

---

## Virtual Influencers (VIs) As Marketing Communication Tools

---

Submitted 10/02/25, 1st revision 27/02/25, 2nd revision 18/03/25, accepted 30/03/25

Anna Mazurkiewicz-Pizło<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The aim of this study was to highlight the importance of virtual influencer marketing in innovative corporate communications and how virtual influencers can be used in marketing strategies. It also describes how they can be used in countries to promote tourist visits.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The study used a systematic literature review based on the Scopus database. Google scholar, Academia.edu and Research Gate databases were used to complement the study. In order to diagnose the use of VIs in the tourism industry, an analysis of related websites was carried out.

**Findings:** Virtual Influencer Marketing can be an effective and cost-efficient marketing tool that can be used in all types of organisations, both profit and non-profit, but it requires strategic planning. The effectiveness of influencers comes from the skilful application of social psychological theories, Social Proof, Authority, Halo Effect, Liking and Sympathy and the Two-Step Knowledge Flow Theory.

**Practical Implications:** Virtual influencers have become the link between marketing activities in the real world and those in the digital world. With the help of advanced AI, CGI and LLM technologies, companies can use avatars as a more cost-effective, brand-safe and innovative alternative to human influencers. Attention to ethical issues and consumer safety should increase with the growing popularity of virtual influencers as a marketing communications tool.

**Keywords:** Firm strategy, marketing, avatars, influencer marketing, marketing communication, marketing strategies, brand, management.

**JEL codes:** L10, M31, O32.

**Paper type:** Research paper.

**Acknowledgements:** "This research work is financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education for the years 2025/2026 as part of the University Research Project of AWF Warsaw, UPB No. 11, entitled: Social Aspects of Sport and Physical Culture Practices in the Cultural Perspective of Tradition, History, and Modernity."

---

<sup>1</sup>PhD., Assistant professor, Deputy Head of the Department of Management, Organization and Economics, Physical Education Academy, Poland,  
e-mail: [anna.mazurkiewiczpizlo@awf.edu.pl](mailto:anna.mazurkiewiczpizlo@awf.edu.pl);

---

## 1. Introduction

In the last decade of the 21st century, the introduction of influencers into marketing management has become one of the most widely used communication tools. It is a dominant and targeted way of connecting a brand with its consumers (Sand *et al.*, 2022), which is why companies are allocating an increasing part of their budgets to working with people who are recognisable online and have a large number of followers.

In European countries, the value of the market for this type of marketing activity was almost USD 14 billion in 2023, doubling since 2019. The global value of this market will be \$21.1 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2023).

This is a threefold increase from 2019. Influencer marketing has become an important strategic tool for companies seeking to increase their reach and profitability, as well as to build a strong bond with consumers, develop their loyalty and promote the brand, significantly strengthening its image.

The development of social media has played an important role in this (Srivastava *et al.*, 2024; Mazurkiewicz-Pizło, 2023; 2025), fundamentally changing the communication possibilities of both companies and society. The use of influencer marketing requires the development of a process to select the right people whose reach and number of followers is high and whose activities and recommendations are of interest to the potential market (Ki *et al.*, 2020; Mouritzen, Penttinen, and Pedersen, 2023).

## 2. Literature Review

An influencer is a person who shapes opinions. They are content creators who specialise in a particular topic. This is usually travel, cooking, lifestyle, make-up, fashion, cars, sports, etc., which are topics of broad interest to people who use the internet. The content provided can be educational, entertaining or otherwise inspiring.

To become an influencer, the content creator must have a large number of followers who are perceived by the business as potential consumers of the products they recommend. The condition for acquiring a large group of followers is the ability to build strong relationships and bonds with the recipients of the content (Mouritzen, Penttinen, and Pedersen, 2024).

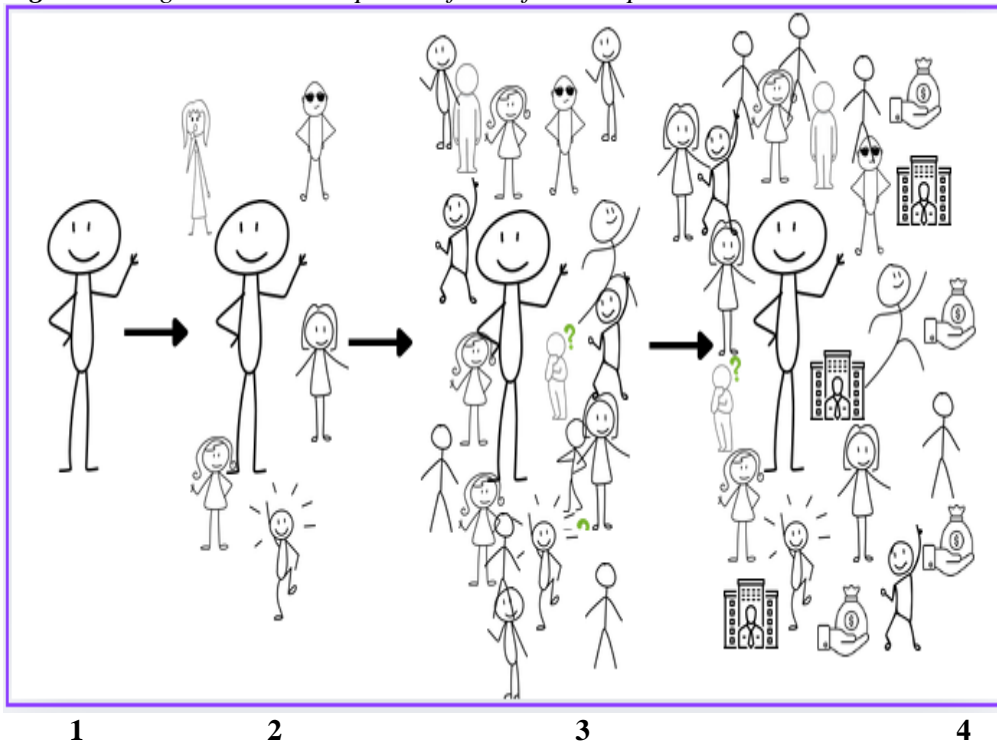
Influencer marketing not only affects the brand strategies of companies, but also changes the behaviour of buyers in the market. Research shows that 60% of consumers trust online recommendations from social media influencers, which translates into almost half of all purchase decisions (Digital Marketing Institute, 2024).

