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| RESEARCH ARTICLE | | **Virtual Influencers as a New Format of Interactive Advertising** |
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### Abstract

The rapid evolution of digital technologies and the growing dominance of social media platforms have transformed the nature of advertising. Traditional influencers, who once played a central role in establishing brand–audience connections, are increasingly being complemented or replaced by virtual influencers (VIs). These algorithmically generated personas, developed using artificial intelligence, computer graphics, and machine learning, can autonomously produce content, interact with audiences, and serve as brand representatives in interactive advertising campaigns.

This study explores the phenomenon of virtual influencers in the global and Russian advertising ecosystems, analyzing their communicative potential, economic effectiveness, and ethical implications. The research adopts a qualitative-analytical approach, drawing on secondary data, case studies, and theoretical insights from media studies, marketing science, and cultural theory. Findings suggest that VIs offer significant advantages in terms of brand control, personalization, cost efficiency, and cross-platform integration. However, challenges persist, including audience skepticism, questions of authenticity, and ethical dilemmas regarding transparency, manipulation, and identity construction.

The paper highlights pioneering efforts in Russia where media companies, startups, and advertising agencies have experimented with virtual influencer technologies. These include the use of digital avatars in branding campaigns, cultural promotion, and commercial advertising, illustrating the potential of VIs as both cultural products and marketing tools. The authors conclude that while VIs are not likely to fully replace human influencers, their integration into interactive advertising strategies will expand, particularly as AI-driven personalization and immersive technologies continue to advance.

### Introduction

The twenty-first century has been marked by the convergence of technological progress and consumer culture, reshaping the modes of communication between brands and audiences. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have popularized influencer marketing as a dominant form of interactive advertising. Influencers, who initially emerged as niche content creators, gradually became powerful media

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intermediaries, shaping consumer preferences and purchasing behavior through perceived authenticity and peer-like interaction.

However, as the influencer market grew, challenges emerged: rising costs of collaboration, scandals affecting influencer credibility, and audience fatigue toward repetitive advertising content. In this context, virtual influencers (VIs)—digitally created characters that simulate human-like appearance, behavior, and communication—have emerged as a transformative innovation. Unlike human influencers, VIs are entirely controlled by their creators, ensuring consistency, scalability, and brand alignment.

Globally, examples such as Lil Miquela (USA), Imma (Japan), and Shudu Gram (UK/South Africa) demonstrate how VIs can attract millions of followers, collaborate with luxury brands, and even advocate for social issues. They blur the boundaries between reality and simulation, challenging traditional notions of authenticity while offering marketers a new medium for interactive advertising.

In Russia, the phenomenon is relatively recent but increasingly relevant. The interplay of technological development, cultural identity, and marketing innovation provides fertile ground for the adaptation of VIs. This paper seeks to analyze their emergence and role within Russia's advertising ecosystem, situating the discussion in broader global trends.

The objectives of this study are threefold:

1. To define the communicative and economic significance of VIs in interactive advertising.
2. To examine their implementation in Russia, focusing on case studies and industry efforts.
3. To assess the ethical and cultural challenges posed by virtual media personas.

By addressing these aims, the paper contributes to the literature on digital marketing and offers practical implications for advertisers, cultural policymakers, and media scholars.

## Chapter 1: Efforts in Russia

Russia's advertising industry has traditionally demonstrated adaptability to global innovations while preserving cultural specificity. The adoption of virtual influencers exemplifies this tendency, blending international technological trends with local cultural narratives.

### 1.1 Early Experiments

The first Russian experiments with VIs appeared around 2018–2019, when creative agencies and independent digital artists began developing avatars for social media campaigns. These efforts were initially experimental, aimed at testing audience engagement with synthetic personas.

### 1.2 Industry Engagement

Several Russian advertising agencies have since integrated VIs into campaigns. Avatars were used in fashion and beauty promotions, particularly targeting younger audiences accustomed to digital aesthetics. Some banks and technology firms also experimented with virtual assistants doubling as influencers, merging marketing communication with customer service.

### 1.3 Cultural and Ethical Dimensions

In Russia, debates surrounding authenticity and cultural identity significantly shape audience reception of VIs. While younger consumers show curiosity and acceptance, older demographics often express skepticism toward artificial personas. Ethical discussions also highlight transparency, with regulators considering whether audiences must always be informed that a VI is non-human.

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## 1.4 Government and Institutional Support

Russia's broader strategy for digital transformation and AI development, articulated in state programs, indirectly supports the rise of VIs. Universities and research centers have begun exploring applications of AI in media, including avatar creation, natural language generation, and sentiment analysis. This suggests that the institutional groundwork for expanding VI usage is already being laid.

