

Virtual Influencers' Leadership: A Catalyst for Emotional Brand Attachment and Fashion Brand Credibility

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Abstract

Influencers in digital marketing strategies are increasingly frequent and effective in promoting certain brands' products and spreading fashions within users' online communities. With the advent of new technologies, virtual influencers (VIs) have also started to spread and be followed.

The influence and leadership held by virtual influencers can foster emotional attachment to a brand and influence behavioural intentions. Emotional attachment in turn enables greater brand credibility. The proposed conceptual model also considers control variables such as product category and the importance of a suitable fit between influencers and sponsored brand products.

The study offers both theoretical and managerial implications, promises to test a conceptual framework, and suggests new insights that can direct the digital marketing strategies of managers in the fashion industry enhancing the role of VIs.

Keywords: Virtual Influencers (VIs); Fashion, Emotional Brand Attachment; Brand Credibility; Virtual Influencers' Leadership.

1. Introduction

Social media influencer marketing represents a highly effective marketing tool to increase brand awareness and attract social media users, especially Gen Y and Gen Z. Influencers can be a source of inspiration for social media users, shaping their followers' perceptions of a particular brand (Shah et al., 2023) and increasing in turn purchase behaviour (Dinh and Lee, 2022; Shao, 2024).

In recent times, virtual influencers (VIs) have gained prominence, gathering a significant fan base and interacting with millions of social media users (Angmo and Mahajan, 2024; Thakur et al., 2016). Specifically, VIs can be defined as computer-generated characters that possess humanlike traits and personalities (Kim et al., 2024; Leighton, 2019; Shah et al., 2023). According to Sands et al. (2022, p. 778), VIs are: *"an entity – humanlike or not – that is autonomously controlled by artificial intelligence and visually presented as an interactive, real-time rendered being in a digital environment"*.

One of the most followed VIs is Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela), a fashion model and musician with about 2.5 million followers on Instagram in 2024. She has been named one of the 25th most influential people on the Internet by Time Magazine in 2018 and she has worked with premium and luxury fashion brands. Luxury brands are indeed increasingly collaborating with virtual influencers to promote their products (Moustakas et al., 2020).

Given the expanding use of VIs in marketing campaigns, researchers have started to focus on such characters and their role in endorsing brands. Previous research has already explored: perceived authenticity of virtual influencers (Koles et al., 2024; Liu and Lee, 2024), influence on brand trust (Muniz et al., 2024), audience reactions to virtual influencers on social media (Arsenyan and Mirowska, 2021), perceived characteristics of VIs, particularly regarding their anthropomorphism (Belanche et al., 2024) or attractiveness (Kim and Park, 2023), the effect on attitude towards brands (De Cicco et al., 2024; Ozdemir et al., 2023), or the impact of virtual influencers on purchase intentions (Kim and Park, 2023; Li et al., 2023), even if, in this case, many authors reported that literature is still in its infancy (Davlenbayeva et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024).

However, many research areas are yet to be explored, regarding in particular how VIs can influence different antecedents of consumers' behavioural intentions, such as brand credibility, a vital brand judgment that potentially shapes the basis of consumer-brand relationships.

To fill this gap, this study aims to investigate the leadership role exercised by VIs in enhancing brand credibility and the extent to which the emotional brand attachment mediates this link. Building on prior literature on brand emotional attachment (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Thomson et al., 2005) and on opinion leadership (Casalò et al., 2020), we propose that VIs, due to their leadership role, in terms of being a model for others and persuasiveness, can exert an influence on brand credibility and on consumers' emotional brand attachment, which may represent also a mediating factor of the relation between VIs and brand credibility. Therefore, the following research questions come up:

RQ1: *To what extent does VIs leadership influence the credibility of a brand?*

RQ2: *To what extent does the emotional brand attachment mediate the leadership role exercised by VIs in enhancing the credibility of a brand?*

2. Conceptual development

2.1 Emotional Brand Attachment and the role of VIs' leadership

Imagine you are at the supermarket, and you are searching for your usual beauty cream. If you are not able to find "your" preferred brand, you will experience some negative emotions such as sorrow due to the lack of purchase. This can be explained by the fact that consumers develop an emotional attachment to a brand or a product in their shopping routine (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Slater, 2000).

Emotional attachment can be defined as an emotional bond between an individual and a specific object (e.g. an influencer or a brand) that is characterized by a strong emotional connection and feelings of affection (Thomson et al., 2005).

These feelings are derived from the sense of accessibility and psychological proximity that individuals perceive when engaging with influencers (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016). According to Thomson and colleagues (2005), this construct embeds three dimensions which can vary based on their intensity (weak vs strong): (i) *affection*, i.e.,

the love towards a brand, (ii) *connection*, i.e., the feeling of bonding with a brand and (iii) *passion*, i.e., the pleasure towards a brand.

The advent of the online world and in particular of social media has facilitated consumers in experiencing an emotional attachment with certain brands, exacerbated sometimes by the communication created by influencers and the easiness of access on social media, which make some niche brands quite famous and particularly appreciated by the public (Harrigan et al., 2017).

This aspect is possible due to the role played by influencers and VIs in boosting social opinion towards brands and products, by offering a personal view and feedback on brand products (Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021). Therefore, influencers and VIs can act as opinion leaders (Childers et al., 2019; Magno, 2017; Xiao et al., 2018), i.e., they assume a great influence in affecting consumers' decision-making (Rogers and Cartano, 1962), along with moving their attitude towards products and purchase behaviours (Godey et al., 2016).