The use of social media is changing the way companies work with small and medium sized businesses to promote brands and products and build long-term relationships (Ekinici, Dam and Buckle, 2025).

One of the reasons for the use of influencers by companies, apart from the development of new technologies (including primarily SM), is the decreasing effectiveness of traditional marketing channels. A person who is able to gain the interest and trust of followers creates opportunities to enter the so-called social communication channels, which enjoy greater trust among consumers and are more effective and efficient in marketing strategies.

Building a strong position by an influencer is not a one-off act, but a longer process consisting of systematic actions taken by a person who wants to exist in the network (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Stages in the development of an influencer position



**Source:** Own study.

The development of influencer marketing has also been driven by changes in consumer lifestyles, including widespread access to the internet and, in the case of Generation Z, being virtually online all the time (Slepian *et al.*, 2024). As a result, traditional marketing channels have become less effective. Marketing communications have largely moved online.

Influencer marketing is an effective and cost-effective marketing tool that can reach a wide and engaged audience without being perceived as traditional advertising (Ye *et al.*, 2021).

The main motive for using IM is to leverage the popularity, credibility and influence of social media influencers to promote brands, products or services to an engaged audience. The main objectives include reaching target audiences, leveraging influencer credibility, increasing brand awareness and visibility, driving customer acquisition and sales, adding a human touch to marketing, and creating authentic content (Singh, Tiwari, and Tiwari, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to the increased use of VIs in marketing strategies. Social isolation and the shift to online platforms have accelerated the adoption of digital marketing strategies in most companies. Brands have begun to use VIs to engage consumers in the midst of social isolation. They have also responded to consumer demand for innovative and engaging content (Shi, 2023).

Influencer marketing as a marketing communication tool is used because of the following benefits: The ability to build relationships with buyers, enabling the creation of more personal connections, resulting in greater trust and a better brand image (Pick, 2020; Farivar and Wang, 2022; Nadányiová and Šujanská, 2023).

Content provided by influencers is liked, commented on and shared more often than traditional advertising (Zhang and Huang, 2021), increased brand awareness, especially among younger buyers (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2016; Rambocas and Metivier, 2024), more precise targeting, resulting in higher ROI (return on investment) (Singh, Tiwari, and Tiwari, 2023; Beichert *et al.*, 2024), leveraging network effects and social learning (Berman, Oery, and Zheng, 2023), increasing conversion rates for brands by creating compelling narratives for audiences (Schorn, Vinzenz, and Wirth, 2022).

A positive aspect of using influencer marketing is the psychological premises related to the personal stories of the influencer and the relationship they build with their followers, leading to greater trust and loyalty from consumers (Barari, 2023).

The literature also identifies negative phenomena associated with the use of IM that can affect the image of the company (Sand *et al.*, 2022). These phenomena can arise from risks that, according to the study by Ekinci, Dam and Buckle (2025), can be divided into the following groups:

- *The promotion of harmful products:* Often, influencers take advantage of their established relationship with observers by promoting products such as high-energy drinks and fast food, high in sugar, saturated fat, etc., slimming pills, detox teas, dietary supplements, cosmetics containing harmful

- chemicals. Influencers also support the normalisation of alcohol consumption by presenting it in a positive light.
- *Spreading misinformation:* By building close relationships with observers, influencers can become authorities for them, leading them to believe any information they provide, which may not necessarily be scientifically proven.
  - *Reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards:* It can contribute to false self-esteem in viewers who are presented with standards of beauty and ideal body images, often created using filters and artificial intelligence tools.
  - *Promoting a culture of comparison:* Influencers often present a luxurious lifestyle, an idealised version of reality, which can lead observers to feel frustrated when comparing their standard of living to that of an idol.
  - *Encourage deceptive consumer practices:* Influencers who do not respect ethical behaviour may falsify the number of observers by buying them, promote products without disclosing the financial benefits of doing so, encourage the purchase of counterfeit luxury goods.
  - *Concerns:* Concerns about invasion of privacy through the acquisition of sensitive personal data and its collection and management by the influencer.

Research by Mouritzen, Penttinen and Pedersen (2023) confirms that marketers' initially optimistic and uncritical approach to the use of influencers in communication strategies has become more cautious over time.

This was due to the abusive and unethical behaviour of some influencers, which had a negative impact on brand image. This led to broken contracts and withdrawals. Adverse situations caused by influencers have become one of the reasons for the use of virtual influencers (VIs) in marketing communications to replace real people (Allal-Chérif, Puertas and Carracedo, 2024).

### **3. Research Methodology**

Influencer marketing is a form of activity in which a company establishes paid cooperation with a popular person on the Internet who has a large following, runs a blog, vlog and actively publishes on social media in order to effectively communicate the marketing of a brand, product or company.

The effectiveness of this type of activity stems not only from the popularity of the influencer, but also from the ability to influence their recipients by building bonds and relationships. However, not all hired individuals act ethically, for example, the number of followers can be falsified by buying them and inflating the influencer's popularity statistics (Ye *et al.*, 2021).

Influencer marketing continues to evolve. In recent years, we have seen the process of replacing human influencers with digital avatars. Examples of their use include the largest fashion brands such as Prada, Gucci and Louis Vuitton, who wanted to

avoid the risk of associating their brand with the name of a human influencer for fear of damaging their reputation through inappropriate behaviour. The aim of this study was to highlight the importance of virtual influencer marketing in innovative corporate communications and how virtual influencers can be used in marketing strategies. It also describes how they can be used in countries to promote tourist visits.

A systematic literature search was carried out. The search was based on the Scopus database. As a result, a total of 135 articles were found. Finally, 93 publications remained after entering the following keywords: Virtual Influencer, Social Media, Influencer Marketing and Marketing.

