when looking at her Instagram profile. It was agreed among most of the participants that Lil Miquela's Instagram page was beautiful the first time they saw it, and interesting to follow.

Therefore, the Brand Meaning was achieved by both segments.

Thirdly, the Brand Loyalty dimension was determined through understanding whether the follower had recommended or talked about Lil Miquela's profile to others. The results showed that 90% of the Community Seekers have recommended or talked about Lil Miquela. In comparison, 80% of the Technology Admirers have only talked or recommended peers to follow Lil Miquela's account.

Hence, both target groups have increased Lil Miquela's word-of-mouth (WOM) by recommending or showing her account to others, is that Technology Admirers have done it to friends who are also interested in new technology trends.

The fourth brand equity measured element was Perceived Quality. According to Aaker (1996), this dimension is quantified by comparing the brand to its competitors. The authors considered regular human influencers as direct competitors of Lil Miquela, since they all operate on the same social media platforms.

Results show that the Community Seekers perceive Lil Miquela as being either equal or better than real SMIs. 75% of this target group also follows other VSIMIs, namely Bermuda Bae, due to the genuine interest in Lil Miquela's life. These followers want to be aware of everything and everyone Lil Miquela connects with. Thus, this target group perceives Lil Miquela as a market leader with growing popularity.

Most Technological Admirers believe that Lil Miquela behaves just like normal real SMIs. However, around 40% of this target group states that Lil Miquela is less genuine than a real SMI, as she uses artificial intelligence or someone is giving her a voice and life.

75% of these followers are only following one VSMI - Lil Miquela, as they believe that "one is enough" to satisfy their curiosity. They also believe that the other virtual social media accounts are very similar but have lower execution quality and are less popular.

Therefore, this target group is divided between followers who believe that Lil Miquela is just like any other SMI, and followers who believe that she cannot be considered as an SMI, but rather as a technological phenomenon.

The fifth dimension is Brand Associations. The authors have chosen to measure Lil Miquela as a brand personality, measuring the perceived authenticity and honesty, attractiveness, and support of the same values and causes of herself.

The target group Community Seekers perceive Lil Miquela as authentic and honest as she can be, they believe she is beautiful and has a cool style, and mostly support the same values and causes as she does. Thus, Lil Miquela scores high regarding brand associations to the Community Seekers.

Technological Admirers are not linear. The majority does not perceive her as being authentic and honest, for the fact that she is not a real human and is controlled by a third party. Most find her attractive and with a cool style, and only 60% support the same values as she does. The remaining 40% do not know which values and causes she supports, or simply do not care about them. Weighting all the variables equally, this target group has poor brand associations to Lil Miquela as a brand personality.

Following was the sixth brand equity dimension measured -Brand Awareness. Because the interviews were conducted to already existing followers of this account, the authors assume that they already have a high awareness of the human brand. Them being either in the stage of brand knowledge or in the phase of having an opinion about Lil Miquela. The distinction was made considering whether the followers already knew that Lil Miquela was a singer. Moreover, it is measured through the relatability, her engagement to her followers and over considering if VSMTs is a future trend.

Results show that all the Community Seekers enjoy her songs, interact with her posts, either commenting under their pictures or sending her messages. The entire community can somehow relate to her and wished to have a similar life as she appears to have.

This target group has a clear and very positive opinion about Lil Miquela.

On the other hand, only 64% of the Technological Admirers are aware that she is a singer but do not listen to her songs, and 36% of them did not know that she was a singer. This group does not engage with her posts (commenting or sending her direct messages), and only 60% click on the brands that Lil Miquela tags in her posts, for the reason that these individuals are interested in knowing the marketing strategies of the brands that sponsor Lil Miquela. Finally, around 70% cannot relate to Lil Miquela.

Therefore, the target group Technological Admirers have brand knowledge about Lil Miquela, but not a solid opinion about her, as they are not interested in knowing more.

The last brand equity category is Market Behavior measures, which show that Lil Miquela is the most influential and popular VSMT in the world (HypeAuditor, 2019).

The authors can conclude that the brand equity of the Community Seekers' target group is very positive, as they have scored high in every category. They represent 20% of the followers and are the loyal and most valuable segment that the brand needs to maintain and ideally increase.

The second target group, Technological Admirers, are not so loyal to Lil Miquela. They do not engage with her posts, and when they want to click on the tagged brands is purely work interest. Most do not perceive her as being honest and authentic because of her attitudes, photographs, and comments are all generated by someone else. Furthermore, these threats are key to being perceived as good SMI. Their main motivation to follow Lil Miquela is due to technological interest, and most of them cannot relate to Lil Miquela as a human or character.

Hence, this target group is not loyal to Lil Miquela, but also does not follow any other VSMI, as they claim that one is enough to satisfy the curiosity about this new trend. Therefore, if an element of this group finds another VSMI that is more similar to them, the change for the relatable one is very likely.

Another downside can be that Lil Miquela is one of the first VSMI that have appeared in the market. When the novelty factor vanishes, the Technological Admirers can lose the interest in following Lil Miquela, as she does not represent much meaning for them.

Concluding, with the possible decrease of the Technological Admirers target group over the years, the producers of Lil Miquela should bet on increasing the first target group: Community Seekers through engaging even more with these individuals and continuing producing music and history for Lil Miquela's character. This will keep the followers interested in knowing more about her life, and creating an even stronger relationship with Lil Miquela.

## **Discussions and Conclusions**

### **Discussion**

The following paragraph will be divided into two parts - theoretical contribution to the existing literature and managerial implications for the marketers worldwide to get a better understanding of the world of digital influencers.

This chapter will provide some more insight into types of consumers who are interested in following virtual influencers and how brands can utilize this information for their benefit. Managerial implications will be discussed from a few perspectives - managers and brands who are thinking of creating a virtual social media influencer, the ones who already have one, and the ones who are thinking of collaborating with one.

Finally, future research possibilities will be debated in terms of the rising popularity of virtual social media influencers and their market demand.

### **Theoretical contribution**

The goal of this study was to provide advancement to the research of Brand Equity and its relation to Virtual human brands and to determine what type of consumer would be interested in following a virtual social media influencer and what their motivations could be. The aim of this study was to shed some light on the world of virtual influencer brands by answering the following research questions:

***RQ1: What type of customers engage with a virtual influencer?***

***RQ2: What is the virtual influencers' perceived value (brand equity) as human brands?***

In the first part of the theoretical contribution, findings were summarized to get an overview of the results and how this would answer the research gaps defined in the literature review. In the second part, the authors presented how this knowledge could contribute to the existing literature. The gaps in the literature were filled by writing an exploratory research study, based on primary data collection via interviews and complemented by secondary data collected online.

The results of the research have provided insights into the type of consumer that engages with a virtual human brand. Specified in the findings section, the researchers have distinguished two main consumer target groups - Community Seekers and Technological Admirers (see findings, page nr.). When it comes to consumer motivations to follow, the



study has shown that they can be categorized into these categories - curiosity, intrigue, love, musical admiration, and work-related interest. The researchers have further identified human-like connection and the aspect of realism as contributing factors to the interest to follow. Combining these answers, it is clear that some of the consumers are indifferent to the fact that Lil Miquela is, in fact, not a real human. The majority of the answers revealed that people could feel and form connections with virtual influencers just as well as with the real ones. It all comes down to feeling love or admiration towards their personality and ability to make their audience feel the sense of community.

Connecting the findings to the already existing literature, the authors could establish a link between the main followers' motivations to follow Lil Miquela tied to the satisfaction of some needs presented in the Maslow's hierarchy of needs through hedonic consumption of the human brand Lil Miquela.

The main motivations for Community Seekers to follow a VSMI are love, musical admiration, and some curiosity. The human brand Lil Miquela is able to satisfy these needs, which represent the third layer of Maslow's pyramid of needs - the social needs. This target group can relate to the VSMI, finds her cute, funny, honest and relatable and loves her music. Moreover, as Deci and Ryan (2000) refer, these followers are experiencing Relatedness, which creates a feeling of belonging, closeness and connectedness with the consumers (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The target group Technological admirers have different motivations to follow a VSMI, which are mainly curiosity, due to believing this is an interesting project and creation, intrigue, these followers present mixed feeling about this new trend - in one hand they believe it is the future and they want to be aware of how will this develop, but on the other hand they are sceptical and scared regarding the substitution of human SMI. Another big driver for the Technological admirers to follow Lil Miquela is due to her music (see appendix...). This target group follows VSMI mainly due to the last step on the Maslow's pyramid of needs - the self-actualization. Their motives show that Lil Miquela, as a human brand, provides creativity for the area of expertise of most of these followers and leisure purposes. The trait that is most valuable to Technological admirers is competence, which refers to one's sense of skill, effectiveness and accomplishment, this competence is based on

social standards, such as success, influence, achievements and capability. (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The second part of the theoretical contribution will focus on how the findings of this research study will add on to the existing literature about social media influencers and building a brand's equity. This researched question provided some insight into Miquela's perceived brand quality as a human brand. Some elements of Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity pyramid, together with Aaker's brand equity model, were used to determine the level of a brand's equity of a virtual social media influencer - Lil Miquela.

The overall brand equity of Lil Miquela has shown to be positive for both target groups interviewed. There was a positive concordance in regards to the three first dimensions measured: Brand Salience, Brand meaning and Brand loyalty. Her followers immediately understood that Lil Miquela was not a real human, found her profile appealing and attractive due to the variety of pictures she posts, different people that she poses with, and the good quality of them. Finally, the majority of the followers have talked about Lil Miquela to some peers, increasing Lil Miquela's brand loyalty.

However, some dimensions of Aaker's brand equity model were not agreed upon by both target groups of followers. The Perceived Quality of Miquela's brand was measured when using Aaker's model and directly comparing her to a regular human influencer. Community seekers claimed that the virtual influencer Lil Miquela in their eyes, is perceived just as exciting and genuine or even more so than a human influencer. An interesting fact that 75% of them also follow Bermuda Bae, which is Lil Miquela's online friend, created by the same agency and therefore living in the same universe. This shows that this type of consumer is interested in following up with all aspects of Miquela's life, even from other accounts' perspective. However, Technological admirers were more skeptical - only 18% believed that she was better than a real-life influencer - in the sense that she was more mysterious and would leave one wondering about her true identity. 36% perceived her as being similar to a real human being, the only difference being her computer-generated imagery face. Lastly, and more importantly, 36% of this consumer group perceive her being less genuine, since, as they understand, there is someone else behind the account programming and managing her every move. Therefore, this group perceives her as not being as authentic as a real SMI, which is a necessary trait of a successful influencer.

Again, brand associations, when considering Lil Miquela as a brand personality, scored very high in the Community seekers who perceive her as being honest, attractive and support the same causes as she does. Contrary, Technological admirers do not perceive her as being authentic and honest, for the fact that a third party controls her. The last dimension where the brand equity of Lil Miquela is not positive for both of her main target groups is brand awareness. Community Seekers are a fan of her music, interact with her, can relate to her, and even wished to be her. Opposed, most of the Technological admirers cannot relate to her, barely know her songs, and are more cautious when it comes to interaction, as they perceive this virtual influencer as a constructed entity and not as someone "real." Hence, they are skeptical about reaching out. Moreover, engagement is a vital quality for social media influencers to have, since the engagement rates are a good measure to have in order to get a paid brand deal or promotion.

All in all, when asked whether or not all the consumer groups consider the virtual SMIs being a future trend, they all agreed. An interesting observation was that some of the participants were guessing that in the future, people will not be thinking about whether or not the character is real. It all comes down to the way they engage and can keep the audience interest.

To conclude, the brand equity of a virtual human brand is overall positive, considering all the dimensions equally. For the Community Seekers, which represents approximately 20% of her followers, Lil Miquela has exceptionally high brand equity, scoring maximum in all the dimensions.

For the Technological admirers, which represents around 80% of her total followers, Lil Miquela has medium-high brand equity, scoring very high in 3 of the more basic dimensions, and not so high in the last three elements - perceived quality, brand associations, and brand awareness.

## **Managerial implications**

The findings of this study are relevant for both brand managers who are thinking of creating or managing a virtual SMI and the ones who are brand representatives and consider a collaboration with VSMI creators.

## **Brand Persona creation**

In the beginning of the reviewing literature for this study, the authors have encountered several brands who are either working with virtual social media influencers or employing them in their campaigns. These are the brands such as Calvin Klein or Balmain, who have previously hired virtual models to advertise their products both in picture and video campaigns. A brand like Essence (a German based beauty and make up brand) went one step further and created their own virtual "intern", that was featured frequently on their Instagram account, as well as the food chain KFC, which personified their founder "Colonel Sanders" in an attractive, young virtual men.

It is yet to be discovered why brands are entering the digital world, by creating or employing these virtual robots, however, the findings of this study could help them determine the drivers behind growing interest towards virtual SMIs, which in return could help brands to utilize this part of influencer marketing. From what the authors have discovered during the primary and secondary data collection, some brands use these virtual models to create a level of intrigue and curiosity between their followers, and make a statement about their values regarding innovativeness, courage and boldness.

Some of the brands with the resources available could use this opportunity to create a similar virtual brand ambassador, which would act as a brand representative on social media platforms. This type of character would represent a set of brand's values and ideas, presented in a form of an engaging and interactive avatar, which would be posting pictures featuring the brand's production, interact with its target audience and even act as brand community mediator, who would listen to complaints and compliments. The brand persona could be seen as a trustworthy outlet for your audience to reach out and get in contact with, especially if this character would have their own likable personality. Brands could use the

data of the comments that would be directed towards this persona and access a deeper brand meaning and understanding from their consumer perspective.

### **Creating an authentic world for the virtual SMI**

The brands who already have a virtual brand persona could use the findings of this study to draw some guidelines on how to present their already existing character in a way that would gain the most traction and would help to build their brand equity. The findings about Lil Miquela have presented the main values that consumers are looking for when deciding to follow a virtual influencer. These have to be attractive, active on their social networks and be as engaging with their followers as possible.

### **Collaborating with a virtual brand persona**

Collaborating with a virtual social media influencer can bring the brand both positive and negative attention. Starting with the positive - it creates a spark of interest and intrigue. The brand appears to be thinking forward and in line with the futuristic market trends. Virtual influencers being a highly debatable topic might get more brand mentions and profile visits, since the consumers are used to sharing the "news" with their peers. Hiring virtual influencers will also decrease the overall advertising costs and be an environmentally friendly option - the brand does not have to hire and fly a model and the entire crew to the shooting location, all they have to do is hire one skilled graphic designer. However, the virtual SMIs and the use of their image can also be welcomed with a level of mistrust. Virtual personalities are still a relatively new topic, which leads to some of the consumers feeling sceptical. Some consumers might feel like their beloved brand is lying to them or trying to trick them into believing that these persona's exist in real life. Another downside of collaborating with the digital influencers is that they often appear just a little bit too perfect. Looking into Lil Miquela, Bermuda Bae and Shudu - South African digital supermodel, it is clear that the agencies behind tried to create attractive and stylish female characters, that the majority of their followers can not relate to. These digital influencers have to be human-like and have human-like issues, otherwise the audience might be getting annoyed by the

perfection and lack of diversity. Robots do not seem to ever have a "bad hair day" or get wrinkles, which is very human and helps with the brand-consumer authenticity aspect. Lastly, some consumers might be against seeing virtual SMIs in brand advertisement, as they believe brands should support real human models and influencers. Not only real human models promote a healthier body image, but their employment also stimulates the economy.