Recent studies demonstrated that VIs create a positive effect on emotional brand attachment by strengthening consumers' behaviour intentions (Kim and Park, 2023; Jin et al., 2019). Thus, the following proposition comes up:

P1: VIs leadership boost a positive effect on emotional brand attachment in their online community.

2.2 VIs and Brand Credibility

Emotions and attachment to a brand can influence consumers' beliefs, influencing consumers' perceptions and purchasing preferences (Dwivedi et al., 2018). Indeed, recent research demonstrate a crucial role played by emotional brand attachment in connecting consumers with entities, stimulating some feelings such as predictability, constancy and security (Dwivedi et al., 2018; Fournier, 1998). This connection is called brand credibility, defined as the "*credibility of the product position information contained in a brand*" (Erdem and Swait, 2004, p. 91). Therefore, brand credibility refers to the ability of a brand to deliver on the promises made and expectations created by consumers (Delgado-Ballester & Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2001; Erdem and Swait, 2004).

In past research, influencers and VIs assumed a crucial role as opinion leaders in influencing consumers' shopping decisions (Casaló et al., 2020; Thakur et al., 2016) and updating them on fashion trends (Rahman et al., 2014). Indeed, the greater the influencers' recommendations towards a product brand are positive, the more the brand assumes outstanding credibility (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Furthermore, the role of VIs in influencing and shaping their community's opinion (Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021) could potentially impact brand credibility. This is attributable to their role as opinion leaders, which makes them assume high credibility when they are closer to their community (Casaló et al., 2020; Thakur et al., 2016). It can be reasonably inferred that emotional brand attachment has a direct impact on brand credibility and that it may also act as a mediator in the positive exacerbation of the relationship between VI leadership and brand credibility.

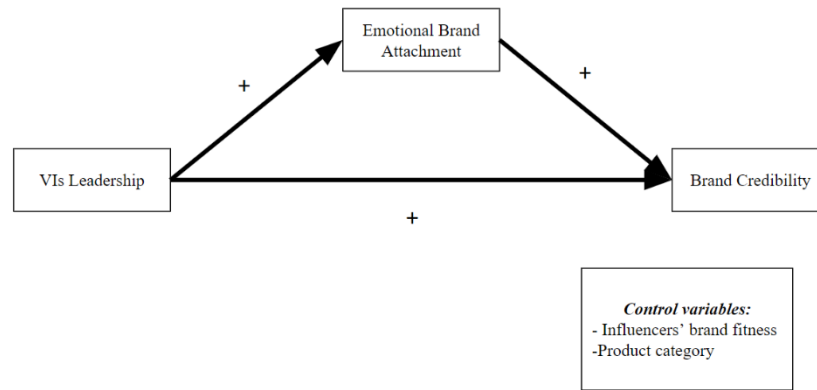
Therefore, we formulated the following propositions:

P2: VIs leadership play a positive relationship with brand credibility.

P3: Emotional brand attachment plays a mediation role between VIs leadership and brand credibility.

In addition, some studies highlighted the importance for a brand of selecting the right influencers in terms of coherency and alignment of ideals and brands' goals (Breves et al., 2019; Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016). The same happens when the product category is considered (Franke et al., 2023). Therefore, we considered inserting the influencer-brand fit as a control variable in this model, along with the product category. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model.

Figure 1: The conceptual model (Authors' Elaboration)



3. Conclusions

We expect that the emotional brand attachment and the leadership of virtual influencers positively influence brand credibility. Following a comprehensive interaction with a VI on a product, consumers will exhibit a heightened proclivity towards emotional brand attachment, as opposed to a lack of interaction. Consequently, the assumption of credibility for that brand will be more pronounced. In addition, we believe that the choice of a VI-supported product category enhances brand credibility if this selected VI aligns with the ideals and the credo of the brand.

This study has important theoretical and managerial implications for academics and marketers. From a theoretical point of view, this paper enriches the theoretical knowledge on emotional brand attachment, VIs leadership and brand credibility and, in particular, it focuses on the concept of brand credibility concerning virtual influencers,

an aspect still under-explored in the literature and promises to test a new conceptual framework between these variables. From a managerial perspective, the study offers useful insights for improving digital marketing strategies using virtual influencers in the fashion industry to enhance brand credibility. Given the several advantages of virtual influencers – such as the wide adaptability they offer given the ease with which they can be customized, the lack of scandals on their part, the fact that they are ageless, tireless and they have not travel expenses (Hoang and Su, 2019; Zhou et al., 2024) – they can represent an opportunity for companies, specifically to target younger consumers, who may continue to engage with these VIs even as they reach adulthood. Thanks also to the constant presence of VIs, they can guarantee good results in terms of word-of-mouth and the engagement between VI and consumer could work well for the products/services or experiences of those brands that are aimed at consumers who want to feel unique (Jhawar et al., 2023). At the same time, marketers need to choose the right VI also based on its attributes (Angmo and Mahajan, 2024). Indeed, the importance of a proper matching between the virtual influencer and the supported brand product is also emphasized. Furthermore, since a sufficiently high consumer perception of the VI's attractiveness that leads to imitating its image, style and characteristics can influence the decision-making process, it is necessary to analyze the VI's image that consumers prefer before planning brand promotion (Kim and Park, 2023). However, the study is not without limitations that may be overcome in future studies. Future research may examine the robustness of the proposed conceptual model by considering different product categories in addition to fashion products, such as technology products often supported by virtual influencers. Furthermore, future research may explore how emotional brand attachment and brand credibility may also generate positive effects on purchase intentions of the product supported by a consistent virtual influencer.

References available under request.