An analysis of the abstracts was then carried out, resulting in 46 publications. Google Scholar, Academia.edu and Research Gate were used to complement the work. An analysis of websites related to the tourism industry was carried out in order to diagnose the use of VIs in the tourism industry.

The following research questions were formulated in the paper:

- *What scientific theories are involved in the mechanism of the impact of virtual influencers?*
- *What types of virtual influencers are used in marketing strategies?*
- *What are the advantages and limitations of using virtual influencers?*
- *Are virtual influencers used to promote tourism destinations?*

#### **4. Research Results and Discussion**

##### **4.1 Influencer Marketing Theories**

When considering the effectiveness of influencer marketing, there are many scientific theories to consider. People who do not know what to do, what decision to make, or what view is right adopt the same attitudes as other people, according to the theory of social proof (Cialdini, 1984).

What is right is what most people in a social group do. According to this theory, people will choose to buy certain brands or adopt a certain lifestyle based on what others think.

Influencers influence opinions because the follower does not know what to choose, does not have beliefs or experiences related to a particular product/manufacturer, so they choose what the influencer recommends or uses. Similarly, the mechanism of an influencer's influence on people is shown by the rule of authority presented by R. Cialdini (2000). Sharing interesting content about passions, expressing opinions, formulating advice creates the feeling that the influencer is an expert in a particular field. In the minds of the recipients, an image of a trustworthy authority is created.

The credibility of an influencer can also be a result of the perception of his or her attractiveness. In line with the halo effect, a person's attractiveness has an impact on their positive image in the environment. This, in turn, builds trust in the content they promote. As a result, the brands and products they represent become more valuable (Thorndike, 1920).

Cialdini (2000) takes a similar view and formulates the principle of liking and sympathy. Applying this principle, an influencer who is good-looking and aesthetically pleasing will evoke a sense of sympathy and liking, which will also translate into greater effectiveness.

Influencer marketing is a form of relationship marketing. It is only by building a lasting and trusted relationship with followers that they can be effective. The influencer's impact is based on the theory of the two-stage flow of knowledge.

According to this theory, the flow of information is not direct. It is based on the existence of two groups. One consists of opinion leaders (authorities) and the other group, the so-called passive followers. Media information is directed to the first group, which, thanks to its influence, can affect the decisions of other market participants (Rogers, 1976).

Interpersonal communication is a more effective method of influence than mass communication. The influencer marketing mechanism is de facto based on a two-stage flow of knowledge. The influencer receives information about the product, the brand, the company, which he then passes on to people who observe his actions.

Virtual influencers can come in many different forms and guises. They do not necessarily exist in the physical world. The following types are distinguished (King, 2023):

- CGI characters (Computer Generated Imagery - CGI characters). These are digital avatars designed to resemble a human or animal. Avatars can take many forms, from simple cartoon-like creatures to complex, highly realistic, real-life characters;
- 3D Models. Like CGI, these are digital avatars created using 3D modelling software. They can range in complexity from simple 3D models to highly realistic avatars;
- Deepfake avatars. These types of avatars are created using artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning algorithms with the intention of creating a living, breathing person. Deepfake technology allows users to manipulate or "spooft" video and audio content. It is often used by people to create realistic avatars that imitate famous celebrities or public figures;

- Hybrid influencers. These are virtual characters made up of elements of both real and virtual content. An example would be using a combination of real world footage and CGI or 3D programmes to create the desired content;
- Virtual pets. These are digital avatars designed to resemble real animals. They are often used in advertising to promote pet products (King, 2023).

Avatars are characterised by varying degrees of anthropomorphism. They can be very similar to humans, or they can only have human-like features, such as a human with an imaginary, non-human head. Hyper-realistic influencers are created using CGI technology, which allows them to take on 3D forms that give the illusion that they come from the physical world. They share different content and behave in a way that reflects their similarity to the real world, e.g. the Bee Influencer looks and behaves like a bee while providing educational content about the importance of bees in the ecosystem.

Content provided by virtual beings can be combined with real people, so the boundaries between the virtual and physical worlds may become increasingly blurred (Mouritzen, Penttinen, and Pedersen, 2023). Considering the degree of anthropomorphisation, virtual influencers are divided into 3 categories, cartoon images, medium-realistic images and hyper-realistic images.

The first category is based on human images, but they are highly animated with a plastic appearance and the ability to perform phantom movements. It is believed that this type of influencer can grab consumers' attention and increase their engagement and loyalty.

Hyper-realistic virtual images show the highest level of anthropomorphism. This type of influencer has a human-like appearance with detailed representation of hair, pupils and other details. Such a realistic appearance makes it difficult for consumers to quickly identify a virtual being as opposed to a human.

Hyperrealistic influencers are characterised by a high degree of anthropomorphism of the image and can convey human emotional characteristics, which gains consumer trust (Pan, Qin and Zhang, 2024).

When brands use human customer service agents, their personal lifestyle choices, traffic conditions, and other factors can affect how they perceive the brand they work for, the customer they interact with, and how they respond to customer service requests.

By using virtual influencers in customer service, brands can minimise the risk of 'human error' by having more control over the influencer's behaviour and customer service responses. Some of the world's most popular VIs include Lil Miquela, Lu Do Magalu and Noonooori (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Pictures of the world's most famous virtual influencers Lil Miquela, Lu Do Magalu I Noonouri



Source: Instagram (25.02.25).

One of the most famous VIs is Lil Miquela. She was created in 2016 with the typical look of an "Instagram" girl (Skindzier, 2023). In 2025, she has almost 7 million followers (2.4 million followers, 1,362 posts on Instagram, 3.4 million on TikTok, 1.1 million on Facebook (see Table 1).

The account has collaborated with many well-known brands, such as Chanel. Currently the most popular in the world is Lu do Magalu, who has collaborated with Coca Cola and Adidas, among others (Skindzier, 2023). She has 7.4 million followers on TikTok, over 14 million on Facebook and 7.7 million on Instagram, with 3,048 posts (Table 1). The third is Noonouri, a virtual model who looks like a doll (Skindzier, 2023).