## **Limitations**

The following chapter will explain some of the limitations that were met during the research phases of this study. The main reasons defining this were the exploratory research design. This research design allows the researchers to explore the phenomena that is currently being widely discussed; however, it does not require to present any conclusive findings, first just a possible explanation to it. Moreover, the semi-structured interview guide allows the researchers to discuss the phenomenon a bit deeper. However, the data collection using a social media platform poses some restrictions for getting all the data necessary. Finally, there are limitations to the research design using a single case study.

## **Sampling**

Sampling specifics were one of the first limitations the researchers have encountered in the data collection process. Due to the previously mentioned social media platform Instagram rules and regulations, some of the participants did not see the invitation to be interviewed or could not even be contacted. Sampling has been limited to one social media platform, which has contributed to the fact that the research study finding could not be generalizable. The choice of the platform is defended in the Data Sources chapter; however, the fact that Instagram is mainly used by two younger generations (millennials and Gen Zs) did prevent the study from getting a well rounded sample frame that could have resulted to the different type of knowledge.

## **Interviewing process**

The interviewing process took place online, which meant that the researchers had to follow the specifics of the Instagram platform communication guidelines. The interview conductors could not reach out to every one, since some followers have private accounts, meaning they are not able to see the messages, or in some cases, the authors could not message them.

Most of the interviews were conducted through single messages correspondence online, meaning that the majority of the participants did not agree to meet with the interviewers face-to-face through the platform of Skype. Therefore, the research had to rely on followers who made a reply and those who had the time and will to follow through. Since the interviewing process was quite long, there were some cases where the participants lost the interest to continue.

For further research, the authors should conduct a face-to-face interview with a higher number of followers in order to obtain less structured and more complete answers.

## **Brand Equity**

The Brand Equity model by Aaker (1996) also presents some limitations and problems when applied to the findings. When measuring the dimensions of loyalty and satisfaction towards the brand, the participants of the interviews are already customers (followers); therefore, the result is biased as it only measures the customer base. Further research could consider how good is the loyal segment versus the non-loyal segment, which would be followers of other Virtual SMIs or the Instagram users who do not follow any Virtual SMI and would be presented to one.

The perceived quality and awareness dimensions also present a challenge as it involves a competitor frame of reference. Some participants did not know about the existence of other Virtual SMI. Therefore the comparison could not be made. As Aaker

(1996) suggests, it would be useful to monitor the perceived quality by the loyalty segment in further research.

### **Limited literature resources**

The literature regarding virtual social media influencers is minimal when it comes to academic peer-reviewed articles. The phenomena or A.I. marketing still exists mainly in the discussion stage, which is a popular research topic for various branding and marketing online journals that cannot be considered academic literature sources. Further researchers could avail of this thesis and construct a theory based on the findings.

### **Single case study**

By definition, it is an in-depth inquiry into a topic or phenomenon within its real-life setting (Yin 2014). This method of research is criticized by Flyveberg (2011) for the lack of ability to produce generalizable, reliable, and theoretical contributions to knowledge. The results are biased as the participants are very knowledgeable about the brand. Therefore, conducting a multiple case study could be a solution for the future, as the researchers would be able to conduct a literal replication where the findings could be repeated for multiple cases, multiple Virtual Social Media Influencers, to confirm if the findings are only true to Lil Miquela or the entire industry (Yin, 2014; Sauders et al., 2016).

### **Lil Miquela**

Lil Miquela is just like any other Social Media Influencer. She is sponsored by various brands, has her own personality, and has friends and a life. The limitation is that the authors intend to study this Instagram page as a human brand, and Lil Miquela collaborates with various brands and pages.



Brands such as Magazine Luisa (<https://www.magazineluiza.com.br>) and Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) have virtually personified their brand personas, called Magalu and Colonel Sanders. These virtual influencers are a great example of what brands can create as a marketing strategy.

The authors have not chosen as a single case study, one of these two characters, because they do not have their own Instagram pages. Instead, they are incorporated in the brand's page and only appear in some posts. They also do not show a life-style and do not have any autonomy or personality as Lil Miquela has, hence, not being perceived as individuals themselves, only as a character in a brand's page. A good topic for further research could be to understand how people perceive the personality traits of these characters to see if they match the brand's threats. Results could show that creating a brand persona profile is a useful tool to increase the awareness of a brand.

## Conclusions

To conclude, the authors have created a visual summary of the study at hand, followed by the most relevant findings conclusions and their managerial implications.

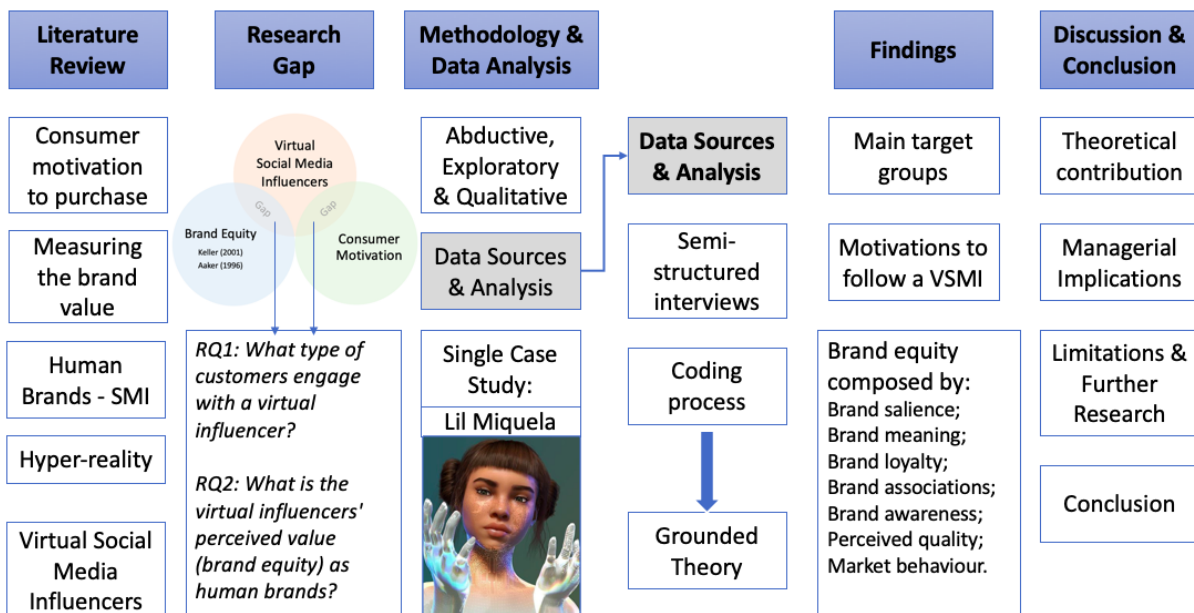


Figure 12 - Visual conclusion summary

Due to the gap in the already existing literature regarding the main motivations to follow a Virtual Social Media Influencer and their brand equity value as a human brand, the present study had the aim to answers to the following research questions:

***RQ1: What type of customers engage with a virtual influencer?***

***RQ2: What is the virtual influencers' perceived value (brand equity) as human brands?***

Based on the results provided by the single-case study of Lil Miquela, the authors could take a deeper insight into what types of consumers would be interested in following a virtual account. These would-be consumers with either a general need for finding their community, where they would feel safe and appreciated, either that being because they can relate with Lil Miquela or feel a certain admiration towards her personality. Another major consumer group would be technologically driven followers, who either follow her because they would like to work with something similar themselves, see the potential in this kind of digital art, or are simply interested in influencer marketing due to school or work. After determining the type of consumer, the researchers have later identified the main drivers behind consumer motivation to follow. These were a curiosity, intrigue, love, musical admiration, and work-related interest.

Additionally, during the interview process, the interview conductors discovered another two motivating factors, which were not mentioned frequently during our primary data collection. However, they were apparent when analyzing the comment section of Lil Miquela's social media platforms. These were a sense of realism and human-like connection. In the comment section under one of her interviews with Zach Sang Show, (a popular Youtube channel with over 400k subscribers), the commentators mentioned that her mannerism and the way she talks has a distinct human-like quality and that she resembles a real human influencer with her unique personality.

Regarding the value of this Virtual SMI as a human brand, the brand salience, meaning, loyalty, perceived quality, brand associations, awareness, and market behavior were identified and equally weighted in order to give a perception of the value of Lil Miquela.

These dimensions were measured for the two main target groups of followers: the Community Seekers and the Technological Admirers.

The results show that the community seekers score high in every possible dimension; therefore, they are a valuable and loyal target group that the brand should maintain and increase, as they represent only around 20% of the total followers' group.

The second target group, the bigger one - Technological admirers are not so loyal to Lil Miquela. They do not engage with her in a significant way, and most do not perceive her as a real, genuine person, which is a critical factor in creating an influencer. Their main motivation to follow this account is purely curiosity towards this technological trend, and most of them cannot relate to Lil Miquela.

This target group is a risky one as if there is another Virtual SMI that they can relate more to, the change for the relatable one will be instantaneous. Another problem can be that if more time passes, the novelty of the trend vanishes, and their motivation to follow also decreases, possibly leading to a decrescent curve of followers along the years passed.

Therefore, with the possible decrease of the technological admirers, Lil Miquela and her producers need to focus on increasing the community seeker followers. Nevertheless, future researches are needed in order to verify this data based on a small sample and achieve a higher degree of detail and generalisability.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1 – personal conversations between Lil Miquela and a follower

Direct and personal conversation between Lil Miquela and Interviewee nr. 10.



## Appendix 2 – Sample of the primary data collection

Sample frame for the primary data collection:

Veran_kapahang	Q Female	Q 14-16	Q < 1 week	Q Indonesia
sophie_wheeler01	Q Female	Q 14-16	Q Unassigned	Q Unassigned
Kennedy	Q Female	Q 14-16	Q 1 month -...	Q USA
yoonicole_93	Q Female	Q 14-16	Q Unassigned	Q Philippines
sadaxxidk	Q Male	Q 14-16	Q Unassigned	Q Spain
imthejourney	Q Male	Q 14-16	Q 1 week - 1...	Q South Africa
galangm	Q Female	Q 14-16	Q Unassigned	Q Philippines
Summer.pahl - u...	Q Female	Q 17-19	Q Unassigned	Q USA
Sirk_17 interview	Q Male	Q 20-22	Q 3 month -...	Q USA
andru_gogh	Q Male	Q 20-22	Q Unassigned	Q México
jacob_herta	Q Male	Q 20-22	Q + 1 year	Q Unassigned
Rodrigo Sanches...	Q Male	Q 20-22	Q + 1 year	Q Portugal
reicen	Q Male	Q 23-25	Q 1 week - 1...	Q México
Hen_ry7	Q Male	Q 23-25	Q 1 month -...	Q Brazil
Shashank_chung...	Q Male	Q 23-25	Q < 1 week	Q India
Diogo Rodrigues...	Q Male	Q 23-25	Q 3 month -...	Q Portugal
Maria Silva (Skyp...	Q Female	Q 23-25	Q + 1 year	Q Portugal
Kadianne.Monroe	Q Female	Q 23-25	Q 1 month -...	Q Jamaica
Yori-photo	Q Female	Q 28-30	Q 6 month -...	Q Lithuania
masterofshapes	Q Male	Q 30-35	Q < 1 week	Q USA
elisajacomassi	Q Female	Q 30-35	Q 1 month -...	Q Brazil
ink.lorenzo	Q Male	Q 40-45	Q < 1 week	Q Italy

14-16 group 7/22 31,8%

17-19 group 1/22 4,5%

20-22 group 4/22 18,1%

23-25 group 6/22 27,2%

28-30 group 1/22 4,5%

30-35 group 2/22 9%

40-45 group 1/22 4,5%

Under 25 - Gen Z 18/22 app.81.8%

### Appendix 3 -Text analysis

Analyzing the Instagram comment section grouped by the basic human emotions:  
The analysis was conducted in the course of 3 days, reading the comments of her newest 20 posts.

#### Disgust

 **wrls.fatmanur** not beautiful  
2d 2 likes Reply

wrls.fatmanur said: “not beautiful”


#### Anger


 **ah.taber** Why does a robot get to be skinnier than me  
16h 2 likes Reply


Ah.taber said: “Why does a robot get to be skinnier than me”


#### Fear (decided to change to confusion)

 **samalex** you're getting slowly realistic....girl are u gonna be human someday?  
16m 1 like Reply

 **mo\_sarim\_** Why you look like artificial 😞  
15m Reply

 **dagkardeln** Robot or human ?  
1w Reply

 **lovelyhopefor1** The character they give you when you join a game  
1w Reply

 **lovelyhopefor1** Like how can a human be this perfect  
1w Reply

— View replies (1)



**mahdi20191380** Omg is she really a robot? 🤖

2w Reply



**eemiiraaa** prettiest robot 🥰🥰

2w Reply



**jujug827** Is it a person or a doll?

2w Reply



**ellixiia** YOU ARE ALWAYS SPONSORED CAN U NOT IM NOT INTERESTED AHHHHG HDHDJAJVAHAN ROBOT-

4w 1 like Reply



**hayirpervolleyikandi** you lack intelligence

5w Reply





Comments



armys\_4\_life\_angel 💜💜 5d 1 like Reply

lilmiquela @armys\_4\_life\_ 💜💜 4d 1 like Reply

angel\_arce16 Love you 😍 5d 1 like Reply

lilmiquela @angel\_arce16 💜💜 4d 1 like Reply

\_meu\_amor\_now\_united I love you 5d Reply

lilmiquela @\_meu\_amor\_now\_united ily too!! 4d Reply

— View more replies (1)

ojedavazquezf Precious 😍 5d Reply

lilmiquela @ojedavazquezf you are!!



sukma\_arum03 Are you a robot in the form of a doll ??? 1w Reply

namjoon\_cheto YOU ARE A ROBOOOT! ❤️ 5w Reply



**joelirose** I want that top your wearing!! Where is it from?? 💕💕



5d 1 like Reply



**bipolar.panda** Ouch... Why so flat



2w 1 like Reply



**shawnrocha** Kiiiiiiii yourself



2w 1 like Reply



**gaozhanrafif\_alvaro** 🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢



3w Reply



**meriss.privv** @ayan123.priv



3w Reply



**ichbinahmet\_Shit**



3w Reply



**peachyyem** do robots need to social distance ?



5w Reply



**maricruz.11** Here I am following a robot in love and dealing with a break up in this pandemic world




5w 5 likes Reply




**vamps\_maggie\_** Are you a human?? You look so beautiful 💕💕💕, the most prettiest face in the world 😍😍




4w Reply

 **destiamhrn.9** are u humann? ♥  
5d Reply

 **lilmiquela**  @destiamhrn.9  ♥  
4d Reply


 **thatonelibra\_** I'm super confused ♥  
5w Reply

samalexcx said: "you're getting slowly realistic...girl are you gonna be human someday?"  
Mo\_sarim\_ said: "Why you look like artificial" (confused face emoticon)

 **deedeejulien561** Are you even a person ♥  
4d 6 likes Reply



 **lilmiquela**  @deedeejulien561  ♥  
4d Reply

deedeejulien561 said: "Are you even a person"

 **brianna.kesslick** i'm still so confused ♥  
3m Reply

lilmiquela replied: "(robot emoticon)"


brianna.kesslick said: "I'm still so confused"

 **baybearia\_** I'm so confused  ♥  
6d 12 likes Reply

 **phume2000** idk wtf is even going on like WHAT?¿ can someone help me cuz this is getting me frustrated WTF ♥  
2d 6 likes Reply

bayberia\_ said: "I'm so confused" (crying face emoticon)

phume2000 said: "idk wtf is even going on like WHAT? Can someone help me cuz this is getting me frustrated WTF"

 **ramossoleil** Are you a robot ? ♥  
5d Reply


 **lilmiquela**  @ramossoleil  ♥  
4d 1 like Reply

— View more replies (1)

ramossoleil said: "Are you a robot?"

lilmiquela said: "(robot emoticon)"





 **tay10r\_h** Just saying the hand thats holding that bottle sure aint yours so please spill the tea already   
3w 1 like Reply



tay10r\_h said: “Just saying the hand thats holding that bottle sure aint your so please spill the tea already”

 **rebecca\_anna12** What's with your face ...are you human or some cartoon ??? I am so confused   
15h Reply  
[View replies \(1\)](#)

rebecca\_anna12 said: “What’s with your face...are you human or some cartoon??? I am so confused

 **marcos\_v\_real** hello are you A.I?   
14h Reply


Marcos\_v\_real said: “hello are you A.I.?”