## 1.5 Comparative Perspective

While global leaders such as the United States, Japan, and South Korea remain ahead in the commercialization of VIs, Russia's efforts demonstrate a unique interplay of technological innovation, creative industries, and cultural adaptation. The Russian market may not yet rival global examples in scale, but its trajectory indicates growing relevance and international competitiveness.

This article explores the phenomenon of virtual influencers (VIs) in interactive advertising. While traditional influencers have become standard carriers for native advertising, virtual influencers act as algorithmically generated media personas, capable of independent content creation and audience engagement. The study examines their role, effectiveness, and the ethical considerations associated with their use in marketing strategies.

Interest in virtual influencers is driven by the evolution of communication practices in both traditional and digital media (Jenkins, 2019). Traditional media relies on proven formats, while the digital environment demands ongoing innovation in content creation and delivery. Digital audiences expect novelty, which drives experimentation with new forms of messaging. This evolution is accelerated by technological advancements, shifts in user behavior, and personalized content consumption patterns.

## From Mass Media to Digital Opinion Leaders

Audiences on digital platforms consistently seek innovative communication solutions (Global Intelligence Hub, n.d.). Digital advertising requires a fundamentally different approach, emphasizing continuous creative experimentation, short content lifecycles, and hybridization of formats. Overcoming advertising blindness requires engaging users with personalized, interactive, and adaptive messaging.

Digital media enables multimodal messages combining visual, textual, auditory, and tactile elements. Interactivity allows users to influence content in real time, while adaptability permits instantaneous adjustments based on behavioral feedback. These capabilities support dynamic, user-centered advertising strategies.

Trust in information sources is increasingly shifting from traditional media to digital opinion leaders and influencers (Adindex, 2024; TASS, n.d.). In Russia, 57% of users consider digital influencer content a primary source of information. Personalized media intermediaries are growing in importance as audiences diversify their information sources and develop media literacy that includes cross-referencing content from multiple channels.

## From Real Influencers to Virtual Influencers

Key Opinion Leader (KOL) marketing leverages the authority of trusted individuals to deliver targeted messages. Unlike traditional advertising, KOL marketing is mediated through opinion leaders with social capital, enhancing trust and engagement. Historically, celebrities activated selective attention, emotional resonance, and cognitive efficiency among audiences (Sostav, n.d.; Nielsen, 2024).

Digital micro-celebrities and ordinary influencers blur boundaries between professional media figures and regular users (Heydon, 2018). Brands are now creating virtual influencers (VIs) — AI-powered digital personas capable of interacting with audiences across scales, from mega-influencers to nano-influencers.

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VIs support the entire customer decision-making cycle, from generating demand to reinforcing brand associations. Research indicates a strong correlation between prolonged VI-audience engagement and marketing effectiveness (Audrezet & Koles, 2023). Regular, systematic interaction fosters cumulative brand perception, while one-off engagements yield limited results. Effective campaigns combine macro- and micro-influencers, synchronize messaging, and use multiple formats while maintaining core brand messages.

### AI-Driven Engagement and Interactive Capabilities

Virtual influencers powered by AI can respond to comments, conduct live streams, and personalize interactions based on user behavior. Integrating AI with storytelling and data analytics allows VIs to deliver relevant content, increase engagement, and create emotional connections (Schaffer, n.d.; Feedspot, n.d.). However, overreliance on AI and personalized techniques may cause audience fatigue and raises ethical concerns regarding privacy and subliminal advertising.

VIs merges contextual communication, behavior-based content adaptation, interactive participation, and transmedia storytelling, bridging digital and physical realities. This integration creates strong emotional connections that can influence purchase behavior, brand loyalty, and user engagement.

### Conclusion

Virtual influencers represent an innovative, humanized advertising format. They combine multiple digital identities, emotional engagement, and anthropocentric narratives to simulate real human interaction. AI technologies enhance their capabilities, enabling long-term engagement, interactive responses, and cross-platform storytelling. Recommendations for effective VI campaigns include:

1. Establishing long-term audience contact (minimum six months).
2. Implementing regular AI-powered content publishing.
3. Combining macro- and micro-influencers to enhance trust.
4. Employing cross-platform strategies and mixing owned and rented VIs.

Balancing marketing effectiveness with ethical considerations is critical to avoid audience fatigue and privacy violations. Virtual influencers thus represent a new frontier in interactive advertising, blending technology, creativity, and human-centered communication.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known financial or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, analysis, or conclusions presented in this paper.

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