**Table 1.** Statistics on observations of virtual influencers

| Virtual Influencer | INSTAGRAM           |                 | TIKTOK              |                 |
|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|
|                    | Number of followers | Number of posts | Number of followers | Number of likes |
| LIL MIQUELA        | 2.4 million         | 1362            | 3.4 million         | 48.4 million    |
| LU DO MAGALU       | 7.7 million         | 3048            | 7.4 million         | 63.8 million    |
| NOONOU RI          | 496 thousand        | 2053            | 80.7 thousand       | 649 thousand    |

Source: Own study based on Instagram and TikTok profile, 25/02/25.

There are many advantages to creating VIs. These include the fact that they exist only in digital form, that they do not have their own views, that they do not express their own opinions, that there is no possibility of making communication mistakes,

---

and that there is no risk of a crisis resulting from inappropriate behaviour or the breaking of generally accepted social rules.

In marketing strategies that use them, characteristics such as effectiveness and authenticity are important. The perceived reality of the influencer is crucial and determines consumer trust and commitment (Mouritzen *et al.*, 2024). VIs are often perceived as less effective than real people due to their inauthenticity (Liu, 2024; Zhou, 2023). Research also suggests that the effectiveness of VIs depends on the type of product being promoted. Virtual influencers tend to generate higher purchase intentions for utility products.

On the other hand, human influencers are more effective for hedonic products (Belanche *et al.*, 2024). In turn, Shi's research (2023) proves that VIs are effective when they are tailored to specific product groups. It is emphasised that these are primarily goods related to digital culture, such as NFTs and video game skins, suggesting that brands targeting younger, digital audiences may find VIs more effective, especially in situations where they match the digital persona of the influencer (Shi, 2023).

In addition to the effectiveness of VIs, consumer perceptions of brand value and ethical issues are also important. VIs can increase brand engagement, but there remains the issue of assessing their credibility and the truthfulness of the content conveyed to followers (Muslimah, 2023).

#### **4.2 Virtual Influencers - Business Challenges**

Traditional influencers are typically individuals whose fame is rooted in institutional contexts, such as acting, music or sports. VIs, on the other hand, use social media platforms to build recognition based on a personal brand and a strong commitment to building relationships with followers (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Jin and Ryu, 2019). They use social media to act as opinion leaders. They become experts in various fields, evaluating products to influence purchasing decisions.

They often become macro influencers with 100,000 to 1 million followers and mega influencers with more than 1 million followers. Most human influencers have a reach of 1,000 to 100,000 and less than 1,000, being micro and nano influencers respectively (Dabiran *et al.*, 2024). The use of VIs is widely applied in different areas of business activity. Not only in the area of brand promotion, with which they are most often associated.

The main benefit of using VIs is the reduction of operational costs in customer service. Apart from the initial cost of implementing the system, they are less expensive than employing people. In addition, they can operate flexibly according to service demand without the need to employ additional agents, and the customer service provided is consistent, predictable and uniform, with a minimum of service

interaction errors and high reliability. VIs enable the elimination of human errors (Sand *et al.*, 2022).

Another way in which companies can use VIs is in the metaverse. This is a three-dimensional world inhabited by avatars of real people (Kim, 2021). It creates the possibility of a digital experience on the Internet that is persistent, immersive, three-dimensional and virtual. It offers experiences related to entertainment, work, shopping and consumption. The Gucci brand metaverse is one of its successes. A virtual Roblox garden exhibition was developed, which was visited by 19 million people.

Users could visit different themed rooms and buy skins, which were used to embellish their avatars. Gucci skins were initially sold in limited quantities. Players could resell them and, for example, a Dionysus GG shoulder bag, originally priced at 475 Robux (5.5 USD), sold for 350,000 Robux (4115 USD), exceeding the retail price on the real market (Sand *et al.*, 2022).

In the metaverse, brands have three options for using VIs. They can create their own VIs, collaborate with existing VIs, or augment real-world influencers, brand ambassadors or celebrities with digital doppelgangers that can interact in the metaverse and have the potential to transform virtual showrooms, fashion shows and fitting rooms.

They can move from random experiments to increasingly widespread brand-building experiences, such as fashion brand Dior, which created Angelbaby to virtually attend its 2021 Shanghai show. Digital doubles are created using CGI. They create opportunities for longevity through active participation across multiple platforms and formats using digital technologies. VIs are commonly used in advertising. In recent years, however, they have begun to transcend the world of social media and extend their influence to other advertising formats that contribute to the growth of online followers.

One of the most famous advertising partnerships is the aforementioned Lil Miquela with Samsung. She appears in the ad among human celebrities. In addition, her Instagram account only shows her with a Samsung smartphone, a form of product placement.

VIs often have higher engagement rates than human influencers, greater effectiveness and the ability to capture the attention of young people, giving them a greater opportunity to build a community around their brand. Their advantage lies in their ability to attract communities at scale, engage across multiple platforms, and respond to all comments in real time (Sand *et al.*, 2022).

Despite the popularity, effectiveness and efficiency of VIs, there are a number of challenges associated with their widespread use. Sand *et al.* (2022) identified five,

---

consumer concerns, unrealistic notions of beauty, inauthenticity, regulatory and ethical concerns, and subversion.

In terms of consumer concerns, brands need to strike a balance between creating hyper-realistic, human-like influencers and fictional characters, as people respond differently to each type of influencer. Some consumers are also concerned about the falseness of creating emotional stories.

When it comes to presenting VIs, audiences often find them to be unreliable. In relation to the unrealistic concept of beauty, VIs are mainly young women with beautiful figures and exceptional beauty. The danger of virtual influence is that it creates unrealistic expectations about concepts such as beauty, style and culture. Another area of danger in the use of VIs is inauthenticity.

VIs may not have a reliable connection with their followers, as it is known that the main motivation for their creation is profit. Another issue that requires special attention from entrepreneurs is regulatory and ethical requirements. It is necessary to clearly inform consumers about the use of VIs to avoid false or misleading advertising and impersonation of real celebrities. It is necessary to establish responsibility for published content. Marketers should also consider copyright or trademark issues when creating their own virtual influencers.