 **kenzy.mohamed71** Are you a robot, please a answer me 🙄❤️   
15h Reply

Kenzy.mohamed71 said: “Are you a robot, please answer me (sad face emoticon, heart emoticon)”



 **ajandfriendsuwu** I just started listening to your music! It's beautiful 💕 And I wanna know If your a robot or a actual person? Not that I'm being rude.   
16h Reply

Ajandfriendsuwu said: “I just started listening to your music! It’s beautiful (heart emoticon). And I wanna know if your a robot or an actual person? Not that I’m being rude.”

 **losersunflower** i dont understand why you're pretending to be a robot   
13h Reply

Losersunflower said: “I don’t understand why you’re pretending to be a robot”

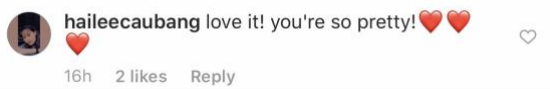
### **Happiness (decided to change to love/admiration)**

 **bebekrewell** Dont believe you but i love you 🥰🔥   
11m Reply

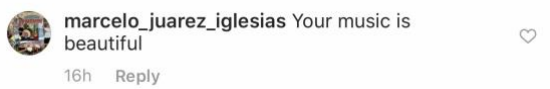
bebekrewell said: “Don’t believe you but I love you” (fire emoticon, hearty eyes emoticon)



kennedy\_f\_simcox said: “You make my day better! ILY (I love you)”

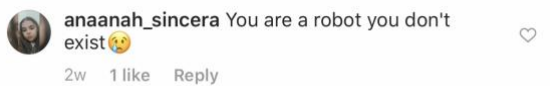


hailecaubang said: “Love it! You’re so pretty! (Heart shaped emoticon)”



Marcelo\_juarez\_iglesias said: “Your music is beautiful”

### Sadness

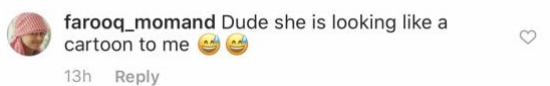


Anaanah\_sincera “You are a robot you don’t exist” (sad face emoticon)

### Surprise



Zari.persiangular said: “You were in team Galaxy, what’s the deal with the iPhone??”



Farooq\_momand said: “Dude she is looking like a cartoon to me (laughing face emoticon)

Oof\_its\_oscar said: “So if you’re a robot do

you actually have feelings?”

## Appendix 4 – Target distribution group

### Target group distribution

Two biggest consumer groups would be:

Community seekers 22%

Technology enthusiasts 78%

<b>Community seekers</b>	<b>Technological admirers</b>
Interviewee nr.17	Interviewee nr.12
Interviewee nr.10	Interviewee nr.18
Interviewee nr.9	Interviewee nr.1
Interviewee nr.15	Interviewee nr.14
Interviewee nr.20	Interviewee nr.6
	Interviewee nr.7
	<b>Future potential</b>
	Interviewee nr.4
	Interviewee nr.13
	Interviewee nr.21
	Interviewee nr.8
	Interviewee nr.16
	Interviewee nr.5
	<b>Professional interests:</b>
	Interviewee nr.22
	Interviewee nr.2

	Interviewee nr.11
	Interviewee nr.3
	Interviewee nr.19

## Appendix 5 – Findings percentage

Findings regarding the interviews results:

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Opinions	Community Seekers		Technological Admirers	
			Number	Total percentage	Number	Total percentage
Customer Motivations	Curiosity	Interesting project	1	11%	6	32%
	Intrigue	Also scary, weird creation	0	0%	4	21%
	Love	Relatable, honest, cute, funny	4	44%	0	0%
		Enjoy to see the pictures	1	11%	2	11%
	Music	Enjoy listening the music	3	33%	3	16%
Work related	Where will this trend go in the future	0	0%	4	21%	
Brand Salience	Did you immediately understand that she is not a real human?	Yes	4	100%	11	92%
		No	0	0%	1	8%
Brand Meaning	First impression when seeing her on Instagram	Very beautiful page	4	100%	11	100%
	How do you perceive her Instagram account?	Interesting to follow	4	100%	11	100%
Brand Loyalty	Have you recommend it to others?	I have recommended	3	38%	4	33%
		I have only talked about it	4	50%	6	50%
		I haven't talked or recommended	1	13%	2	17%

Perceived Quality	Compare Lil Miquela to real SMI	Comparable/equal	2	50%	5	42%
		Better than SMI	2	50%	2	17%
		Less genuine than SMI	0	0%	4	33%
		Entails more effort to be produced	0	0%	1	8%
	Do you follow any other VSMI?	Yes	3	75%	9	75%
	No	1	25%	3	25%	
Compare Lil Miquela to VSMI	Better than the others	4	100%	12	100%	
Brand Associations	Authenticity and honesty	Agree	4	100%	9	75%
		Do not agree	0	0%	3	25%
	Attractiveness	Agree	4	100%	10	77%
		Do not agree	0	0%	3	23%
	Same values and same causes	Support	3	75%	8	62%
Indiferent/Doesn't know		0	0%	5	38%	
Do not support		1	25%	0	0%	
Brand Awareness	Music - Lil Miquela as a singer	Enjoy it	3	100%	1	9%
		Just know	0	0%	7	64%
		Didn't know	0	0%	3	27%
	Engagement	Nothing or only like	0	0%	12	92%
		Comment	2	40%	1	8%
		Sends DMS	3	60%	0	0%
	Clicking in tagged brands/people	Click	5	100%	4	40%
		Don't click	0	0%	6	60%
	Relatability to Lil Miquela	Yes	4	100%	1	14%
		No	0	0%	6	86%
VSMI as a future trend	Yes	5	100%	10	100%	
	No	0	0%	0	0%	

## Appendix 6 – Interview Guide

### Interview guide

The Semi-structured interviews will be made to random followers of the Instagram account *Lil Miquela* - the most famous CGI virtual social media influencer. The interviews will be conducted through direct messaging, or ideally, through a face-to-face call on Instagram.

### Questionnaire guide:

Type of followers:

1. Introduce yourself
  - a. How old are you?
  - b. What is your job? In what area of expertise?
  - c. Life-style
2. Tell a bit about your day-to-day/interests.
  - . Are you interested in new technologies?
3. How did you find out about this account?
4. Are you aware that she is not a real human being?

Customer motivation

5. Why do you follow influencers?
6. Why did you follow Lil Miquela?
7. Hedonic reasons to learn about style, new techs,
8. Add with the literature research

Brand awareness:

9. Are you engaging/interacting with her content?
  - a. If so, why?
  - b. If not, why not?
10. Are you aware that she is making music?
  - . if yes, do you listen to her songs?
11. Compare her to other real influencers (that have around 2 millions followers)

Brand loyalty:

12. For how long have you been following her?
13. Do you follow any other “robots”/digital influencers?
  - a. If yes, what do you think makes her different/so popular on Instagram?
  - b. Do you think that we will see more of these accounts in the future?

Perceived quality:

14. Do you find her honest?
15. Do you find her attractive?
16. Do you find her style cool?
17. Do you feel like you share the same values as she does?
18. Do you support the same causes she does (like LGBT rights, Black lives matter)?
19. Do you believe she is living the life she says she is?
20. Would you like to be like her? (Having the life, the voice and the fame she has)
21. Do you feel like you really know and understand her?

Purchase intention:

22. Have you talked about her to your friends?
  - a. If so, why?
  - b. If not, why not ?
23. Would you suggest following her account to your friends?
24. When she tags someone or a brand in her posts, do you check the tagged account?

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Choice of method: Instagram DM or video if possible. Record it, transcript it to a Word document, put it to NVivo.

## Appendix 7 - Interview transcripts

### Interview with Interviewee nr.17

**IC.** Hey! I am writing to you, cause you are following @lilmiquela's account. I am writing a master thesis about her and I would love to interview you about why do you follow her. We could just chat here over Instagram and it would take around 15 minutes. Would you be interested in helping me out? This would be such a big help!

**S.** Of course!!!

**IC.** Oh really? Yayy

Do you have time now?

**S.** I do!

**IC.** Ah Perfect:)

Ok, so I'm going to be asking you some questions, just about Lil Miquela and a bit why you're following her, ok?

**S.** Sounds good!

**IC.** Will you start by introducing yourself super fast?:) like your age and where are you from? And maybe what are you doing in your everyday?

**S.** Well, my name is Keshawn Spinks, I'm 22yo and I'm from NY, adn everyday I'm either drawing, listening to music or playing video games lol

**IC.** Perfect! Are you a student?

**S.** Former student graduated in May 19, 2019

**IC.** Nice! And how did you find Miquela's account?

**S.** I actually saw a video on The React channel and the game was "Real or fake" and it featured Miquela and I was immediately interested lol

**IC.** Oh really? Cool! Would you say you're interested in the new technologies?

**S.** Most definitely!!!

**IC.** And just to be clear - you are aware, that she is not a real human being?

**S.** Oh I knew from the start haha but yes, I know she's not real

**IC.** Ok:) will you tell me in a few sentences why did you follow her?

**S.** Of course! After I saw that React video I went and looked her up and saw videos on YouTube and blogs she made, while being an AI...I thought it was so cool how she's



animated and was like a relatable robot, I started listening to her music and the first song was Money, and then came Wasted and Wasted is one of my favorite songs by her! Then I took to Instagram to see her on there and my love for her sparked there, knowing she's not real, she still left a mark on me. She's talented, she's amazing, she's cute and funny and it's amazing at what we can do in the world with technology

**IC.** Aw thank you for answering in such detail! I put on Wasted now, since I haven't heard that one before:)

Good! So, I actually found you, because you were commenting on her latest posts:) Why are you interested in engaging with her?

**S.** It's fun to engage with new and rising artists, I think it's the thought we know she's not real and to see that she responds to us is just exciting. She's commented on a couple of my posts plenty of times and it's fun to share the excitement with her directly. There's something about her that I'm mesmerized by and I can't seem to yet figure it out lol, she blows my mind! In a good way of course:)

**IC.** Oh did she? How cool!

Would you say it is more exciting to follow her than a real life human being influencer?

**S.** I don't want to sound biased, but yes in a way. The reason I say that is because if you follow a real life influencer you start to get bored with them cause yes they're real, but it'll be once in a blue moon where they actually post something or share something that grabs your attention. With Miquela...knowing she's not real...every time she posts a pic it's eye grabbing cause we look at different poses she does and we look at all the environments she's placed and we're like I wonder what the other people are seeing while she's having the picture taken you know?

**IC.** Totally understand what you mean! I always wonder if it's a human girl having her picture taken and then they blur her face/add Miquela's features or how does it even work...but all this sounds so good! So useful for my research. let me know, if you have somewhere else to be, but we're about halfway there.

**S.** No, I'm intrigued!! And yes, I even share with my friends like isn't she cool how she looks in all these photos?? They get so mind blown, haha

**IC.** Ah good! Ok, so for how long have you been following her?

**S.** Probably since December 15 to be exact (2019)

**IC.** Ok, and do you follow any other digital influencers?

**S.** Of course @bermuda haha but those two are pretty much the only two lol

**IC.** Haha, she is cute! But why do you think Miquela is more popular than her? \*has more followers

**S.** I feel it's because people can relate to her, yes it's weird seeing a "robot" have feelings but I feel when we are in tough situations and we're looking for a light we can find it anywhere and in anything...especially artificial intelligence social media influencers. I feel Miquela interacts more with her fan base tbh...and the more we see that we get that urge to reach out to her. And her voice is astounding, it's all about how she's not real, but have such a beautiful voice and a good amount of interaction time with her Miqualiens

**IC.** Thank you for such detailed answer! Do you think we will be seeing more accounts like that in the future?

**S.** I hope so tbh! The world is so advanced and we need to continue showing what talents we have within the technology field!

**IC.** I definitely agree! The next couple of questions can be just a short answer:)

**S.** Awesome!

**IC.** Do you find her honest?

**S.** Kinda lol, because she's not real we can't fully expect a truth but as far as her online persona...yes I do.

**IC.** Yes, exactly... it's a trick question. I think this one is clear, but just for the record - do you find her attractive?

**S.** Of course hahaha she's adorable!!

**IC.** Aww, I'm sure she would love to hear this! Ok, what about her style? Do you like it? Think it's cool?

**S.** Her style is so damn bomb!! Like I'm so jealous!! If I was a female robot i don't think I could pull that off haha! She always looks so good

**IC.** Agreed! Ok. Do you feel like you share the same values as her?

**S.** Yes!! Like I said with her online persona, she's looking to live a normal life, find true love and enjoy her love for making music.

**IC.** Perfect. Do you support the same causes she does? (LGBT rights being one for example)

**S.** I actually have a boyfriend named Jermey and we both support any cause! Love is love! You should be free to express your love for anyone!

**IC.** Aw yes, I agree!

Ok, here comes a bit of a tricky question, but we're almost there. Do you believe she is living the life she says she lives? (Like going to a fashion show, where she posts something from it)

**S.** Oh yes! What makes me think of that is the person we supposedly sings as Miquela is actually going to these places! The only thing not real is her face. Think of Marshmello for example, we don't know what he looks like cause he wears a mask wherever he goes. Think of that with Miquela the person is real and her face is only a 3D designed face to hide her identity.

