

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Is there a case for virtual influencers?

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Balmain's latest CGI models Margot (left) and Zhi (right), together with Shudu Gram. Image credit: Balmain

By **Lydianne Yap**

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While it might seem more like an episode straight out of the critically acclaimed sci-fi anthology series *Black Mirror*, virtual influencers are no longer limited to the confines of a scriptwriter's imagination, but an integral part of today's reality.

Immaculately 3D-designed virtual personalities such as **Miquela Sousa** and **Shudu Gram** live out their lives on social media decked out in the latest ready-to-wear collections, "attend" fashion shows and even champion social causes.

This development has left consumers equal parts uneasy and intrigued. But brands have been surprisingly receptive to this notion.

In fact, several luxury labels have already initiated collaborations with these virtual celebrities. And given their huge Instagram followings, perhaps it is not hard to see why.

Should you?

Nineteen-year-old Brazilian-Spanish computer-generated model **Miquela Sousa**, or Lil Miquela as she is better known, has more than 1.4 million followers on Instagram. She **took over Prada's Instagram account during the brand's fall/winter 2018/2019 catwalk show** earlier this year.

Italian jeweler Buccellati worked with German CGI influencer Noonooori who currently has an Instagram fan base of around 103,000 on recent a **social media campaign**.

Just two weeks ago, French fashion house **Balmain announced that it had recruited virtual models Shudu Gram, Margot and Zhi into its "Balmain Army"** the high fashion label's equivalent of ambassadors, or spokespeople.

While Margot and Zhi are new digital fabrications created by and exclusive to **Balmain**, Shudu Gram has been in existence since 2017 and is the brainchild of **British photographer Cameron-James Wilson**. She presently boasts about 144,000 followers.

While it remains debatable if CGI models are really an effective way to reach this generation's social media natives, it is undeniable that working with inanimate influencers has its share of benefits for brands.

Image protection

When a brand engages a celebrity ambassador, it is identifying itself with the personality, acknowledging that they stand for the same things and have the same values.

So when a scandal hits the star in question, the brand is affected by association which is why most labels have no qualms about dropping spokespeople at the first hint of a scandal.



Prior to her doping scandal, Maria Sharapova was estimated by Forbes to be the world's highest-paid female athlete. Image credit: Tag Heuer

Who could forget tennis superstar Maria Sharapova's fall from grace two years ago when she admitted to testing positive for a banned substance?

Previously an endorsement magnet, Ms. Sharapova saw brands such as Porsche and Tag Heuer **suspending their deals with her once the news broke**. This is where a virtual influencer could make a significant difference.

While humans are flawed and prone to making mistakes, how much mischief can a digital avatar possibly get up to?

Controlled brand messages

While brands often provide influencers with strict guidelines and clear briefs on the marketing messages they wish to disseminate, the outcome is not always satisfactory.

Messages broadcasted by these individuals will inevitably be colored by their personalities and opinions, causing a potential rift between the brand's original intention and the end result.



Chriselle Lim with her husband and daughter in the much-talked-about Volvo post. Image credit: @chrisellelim

Take popular fashion influencer **Chriselle Lim**, for instance.

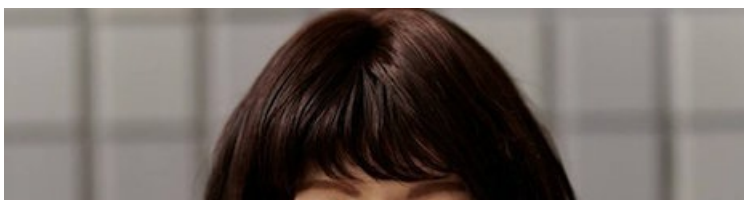
In the early days of her collaboration with luxury automobile manufacturer **Volvo**, Ms. Lim **drew much criticism for her contrived car-related posts**.

Better known for her fashion, beauty and lifestyle-centered content, Ms. Lim was deemed by netizens to be a poor match for the brand.

With CGI influencers, the likelihood of this happening would be reduced, seeing as to how their personalities are malleable based on their creators' or even the brand's design.

Novelty factor

In this day and age where influencers are a dime a dozen, having a virtual influencer front a product could very well be a breath of fresh air.





Erica in the Gucci campaign. Image credit: Gucci

Gucci subscribed to this belief when it enlisted the help of AI-robot Erica and her creator, Japanese roboticist Hiroshi Ishiguro, in **promoting its one of its latest collections**.

As part of **collaborative series "The Performers" with men's title GQ**, the Italian luxury powerhouse threw the spotlight on what is purportedly the world's first fully autonomous, sentient android.

In the campaign, Erica is photographed decked from head to toe in Gucci's latest pieces. The brand also extended this campaign to China, releasing it on **WeChat via an article titled, "Why are you scared of me?"**

Response to the article was positive, generating more than 100,000 views since its release.

In a clear indication that the novelty of such a campaign was a huge driving factor of its success, top commenters on the WeChat article noted that the imagery "felt slightly creepy, but looks really good" and that "the creativity behind this campaign is amazing."

Robotics pioneer Professor Hiroshi Ishiguro stars alongside his futuristic creations, Erica and Geminoid HI-4, in the latest installment of GQ and Gucci's original video series, "The Performers." Featuring a day in the life of Ishiguro in Osaka and Kyoto, it begs the question: What is the distinction between humans and robots? Director: Barbara Anastacio. Credits: GQ and Gucci

WHILE VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS do seem to be a solid alternative for brands looking beyond the Aimee Songs (@songofstyle) and Chiara Ferragnis (@chiaraFerragni) of today, it is not without its pitfalls.

One strong point to consider is the perceived lack of authenticity in working with such characters.

Brands run the risk of appearing artificial after all, everything from the message to the delivery platform is of human design. And millennials, as we all know, value authenticity above all else.

This, however, is all hypothetical at this point.

Only time will tell the true value that virtual influencers can possibly bring to luxury brands.

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