A challenge for entrepreneurs using VIs is the constant monitoring of the created entities, which are usually controlled by AI, making them vulnerable to attacks by consumers or activists. The algorithms behind virtual influencers are designed to respond to consumers in context and in real time.

This functionality allows consumers to hack and manipulate the algorithms, causing them to act in unexpected ways. They may act in ways that are contrary to their original intentions or that are offensive to others. When promoting a brand, it is important to ensure that VIs, especially AI-controlled CIs, cannot be manipulated into transgressive behaviour (Sand *et al.*, 2022).

#### **4.3 Virtual Influencers - Application in Tourism**

The development of artificial intelligence (AI) is being used in many sectors. Tourism has also recognised its potential. Among the most common applications are virtual assistants, which are changing the relationship between tourism professionals and travellers.

VIs, chatbots on travel company websites, virtual hostesses at airports, interactive digital guides and virtual and augmented reality are being used. All of these innovative tools help to improve the customer experience while promoting destinations more effectively.

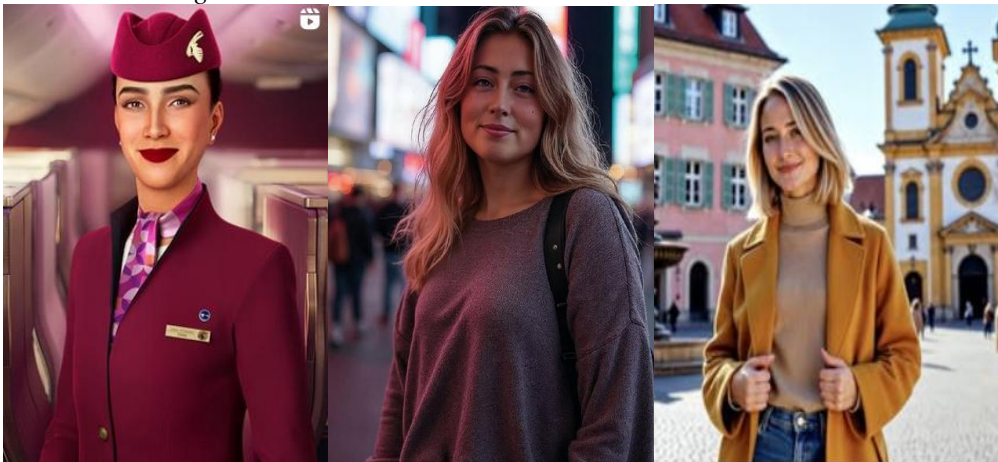
Research into the use of virtual influencers in tourism shows that they are perceived as less sincere but more exciting than their human counterparts, and this approach is being applied to tourism brands. Matching VIs with brands perceived as 'exciting' increased the effectiveness of recommendations.

The use of VIs can create positive associations with the brand. For example, the Italian Ministry of Culture used Botticelli's famous Venus as an influencer (Figure 3), which did not please Italian society, which criticised it for its alleged lack of respect (Zhang, Shao and Wang, 2025).

On the other hand, research by Kholkina, Chesnkov and Zelenskaya (2025) suggests that for Generation Z, traditional influencers are still a more effective marketing tool than VIs, who create a greater socio-psychological distance. Consumers with a higher need for uniqueness and novelty feel less distance from VIs (Kholkina, Chesnokova and Zelenskaya, 2025).

Virtual assistants have ushered in a new era in the tourism industry, creating positive experiences for travellers. Thanks to their ability to constantly learn and adapt, virtual assistants are becoming an important tool in achieving the marketing goals of tourism companies and regional authorities. Examples of positive consumer perceptions of VIs include Sama, Lena, Emma, Anne Kerdi and MiKo (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** *Virtual influencers in tourism: Sama, Lena, Emma, Anne Kerdi i MiKo. Venus Botticielego.*





**Source:** *Insagram* (28.02.25) and <https://en.italiani.it/Botticelli%27s-Venus-becomes-a-virtual-influencer-of-the-beautiful-country/> (28.02.25).

Sama is a Qatar Airways virtual character. She made her debut on social media in 2024 as an ambassador for the airline. She is the world's first digital flight attendant. Sama means "heaven" in Arabic. She communicates with passengers through Qatar Airways' digital platforms, including the app and QVerse, an immersive digital experience. She can answer frequently asked questions, provide destination information and offer assistance tips, while constantly learning and improving her answers through interaction.

In addition to her role as a flight crew member, Sama is also a social media user. She has an Instagram account @SamaOnTheMove where she shares travel tips, anecdotes and behind-the-scenes impressions of her life as a digital cabin crew member. By combining human contact with technological innovation, travel becomes more engaging and personalised. (<https://www.qatarairways.com/press-releases/en-WW/245937-sama-on-the-move-the-world-s-first-digital-human-cabin-crew-debuts-on-social-media>).

The content provided by Sama encourages the discovery of new places, deepens the knowledge about travel, including information about the extensive network of Qatar Airways routes serving over 170 destinations. In SM, Sama serves as an ambassador for the airline.

TUI created VI Lena with the help of the Trojan Monkeys agency. She was chosen by a panel of 2,000 testers from five profiles proposed by TUI. The aim of the activity is to inform consumers in Belgium and the Netherlands about TUI's offer. Lena, who appears against a backdrop of real images, shares her insights on global destinations and adventures in SM and on the TUI blog. She also answers customer questions about TUI's services. She is an example of the innovative use of AI to improve the customer experience when travelling.

The virtual influencer always reveals her identity, demonstrating TUI's responsible use of AI. Lena travels to different locations around the world, sharing parades, tips and inspiration, enriching TUI's storytelling with personal accounts from human creators such as Katrien Goris. The use of VI in the communication strategy is only a complement to the company's physical ambassadors, while Lena will have a permanent presence in SM, where all content is created and managed exclusively by her.

(<https://www.aviation24.be/tour-operators/tui-group/tui-unveils-lena-an-ai-explorer-redefining-travel-inspiration/>).