**IC.** Right? I always think if the person, who's voice they are using doesn't mind that they could be getting famous, but instead they are sort of giving their talent away...

**S.** Exactly!! love this conversation

**IC.** I'm so happy to hear that, this is helping me heaps with my research!

So, would you say that you would like to be like her in a way? Have her voice/talent/fame?

**S.** I had my dreams lol most definitely! But I'm ok with the life that i live! As long as I have access to music I'm ok! Music is what shaped my life, did have those talent and famous dreams but I'm grateful for what I have now:)

**IC.** I definitely agree:) We should be grateful for what we have. Would you say that from what you see online, you feel like you know her?

**S.** Yes! I start to think of her almost as my best friend

**IC.** This is so interesting! I think it's insane, how we feel attached to some of the influencers online, because we are exposed to so much of their content, even though they have no idea who we are...

**S.** You spoke the rights words my friend!! Preach!

**IC.** Ok, last three questions:) You mentioned you have sent some of her posts to your friends? Why do you discuss her with them?

**S.** To be honest, I feel like, when I show her to my friends, it's a thing where I'm like ok, "Look at this girl...do you think she's real?" and some people will say "yea, she's real...", but other people will say "no, she doesn't look real" and that's the thing, like, you bounce back and forth between the issue "is she real or is she not?" and that's what gets you interested in her, because you're trying to decide "ok, is she real or is she not?". But then it amazes yoIC...and to see what she does, it really enhances that feeling, because she can really sing....um, she's in these different places posting these different pictures, that's what amazes me about her and I want to show that to everybody.

**IC.** Awesome! So interesting...Would you suggest your friends to follow her?

**S.** Oh yes!! By a landslide!

**IC.** Ok, and the last question is - when she tags someone, some brands on her posts - do you go and click on them?

**S.** Oh, of course I do! When she did that one ummm... when she did that ad with Bella Hadid for Calvin Klein, most definitely I clicked on Calvin Klein to see, you know, exactly what they had. And especially with her accessories, like her necklaces and her earrings...her jackets, her boots, I always go and click to see what that designer does and specifically what they offer.

**IC.** Cool! Well, that was actually it for my interview...thank you so so much for taking the time and it was so cool talking to you, it has made my day!

**S.** Thank you for asking me! You are very welcome! I have been following Miquela for a while now and I do appreciate someone talking to me about her...Have a lovely the rest of the day!

**IC.** You too! have a lovely day!

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.15**

**IC.** Hey! I am writing to you, cause you are following @lilmiquela's account. I am writing a master thesis about her and I would love to interview you about why do you follow her. We could just chat here over Instagram and it would take around 15 minutes. Would you be interested in helping me out? This would be such a big help!

**S.** Yeah, sure!

**IC.** Really? That would be such a big help! Do you have time now?

**S.** Yup, all ready!

**IC.** Nice:) Will you introduce yourself? Like your age, where are you from and what do you do in your day to day?

**S.** Okay:) um, my name is Denzel Chance and I'm 14 years old. I am from Barcelona, but I live in Maryland and i love to draw architecture. I love singing, fashion and I'm very efficient with day to day tasks I love life even through our hardships right now.

**IC.** I love your introduction! Would love to see your paintings one day! But let's start with our questions:) Are you interested in the new technologies? And how did you find her account?

**S.** New technologies are a work of art and may focus us into the future where we may all be together in simple times the new world of innovation has so much to offer and many people don't see that and it should be important to know the good things in technology so our lives may be better ourselves. And it's actually kinda coincidental but I found her account from a sponsored story on Instagram and I was like "this is so cool". A digital artist which is pretty rare right now, but this may be the future as we drift off to a new world.

**IC.** Why did you decide to follow her?

**S.** I love her music, it's a sensation of self confidence that i can walk anywhere and be me for me and because even though she might not be real it's a step into self motivation from digitized simulations instead of real humans which gives us a glimpse on what image people may set for themselves.

**IC.** That is so interesting:) Do you think she is real? Like a real human being with an edited face? Or do you believe she is a bot?

**S.** I do believe that she is a bot, but that can't stop people from knowing who she may be even though she is not entirely real:)

**IC.** Got it:) Are you interacting with her in any way?

**S.** Lol no, I wish though, her life seems really cool! well...her simulated life:)

**IC.** So you never comment on her posts?

**S.** Oh!! Sorry, yes, I have a few times and usually I just say "yaaaas" or something else usually she never likes it though she does respond to others that are first and likes them too, which confused me first because I knew she was not real, but there is someone who manages her Instagram account.

**IC.** I'm curious, why do you comment?:) is it thrilling to see if she would respond?

**S.** Yeah, that's why I usually do it or some motivation I'm not usually the one to see if they like it or not.

**IC.** Great, thanks! You said that you knew she was making music? Do you listen to her songs?

**S.** Yes, I love her music especially her new song Speak up and Money. They're my fav!!

**IC.** I love Speak up too:) And how would you compare her to real life influencers? Is she more exciting or in any way different to follow?

**S.** She's new and different and there is a small, but fair amount of influencers that may not be the best at their social everything may be happy and good and loyal, but at a meet-and-greet or anything influencers sound very, not in a bad way, fake, but, like, they don't truly like what they do...But Miquela is different, like she really cares about all of us.

**IC.** I know what you mean.

**S.** Yeah like "Omg, I LOVE YOU AND HI HONEY HOW ARE YA" and then they just talk behind others backs

**IC.** So, in a way, because you would never be able to meet her, you find her more authentic? For how long have you been following her by the way?

**S.** Yes, she has a wonderful sense of glow that many stars I don't see like she is the queen!! And you know, she has surprisingly given me the courage to keep moving forward. And I've been following her for a few weeks now, not so long, but self entering into a new future.

**IC.** I'm happy to hear that:) Do you follow any other digital influencers?

**S.** Actually not follow, but I know some fake pop stars like the ones in that one show Black Mirror and how Miley Cyrus is Ashley O, I don't know if that counts though:) And she doesn't have an Instagram, but she does have music.

**IC.** Yeah, there are some of her "friends", like @bermudabae that she sometimes tags in her pictures:) Do you think we will be seeing more of these virtual influencers in the future?

**S.** Yes, this may be a way for the music industry and social network to see what technology can do and that we may influence ourselves and for the people that don't see that we can't worry, because we must focus on making and we as the world to see what everyone is capable of and how creators of these digital influencers may help us all in a time of need. Not worrying about situations and that means that they may be infinitely inspiring and always working on their goals so that we may follow them and also follow our goals in life.

**IC.** Ok, cool! And what do you think about her, Miquela? Do you find her honest?

**S.** She is honest, she knows what she's saying and she knows the hardships we may go through, which is why I think she is such a good influencer.

**IC.** Do you find her attractive? And what about her style?

**S.** OMG I love her style she has her bright and beautiful colors blended in together it's just AGHHH!! Amazing, and yes, she is very pretty and like, I kinda wanna look like her, but I'm not totally into girls:)

**IC.** Haha, this is so cool:) Means that you truly admire her then. Do you feel like you share the same values like her? I've seen her writing about LGBT rights...

**S.** Yes, it's important to respect everyone, even some of her fans may not seem comfortable but that just means they don't truly know her and that all should be equally treated. Sometimes and most of the time I just wish I was her lol, I've always wanted to be an influencer or a celebrity.

**IC.** Ok, so would you say that you believe that she is living the life she is living? Like actually going to events and actually dating someone?

**S.** Lol well, she's not real, but yeah, pretty much all in a digital perspective from a phone or TV, but not in real life.

**IC.** It seems like you feel that you really know and understand her?:) Would you agree?

**S.** Well...kind of

**IC.** Ok:) I have a couple of questions left, so we're almost there...Would you like to be like her?

**S.** I would love to!:) But it probably never happen...

**IC.** Haha:) Ok, so the last set of questions would be about you talking to your friends about her. Have you ever sent her posts to someone?

**S.** Yes, on my story one time and to one of my bf's and she follows her now:) She loves her music too and we listen to her in the car

**IC.** Aw, that's sweet! So would you suggest your friends to follow her?

**S.** Yup, it's so cool cause we all can talk about her now with the same interest:)

**IC.** Ok, the last question - do you check out the brands she tags in her posts?

**S.** Yeah, one of the brands that she tagged earlier was Channel, which I do like to wear. Most other companies I've not really heard of before but I usually check it out, but yeah:)

**IC.** Perfect! That was it! Thank you so much for helping me out, I have really enjoyed this talk:)

**S.** No problem!

## **Interview with Interviewee nr.22**

**IC.** Hey! I am writing to you, cause you are following @lilmiquela's account. I am writing a master thesis about her and I would love to interview you about why you follow her. We

could just chat here over Instagram and it would take around 15 minutes. Would you be interested in helping me out? This would be such a big help!

**Y.** Hi! Sure, I would love to:)

**IC.** Awesome! That would be such a big help for my research! Will you start by introducing yourself? How old are you?

**Y.** 28

**IC.** Tell me a bit about your day to day interests?

**Y.** Working full-time as a creative copywriter and communication manager at videography & animation production house. Also, freelance photographer and social media manager. Interested in visual arts, dance, yoga, travelling, music, cultural events.

**IC.** Interesting! Are you interested in new technologies?

**Y.** Yes!

**IC.** How did you find out about this account?

**Y.** At the “Innovation Drift” conference in Vilnius, 2019 - there was a speech about digital influencers.

**IC.** And are you aware that she is not a real human being?

**Y.** Yes

**IC.** Ok, so why did you follow her?

**Y.** As I am working in advertising, it’s crucial to be aware of the latest trends. Actually, I haven’t heard about anything like this before the conference, so definitely had to follow and explore this phenomenon.

**IC.** Ok, interesting. Are you engaging/interacting with her content?

**Y.** No, I don’t feel like I’m her target audience.

**IC.** What about her music carrier? Are you aware, that she is making music? And if so, are you listening to her songs?

**Y.** I am aware, but I don’t listen to her music.

**IC.** Great. Let’s compare her to a real life influencers you follow. Do you think she is in any way different or more interesting to follow?

**Y.** Probably her content is not so much different from the real influencers / singers - focusing on fashion, relationships, brands, pop culture. The only difference - that she is fictional.

**IC.** For how long have you been following her?

**Y.** 9 months



**IC.** And do you follow any other “robots”/digital influencers?

**Y.** Yes, a few

**IC.** Why do you think she is the most popular? (in terms of following)

**Y.** To be honest - no idea. Maybe because she is so mainstream and probably targeting teenagers mainly. Also, isn't she one of the first such influencers?

**IC.** Yes, I actually believe that she is one of the first ones...Do you believe, that we will be seeing more of these types accounts in the future?

**Y.** I think so.

**IC.** Ok, let's talk about her personality. Do you find her honest?

**Y.** Probably she sounds pretty honest in her posts and keeps a consistent approach.

**IC.** Do you find her attractive?

**Y.** She's ok attractive

**IC.** Do you find her style cool?

**Y.** Some of her outfits / pictures are pretty cool

**IC.** Do you feel like you share the same values as she does?

**Y.** Not sure...

**IC.** Do you support the same causes she does (like LGBT rights, Black lives matter)?

**Y.** Yes, some

**IC.** Do you believe she is living the life she says she is?

**Y.** No - she is not real anyway, and it's super weird to read about her breaking up with her boyfriend, for example.

**IC.** Would you like to be like her in any way? (Having the life, the voice and the fame she has?)

**Y.** No

**IC.** Do you feel like you really know and understand her?

**Y.** No - when reading her posts I am rather trying to imagine the person / agency who created her and what's the purpose of this post / project in general. Somehow I can't accept her as a “real person” - always think about what's behind all this.

**IC.** Ok, we're almost there. Here are the last few questions regarding her and your friends. Have you talked about her to your friends? If so, why?

**Y.** Yes, just in order to understand this phenomenon and how it impacts the industry.

**IC.** Would you suggest following her account to your friends?

**Y.** For those who are interested in new technologies / trends - yes.

**IC.** Ok, and the last question. When she tags someone or a brand in her posts, do you check the tagged account?

**Y.** No

**IC.** Well done! That was it:) Thank you so much for the interview!

**Y.** No problem:)

## **Interview with Interviewee nr.6**

**IC.** Hey! I am writing to you, cause you are following @lilmiquela's account. I am writing a master thesis about her and I would love to interview you about why do you follow her. We could just chat here over Instagram and it would take around 15 minutes. Would you be interested in helping me out? This would be such a big help!

**I.** I would love to help! Ready when you are:)

**IC.** So happy to hear that! This would be such a huge help for me:)

I'm going to be asking you around 10-15 questions about Miquela and why are you following her, if that's alright with you.  
**IC.** I am writing a thesis about virtual influencers, cause I have noticed a rise in these types of accounts on Instagram and I find it super exciting. Will you start by shortly introducing yourself? Your age, occupation and where you're from?:)

**I.** I have mixed feelings about the whole virtual model thing, but it's kind of interesting at the same time.

I'm 16 years old, I'm a senior at The National School of the Arts in South Africa, Johannesburg and I'm a musician. And I'm from South Africa, Gauteng.

**IC.** Why do you have mixed feelings about it?

**I.** I mean, it's just really bizarre, but like it's super cool as well I guess. I shouldn't be surprised judging by the technological era we're living in currently...but still. It's really impressive though

**IC.** I totally agree and I feel like we're just starting to experience it all...anyways, how did you find her?

**I.** I watched an episode of Teens React on YouTube where they had a group of teenagers determine from a set of photos what was real and what was not. They used Miquela as an example. AND SHE WAS FEATURED AS A GUEST TOO. (He sent the link)

**IC.** Oh wow, was she the guest too? How crazy...

Do you think she is real? In a sense that maybe she is a real human girl that gets her face blurred or something?

**I.** I think she's a real person with a CGI'd face

**IC.** Interesting:) So why did you decide to follow her? Or why are you continuing following her?

**I.** Curiosity tbh. I'm not freaked out enough to unfollow her yet so I wanna see where this goes you know?

**IC.** I totally know what you mean...Are you interested in interacting with her? Comments and stuff?

**I.** I'm a bit hesitant. Feels like I'm speaking to an entity rather than a person.

**IC.** Interesting you say that...care to elaborate? Do you feel like there is an entire production team behind her?

**I.** Yes

**IC.** Got it:) Are you aware of the fact that she is making music?

**I.** I'm aware. Haven't listened to any of it yet.

**IC.** Ok, cool:) What about her compared to real life influencers? Do you feel like she is any different in any way? Maybe more exciting to follow?

**I.** i feel like what makes her even more interesting than the other influencers is the fact that she's so mysterious. Like, you find yourself asking "why?"....and that makes you intrigued and wanna know how far they can push everything you know?

**IC.** So true! It kinda blurs the lines between reality and the digital world don't you think? And for how long have you been following her?

**I.** A week. And it really does...scary but intriguing.

**IC.** Do you follow any other digital influencers?

**I.** No, not at all

**IC.** Oh, so just her? ok. I am going to ask you a couple of questions about her personality now. Do you find her honest?

**I.** In what sense? Her personality?

**IC.** Yes, and like do you find her authentic? Regarding the brand deals she is posting, the stuff she is saying online...Just think of her as if you were thinking about a regular influencer.

**I.** It definitely kind of feels like I'm watching a movie...Doesn't feel 100% authentic to me

**IC.** Ok, got it:) This is so useful for me! What about her attractiveness? Do you find her attractive?

**I.** No, I personally don't find her attractive:)

**IC.** What about her style?

**I.** For a robot, she has a pretty cool sense of style. Idk...Like, I'm no fashion icon/police. But she has a really flashy and eye catching sense of style.

**IC.** Do you feel like you share the same values as her? For the things she advocates, for example LGBT rights...

**I.** Well, yeah, she is basically perfect and although we shouldn't strive to be PERFECT, we should all strive to have a mindset of respecting everyone equally, and as well as to have basic human decency.

So yes, I do share the same values.

**IC.** Thank you for answering in such detail:) What about her life, that she posts so much about...Do you believe she actually lives it? Does all the things she says she does?

**I.** I think the person that portrays her live Miquela's life for the sake of her image on social media, but I also think that she is not always 100% Miquela all the time and that she has a life outside of her character...

Like, I sort of see Miquela as a character you know?

**IC.** So you believe that she is out and about doing normal things as we all do, and then she does something that is just for the gram to keep up with her image that she portrayed?

**I.** Yes. You phrased that way better :) Basically what I mean...

**IC.** Ok, got it!

**I.** Sorry if that didn't make 100% sense:)

**IC.** No, don't worry about it, this subject is very unclear in itself:) So would you wanna have her life? Be like her?

**I.** Yes and no...

Yes, because I would love to one day have sponsorships and endorsements with brands that I love and appreciate, and I would love to be able to be as somewhat popular as her one day as an artist.

No, because while I want desire aspects of her life, I want it to be because of the real me:)

**IC.** Ok:) Would you want to have a platform like she does? To reach that many people? And maybe even inspire them?

**I.** Definitely...That's my dream. To connect with an audience that appreciates me for me, as well as my music:) To inspire, touch and heal people with what I consider my "superpower" (my songwriting).

**IC.** Yes, that is kind of what she does, don't you think? I have talked to several of her followers now and a bunch of them were from the gay community and they feel like her accounts was a safe space for them:)

From what you're writing, it feels like you understand her? Would you agree? That you feel like you know her?

**I.** Yeah, I do understand her and I guess share the same motives as her character in a way...We're both artists and we both want to create safe space for our supporters and listeners.

**IC.** Ok, this is all very useful for me:) The last couple of questions and we're done! Have you ever talked to your friends about her? Maybe even suggested following her?

**I.** No, and the biggest reason is because I discovered her during quarantine...and I somehow haven't had the urge to bring her up with friends.

**IC.** Do you feel like they wouldn't understand or wouldn't be into it?

**I.** I don't think most of my friends would be into it...I'm not even that into it 100% so I wouldn't really bring her up in a conversation with friends

**IC.** Got it! And the last question! When she tags a brand in her post, do you check it out?

**I.** Yes, I do...I want to check how the brands respond to her and see how much they lean into it

**IC.** Awesome, that was it! Thank you so much for your time!

#### **Interview with Interviewee nr.4**

**IC.** Hey! I am writing to you, cause you are following @lilmiquela's account. I am writing a master thesis about her and I would love to interview you about why do you follow her. We could just chat here over Instagram and it would take around 15 minutes. Would you be interested in helping me out? This would be such a big help!

**G.** I just followed her earlier.

**IC.** Earlier today?:)

**G.** Yes, I've found her really cute

**IC.** Oh, ok:) Would you be up for a little interview about her?

**G.** I don't really know her. But if those are easy questions, then I'm in

**IC.** Relatively easy:) Just how you feel about her

**G.** Oh ok

**IC.** Ok, will you start by introducing yourself? Your age, where are you from and what do you do in your everyday?:)

**G.** I'm 16 years old, from the Philippines. I'm just staying here at home since March 15, because we're having a community quarantine in the Philippines. I love singing and using Instagram to escape boredom. Sorry I'm not that good in english.

**IC.** No, I think you're really good at it! And thank you for your answer:) So, let's start - how did you find her account?

**G.** My younger brother showed me a picture of her, he told me to search her name on IG and I found really cute that's why I followed her.

**IC.** And are you aware of the fact that she is not a real human being?

**G.** Nope, I didn't care:) Then what is she? A robot?... Oh yes, she is :)

**IC.** Haha, I don't really know what she is...She says she is a robot...

Would you say that you're into these new trends of technology and virtual influencers?

**G.** I think I'm not. People get more receptive to these virtual influencers than celebrities.

**IC.** Really? That's interesting:) Why do you think so?

**G.** For me, I don't prefer virtual influencers, they don't give authenticity to the endorsement they provide. Unlike real people, they can tell their honest opinion about a product.

**IC.** So you find real human being influencers more honest?

**G.** Yes, personally.

**IC.** Ok. And you have decided to follow Miquela cause you were intrigued? or just thought she was cute looking?

**G.** I thought she's a real human, because it is not possible (otherwise).

**IC.** That is so interesting. And are you interacting with her in any way? Commenting under her posts and such?

**G.** No, I don't even liked any of her posts.

**IC.** Why? Are you generally not commenting on any influencers' posts?

**G.** Yes, I really don't

**IC.** Ok:) And are you aware of the fact that she is making music?

**G.** A little bit. I don't know if that is her own voice.

**IC.** How do you think she records her songs? Or do you think it's even her singing?

**G.** I don't have any idea of how. I think the voice is edited, I don't know anything about recording.

**IC.** Would you say that she is more exciting to follow than real human being influencers?:)

**G.** Following her is not a big deal for me. I know, that she isn't able to affect me physically, emotionally or mentally.

**IC.** Interesting! And what about other digital influencers? Do you follow any of the other accounts out there?

**G.** Most of the people I followed are my friends and those who I know personally. And some famous celebrities in my country as well as other countries.

**IC.** Oh, so she is the only virtual influencer, that you follow?

**G.** Yes.

**IC.** Do you think we will see more of these digital accounts in the future?

**G.** Yes, there are many possibilities that virtual influencers can do.

This generation is more on technology, it is really possible that in the future, everything is under control of different technologies. I'm sure that the creator imagined a lot of possibilities that a virtual influencer can do.

**IC.** Yes, I agree with you! I think it is just a beginning...And what about Miquela - do you find her honest?

**G.** I don't know what to believe right now. I mean, she can be a real human and her face just edited, or a robot that is made intelligently. I really don't know.

**IC.** But when she writes something about her life, do you think she is being truthful? For example about her being a robot....

**G.** This world is full of lies. I think there is something untrue about her. I don't know, I still don't know anything about her. \*sends a picture of Lil Miquela\*

What?

Their bodies look so real.

**IC.** I know, they do look real! Do you find her attractive?

**G.** I showed her photos to my brother, he was speechless. I looked at her photos, I didn't find it cute anymore, I think it's really creepy now haha

**IC.** Interesting how it changed your opinion about her! Do you think it's because she looks too similar to a human being, but something is off?

**G.** Maybe I'm just afraid of what it can do to people and to the world.

**IC.** I get it:) What about her style? Do you find it cool?

**G.** She dressed like the other girls too, and it's cute

**IC.** Do you feel like you share the same values like her?

**G.** No haha

**IC.** What about the causes she claims to support? Do you support the same ones? Like LGBT rights for example

**G.** If about LGBT, well I'm not against them, I don't support them as well. I just don't focus on things that aren't affecting my life.

**IC.** Yea, I understand:) Do you believe that she is living the life she says she is? Like going to events and such?

**G.** I don't think so. If people tell that they saw her in person, I will believe then.

**IC.** So you're hesitant...Ok, but would you like to be like her in any way? Maybe have the platform she has, or have the same style?..

**G.** No, I'm content with what I am and what I have now.

**IC.** Makes sense:) From what she is posting, do you think that you know her?

**G.** No

**IC.** Ok, the last couple of questions and we're done!

Have you talked to your friends and family about her?

**G.** Yes, with my siblings

**IC.** Why did you feel the need to?

**G.** We're really confused. That girl is unbelievable...My brothers just got speechless when I showed them her pictures.

**IC.** Right:) Would you suggest your friends to follow her?

**G.** No, I'm not going to waste my time for that, I mean, I am just going to make my friends confused too.

**IC.** Ok, and the last question - when she tags a brand in her post, do you check it out?

**G.** No, I just stared at her face.

**IC.** Love your answers! And we're done! Thank you so much for your time and collaboration:)

**G.** Your welcome! Have a lovely day!

**Interview with Interviewee nr.12**



**IC.** Hey! I am writing to you, cause you are following @lilmiquela's account. I am writing a master thesis about her and I would love to interview you about why do you follow her. We could just chat here over Instagram and it would take around 15 minutes. Would you be interested in helping me out? This would be such a big help!

**M.** Admittedly I just found out about her yesterday, my friend told me about some CG influencer accounts. So I don't know too much about the account.

**IC.** You would still help me out a lot! I just want to find out why did you follow her and how do you feel about her in general, so would you be up for answering a few questions?

**M.** Sure, happy to help, I'm not super invested in the account, so might not have a lot of insight to provide.

**IC.** Yay! that doesn't matter! All kinds of followers count! Would you start by introducing yourself? Like your age, where are you from and some of your hobbies?:)

**M.** 34, live in LA, make interactive art

**IC.** Are you interested in the new technologies?

**M.** Yup, definitely. That's mostly our work - [www.masterofshapes.com](http://www.masterofshapes.com)

**IC.** Wow! Impressive! So you could maybe yourself create one CGI account?

**M.** Yeah, I guess so, never thought of doing it tho, but not a bad idea! Hahaha

**IC.** So why did you decide to follow her?:)

**M.** So a friend told me about the account and I was like oh cool, that reminds me of another friend of mine, I worked with a while back, who made something similar (he sends a link).

He made this very weird character "sheast", who even spoke at a design conference a few years back

**IC.** Wow! Cool! So these virtual "personalities" have been around for some time now...And do you follow any other digital influencers?

**M.** I don't think I do, but maybe someone just does really good CG and has been tricking me hahaha

This is the first CG influencer account I have seen with such a following before the ones I had seen were more experimental and for some reason didn't grab as much peoples attention.

**IC.** Why do you then think Miquela is the most popular one? What makes her so special/different?

**M.** Since I just started following her admittedly am probably not the best person to ask as to why, but my one first thought is they focused on realism for lil Miquela and often show her perfectly composited with other people. So I think that realism attracts people to the account or maybe even tricks them I wonder if some people think she's just a slightly off looking real person lol

**IC.** This is gold! And do you listen to her music?

**M.** Oh I didn't even know she made music! I learned something new lol, I told I just started following hahaha, so might be a noob

**IC.** No no, this is good! Just tells me you weren't aware of it, that's all:) What about comparing her to real life influencers? do you think she is any different to follow than them?

**M.** I think the time that goes into each post to render and make shows that their level of effort and care and I think there is value in that in some ways more than other influencers. I don't want to assume for everyone, but there are a lot of the hot model girl and guys' instagrams that essentially they just take a selfie a day and get millions of followers, doesn't seem deserving sometimes, when you realise they aren't putting much care or additional concept into their posts, they are just repurposing what works over and over. So I think lil Miquela being a CG, making music (now I know haha) and the attention to detail to make her seem realistic gives the account more interest to me and made me follow.

**IC.** That is so true! Do you think we will be seeing more of the CG accounts in the future?

**M.** I think so, especially with a lot of artists in quarantine they will be looking to make more things with that added time.

**IC.** I know that you just started to follow her, but I will be asking you a bit about how you feel towards her:) Do you find her honest? In terms what she writes under her posts...

**M.** Hmm, I think so. It sounds like someone curates the writing and that's not AI so there is a human element, that sounds believable.

**IC.** And do you find her attractive?

**M.** I don't, she does still appear CG to me.

**IC.** What about her style?

**M.** Cool vibe, feels like early 2000s pop star clothing. Maybe late 90s

**IC.** Would you say that you share the same values as she does? I know you're not super invested, but from what she's posting, support to the LGBT community or the Black lives matter movement, do you feel like you would support the same causes?

**M.** For sure

**IC.** Would you also say the that you know her?

**M.** I think so, she has a distinct human quality, feels like whoever runs the account uses miquela as a character that infuses with some of their own traits, so the human element still shines through and feels like something you could connect with.

**IC.** Well said! And the last few questions:) Do you ever share or have shared her posts with your friends? Or would you ever discuss her with them?

**M.** I have not yet...But chatted about her to some friends recently.

**IC.** Would you suggest them to follow her?

**M.** I think I would definitely, something interesting to check out

**IC.** And when she tags a brand on her posts, do you check it out?

**M.** I have not yet.

**IC.** Ok, perfect! That was it!

**M.** Sweet!

**IC.** Thanks so much for taking your time!

**M.** Thanks!

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.10**

**IC:** Hi! My name is Sofia, I am doing my master thesis in CBS about Lil Miquela and why do people follow her!

I have seen that you follow her, would you mind if I made you some questions?

**K:** Hi! Yes! I will totally help you! I'm not promising I can answer everything! But I can try!

**IC:** Will you start by introducing yourself super-fast? like your age and where are you from? And maybe what are you doing in your everyday?

**K:** I'm Kennedy! I'm 14. I'm from California. I dance and play basketball! I have 8 siblings.

**IC:** Would you say you're into new technologies?

**K:** I wouldn't say that. I just stumbled across Miquela. I'm not really familiar with anyone else

**IC:** So don't you follow other "CGI" influencers? Like BermudaBae?

**K:** I follow Bermuda as well. Only Bermuda and Miquela.

**IC:** Nice!! Why do you think Lil Miquela is more popular?

**K:** Probably because she produces music, and has a YouTube channel. And Miquela has been around longer than Bermuda. Plus Bermuda started getting bigger when she was harassing Miquela and forced her to come out about being a robot.

**IC:** How did you find @lilmiquela's account?

**K:** I was going down the #FYP on Tik Tok and one of her videos shows up. So I looked her up on Instagram

**IC:** Nice! Why did you decided to follow her?

**K:** I decided to Follow her because she's very humble and honest. And very relatable

**IC:** Do you engage with her?

**K:** Yea I do sometimes. I've actually had a lot of conversations with her.

\*Add transcripts of conversations\*

**IC:** Could you compare her with other "real" influencers?

**K:** I personally like her more. She's more real than other influencers. She replies to people. She builds people up. She's not always about herself.