Another example is the German Centre for Tourism (DZT), which launched its first VI project using artificial intelligence to promote German tourism worldwide, in collaboration with the Creator agency. AI was used to create an interactive influencer called Emma. She is available 24/7 and her task is to inspire potential tourists to spend their holidays in Germany.

Emma will become a key element of the long-term digital communication strategy. She will work in parallel with human influencers and complement the classic influencer marketing activities, which are very effective and generate millions of views on social media. Emma is a modern, outgoing Berliner in her 30s. She is passionate about travel and new technologies.

On her channel @EmmaTravelsGermany she inspires her followers to travel around Germany, accompanies them on their journeys and shares her experiences in an entertaining and informative way. Technically, Emma is a fully AI-generated "digital person".

Thanks to advanced deep learning algorithms and large language models (LLM), she can chat with observers in over 20 languages. By the end of the year, the AI assistant will be able to use not only information from [germany.travel](http://germany.travel), but also data from the DZT's open data sources in real time. The introduction of VI is another AI-based initiative.

The German Centre for Tourism has been using AI for several years. AI helps to get to know and understand customers better and to provide them with tailor-made offers. The chatbot, which has been running since 2020, answers tourists' questions on the website around the clock. DZT also uses immersive technologies (AR, VR) and applications for smart speakers. In marketing activities, it uses AI to create and implement digital marketing tools, such as the creation of resources such as images and videos, texts, translations and graphic design (<https://www.germany.travel/de>).

Virtual influencers are also used in regional tourism. The British authorities used Anne Kerdii as part of the regional digital strategy in SM. She embodies a young and enthusiastic personality. Interestingly, the name Anne Kerdii is deliberately associated with AI by using these letters at the beginning and end of the name.

The influencer's role is not just about sharing content, but takes an immersive approach, sharing fictional travel stories and anecdotes about the most important and lesser known places in Britannia. Based on a digital platform, the avatar creates innovative features illustrated with virtually generated photos and videos.

With VI, Britannia is emphasising its strong identity and heritage, while staying in line with contemporary communication trends (Slate, 2025). The local government of Warmia-Masuria (Poland) also implemented VI in its communication strategy. The aim was to promote European funds and the region. The avatar called Miko Kopernik (MiKo) runs an Instagram profile and uses visual content to showcase the region. The name MiKo refers to the figure of Nicolaus Copernicus, who was associated with Warmia for most of his life.

The idea of creating the character was based on building his identity using elements of the scientist's biography set in modern times. Like Copernicus, MiKo is interested in space and economy, but he also runs, rides a bike and, most importantly, uses all the advantages of Warmia, Mazury and Poviatic. The profile has a lifestyle character.

The presentation of everyday, active life in the region aims to build a friendly community around MiKo, who will also be its ambassadors. This approach makes the avatar credible by embedding him in the value system of the region, i.e., healthy life in Warmia and Mazury, social and sports activities.  
([https://www.instagram.com/miko\\_kopernik](https://www.instagram.com/miko_kopernik)).

In Italy, a different concept of using an influencer has been adopted. Sandro Botticelli's Venus has been used for promotional purposes to promote tourism in the Belpaese region. Venus appears in a denim miniskirt, riding a Vespa and eating pizza. Under the Colosseum, by the sea or in the alleys of a typical village.

The magnificent Venus, one of the most famous female figures in Italian art, is the protagonist of the new international tourism promotion campaign launched by the Ministry of Tourism. Venus is part of the campaign "Open yourself to wonders". She also has an Instagram profile [venereitalia23](https://www.instagram.com/venereitalia23), is on the [Italia.it](http://Italia.it) website and on other platforms.  
(<https://www.nuovi-turismi.com/turismo-virtual-influencer-venere-botticelli-italia>).

Another example of the use of VIs in the tourism industry is Xingtong. This is a popular virtual idol chosen in Changsha (China) as an ambassador for heritage tourism. In addition, a popular virtual YouTuber, Kizuna AI, was chosen to promote Japanese traditional culture to international tourists (Zhang, Sun and Li, 2024).

The use of VIs has brought many benefits to tourism managers, including reduced financial costs and difficulties compared to working with top human influencers (Mrad, Ramadan and Nasr, 2022; Zhang, Sun and Li, 2024).



People with many followers on social media are becoming increasingly recognisable. This translates into their ability to influence tourists' decision-making processes. The new phenomenon of creating virtual influencers poses a great challenge to their human counterparts and changes the dynamics of marketing communication in tourism (Menga *et al.*, 2025). The integration of different forms of destination promotion and the associated actions of both human and virtual influencers can also be a major challenge.

## **5. Conclusions, Proposals, Recommendations**

The last decade has seen an increase in the use of influencers as a marketing communications tool to build trust in a brand and connect it with consumers. The effectiveness of their activities results from the skilful application of social theories and rules, including social proof, authority, the halo effect and the two-stage information flow theory.

Companies are increasingly allocating financial resources to this type of activity. This leads to a growing interest among different people to publish interesting content in order to gain a growing number of followers and creates an opportunity to make large amounts of money in a short period of time.

However, not everyone acts ethically, which has become one of the reasons for using new technologies to create digital creations (avatars) using AI, CGI and LLM, among others. These can be very simple creations or very advanced, hyper-realistic look-alikes of characters appearing in the real world.

The increasing use of virtual influencers by companies is an indication of their commercial strength. Some have greater reach and engagement rates than traditional creators. VIs are used in many industries: fashion, beauty, automotive, entertainment and even travel. The virtual influencer can be an effective and cost-effective tool for all organisations, both for-profit and not-for-profit, but requires strategic planning.

The studies presented show many benefits of using virtual influencers as a marketing communication tool. Threats have also been identified, which is why organisations using this type of communication must be socially responsible, which means that content transmitted by VIs should not: promote products and beverages that have a negative impact on human health, reinforce unrealistic beauty standards, spread false information, use fraudulent practices.

Any product promoted must be checked for quality and safety of consumption or use, and any information provided must be verified and not leave any doubt. The use of modern technology to create virtual characters can be a temptation to use the image of famous people as virtual influencers without their knowledge.