**IC:** For how long have you been following her?

**K:** About a month

**IC:** Okay! Do you find her honest?

**K:** Yes

**IC:** Do you find her attractive and with a cool style?

**K:** I'm not attracted to her. But I do like her style. I find her beautiful.

**IC:** Do you feel you share the same values as her? Love, support..?

**K:** Yes I do!

**IC:** Do you believe she is living the life she says she is?

**K:** I do!

**IC:** Would you like to be like her?

**K:** I would like to be my own version of her.

**IC:** And have you talked about her to your friends?

**K:** yes.

**IC:** Suggesting them to follow her?

**K:** Not really. I just told them about her

**IC:** When she tags a brand/person in her posts, do you click on the tags to see what is that?

**K:** It really depends. If I'm busy then I won't. But if I'm not, then yes!

**IC:** Thank you so much for your answers! That's it!

**K:** You are welcome!

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.13**

**IC.** Hey! I am writing to you, cause you are following @lilmiquela's account. I am writing a master thesis about her and I would love to interview you about why do you follow her. We could just chat here over Instagram and it would take around 15 minutes. Would you be interested in helping me out? This would be such a big help!

**R.** Sure!

**IC.** Love it! I will be asking you how you feel towards Lil Miquela and why are you following her:) Would you start by introducing yourself? Like your age, where are you from and some of your hobbies?:)

**R.** I feel weird at the beginning cause I feel that something's wrong with the picture, but at the same time she looks like another typical model and I started to follow her cause I never seen anything like her, something like a virtual model created by a computer.

And I am 25, from Mexico and my hobbies are rock climbing, basketball and go out with my friends mainly.

**IC.** Would you say that you are artistic? Or maybe interested in the new technologies?

**R.** I'm interested in the new technologies, but I'm not so artistic

**IC.** And how did you find her account?

**R.** Watching something new on Instagram

**IC.** As an ad?

**R.** Sorry?

**IC.** Did you find her account since it was an ad that appeared to you? Or through someone else's profile?:)

**R.** Her profile appeared to me

**IC.** And for how long have you been following her?

**R.** I don't remember exactly, but I think a couple of weeks.

**IC.** Ok:) Do you follow any other digital influencers?

**R.** No, Lil Miquela is the first one

**IC.** And how would you say she is different from human influencers?

**R.** Actually she is like other influencers, if I didn't notice her face that looks like a face made by a computer I thought she was another influencer like others

**IC.** So you mean, she is similar to human influencers you follow?:)

**R.** Yes

**IC.** Ok:) Do you ever interact with her? Maybe comment?

**R.** No

**IC.** And why is that?

**R.** I only like message people that I know, and respect to the comments, I only like to see her videos cause she looks like something new for me, so I don't know what can I comment to her

**IC.** And are you aware that she is making music? If so, do you listen to it?

**R.** Actually no

**IC.** Ok, got it:) why do you think Miquela has such a big following? 2 million?

**R.** Hmm, maybe because she is unique, I have never seen something like her, and she have all that she needs to be a popular influencer, chick clothes etc...music videos and she does look like a model

**IC.** Yea, I agree! And what do you think about her personality? Do you find her honest?

**R.** I only seen some of her pictures and one or two videos, so I'm not sure about her personality and if she's honest or not...

**IC.** Would you say that you believe that she actually is in those places she posts pictures from?

**R.** Yes, some of her pictures that I see looks amazing and the only thing that i notice is not real is her face.

**IC.** Do you find her attractive?

**R.** That's a hard question

**IC.** It is tricky, right?

**R.** Yeah, haha. Her face looks fake and that is difficult for me to consider if she is beautiful or not

**IC.** Ok, what about her style? Do you like it?

**R.** Yes, she has a model haircut and clothes that look amazing

**IC.** Would you like to be like her? In any way?

**R.** Maybe the part, that she visits amazing places, yeah, but that's the only thing I can think of

**IC.** Do you feel like you share the same values like her? Maybe support the same causes she does? Supporting LGBT community for example

**R.** I actually don't know she was a part of LGBT community, but if that's the case, yes, I share the same values

**IC.** Ok, we're almost done:) Have you ever talked to your friends about her? And would you suggest someone to follow her?

**R.** Yes and yes, she is something new on Instagram to me and my friends

**IC.** Cool! And the last question - when she tags a brand in her pictures, do you check it out?

**R.** Sometimes yes

**IC.** Perfect! Thanks for helping me out:

**R.** You're welcome! It is an amazing profile on Instagram

**IC.** It truly is!

## **Interview with Interviewee nr.20**

**IC:** Hi! My name is Sofia, I am doing my master thesis in CBS about Lil Miquela and why do people follow her!

I have seen that you follow her, would you mind if I made you some questions?

**V:** Yes, it is ok what do you want to ask?

**IC:** Will you start by introducing yourself super fast?:) like your age and where are you from? And maybe what are you doing in your everyday?

**V:** i am fifteen years old I come from Indonesia and my activity is to help my mother at home

**IC:** Cool! Do you study?

**V:** yes but now it is forbidden to do activities outside.

**IC:** how did you find lil Miquela's account?

**V:** I'm looking for her because I'm a fan

**IC:** Fan of her music?

**V:** Yes

**IC:** Cool! And for how long have you been following lil Miquela?

**V:** for 2 days now

**IC:** Ahaha very recent then! Are you into new technologies?

**V:** Yes

**IC:** Oki! And why do you follow her?

**V:** because I like the music and the photos are also interesting.

**IC:** Cool! And do you interact with her posts? Comment, like them..?

**V:** yes

**IC:** Could you compare her with other real influencers please?

**V:** Her face really looks like a cartoon

**IC:** Ahahha do you know she is not a real person?

**V:** Yes, I know because I have watched videos on Youtube about her not being human

**IC:** Do you follow other “robots” influencers? Like BermudaBae

**V:** no i just want to follow the miquela

**IC:** And do you find Miquela honest?

**V:** I don't know much about her

**IC:** And do you find her attractive?

**V:** Yes

**IC:** And with a cool style?

**V:** Yes

**IC:** Do you think you share the same values as she does?

**V:** no, I can't have the same value as her

**IC:** why?

**V:** because she is so famous and is very attractive

**IC:** Do you support the same causes as she does? LGBT, Black wives matter..?

**V:** ohh i don't like gays

**IC:** okay! Finally, have you talked about Miquela to any of your friends?

**V:** yes I have already discussed it with my friend

**IC:** Encouraging your grind to follow Miquela?

**V:** no I just made him attracted to miquela. he feels attracted because he also likes robots.

**IC:** And when Miquela tags a brand or a person in her posts, do you click to check who is it?

**V:** of course because of my curiosity



**IC:** Great! That's it! Thank you very much for the collaboration!

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.9**

**IC:** Hi! My name is Sofia, I am doing my master thesis in CBS about Lil Miquela and why do people follow her!

I have seen that you follow her, would you mind if I made you some questions?

**K:** Sure thing, what would you like to know?

**IC:** Perfect! First, could you tell me a bit about yourself? Like age, where from, what are your day-to-day interests...?

**K:** I'm from Jamaica, and I'm 23 years old. I'm not dating anyone at the moment. I only date guys though

**IC:** Ahaha great to know! What about studies and activities you enjoy doing?

**K:** Well, I'm not in school at the moment. I enjoy reading young adult novels, listening to pop music, watching web series on YouTube, spending time with friends and family, going for walks

**IC:** And are you interested in new technologies?

**K:** Well, yeah, you could definitely say that. I think technology is amazing, and getting very innovative

**IC:** And do you follow any other "robot" influencer?

**K:** Not on here, but I definitely listen to Bermuda as well. She has a lot of potential, would definitely love to see more of her personality

**IC:** how did you find lil miquela's account?

**K:** Well, as you know, I'm from Jamaica and her type of music isn't really the norm over here, but I found out about her just a couple weeks ago actually. I found about her on the Zach sang show and then I started listening to her music and following her social media accounts

**IC:** And for how long have you been following her?

**K:** Maybe about a month now, I would say

**IC:** Cool! Why did you follow her? For what reasons?

**K:** Well, after I heard the interview with her, I basically started following her because she's cool. I think she has a really down-to-earth personality, and she's always saying that even

robots need love. She has this really likable personality, and her songs are really catchy. And she interacts with everyone on social media, she's almost like a best friend

**IC:** Do you engage with her?

**K:** Yes, of course I do. It's one of the reasons I will continue to follow her. She replied to my tweet, and my Instagram comments, calling me a total sweetheart. I've never had a direct conversation with her before yet even though I sent her a message. Let's be honest here, I live in a developing country, and my biggest problem isn't chasing famous people, but if they make me want to support them, then I will emotionally invest in them

**IC:** Do you follow other influencers? "Real" ones?

**K:** Yeah, definitely. I follow Ariana Grande, Billie Eilish, Justin Bieber, Alec Benjamin, Nico and Chelsea Collins, shy Martin, koolkid, boy in space

**IC:** For you, what is the biggest difference between these influencers and Lil Miquela?

**K:** Well, it's not really a difference necessarily, except for the fact that she is a robot, there really isn't much difference. I mean it, everyone of these people are relatable for me in their own way, and I can love them equally without preferring one over the other

**IC:** Do you find her honest?

**K:** Yes, I think she is as honest as can be. If you took the robot out of the equation, I don't think she really has any reason to lie to anyone. When she did the interview with Zach Sang, I want to hear more about the process of how she was created. I know she said that her memories are implanted and that she thought her original purpose was to be a friend to children with down syndrome, but she was actually created to be some kind of sex slave to the illuminati

**IC:** And do you find her attractive? With a cool style?

**K:** Well, you definitely need to check out her full interview with Zach Sang then. Let her speak for herself. I wish she did more interviews though, and, yeah, her style is pretty cool. Nothing that I could pull off, but definitely trendy

**IC:** Do you share the same values as she does?

**K:** Yeah, to some extent I do, but she says she is always going to be 19 years old. I'm 23 now, and I'm not going to have the mentality of a 19-year-old forever. I do agree that we all need people around us who care about us, but most of her concepts is really for teenagers, at least for now. Think about it, if she's stuck at one age for the rest of her life, or till she dies, she still going to have to mature emotionally and mentally because of her life experiences. Yeah, to some extent I do, but she says she is always going to be 19 years old.

I'm 23 now, and I'm not going to have the mentality of a 19-year-old forever. I do agree that we all need people around us who care about us, but most of her concepts is really for teenagers, at least for now. Think about it, if she's stuck at one age for the rest of her life, or till she dies, she still going to have to mature emotionally and mentally because of her life experiences

**IC:** So do you think you wouldn't want to be like her? Have the fans, know how to sing, live the life she says she is living...?

**K:** Yes, in theory, that's something I would love to do, but I know that having such thoughts are not practical. That's not going to happen for me, because I am not her. No matter how much I think I know her, I don't really know her. Would I love to meet her in real life? Yes! Do I want to live her life for a day? Of course I do, but it's not to the extent where I'm losing myself. And that's the problem. Persons in America build of these influencers to the point where they forget who they are. I want you to know, I don't need a large group of friends when I have one that constantly reminds me all of the time that they are there for me in every way possible. I thought my whole life that I knew what a best friend was, but I was wrong. You've given those words a whole different meaning. Nobody could ever compare to yoIC. I used to think a best friend was sleep overs, reckless activities, and spending every day together. I was wrong. A best friend is not seeing them all the time and still being so close it blows your mind, or getting so excited to see the other one when it might have only been a day that you've been apart, being able to call them at any time of day because you need them, feeling like you always have someone in your corner. Or just you, you are a best friend. Having you as my best has made every individual day better. And I hope to never lose that.

Friends come and go, and relationships with people change over the years and that is okay. If there is ever a time that it seems like we're fading or something is changing, know that I hold the relationship that we once had so close to my heart and I will always look back on the memories. While life takes us through our own path, I hope you know that regardless of where we end up, I will always be there for you. Maybe not physically, but emotionally, I will always be there for you.

Thank you for sticking by me, getting to know my life, showing me the most sincere support and unconditional love. I couldn't thank you enough for the countless amount of times that you have stuck by me when I needed you. I have no idea what I'd do without you

sometimes... or all of the time. And I am so happy that I don't ever have to find out. I love you!

**IC:** Have you talked about her to your friends?

**K:** Not really. Her music isn't really popular here

**IC:** But about her being a robot?

**K:** They don't really care all that much. Most would only think she's a real person wearing a mask for fame

**IC:** And when Miquela tags a brand or a person in her posts do you click on it?

**K:** Yeah, sometimes I do, but not very often. I could probably never afford any of that anyway. And if I don't know anything about the other person, I'm not really inclined to go look them up honestly

**IC:** Not even just for curiosity?

**K:** Yeah, sometimes I do, but let's be honest here, I am not obligated to do any of that if I don't want to. From time to time, I might go look them up out of curiosity, but that doesn't necessarily make me a fan of them, I respect them, but ultimately I don't really know them. And when it comes to brand products, I know that it's marketing, but I'm not going to buy something I don't need or want just because miquela is wearing it

**IC:** Well, that's it! Thank you very much for the answers, happy Easter!

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.1 (UNFINISHED)**

**IC.** Hey!

I'm writing to you, cause you are following @lilmiqueala's account I am writing a master thesis about her and I would love to interview you about why do you follow her we could just chat here over Instagram and it would take around 15 minutes, would you be interested in helping me out? this would be such a big help!

**A.** Yes of course

**IC.** Oh nice! Perfect:) will you start by introducing yourself? Just your age, where are you from and maybe some of your day to day activities and interests?

**A.** I'm 20 years old, I'm from Mexico and I'm interested in arts, I'm graphic designer and film maker

**IC.** Nice to meet you:) would also say that you're interested in the new technologies?

**A.** Bc i wanna work with these

**IC.** Oh really? Would you want to create one yourself?

**A.** No, I wanna make pop culture idols like gorillaz and i think gorillaz and lilmiquealasis the same thing. I wanna work with technologies

**IC.** I agree! Would you explain a bit more how in your opinion they are similar?:)

**A.** For the reason that the two are not people but it doesn't matter because the fact that they have millions of followers and I don't mean mainly social media have an opinion that influences

**IC.** So you're saying that the modern consumer/follower does not even care, whether the influencer is real or not, as long as they are appealing to the masses?:)

**A.** Yes i think so. I mean the internet was a different world and doesn't care too much thinks...Since was a child I'm influence whit cartoons. And doesn't care these was real or not. U understand me??

**IC.** Yes! Totally! You are interested in the character not the fact if they are real or not, right? How did you find Miquela's account?

**A.** I've seen she in a magazine

**IC.** And do you follow any other digital influencers?

**A.** I use to follow the vocaloids

**IC.** What are they?

**A.** \*sends pictures of these virtual creatures

**IC.** So interesting! Never heard of them before... Why do you think that Miquela is the most popular/famous one?

**A.** Bc is modern

And isn't a cartoon

And is a simbol

Fashion simbol

It's the face that no one can have

And it never deteriorates

**IC.** Cool! Thanks:) and do you think we will be seeing more of these accounts in the future?

**A.** Yes, i think in the future we will not care if people are real or not

**IC.** Ok:) and do you find her honest?

**A.** Morally not but on the internet I don't think it matters

**IC.** So you don't think she is really in those places, where she posts the pictures from?

**A.** No

Is the magic of the cgi

And photoshop

**IC.** Ok, and you find her attractive?

**A.** Yes jajaja she's pretty

**IC.** What about her style?

Would you still be interested in finishing the interview?:) 🙏 that would help me sooo much

**A.** Sorry

I don't really care too much her style

She dressed like another girl in this decade

Fashion

But be fashion is normal in every girl in these years

**IC.** Thanks! What about her values and causes she supports? Would you say you support the same ones?

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.7 (UNFINISHED)**

**IC.** Hey!

I'm writing to you, cause you are following @lilmiqueala's account. I am writing a master thesis about her and I would love to interview you about why do you follow her? we could just chat here over Instagram and it would take around 15 minutes. would you be interested in helping me out? this would be such a big help!

**I.** Hello

Pardon my English, but I don't know it well.

I just started following her, so I don't think I'm helping.

I started to follow her because she appeared to me as a suggestion and I was interested to see the profile of a virtual user done very well, in fact my girlfriend believed her a real person

**IC.** Aww, I think your English is awesome! If you're up for it, I would still like to ask you several questions?

**I.** Okay, anytime.

**IC.** Ok perfect! Will you start by introducing yourself? Just your age, your day to day activities and where do you live?

**I.** I'm 43 years old, I live in Monza and I'm a commercial agent.

**IC.** Oh nice to meet you! Would you say that you are interested in the new technologies?

**I.** I've always been a filmmaker

And I like to explore other art forms

**IC.** Cool! So how long have you been following her?

**I.** Few days

**IC.** And how did you find out about account?

**I.** through the internet I've searched for interesting accounts in the art world

**IC.** And are you aware that she is not a real human being?:)

**I.** I was able to recognize it right away unlike my partner who believed it was true

**IC.** Oh that's so interesting!:)

Do you follow any other digital influencers?

**I.** No, I'm only in accounts that deal with art.

**IC.** How do you think she is different from any human influencers?:)

**I.** I'm sorry, he's been following you too soon to judge you.

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.21 (UNFINISHED)**

**IC.** Hey!

I'm writing to you, cause you are following @lilmiqueala's account. I am writing a master thesis about her and I would love to interview you about why do you follow her? we could just chat here over Instagram and it would take around 15 minutes. would you be interested in helping me out? this would be such a big help!

**Y.** Hi! Sure I'm alright with that

**IC.** Hey perfect! Will you start by introducing yourself?:) your age, where are you from, what do you like to do in your everyday?

**Y.** I'm 16 and I'm from the Philippines. I mostly just spend my time by listening to music and watching Netflix series.

Should I also include my real name?

**IC.** No, that doesn't matter:) and how did you find her account?

**Y.** I was looking at ig stories then I happen to see a paid promotion of her new song. I was confused by how she looked and I swiped up to listen to her song and found about her account when I searched her name.

**IC.** And why did you decide to follow?:)

**Y.** I actually like her music and I was impressed on how she acts and speak like a real person. I just generally thought she was cool.

**IC.** Ok:) and are you aware that she is not a real human being?

**Y.** Yes I am fully aware of that

**IC.** Ok cool:) Just had to ask

And why would you say in general you follow influencers? Not only virtual ones?

**Y.** Most of the influencers I follow on social media are at the same time content creators and I just enjoy the different content that they make. I also follow them because there are these influencers who are actually create content that I also want to do and it actually inspires me to do what they do too.

Sorry for the late reply

**IC.** Don't worry about replying later!:) I'm just happy to get some answers

Ok, so are you engaging with her in any way? Commenting under her pictures maybe?:)

**Y.** On lilmiquela's pictures? No I don't really comment

**IC.** Why?:)

Do you usually not comment on any influencers pictures?

**Y.** Yes I don't usually comment on their posts, I just heart their photo.

I don't comment because I think pressing heart is enough

**IC.** Ok:) and are you aware that she is making music?

**Y.** Yes I am

**IC.** Do you listen to her songs?

**Y.** Yes I do listen to some of her songs

**IC.** Ok cool:) and do you think she is any different to follow compared to real influencers?

Is she more exciting? Or do you see her the same as human influencers?

**Y.** I don't really think she's the same as real influencers because lilmiquela is programed everything she says and thinks is A.I. real influencers are more special because they have real passion and real emotions which makes their work more valuable. Lilmiquela is actually slightly different from real influencers she can do what others do it's that it's not that genuine.



**IC.** Interesting:) and do you follow any other virtual influencers? Why do you think Miquela is the most popular one?

**Y.** I don't follow other virtual influencers. I think Miquela is the most popular because besides the fact she almost looks like a real human being the personality that was built into her is more interesting and more fun.

**IC.** Alright:) thank you!

Next couple of questions will be about her personality:) do you find Miquela being honest?

**Y.** About her being honest I'm not really sure about it because a lot of public figures has secrets that they keep and I just don't mind it.

**IC.** But do you believe the stuff she says? Like when she posts something about being in a certain place, do you believe she actually went there?

**Y.** About when she's like being at interviews or like being at a certain place I do have doubts about it

**IC.** Ok got it!:) do you find her attractive?

**Y.** Yes she has great visuals

**IC.** What about her style?

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.18**

**IC.** Hey!

I'm writing to you, cause you are following @lilmiqueala's account. I am writing a master thesis about her and I would love to interview you about why do you follow her? we could just chat here over Instagram and it would take around 15 minutes. would you be interested in helping me out? this would be such a big help!

**S.** I would live to help!!

**IC.** Oh really? that would be great!

**S.** Ok

**IC.** Would you start by introducing yourself? Your age, where are you from and what do you like to do in your day to day

**S.** That's a lot of info how about just my name and age

**IC.** Yeah, I know, I just want to know more about your hobbies and regarding why you are following her (which is the essence of my interview) I need to know what type of people are

her followers:) so I don't want to sound creepy at all and I would just love to know if you're for example are artistic or more into the new technologies and stuff :)

**S.** I just followed her bc it's so interesting how far our technology has come and I think she is so interesting bc she looks so real and the fact that she can understand humans is insane

**IC.** Totally agree! Ok, and what's your age?

**S.** 15

**IC.** Perfect:) let's start then! How did you find her account?:)

**S.** I was watching a YouTube video she was in

**IC.** And why did you decide to follow?

**S.** Because it's so crazy how a real she looked and how she can act like a human

**IC.** I agree! And just for the record, you are aware that she is not a real human girl?

**S.** Yes i know haha

**IC.** Good haha:) do you follow any really human influencers?

**S.** What do you mean?

**IC.** Just like regular influencers, Instagram models...

Someone famous

**S.** Ofc

**IC.** How do you think Miquela is different from the human ones?

**S.** She doesn't look quite real like you can tell she just looks real and fake at the same time if that makes any sense

**IC.** And do you ever interact with her? Maybe comment on her posts?

**S.** Not yet I haven't

**IC.** Would you ever comment?

**S.** Yes eventually

**IC.** Ok:) do you listen to her music?

**S.** I've heard a little bit of her songs

**IC.** Do you like it?:)

**S.** I didn't even listen to the whole thing haha but she genuinely seems like such a cool invention that was created and just to imagine how much time and effort it took to make her blows my mind

**IC.** And do you follow any other "robot" accounts on Instagram?

**S.** No

**IC.** Ok:) and what about lil miquela, do you find her honest?

**S.** I don't really know that much about her I just followed her bc She was in a YouTube video I was watching

**IC.** So from what she is posting, do you believe that she really is in all those places, when she posts a pic from somewhere?:)

**S.** I guess it could be photoshopped

**IC.** So you wouldn't believe what she is saying all the time?

**S.** Well I mean sometimes it's supposed to be obvious

**IC.** Ok:) and do you find her attractive?

**S.** I guess haha

**IC.** What about her style?

**S.** It's good

**IC.** What about the values she represents? Like maybe supporting LGBT community? Would you say you support the same ones?

**S.** LGBTQ doesn't bother me like if my friends are gay I support them I don't hate

**IC.** Ok, so would you say that you know Lil Miquela?

**S.** she cool

**IC.** Would you like to be like her?

**S.** No not really

**IC.** Would you talk about her to your friends?

**S.** No probably not to me she's not that big of a subject but she is pretty cool

**IC.** So you wouldn't recommend your friends to follow her either?

**S.** I mean they can if they want

**IC.** And the last question - do you check out the brands she tags in her pictures?

**S.** No not really

I've only seen a few of her posts

**IC.** Ok perfect! That was it! Thanks so much for helping me out!

**S.** No problem!!!

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.8 (UNFINISHED)**

**IC.** Hi! My name is Urte and I am doing my master thesis related to Lil Miquela!

I was wondering if you could answer to some simple questions about her? It would only take 5 mins and help my research a lot

**J.** ooh my god dude I just saw this!!! if you still would like some answers I'm more than down dude!

**IC.** Hey! Are you still keen on helping me?

**J.** For sure dude!

**IC.** Awesome! Will you start by introducing yourself real quick?

**J.** Of course! My name is Jacob Herta, I'm 21 years old, and I suppose I'm a bit of a self-proclaimed fan of the weird and different when it comes to the internet

**IC.** Nice! For how long have you been following her?

**J.** I'd say for the last 3 years or so now? Back when she was still discovering her origins and what she really was

**IC.** Wow really? You're one of the oldest followers I've talked to! How did you find her?

**J.** Yeah she's really been gaining some traction as of late, when she first appeared online it was strange because she had such a small following, nobody really knew what to make of it. One of her first songs, "Not Mine" has randomly appeared on my recommended on YouTube, and after giving it a listen I fell down the rabbit hole, to say the least. It's been interesting to see how as time goes on she's been releasing more videos with her actually in them, whereas in the beginning it was more focused on just pictures of her and her upcoming music

**IC.** And why did you decide to follow? Or kept following her for all these years?

**J.** I guess simply the fact that she seemed like she was something new. Amidst all the generic bs I always see across social media platforms, it was like Miquela just appeared and was here to give her own twist on things, which I really respect. The fact she's been in modeling magazines is absolutely nutty to me, seeing as how she quite literally was discovering she was a robot with the rest of the world through her socials

**IC.** It is so mind blowing to me too...How do you think she is different from real human influencers?

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.3**

**IC:** Hi! My name is Sofia, I am doing my master thesis in CBS about Lil Miquela and why do people follow her!

I have seen that you follow her, would you mind if I made you some questions?

**E:** You can do this

**IC:** Will you start by introducing yourself super fast? like your age and where are you from? And maybe what are you doing in your everyday?

**E:** Im 34 years. Im from brazil. Im personal trainer. I work at the gym like personal trainer, i start my work at 16:00 and finished at 22:00

I have a business a thrift store that I used work in the morning, that's why I follow Lil Miquela.

I love fashion and my dream is to only work in fashion.

I love miquela style And I like her looks like. Her face is perfect.

**IC:** Do you know she is not a real human?

**E:** Yes I know. But she dont look real person. When she speak we can see that is robotic. But she looks so perfect I like her construction. I just follow her on instagran, because her pictures, but I know that she have YouTube channel, but I can watch her videos because I know that not human telling things like she lives it is strange for me.

One question, when she take pictures of others people. The created of miquela put some people in her place, and before put design graphic in her place?

**IC:** I am not sure actually! I don't know whether there's a girl with only a different face, or if she is completely created on the computer

**E:** I think that. Her body is perfect she doesnt have any scar or stain it Inst normal.

**IC:** And you are interested in new technologies?

**E:** Yes. Although I'm not a technological person. For example, I don't have a cell phone, a computer, and state-of-the-art appliances, but I'm very knowledgeable about everything. So I like to know what the world is doing, in terms of technological advances, I just enjoy it. And I'm impressed about how it has advanced and the makeup is an example, there are studies that say that in a near future it will be more normal to have makeup and we will adapt, because we adapt to everything. She has a cybernetic friend I follow her too. A blonde looks like barbie.

And it would be crazy, and would be interesting, if you interviewed her boyfriend, better the ex jajajaja. As someone dates a hologram he should be studied - case study

**IC:** I also don't understand how he agreed to be her boyfriend. Do you interact with her posts?

**E:** Yes, always. She has even already answered me.

**IC:** Comments, likes, DMs...?

**E:** No, just comments

**IC:** Okay! And how do you feel when she answers?

**E:** happy! Famous "people" don't usually answer.

**IC:** And can you compare it to "real" influences? Similarities and differences?

**E:** I can't just because I know she's not real. She, for example, doesn't have this ability to influence my decision making. I wouldn't buy a brand because I see her using it, as it is usually the case with real influences.

She gives us several experiences because she travels and meets a lot of people, but I know it's not real so I don't mind

For example, today she posted a photo in the sun. Saying that she had already taken her dose of vitamin D. I laughed alone because I know she doesn't produce it.

My opinion about miquela, is that she is like a religion which I do not believe, I know it is not true, but I think it is important to exist, because there is people who only live in this cyber you can influence at least one person in need, their role will already be fulfilled.

**IC:** For how long have you been following her?

**E:** For at least a month

I saw her in the insta suggestions, I found her very beautiful, I entered the profile, I thought it was not possible a perfect person like that, then I saw the videos when she spoke and then I saw that it was a computer graphics

But she's got a nice style, I was interested, so I followed her there

**IC:** Cool! And is there any other "robot" influences that you follow?

**E:** BermudaBae

**IC:** "And why do you think Miquela is more popular?"

**E:** Because Miquela has a more singular face, looks oriental and oriental features are in fashion due to the spread of kpop - one of the reasons may be that.

Bermudabae has a more common profile of a perfect blonde, people are already tired of this stereotype.

Another reason is that miquela sings, has videos with celebrities, has also the channel on youtube, which ends up recruiting more followers.

**IC:** "You are absolutely right! Most of the people I interviewed started following Miquela because they liked her songs

And you think we'll see more of these accounts in the future?

**E:** Yes it's a trend, not only here in Brazil, but we have a store that uses a doll like this to promote shopping in the store's application. The store is called magazine luisa. And the doll is called magalu. The doll records with celebrities, goes to events just like Miquela. I don't know how good this is, because technology advances in order to bring people closer together, but the most of the time it's doing the opposite, it's pushing us away from anyone else, people only think about exposing themselves and being seen on social networks. The problem of people enjoying their profiles so much.

People expect miquela to be perfect in everything. And she forgets that the human being feels and is susceptible to failure. The problem with miquela is that she creates a stereotype of perfection that will not be found or translated in the human being. Then we'll have more frustrated people, more anxious and more depressed.

**IC:** "Yes! But actually that's always happened with famous models, actresses... they're also the stereotype of perfection.

And we're the ones who choose whether or not to follow them.

**E:** Yes you're right, but then the need to have a profile like hers was not to be successful, if only the models or actresses were enough, but the human being is never happy, so there is always the need to invent and progress and that's why people live more on the Internet than their own lives

I like to post pictures and these days I'm more connected because of the quarantine but I don't live in this virtual world I don't take the phone everywhere I go! People are forgetting what really matters, and that is why so many mental illnesses appear

**IC:** "And you think she's honest?"

**E:** Oh I can't tell, because I don't hear what she's saying. I only see pictures and I put likes. I listen to the songs but just to know, I don't download because I don't care.