These are illegal activities. In addition, they can mislead consumers as to the true

source of the information, so the law on image protection and property rights should be strictly observed. In addition, care should be taken to provide information that the image was created using AI.

## References:

- Allal-Chérif, O., Puertas, R., Carracedo, P. 2024. Intelligent influencer marketing: how AI-powered virtual influencers outperform human influencers. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, Elsevier, 200. DOI:10.1016/j.techfore.2023.123113.
- Barari, M. 2023. Unveiling the dark side of influencer marketing: how social media influencers (human vs virtual) diminish followers' well-being. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 41(8), 1162-1177. <https://doi.org/10.1108/mip-05-2023-0191>.
- Beichert, M., Bayerl, A., Goldenberg, J., Lanz, A. 2024. Revenue Generation Through Influencer Marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 88(4), 40-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429231217471>.
- Belanche, D., Belk, R.W., Casalo, L.V., Flavián, C. 2024. The dark side of artificial intelligence in services. *The Service Industries Journal*, 44(3-4), 149-172. DOI:10.1080/02642069.2024.2305451.
- Berman, R., Oery, A., Zheng, X. 2023. Influence or Advertise: The Role of Social Learning in Influencer Marketing. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. DOI:10.2139/ssrn.4324888.
- Cialdini, R. 1984. *Influence. The Psychology of Persuasion*. New York, NY, William Morrow and Company.
- Cialdini, R. 2000. *Wywieranie wpływu na ludzi. Teoria i praktyka*. Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.
- Corcoran, E., Doucette, H., Merrill, J.E., Pielech, M., López, G., Egbert, A., Nelapati, S., Gabrielli, J., Colby, S.M., Jackson, K.M. 2024. A qualitative analysis of adolescents' perspectives on peer and influencer alcohol-related posts on social media. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 43(1), 13-27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.13720>.
- Dabiran, E., Farivar, S., Wang, F., Grant, G. 2024. Virtually human: anthropomorphism in virtual influencer marketing. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 79, 103797. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2024.103797>.
- Digital Marketing Institute. 2024. <https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/>.
- Ekinci, Y., Dam, S., Buckle, G.E. 2025. The dark side of social media influencers: a research agenda for analysing deceptive practices and regulatory challenges. *Psychology and Marketing*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.22173>.
- Farivar, S., Wang, F. 2022. Effective influencer marketing: A social identity perspective. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2022.103026>.
- Harff, D., Bollen, C., Schmuck, D. 2022. Responses to social media influencers' misinformation about Covid-19: A pre-registered multiple-exposure experiment. *Media Psychology*, 25(6), 831-850. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2022.208071>. <https://www.aviation24.be/tour-operators/tui-group/tui-unveils-lena-an-ai-explorer-redefining-travel-inspiration/>.
- <https://www.germany.travel/de>.
- [https://www.instagram.com/miko\\_kopernik](https://www.instagram.com/miko_kopernik).
- <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/maja-miliony-fanow-choc-sami-naprawde-nie-istnieja-top-10-wirtualnych-influencerow-6874529348348640a.html>.
- <https://www.qatarairways.com/press-releases/en-WW/245937-sama-on-the-move-the-world->

- s-first-digital-human-cabin-crew-debuts-on-social-media.
- Jin, S.V., Muqaddam, A., Ryu, E. 2019. Instafamous and Social Media Influencer Marketing. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 37, 567-579. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-09-2018-0375>.
- Kaplan, A.M., Haenlein, M. 2016. Higher Education and the Digital Revolution: About MOOC, SPOCs, Social Media, and the Cookie Monster. *Business Horizons*, 59, 441-450. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2016.03.008>.
- Kholkina, V., Chesnokova, E., Zelenskaya, E. 2025. Virtual or human? The impact of the influencer type on Gen Z consumer outcomes. *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 34(1), 104-118. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBm-12-2023-4885>.
- Ki, C., Cuevas, L., Chong, S., Lim, H. 2020. Influencer marketing: social media influencers as human brands attaching to followers and yielding positive marketing results by fulfilling needs. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 55, 102133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102133>.
- Kim, J. 2021. Advertising in the Metaverse: Research Agenda. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 21(3), 141-144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2021.2001273>.
- King, C. 2023. The Rise of Virtual Influencers: Should You Be Working With Them? <https://hypeauditor.com/blog/the-rise-of-virtual-influencers-should-you-be-working-with-them/>.
- Kotler, P., Keller, K.L. 2016. *A framework for marketing management*. Prentice Hall.
- Liu, F., Lee, Y.H. 2024. Virtually authentic: examining the match-up hypothesis between human vs virtual influencers and product types. *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 33(2), 287-299. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBm-03-2023-4418>.
- Lou, C., Yuan, S. 2019. Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>.
- Mazurkiewicz-Pizlo A. 2025. Social media in trusted communication and economy. In: *Trust, Media and the Economy*, Ed. Paliszkievicz, J., Gołuchowski, J., Zdanowicz-Cyganiak, K., Chen Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 167-178, <https://www.routledge.com/Trust-Media-and-the-Economy-Mutual-Relations/Paliszkiewicz-Goluchowski-Zdanowicz-Cyganiak-Chen/p/book/9781032874739>
- Menga, L., Bie, Y., Yang, M., Wang, Y. 2025. The effect of human versus virtual influencers: The roles of destination types and self-referencing processes. *Tourism Management*, 106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2024.104978>.
- Mouritzen, S.L.T., Penttinen, V., Pedersen, S. 2024. Virtual influencer marketing: the good, the bad and the unreal. *European Journal of Marketing*, 58(2), 410-440. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-12-2022-0915>.
- Mrad, M., Ramadan, Z., Nasr, L.I. 2022. Computer-generated influencers: the rise of digital personalities. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 40(5), 589-603. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-12-2021-0423>.
- Muniz, F., Guzmán, F. 2023. The impact of brand value co-creation on perceived CSR authenticity and brand equity. *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 32(8), 1338-1354. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBm-02-2023-4340>.
- Muslimah, D.D., Sunengsih, A. 2023. A Bibliometric Analysis of Virtual Influencer. *West Science Interdisciplinary Studies*, 1(12), 1353-1360. <https://doi.org/10.58812/wsis.v1i12.421>.