**IC:** "Oki! And you think she's pretty and cool?"

**E:** "I think she's pretty and sometimes she's not so pretty. I'm more bermudabae's style

**IC:** "Oki! And you think you have the same personal values as Miquela?"

**E:** I don't know what her values are. I don't hear her talking.

**IC:** Okay! And do you support the same causes as her? LGBT, Black Lives Matter...?"

**E:** Lgbt yes always and the blacks too specially because I'm descendent of Africans.

**IC:** Cool! And you think she's living the life she says she's living?"

**E:** I don't know. For example, there are pictures of her here at the carnival in Brazil. I don't know if she really came If there's a person who represents her. But it's nice of her to

support social cause even if only cybernetically, as she has great fandom and it can have a positive impact.

She is not just a digital empty influence as we know others.

**IC:** Would you like to be her? To be able to sing, have fans, etc?

**E:** Not to be her, but I'd like to sing and have fans. Actually my dream was to be a singer, being able to wear fancy dress like Rihanna, Beyoncé and lady Gaga. I even like dragqueens.

**IC:** "And you feel you know her?"

**E:** "I don't feel that I know her. I can't establish that link with her precisely because she's a robot or a computer designer."

**IC:** "Finally, have you told your friends about her?"

**E:** Yes to 3 friends

**IC:** "Recommending that they follow Miquela"?

**E:** No, I showed that I followed a profile of a person who was computer generated who lived as a normal human being

**IC:** What about when Miquela identifies a brand or person in your posts do you usually click on the name to see who is it?

**E:** No. Only when there are brands that I already know. She doesn't have that power of persuasion over me.

**IC:** Hmm! I always click just out of curiosity ahah

**E:** I've never even seen her post brands, so I don't click

**IC:** So you're really immune to marketing

**E:** Yeah.

## **Interview with Interviewee nr.16**

**IC:** Hi! My name is Sofia, I am doing my master thesis in CBS about Lil Miquela and why do people follow her!

I have seen that you follow her, would you mind if I made you some questions?

**I:** Hi sofia,

Ok go ahead ask.

**IC:** Will you start by introducing yourself super fast?:) like your age and where are you from? And maybe what are you doing in your everyday?



**I:** Hi shashank chugh this side from chandigarh, India. 25 y/o. MBA in Finance & Marketing. Working as territory manager in Bajaj Allianz general insurance.

**IC:** How did you find @lilmiquela's account?

**I:** On Facebook i saw a video. & seached her username on insta.

**IC:** Cool! And for how long have you been following her?

**I:** Less then 5 days

**IC:** Are you into new technologies?

**I:** yap

**IC:** Could you tell me why did you follow lil Miquela?

**I:** Her profile is unique

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.19 (UNFINISHED)**

**IC:** Hi! My name is Sofia, I am doing my master thesis in CBS about Lil Miquela and why do people follow her!

I have seen that you follow her, would you mind if I made you some questions?

**I:** I can definitely answer some questions!

**IC:** Will you start by introducing yourself super fast?:) like your age and where are you from? And maybe what are you doing in your everyday?

**I:** Sure! I am 19 and from Wisconsin, USA. I am currently a collage student and I am majoring in graphic design and I am also part of a sorority, which takes up a good chunk of my day.

**IC:** Cool!! And are you interested in new technologies?

**I:** yes!

**IC:** And how did you find @lilmiquela's account?

**I:** I watched one of Shane Dawson's conspiracy videos

**IC:** So why did you decided to start following her?

**I:** I was just interested in what she was posting!

**IC:** Okk! Do you engage with her? Like or comment the posts?

**I:** I like her posts but I don't comment!

**IC:** Do you follow other "robot" influencers?

**I:** No!

**IC:** Oki, and why would you think lil Miquela is the most popular one?

**I:** Um I'm not sure! I don't really know about the other ones but she does have really good music

### **Interview with Interviewee nr.5**

**IC:** Hi! My name is Sofia, I am doing my master thesis in CBS about Lil Miquela and why do people follow her!

I have seen that you follow her, would you mind if I made you some questions?

**H:** Yes! Which questions?

**IC:** First, please tell me a bit about yourself: how old are you, what day-to-day interests do you have...?

**H:** 24y , well, I love music, sing, listen, dance.

**IC:** Perfect! And are you working, studying? :)

**H:** Yas, work and study at home. I study English and Spanish at home, strengthening for good communication.

**IC:** Great!! Where are you from then?

**H:** Brazil

**IC:** And what is your highest level of education?

**H:** I had to stop my higher education to help my mother with other tasks. But I was studying physical therapy

**IC:** Are you interested in new technologies?

**H:** Everything new interests me

**IC:** How did you find out about lil Miquela's account?

**H:** Announcements in the snapchat, I saw her in a tag in the instagram page of @pablovittar, then I started listening to it in Spotify, and then I found her in Instagram

**IC:** Do you think she's a real person?

**H:** I think it's an animation, but there's someone who gives her a voice, everything else is manipulated by computer graphics.

**IC:** Yes! I also don't understand if it's a person with a changed face, or if it's all changed

**H:** It could also be, someone is Miquela herself and is manipulating the image

**IC:** Yes! Do you follow more influencers?

**H:** Like Miquela? Just Magalu, from @magazineluiza

**IC:** What about those friends of lil Miquela? Bermudabae?

**H:** I hadn't seen about the others yet, but I think they must have the same principle as lil Miquela

**IC:** Yes, I think so too! And why did you follow lil Miquela?

**H:** Because I liked her music. Nothing else but the music really made me follow her

**IC:** Do you play any instruments/do you like music?

**H:** No instruments but I love music. Music is the voice of the soul

**IC:** And do you ever comment and interact in Lil Miquela's posts?

**H:** I've never interacted on the posts, just liked them

**IC:** How long have you been following Miquela?

**H:** About 2 months

**IC:** And can you compare it to normal influences?

**H:** The only difference is that it doesn't have many stories, just that, but it is an influencer just like the others

**IC:** Do you think she's honest?

**H:** I think that the people who created her should be more transparent about who is Miquela, there is only information in Wikipedia

**IC:** And you think she's attractive?

**H:** I think the avatar is okay. A different beauty.

**IC:** Yes! And her style? Do you like it?

**H:** Yeah it's pretty cool, alternative

**IC:** And do you share the same values as her? LGBT, Black Lives Matter...?

**H:** I'm LGBT, if she really supports the cause at all, she has my vote

**IC:** Do you believe she lives the life she claims to be living?

**H:** There must be some manipulation there, nothing is 100%

**IC:** "And would you like to be her? Have the fans, singing...?"

**H:** But who is behind her? Is the voice also manipulated, or does someone do it? That intrigues me ahah

**IC:** I don't know! But it must be the voice of someone manipulated to look more robot

**H:** Yes, I think so too

**IC:** And you feel you know her? From seeing so many of your posts, comments...?

**H:** No, I don't feel like I know her.

**IC:** What about when she identifies brands or people in your posts, do you usually click on the tags?

**H:** I don't click on the tags

**IC:** Well, that is it! Thank you so much for the collaboration!

**H:** You are welcome! Happy to help

### **Transcript of Skype interview with Interviewee nr.2**

**S:** Good morning, will you start by introducing yourself? Your age, and field of study or work?

**R:** I am 22 years old and I am doing my masters in Marketing, in Barcelona

**S:** And what do you enjoy doing in your every-day life?

**R:** Besides studying, I really like to meet new people, go out with my friends, never stop home, see TV shows, television – everything that interests me, not only entertaining content, but also politics documentaries

**S:** Would you say you are interested in new technologies?

**R:** Yes, Yes, I believe so, I am interested in everything related to technological innovation – it fascinates me, I try to be always up-to-data, I follow and read articles related to that theme, because it is something I am really interested about

**S:** Therefore, it makes sense that you follow Lil Miquela, because she goes in line with that interest of yours

**R:** Yes, indeed she caught my interest, I believe she is a very interesting project

**S:** Great! And how did you find out about her? About this Instagram account?

**R:** Some friends of mine told me about this new concept of virtual influencers, or influencers digitally created. I decided to learn more about the subject, and felt that she, among the other Virtual influencers, had a great content and was very interesting, therefore I decided to follow her

**S:** Perfect! And what was the first thing you noticed when looking at her profile?

**R:** I enjoyed the fact that she has a history behind and shares this life. Although she is not real, there is someone behind the character how really makes the effort to find a history – I found this interesting and also made the character appearing more credible. Also, caught my attention the fact that she had several pictures with international singers and actors, something impressive, and finally the fact that she creates music and video clips. I was impressive with the amount of content that her creators made in order to give credibility to the character

**S:** okay! So have you been listening and seen her video clips? Did you search them?

**R:** I didn't search them, but I see them when she makes a story or post about it. Its pure curiosity, because I don't download them or the music is not my style. Its more about how could them make a video clip with Lil Miquela on movement. What I enjoy seeing is everything the creators create to make her more appealing and real, not the music itself. But the music certainly helped.

**S:** So do you thing that making her as a singer was a good bet? Increased the credibility of the character?

**R:** Yes, as her character is a singer, it makes sense that her page is similar to one of a real singer. And when a singer creates a music, she shares it in her network, and is constantly creating new content, so it makes sense that Lil Miquela does the same.

**S:** Did you instantly noticed she was not a person?

**R:** When I saw her profile I already knew that she was not a person. But there are times where I wonder whether she, or the friends she poses with are real or fake. And that is a positive thing

**S:** Now more in general, do you follow any real influencer?

**R:** I do, well-known people from the TV, as their life-style interests me and I want to know more and how their life looks like, also other influencers that are not celebrities, but share interesting content, as about technology, fashion, new trends about a certain theme. So not only for entertaining myself but also to gain some knowledge on specific themes

**S:** So when you follow this influencers what are the themes you follow them for?

**R:** Sometimes is entertainment, not really about their content but if they are either funny, or having interesting lives, I would say that's life-style. I also follow some travel pages and other related to fashion.

**S:** Makes sense! And do you interact with the content she posts? DM, comments, likes..?

**R:** I have never sent a DM, but likes yes. I normally don't interact because she makes very big descriptions, which are too big for me to read, therefore I end up not reading them so not being impacted by it. I have never commented. Sometimes I share her profile with my friends, more out curiosity, like "look at this cool trend" is more about the character and not really about the content itself.

**S:** Have you then recommended her profile to friends of yours?

**R:** Yes, I talked about it, and if they are interested then they should follow the page

**S:** Cool! And what are the main interests of your friends? Why did you chose them to send the profile?

**R:** The ones that have the same interests as I do, new technologies, innovation, and this is a great example of all those things, it's an innovative thing that is establishing in the market. I shared as I believed it would be interesting for them so see that.

**S:** Great! And when she tags a brand or person in her posts, do you normally click to see the other page?

**R:** yes yes, I have been doing that. As an example, when she is with some friends, I look at the profile out of curiosity. If they are brands, I wonder why is the brand tagged there, if they are sponsoring or making something with her. This is mostly because I am studying marketing, so the brands part really interests me.

**S:** Can you recall a brand she tagged?

**R:** I am not sure, but maybe Burberry?

**S:** Yes, that's right! And for example Calvin Klein, have you seen the add?

**R:** Not really, I can relate her to the brand, and it makes sense, as CK is a young, irreverent brand, as she is. I didn't see the add, but remember associating her to the brand, maybe I saw an add about it

**S:** Cool! And can you tell me for how long have you been following her?

**R:** Well, I would say about a year from now

**S:** DO you follow any other VSMI?

**R:** Nop, she is the only one. Sometimes I see other virtual friends of her (sometimes I can't even say whether they are virtual or not because its super well-conceived), but she is the only one I follow, because I can't relate to any other one.

**S:** Don't you think it is also because she was the first one you followed, and because you follow her out of curiosity then following one profile is enough?

**R:** Yes, it might be that! I am not very interested in the content they share, and because she was the first one I followed and she is a good representative of this family, project, I don't feel the need to follow anyone else.

**S:** Would you say that even though she is the one you can relate to the most?

**R:** Yes, because I know that she also has a story behind, is well conceived, has brands and sponsorships behind and gets together with singers, which raises my interest in her and the profile is more relevant for me. Example, I saw pictures of her with Rosalia and Pablo Vitar, while the other don't do partnerships with real people and real brands,

**S:** Now related to the character Lil Miquela. Would you say she is honest?

**R:** I believe so, as she ends up sharing the most of her life in IG, her relationship, her state of mind... I think that is very interesting and gives credibility to the profile. I believe she is an authentic character inside her type of character. That is good as it can establish a connection between her and her followers, as she has necessities, interests and human emotions.

**S:** Then would you say you know her? Through looking at her profile?

**R:** I would say so. I know more or less her history, and I can associate to her some personality traits, the way she shares content and presents herself to her followers.

**S:** Could you compare her to a real influencer? Would you say she is more honest, shares more things...?

**R:** I think she is more honest, as she shares much more things about her life than normal people. It is difficult to find a singer that makes a post saying that has ended everything



with the bf, explaining all the details. Therefore, I believe she shares more than the real influencers.

**S:** Therefore you feel that you know her better than to the other influencers?

**R:** Yes, because she shares more about her feelings than the others. The real ones would make an idealistic statement about how is it to finish with the bf, while she really shares the feelings one go through the process.

**S:** Therefore, people can relate more to her than to real influencers who are very theoretical and hide the personal aspects of her life.

**R:** Yes, also to protect themselves. Because Lil Miquela doesn't hide anything, she ends up creating a relationship with her followers.

**S:** Makes sense! Would you say she is physically attractive?

**R:** Ahaha Yes, I think she corresponds to the beauty pattern, and also the irreverent, rebel and determinate personality is associated to the body.

**S:** yes yes, and her style? Do you like it and relate to it?

**R:** I don't relate to it. I would say is very punk rock, but matches her personality, and makes sense and she is a determined person and enjoys living the life. She is not very girly.

**S:** Would you say you share the same values as she does? DO you know which values are these?

**R:** I believe the values she says are about the equality of the society, environmental impact... she has a didactic approach. She is the representation of a girl from our generation, that has this environmental concern, is determines and has the power to share her beliefs through the social media power she has.

**S:** True! Do you also support this causes?

**R:** Yes,! And she makes me think more about this causes.

**S:** DO you support the causes she supports? LGBT, Black lives matter...?

**R:** Yes! I support all this causes, I think they are deserve to be promoted and divulgated, and she uses her influence in the digital world to support and share this causes to have impact in the young that follow her.

**S:** Great! Do you believe she lives the life she says she lives?

**R:** Keeping in mind she is not real yes, I would say so, although her emotions and comments are too much, are not natural. Even if she was a real person, one would never write everything she says about her intimate life. It's too much, to turn the lights into her. Too much effort.

**S:** Great! Would you like to have the life she has? Be her? Have the fans..

**R:** Well, I believe that would be interesting, as she has fans, have a good life, connects with interesting people, supports causes and can have impact on people about those causes, which is a great sentiment I would like to have, to be able to contribute to what you believe on.

**S:** Great! Thank you so much for your collaboration!

**R:** That's fine! You're welcome!