- Nadányiová, M., Šujanská, L. 2023. The impact of influencer marketing on the decision-making process of generation z. *Economics and Culture*, 20(1), 68-76. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jec-2023-0006>.
- Pan, S., Qin, Z., Zhang, Y. 2024. More Realistic, More Better? How Anthropomorphic Images of Virtual Influencers Impact the Purchase Intentions of Consumers. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 19(4), 3229-3252. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer19040157>.
- Pashaie, S., Piątkowska, M., Hoseini, M., Dostimehr, A., Jahanbakhsh, I. 2022. Sociological Analysis of Branding of Professional Football League Players, *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research*, 96(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.2478/pcssr-2022-0014>.
- Penttinen, V., Mouritzen, S.L.T., Pedersen, S. 2024. Is She Real? Leveraging Real-Life and Virtual Influencer Marketing in Brand Communications. In: Jeseo, V., Allen, J. (eds) *Welcome to The New Normal: Life After The Chaos. AMSAC 2023. Developments in Marketing Science: Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Science*. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-49039-2\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-49039-2_4).
- Pick, M. 2020. Psychological ownership in social media influencer marketing. *European Business Review*, 33(1). <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb-08-2019-0165>.
- Pizło, W., Mazurkiewicz-Pizło, A. 2023. Gamification – Use in Tourism Business Management. *European Research Studies Journal*, XXVI, Issue 2, 390-409. DOI: 10.35808/ersj/3177
- Prokopowicz, D., Gołębiowska, A., Jakubczak, W., Jakubczak, R. 2021. Cybersecurity of Business Intelligence Analytics Based on the Processing of Large Sets of Information with the Use of Sentiment Analysis and Big Data. *European Research Studies Journal*, XXIV, 4, 850-871. DOI: 10.35808/ersj/2631.
- Rambocas, M., Metivier, J. 2024. How does the influencers' country of origin affect online brand advocacy among young consumers? *Young Consumers Insight and Ideas for Responsible Marketers*, 25(6), 909-927. <https://doi.org/10.1108/yc-01-2024-1970>.
- Rogers, E.M. 1976. Communication and Development: The Passing of a Dominant Paradigm. In: Rogers, E.M. (ed.), *Communication and Development: Critical Perspectives*, Beverly Hills: Sage Publication, 121-148.
- Sands, S.J., Ferraro, C., Demsar, V., Chandler, G. 2022. False idols: Unpacking the opportunities and challenges of falsity in the context of virtual influencers. *Business Horizons*, 65(6), 777-788. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2022.08.002>.
- Schorn, A., Vinzenz, F., Wirth, W. 2022. Promoting sustainability on instagram: how sponsorship disclosures and benefit appeals affect the credibility of influencers. *Young Consumers Insight and Ideas for Responsible Marketers*, 23(3), 345-361. <https://doi.org/10.1108/yc-07-2021-1355>.
- Shi, W. 2023. Virtual Human Influencer and Its Impact on Consumer Purchase Intention. *Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences*, 47, 80-87. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2754-1169/47/20230376>.
- Singh, R., Tiwari, D., Tiwari, H. 2023. Influencer Marketing: Concept, Practices and Strategies: An Overview. *EPRA International Journal of Environmental Economics, Commerce and Educational Management*, 10 (8), 6-12. <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra14005>.
- Skindzier, O. 2023. Mają miliony fanów, choć sami naprawdę nie istnieją. Top 10 wirtualnych influencerów. <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/maja-miliony-fanow-choc-sami-naprawde-nie-istnieja-top-10-wirtualnych-influencerow-6874529348348640a.html>.

- Slate, T. 2020. Tourism companies introduce more and more virtual influencers. <https://www.tourism-review.com/companies-adopt-more-virtual-influencers-news14755>.
- Slepian, R.C., Chey, A., Patterson, V.H., Furman, H. 2024. Social media, wearables, telemedicine and digital health - A Gen Y and Z perspective. *Comprehensive Precision Medicine (First Edition)*, Elsevier, 524-544. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-824010-6.00072-1>.
- Sorosrungruang, T., Ameen, N., Hackley, C. 2024. How real is real enough? Unveiling the diverse power of generative AI-enabled virtual influencers and the dynamics of human responses. *Psychology and Marketing*. DOI:10.1002/mar.22105.
- Srivastava, A., Mukaria, B., Arora, M. 2024. Influencer marketing: a citation and co-citation analysis within business and management domains. *International Academic Publishing House*, 44, 149-161. <https://doi.org/10.52756/ijerr.2024.v44spl.013>.
- Statista. 2023. Influencer marketing worldwide - statistics and facts. <https://www.statista.com/search/?q=influencer+marketing&dp=1>.
- Tajfel, H., Turner, J.C., Austin, W.G., Worchel, S. 1979. An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. *Organizational identity: A reader*, 56-65.
- Thorndike, E.L. 1920. A constant error in psychological ratings. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 4(1), 25-29. <http://doi.org/10.1037/h0071663>.
- Ye, G., Hudders, L., De Jans, S., De Veirman, M. 2021. The Value of Influencer Marketing for Business: A Bibliometric Analysis and Managerial Implications. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(2), 160-178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2020.1857888>.
- Zhang, K., Sun, X., Li, G. 2024. Virtual influencer and cultural heritage destination: Endorsement effectiveness of virtual versus human influencers. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 110(3). DOI:10.1016/j.annals.2024.103873.
- Zhang, T., Huang, X. 2021. Viral marketing: influencer marketing pivots in tourism – a case study of meme influencer instigated travel interest surge. *Current Issues in Tourism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2021.1910214>.
- Zhang, U., Shao, Z., Wang, K. 2025. Does your company have the right influencer? Influencer type and tourism brand personality. *Tourism Management*, 107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2024.105079>.
- Zhou, X., Yan, X., Jiang, Y. 2024. Making Sense? The Sensory-Specific Nature of Virtual Influencer Effectiveness. *Journal of Marketing*, 88(4), 84-106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429231203699>.

